



PhD thesis

Community, word and wonder: discerning key elements in the faith inquiry of Chinese international students

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**Community, Word and Wonder:
Discerning Key Elements in the Faith Inquiry of
Chinese International Students**

Lynette Shu Yin Teagle

OCMS, Ph.D.

June 2023

ABSTRACT

The internationalisation of British universities has led to increased opportunities for cultural, social and religious transnational collaboration and interchange on campus. Amid the growing discourse on international student issues within the academy, including the engagement and apparent interest in Christianity among Mainland Chinese students, research on their actual interaction with Christianity in Britain remains scarce and limited in scope.

This qualitative study involved participant-observation of Christian activities for international students, literature produced by faith-based organisations, and in-depth interviews with 25 ethnically Chinese students, of which 18 were from Mainland China. Analysed using a grounded theory methodology, the data reveals the wider motivating factors behind Chinese students' involvement in Christian activities organised by multi-ethnic British churches, beyond socio-cultural and linguistic interests. Within the faith inquiry process, students' emerging beliefs are shaped by participation in Christian community groups, study of Bible texts, and numinous experiences. The iterative and progressive interaction of these elements contributes to a process of 'ordinary theologising' involving both the emergence of nascent theological understandings, and the deconstruction of some existing beliefs. Significant influences which shape the process include relational learning within the Christian community, Chinese approaches to religious practice, and encounters with the transcendent.

Using an emergent framework incorporating 'ordinary theology' (Astley 2002) and modalities of Chinese religion (Chau 2019), the findings show that Chinese students are active agents in a process of theological construction which has hitherto remained under-examined. Beyond socio-cultural motivations, their nascent theologising – including conversion, for some – leads to clarity of inhabited Christian beliefs, despite internal dissonance and expectations of interpersonal conflict.

The findings of this study are pertinent to understandings of faith exploration and belief change, specifically among international students, and more broadly, within migrant communities. It makes a unique contribution to original knowledge within the field of Practical Theology as an empirical study of biblically-centred activities for inquirers from non-Western, non-Christian backgrounds.

**Community, Word and Wonder:
Discerning Key Elements in the Faith Inquiry
of Chinese International Students**

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in Middlesex University

June 2023

Oxford Centre for Mission Studies

DECLARATIONS

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed  (Candidate)

Date 12th June 2023

STATEMENT 1

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Where correction services have been used, the extent and nature of the correction is clearly marked in a footnote.

Other sources are acknowledged by midnotes or footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

Signed  (Candidate)

Date 12th June 2023

STATEMENT 2

I hereby give consent for my thesis, if approved, to be available for photocopying by the British Library and for Inter-Library Loan, for open access to the Electronic Theses Online Service (EthoS) linked to the British Library, and for the title and summary to be made available to outside organizations.

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Date 12th June 2023

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the memory of my sister,
Dr Sharon Lim Shu Lee (1966-2015)
my role model, guide, and erstwhile companion
on the lifelong journey of faith in Christ.

“I have fought the good fight, I have kept the faith, I have finished the race.”

2 Timothy 4:7

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GLOSSARY OF KEY CHINESE TERMS AND CHARACTERS IN THE TEXT

<i>baizuzong</i>	拜祖宗	ancestral rituals (<i>bai</i> = ‘worship’)
<i>chuantong</i>	传统	tradition (noun or adjective)
<i>daojiao</i>	道教	Taoism/Daoism
<i>feizongjiaozhe</i>	非宗教者	person with no religion
<i>fojiao</i>	佛教	Buddhism
<i>guishen</i>	鬼神	ghosts/spirits
<i>jiaohui</i>	教会	church (usually referring to people)
<i>jiaotang</i>	教堂	church (usually formal or structural)
<i>li</i>	礼	order, ritual, ceremony
<i>maodun</i>	矛盾	contradiction
<i>mixin</i>	迷信	superstition (noun or adjective)
<i>rujiao</i>	儒教	Confucianism
<i>tuanyi</i>	团契	informal gathering, could refer to church
<i>wushenlun</i>	无神论	atheism
<i>wushenlunzhe</i>	无神论者	atheist
<i>wusuowei</i>	无所谓	it doesn’t matter
<i>zixiangmaodun</i>	自相矛盾	‘self-contradiction’ (unsolvable)
<i>zongjiao</i>	宗教	religion
<i>zongjiaotiyān</i>	宗教体验	religious experience
<i>zongjiaojingyan</i>	宗教经验	religious experience
<i>zuxian</i>	祖先	ancestor(s)

CHAPTER ONE THE START OF A JOURNEY

Suwen's story

Suwen approached the church hall with some trepidation. It was a blustery late September evening, and an early autumn wind was blowing fallen leaves about on the street. The international students' orientation events, run by the university, had come to an end, but Suwen and a few others on her postgraduate law course had received an invitation at a stall in the students' union to this evening's welcome dinner, held in a local church.

Admittedly, Suwen was only looking forward to the promised hot meal, having become tired of her steady diet of instant noodles since arriving in Britain. The hectic orientation schedule left no time to cook, and she was still unfamiliar with the area around the student halls, so had been subsisting on the non-perishable food her mother had crammed into her luggage at the last minute.

The church hall felt warm after the chill outside, and had been decorated attractively. Each table could seat 6 guests, with one or two British people from the church acting as 'table hosts' for the evening. The food was substantial, if a little bland, but conversation flowed. It was great to finally be able to have more practice using her conversational English with local people! Brief talks followed while dessert was served, but Suwen paid scant attention to them. A silver-haired gentleman – said to be a retired academic - explained the importance of the Christian faith within British history and extended an invitation to any students interested to come along the following week for a discussion about the Christian faith.

Suwen had no previous interest in religion. Back home in China, she knew almost nothing about churches or the Christian faith – as far as she was concerned, Christianity was for the farming community in the countryside around her hometown, not for urban professionals like herself! She had to admit, though, to being drawn. She had enjoyed the

evening, felt very welcome and relished further opportunities to speak in English in this relaxed atmosphere. Perhaps she would come again the next week, unless things became too busy on her course. She was looking forward to telling her husband, Lihong, about her evening. He would be joining her in the UK as soon as his work unit could release him, and they were hoping that he too would be able to embark on a Master's degree course before too long.

Such stories have been repeated in British university towns over the last few decades. As the number of students arriving at university from overseas has grown exponentially over the last thirty years, British evangelical churches have sought to meet their social, pastoral and spiritual needs, with activities including social events, such as weekly 'café'-style evenings which promise a mix of cultural information, language practice and friendship with local people; outings and trips; hospitality programmes; and Bible studies for Christians as well as for inquirers¹. Although open to students of any nationality, an internal survey of student nationalities represented in activities organised by the international student ministry Friends International and associated churches from 2019 to the present, showed that attenders are predominantly from China². Of these, most, like Suwen, would not self-identify as Christian believers, and many would say that they are non-religious.

The story of Suwen continues however, with her continued participation in international student events held in the church, especially Bible discussions:

Although she had never read the Bible, it seemed an ancient book which had made a great impact on Western culture, yet was considered largely irrelevant by most of her

¹ Throughout this thesis I refer to students who do not identify as Christian but participate in Christian activities, especially Bible studies, as 'inquirers'. This is a more accurate descriptor than the more commonly used 'seeker' since Chinese students do not always initially attend events 'seeking faith in Jesus'. Use of 'inquirer' as a descriptor reflects their desire to learn and discover but does not limit their objective to the spiritual.

² This co-relates with official figures produced by the Higher Education Statistics Agency. <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-from#non-uk> (figures for 2020/21) Accessed 4 June 2022.

British course mates. Over time however, she became intrigued. The Bible texts they studied each week created questions in Suwen's mind about the deeper issues of life, particularly as they discussed the biblical account of Jesus's life.

Suwen considered herself 'a product of her generation'. Until then she would have said that she was an atheist who believed in scientific answers to everything, with no spiritual beliefs of any description. But the book of Genesis described a creator God who was involved in the world, which was broken by human rebellion. The discussion leaders said that Jesus had come to 'save people' and that through prayer, ordinary human beings could talk to God and have a relationship with him.

With her legal background in mind, Suwen began to actively gather 'evidence' from the Christians she met each week at the various social events run by the church for international students. Each had a story to tell: of life change, finding new purpose, reconciled relationships, receiving help in trouble. A British teenager in the church who was suffering from chronic back pain deeply impressed Suwen with her courage and patience, which she attributed to God's presence in her life, mentioning Bible verses which helped her.

Slowly, the Bible discussions began to resonate with Suwen's life experiences. She began to experiment with 'talking to God' and reading the Bible to find answers, even on practical matters. Jesus' teaching on forgiveness struck a deep chord when Suwen encountered conflict with her landlord. Her husband Lihong finally arrived from China and together, they began to explore what it would mean to believe in Jesus Christ and become Christians. After further months of exploration of the Bible, and long discussions with friends in church who answered their many questions, Suwen and Lihong professed faith in Christ and were baptised in the local British church.

Faith inquiry in Chinese international students

The evidence of Chinese students who profess faith in Jesus Christ through campus Christian ministries and churches in the UK is noted in the scholarly literature. A number are baptised at their local church prior to departing for China. This prompts questions about how they might come to an understanding of the faith enough to self-identify as ‘Christian’, particularly within a relatively short period of time. Although the phenomenon of Chinese academics and scholars converting to the Christian faith during their overseas sojourn has been noted in the wider discourse for two decades, these have largely focused on the ecological or social factors, attributing conversion to sociological reasons, such as the societal and political turbulence in modern Chinese history (Yang 1998), active evangelisation by ethnic churches or faith-based organisations in the host country (Yu 2017, Li 2012, Wang & Yang 2006) and the value of social capital gained from religious conversion (Ding & Devine 2017).

While such justifications might be satisfactory when analysed using sociological, psychological, or intercultural frames of reference, these theories are insufficient from a theological or missiological perspective.

At the heart of this project is the foundational Christian understanding that international student ministry is part of the *missio Dei*. The triune God is the initiator of all revelation of himself to human beings, such that their experience can inform interpretive understandings of his nature and character. In so doing it is God himself who enables each person to develop a meaningful relationship with him. This comes by believing, through faith – thus, the Christian understanding is that a relationship with God is not developed through acquired theoretical or propositional knowledge alone, but embodied knowledge of his person and character, which gains focus and clarity as it is indwelt.

As stated earlier, the current discourse acknowledges overseas religious conversion in Chinese students, with reference made to the conversion theories of Rambo et al (2012) and Lofland and Stark (1965) as analytical frameworks. Much of the literature, however, attributes student conversion to a single cause, with conversion accounts summarised in a few sentences which are related to the affective impact of life as a migrant and the evangelistic agenda of churches and faith-based organisations (see, for example, Li 2012 and Yu 2017).

Such explanations are insufficient for this project. McGuire defines conversion as ‘a transformation of one’s self concurrent with a transformation of one’s basic meaning system. It changes the sense of who one is and how one belongs to the social situation’ (2002:73). Such a definition encompasses both meaning change as well as socialisation, but the current discourse focuses on the latter and pays scant attention to the former, particularly regarding what it entails and how such change might occur.

Within Christian theology, conversion is understood to be a complex and multifactorial process (see, for example, Tidball 2006; Peace 1999; and others³). Evangelical Christianity, with its emphasis on conversionism, attributes the turning of individuals to God and the subsequent ongoing process of transformation as the work of the Holy Spirit. As Larsen (2007) writes, evangelical Christians believe both in the ‘decisive moment of turning from darkness to light’ as well as a process of being ‘truly drawn to Christ over a long period of time and without any dramatic turning point’. This leads to ‘an ongoing life of fellowship with God’ which can be described in ‘very intimate terms’ (2007:11).

³ Scholars disagree as to the degree to which socialisation is a factor within the conversion process. Tidball (2006), who studied the conversion reports of applicants to the London School of Theology, says that conversion is ‘overwhelmingly’ a process of socialisation. In this project, I acknowledge the significant impact of socialisation within Chinese students’ experience but assert that these serve as sites for theological construction and belief acquisition and change, as will be demonstrated in Chapters Five and Six.

The work of evangelical campus ministries, such as Friends International and the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF) to both local and international students, is based on the theological understanding that active engagement with the Bible can lead to an understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ, an acknowledgement of the truth of the human condition as revealed in the Scriptures, the development of salvific faith in Jesus and a living relationship with God which results in personal transformation.

I acknowledge that ‘religious identities cannot be simply reduced to a matter of propositional belief’ (Guest et al 2013a:25). However, within the ministry groups mentioned above, students attending Bible studies from a position of little or no previous knowledge are perceived to develop an understanding of Christianity based on a fixed set of propositional beliefs, which are founded on adopted/acquired understandings of the Bible, God and Jesus Christ (Guest et al 2013b:210-211). Day remarks in her study of performative belief in the UK that to some adherents of the Christian faith, the act of attesting to the belief in ‘God, the father, the maker of heaven and earth and in Jesus Christ’ is central to their identity as both a member of their church and to their guarantee of eternal life’ (2010:24). Within the discourse on Chinese students, Ma observes that those who convert in British church settings ‘articulate a biblical evangelicalism’ which is similar to their US counterparts (2021:5).

Yet, while such students have been observed to undergo conversion through participation in Bible studies, little is known about how they acquire the beliefs which might lead them to do so. This is a significant gap in the current understanding which my thesis aims to address.

A review of the current discourse, in tandem with my ongoing conversations with Chinese students in the UK, provokes the following questions regarding their interaction with Christianity:

Why do Chinese students professing ‘no religious belief’ continue to attend Christian groups and study the Bible? Beyond their need for cultural understanding and English practice, what impulses drive their continued pursuit of biblical understanding? What beliefs do they acquire as they study the Bible and participate in Christian groups? Specifically, following Day’s research (2010:3), are these beliefs ‘invisible, pre-social and immutable’? Are such beliefs acquired through socialisation (collective), private belief (individual) or the transcendent? How do internalised and embodied beliefs contribute to the construction of nascent ordinary theology?

Alongside these emerging questions, it is also important to interact with scholars of Chinese religion who have constructed different models of religious faith in China, including Chau’s modalities of religion (2019). These reflect alternative theorisations of religion based on historical and empirical research, wherein modern Chinese religious life is characterised by pragmatism, pluralism and communal belonging, containing ritual and ‘folk’ elements which have not traditionally been acknowledged as ‘religious’ from a Western perspective (Madsen 2014, Fan 2011). These considerations from the Chinese context increase the complexity of the questions at hand.

As a ministry practitioner of more than twenty years, I was curious to see how Chinese students themselves would express their own understanding of the process, and whether this would challenge the assumptions made in previous studies of socialisation being the major factor in faith inquiry and religious assimilation.

My aim therefore is to conduct an analysis based on a wider understanding of the Chinese student experience within Christian activities here in the UK, through participant-observation of international student events and in-depth interviews with Chinese students who have recently undergone the process of interrogating their own development of belief in Jesus Christ. The focus is not primarily on the *decision* to convert, since not all students involved, even in Bible studies, profess faith. Instead, my emphasis

is on the *content* of belief and how this is acquired, internalised and embodied through involvement in Christian activities and Bible studies. My project thus seeks a holistic understanding of the factors and processes which contribute to learned beliefs becoming genuine faith claims, the reliance on which leads some Chinese students to say that they have come to know Jesus as Lord. It also, as a corollary, leads to an understanding of the reasons why, for other students, acquired knowledge did not fundamentally alter their religious belief or identity.

Researcher identity

My project is significantly driven by questions which have arisen in my vocation as a staff worker for Friends International. This has been my main ministry role over the last two decades. Hosting, leading or organising social events and Bible studies, both in small groups as well as on a one-to-one basis, for international students with an interest in the Christian faith has been my central focus for many years. In fact, events such as the ones Suwen attended are a common feature of international student ministry in many British university towns and cities.

My journey in international student ministry began almost thirty years ago when I arrived in Britain from Singapore as an undergraduate to study law. Although I grew up in an ethnically Peranakan-Chinese⁴ family, my introduction to Mainland Chinese students took place on the British university campus where I was intrigued by our cultural similarities as well as the evident differences in historical background and political ideologies. My first Mainland Chinese friend was a government scholar, a party member who was visiting Liverpool as an academic visitor. As our conversations (in Mandarin) eventually came round to religious faith, I was as fascinated by his complete lack of knowledge of Christianity as he was about my account of growing up going to church and

⁴ Peranakan (also commonly known as Nonya or Baba) ethnicity and culture has its roots in the first wave of Chinese immigrants who arrived in Southeast Asia in the 15th century and intermarried with the local Malay women. Peranakans thus have a hybridic identity and heritage, a fusion of Chinese and Malay/Indonesian cultures producing a unique language, dress, cuisine and other traditions.

my testimony that God had brought me to Britain for a purpose. These discussions led me to ask deeper questions about the multiple strands which led to my own faith in Jesus Christ at the age of ten. These include the Methodist school education I had received; my family background with grandparents who had strong connections with Western missionaries in the late 20th century; the influence of the colonial church in Singapore; and my own personal encounter with God at a young age.

In the decades which have passed, I have taught in a mainland Chinese university and interacted with countless Chinese students from China and elsewhere in East Asia, finding that the common ground of our similar cultural heritage helps me build friendships, while highlighting the evident spiritual curiosity and hunger in many of them. Always, it is a privilege as well as something of a marvel to witness a student with no religious background reading the Bible for the first time, coming to an understanding of the good news of Jesus which ultimately leads to transformation of life.

The ministry of Friends International within the UK church

In this project, my participants' search for answers brought them to the British church, and involvement in Christian activities and groups on campus, particularly under the umbrella of Friends International, a British-based evangelical Christian mission organisation with a specific focus on the pastoral care, evangelism and discipleship of international students studying at UK universities, envisioning and equipping local Christians to do so. One of the organisation's core values is the Bible as 'our authority, source of teaching and model of ministry'⁵. The organisation works within, and in partnership with, the evangelical church in the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland. Thus, all churches hosting international students in partnership with Friends International hold to the authority and value of the Bible for teaching and training.

⁵ <https://www.friendsinternational.uk/vision-and-values/>

As a mission organisation, Friends International subscribes to the UK Evangelical Alliance (EA) basis of faith, requiring employed staff to sign their agreement of the EA doctrinal basis annually, and functions as a parachurch organisation solely among evangelical churches. It can thus be seen that in terms of operant, espoused and normative theology, Friends International and its associated church partners clearly adhere to an evangelical theology⁶.

Research questions

Based on the discussion above, my main research question for this project is

How does faith inquiry in Chinese international students increasingly lead to a greater knowledge and experience of ‘knowing God’, from a Christian perspective, during their sojourn in the UK?

with the following sub-questions:

1. What frames of reference for spiritual and existential inquiry do Chinese students rely upon before and during their studies at university in Britain?
2. What factors shape the process of faith inquiry undertaken by Chinese students during their participation in British campus-based Bible studies and other activities, whether or not that leads to increased belief? How does such belief change occur, if at all?
3. How do the different factors and experiences interact to inform the emerging faith or otherwise of Chinese students?

⁶ My research for this project is thus entirely based in the British evangelical church. All my participants were identified through their involvement in activities organised by such churches. In recent years, however, it has become increasingly apparent that the word ‘evangelical’ has become both culturally and politically laden, and it is therefore important that a clear definition is given at the outset of this thesis, which not only clarifies the ‘brand’ of Christianity with which my participants were engaged, but also forms the theological basis upon which my understanding and analysis are based. Throughout this project, therefore, the definition of evangelicalism utilised is the quadrilateral developed by David Bebbington (1989). This identifies the four distinguishing marks as: Conversionism, emphasizing conversion experiences; Activism, wherein an active laity shares the gospel and is engaged in good works; Biblicism, centred on the Bible; and Crucicentrism, salvation through the work of Christ on the cross.

Research design

This project is located in the field of Practical Theology, which ‘is dedicated to enabling the faithful performance of the gospel and to exploring and taking seriously the complex dynamics of the human encounter with God’ (Swinton & Mowat 2006:4). Of critical importance is their observation of the ‘uneasy but critical tension’ between the revelation of Jesus Christ ‘formulated historically within scripture, doctrine and tradition’, when held against the ‘continuing innovative performance of the gospel as it is embodied and enacted in the life and practices of the Church’ as it encounters ‘the life and practices of the world’ (2006:5).

The observation aptly describes this project, which seeks to develop an empirical understanding of how students from Mainland China begin to engage with the Bible in British evangelical Christian settings as part of spiritual inquiry, and based on that understanding, to discern the process of faith development within young people outside the post-Christian West. The ‘uneasy but critical tension’ exists as I seek to apply traditional scriptural and doctrinal understandings to a context which is very different from the familiar environs and practices of the British church as it appears in much of the literature of Practical Theology. An inherent aim is to discern the ways in which Chinese students reflect on their response to the self-revelation of God in the Bible. Their narratives demonstrate how those who are strangers to the life and practices of the Church can make meaning and find belonging and genuine Christian belief in their journey from the (self-described) stages of ‘learning the Bible’⁷, to ‘knowing God’⁸.

As a work of Practical Theology, a significant part of this work is theological reflection, based on a fresh understanding of the lived experiences of Chinese students participating in international student ministry activities. Such reflection utilises as a

⁷ Literal translation of the term used by participants, *xue shengjing* 学圣经

⁸ Literal translation of the term used by participants, *renshi shen* 认识神

framework ‘the four voices of theology’ developed as part of the Theological Action Research approach to empirical theological research. These ‘four voices’ (Cameron et al 2010: 53-56) are described as:

- Operant: the theology embedded in the practices of a group.
- Espoused: theology drawn from the group’s own articulation of beliefs.
- Normative: theology from sources which the group considers authoritative.
- Formal: the theology of the academy.

A caveat is necessary at this point. Although Practical Theology begins with human experience, this does not imply that experience itself is a source of revelation. Rather, as Swinton and Mowat (2006) emphasise, more than creedal or doctrinal belief, an understanding of the cross and resurrection should lead to faith, which is both performative and embodied, such that human experience becomes the ‘place’ where the gospel is ‘grounded, embodied, interpreted and lived out’ (Swinton and Mowat 2006:5). Within human experience therefore, an interpretive context can be found which ‘raises new questions, offers challenges and demands answers of the gospel which are not always obvious when it is reflected on in abstraction’ (Swinton and Mowat, 2006:5).

My research utilises a qualitative inductive methodology to foreground participants’ reflections on their participation in seeker Bible studies, along with other social activities explicitly organised for international university students. A grounded theory methodology was chosen in order to allow the key concepts to emerge from the data, shaping the development of a new theory. As a staff worker for Friends International, I was aware of the inherent biases which might affect the reliability of the interview data. I therefore conducted a trial focus group which discussed the draft questions which I had devised for a semi-structured interview. Participants in this group reflected that as East Asians who were aware of my role within Friends International and my relative seniority in terms of age, interview questions would prove to be too directive and, in any case, would go against my specific desire to ‘let the findings emerge from the data’.

The decision was made to conduct narrative interviews which offered participants the choice to respond in English or Mandarin. The free-flowing nature of the narrative (with some direction, so that it was not merely a ‘conversation’) enabled participants to give me thick descriptions not only of their spiritual inquiry, but a range of topics, from the more intimate, such as their personal relationships in China, their rationale for studying overseas, including honest opinions about education in the UK, reflections on arrival on the British campus, to wider discussions on religion and politics in China. This also meant that the emphasis and focus of narratives were driven not by my pre-set agenda but by their own sense of what was inherently important within their accounts. Throughout this I was aware of the limitations of generalisations from qualitative data and McGuire’s caution that individuals ‘reinterpret past experiences in relationship to the new meaning system’ and should therefore not be taken as ‘objective’ (McGuire 2002:76). That said, the accounts of my participants, corroborated by memos from participant-observation and primary data gleaned from ministry literature such as prayer letters, provided sufficient evidence to triangulate their account of the elements which contribute to faith development and the ways in which they interact to change an individual’s ‘meaning system’, which will be significant for missiological understanding as well as the shaping of future research and ministry.

Research significance

This thesis contributes to original knowledge in a number of respects. First, by extending current understandings of Chinese students’ explorations of the Christian faith beyond socio-cultural understandings, by shifting the focus onto theological perspectives. In so doing, I demonstrate the ways in which my data corroborates some of the sociological aspects of the existing discourse, while providing new knowledge by examining the reported process of theological evaluation and professed changes of belief leading to faith development. This has, hitherto, remained an under-examined area in the

discourse on Chinese students interacting with the Christian faith during their study overseas.

Second, with regards to understandings of faith development, I explicate the process in which Chinese students undergo a process of ‘ordinary theologising’ (Astley 2002) as they develop an understanding of Christian beliefs. The data demonstrates the ways in which Chinese students develop nascent theological understandings which emerge from involvement in Christian gatherings and Bible study activities. Their accounts challenge the dominant view held within international student ministry that Bible studies are the primary means by which students learn about the Christian faith. Rather, the findings reveal that biblical learning and spiritual formation grow through embodied participation as well as directed teaching. This involves the simultaneous deconstruction of some previously held beliefs and the formation of new emergent theological understandings, leading to significant feelings of internal dissonance and contradiction. The empirical data also shows that the process is shaped by three key elements: Chinese modalities of spiritual belief and practice, particularly from their home context; participation and inclusion within multi-ethnic British church communities; as well as pre-existing and ongoing experience of the transcendent.

Finally, as a contribution to knowledge within Practical Theology, this thesis provides an empirical understanding of the impact of Bible studies on self-professed non-believers from cultures distant from Western Christianity. While the extant literature includes empirical studies of Bible reading practices in various UK church denominational settings for believers and congregants, I have been unable to locate equivalent studies of Bible courses and discussions provided for non-believing inquirers from non-Western cultures. This has relevance not only for mission practitioners in intercultural settings, but has implications also for British churches which seek to provide

Bible learning opportunities for the increasing numbers of migrants and refugees arriving in the UK.

The structure of this thesis

Having set out the premise and questions for my research in this introductory chapter, it is important to provide an account of the complex nature of Chinese students' social and religious context, before exploring the current discourse on Chinese student exploration of Christianity during their overseas sojourn. In the next chapter therefore, I provide an outline of the characterisations of international students in the literature, before focusing on Chinese students overseas, including their contested and constructed identities in the scholarly works; the social and religious context in China within which they have grown up; and the impact of modernisation and globalisation on 'traditional Chinese values' and how these are changing. These create an understanding of the assumptions which underlie the discourse on Chinese student conversion overseas, which I then review and evaluate.

I then move to the presentation of empirical data derived from the fieldwork. In Chapter Three, I explain the research undertaken in terms of the undergirding theoretical considerations, the resultant choice of research philosophy, methodology and methods applied.

Chapters Four, Five, Six and Seven present the findings and sections of analysis of the empirical data. I introduce the research participants in Chapter Four, providing an analysis of the general characteristics of the cohort of students from 2015-2020, during which the different stages of my fieldwork were conducted.

Chapters Five, Six and Seven discuss the three main elements which emerged from the data as significant to the process of Christian belief acquisition and internalisation, beginning in Chapter Five with 'Community'. In this chapter, I discuss the contribution of the communal activities which form the core of Chinese student socialisation with

British Christians. Chapter Six turns the focus on Bible studies, long considered the primary site for the acquisition and interrogation of Christian beliefs, including an account of how these beliefs become internalised, espoused and embodied, as demonstrated by some participants' professions of faith in Jesus Christ. In Chapter Seven, I explore the ways in which participants' reported experiences of the transcendent – both positive and negative – provided the impetus for their engagement with the Bible, provoking nascent theological construction and faith responses.

In Chapter Eight, I propose a new theory for faith development drawn from my analysis of my participants' narrative, drawing the three elements together into a diagrammatic schema which describes how each of the three contributes to the process of faith development and acquisition, as part of the journey towards professing faith in Jesus Christ. This theory serves to interrogate some of the assumptions held within international student ministry: that Bible studies are the prime site for biblical learning and spiritual formation in international students. This forms my contribution towards extending current understandings within the discourse on Chinese student participation in Christian activities, as well as providing new knowledge in the area of Christian belief acquisition from embodied learning and Bible-focused discussions, and the process of faith development in adults from non-Western, non-Christian backgrounds.

Chapter Nine, as the conclusion of this thesis, provides a summary of the entire thesis. More importantly, having conducted this research as a practitioner, I address the ways in which my proposed theory might critique and impact current ministry praxis, including recommended changes. Finally, I outline the limitations of this study and make recommendations for future studies which might develop the nascent theorisation which I have undertaken.

CHAPTER TWO

THE CONTEXT AND EXPERIENCE OF CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Introduction

Transnational migration and its impact have long been an area of academic interest encompassing multiple disciplines. Whereas long-term migration might engender research into the psychological and sociological issues of socio-cultural adaptation, transcultural identity negotiation and intercultural adaptation, scholars recognise that temporary and voluntary migration has its own characteristics, involving both overlapping and unique considerations. The overseas education sojourn falls within the latter category in studies on migration, with the discourse on the international student experience forming a significant body of research.

Since 1978, Mainland Chinese nationals have pursued higher education overseas in ever increasing numbers. With almost three-quarters of a million Mainland Chinese nationals studying abroad worldwide in 2019⁹, it is unsurprising that they occupy a significant place in the research. The body of literature is both diverse and growing, and a broad survey reveals both an increased interest in ethnographic studies of the lived experience of overseas Chinese students, as well as a significant shift in researcher voice over the last decade, with more Chinese researchers choosing to focus on issues faced by co-nationals. Within the empirical studies, the religious participation and conversion of Chinese students to the Christian faith while overseas is increasingly coming under focus.

In this chapter I lay the groundwork for my analysis of the discourse in question by first outlining the ways in which academia has recognised the impact of transnational migration, particularly for temporary sojourners such as international students. I highlight

⁹Press release from the Chinese Ministry of Education website, http://en.moe.gov.cn/news/press_releases/202012/t20201224_507474.html. Accessed 2 Feb 2022.

the way in which international students around the world are characterised within the literature, with a particular emphasis on students from Mainland China.

I then foreground the existing literature focused on Chinese student involvement in Christian churches and faith-based organisations while overseas, with the discourse located within a range of fields, particularly sociology, psychology of religion, intercultural communication and religious studies. A significant contributor to the discourse is the US-based sociologist Yang Fenggang¹⁰, a leading scholar with interests in migrant religion, particularly Chinese religious studies and Chinese migrant conversion. Based on his theorisation, I explicate key elements which have been referenced in much of the discourse: the so-called ‘ecological factors’ which impact Chinese international students, including an understanding of the contested nature and the roots of Chinese religion and religious activity, as well as the historical role of Christianity in China; generational differences attributed to key events in China’s history as recognised in sociology and organizational management; and finally, the ways in which globalisation and modernisation have been seen to shape long-held traditional values. These form the complex contextual background for the extant theories on Chinese student interaction with the Christian faith while overseas.

In terms of the British context, Chinese students’ involvement in Christian activities, and their ensuing interest in Christianity, have been studied in limited ways. While scholars have acknowledged students’ conversion accounts to a small extent, most utilise a socio-cultural lens, attributing the observed conversion and change of religious identity to intercultural learning, adhesive bonds created by socialisation with local Christian group, or a sense of obligation created by the kindness shown by Christians.

¹⁰ Within the main text of this thesis, I follow the convention for Chinese names of placing the family name before the given name, for example, Yang (family name) Fenggang (given name). Within the bibliographic referencing, the family name is listed, following the APA format.

Viewed through the lens of Practical Theology, it is immediately apparent that the literature lacks exploration of the rationale behind such conversions, including the inherent processes of belief change and possible sources of theological understanding. The gap is particularly marked since the current theories focus on those who profess Christian belief from a self-asserted 'atheist' or 'no religious belief' perspective. The academy therefore appears to have failed to recognise, or has disregarded by omission, some of the significant processes within the lived reality of Chinese students participating in Christian activities, including the nascent theological construction which takes place in the process. This deficiency has tremendous implications on understandings of Chinese conversion within overseas Christian settings, not only sociologically but theologically. My project thus aims to extend the current socio-cultural understandings and add fresh theoretical analysis within the field of Practical Theology.

Considering transnational migration

A survey of the extant literature reveals the breadth of topics which are integral to a study such as this. One fruitful place to begin is a review of the ways in which issues of migration are addressed by the academy. Migration produces a myriad of emotions and experiences, among them a sense of displacement, of being uprooted and losing the bonds which determine belonging and identity (Madison 2006). The politics of transnational migration are beyond the remit of this project, but suffice to say, the mass movement of people globally – whether forced, because of war, famine or persecution, or voluntary, such as those who migrate for economic or educational reasons - has facilitated an increasing sense of globalisation worldwide, for good or ill. Yet, as the discourse on Chinese international students has noted, the lived experiences and tangible societal changes which were the dream of internationalisation have not always materialised (Knight 2011). While discussions around Orientalism (Said 1978), the Cultural Other and hybridity (Burke 2009, Bhabha 1994, among others) have highlighted and sought to

ameliorate the problematic dualistic binaries which persist in diaspora and migration studies (see, for example, Oppong 2013; Smith 2010; Chaitlin et al 2009; Ang 2003; Castles 2002), the reality on the ground is that those who embark on sojourns overseas continue to face a multitude of challenges alongside the opportunities.

In the face of this, it is helpful that Yang Fenggang follows Timothy Smith in describing migration as a ‘theologising experience’ (1999:80), which arises from the uncertainty of the sojourn and the psychological experience of ‘homelessness’. Migration has thus been a rich source of theorisation in the disciplines of missiology and theology (Casteel 2021; George 2011; Cruz 2008; Pohl 2002). Levitt (2002), for example, describes diaspora religious communities’ attempts to “keep two feet in two worlds” by maintaining transnational ties. For some of the Chinese students involved in this project, their overseas sojourn suddenly produced an awareness of existence in not just two, but three worlds, creating experiences filled with spiritual potential, yet fraught with conflict and chaos. My research, rooted in Practical Theology, seeks to elucidate this process, by considering, for instance, the acknowledgement of supernatural experiences by Chinese students and the ways in which this shapes their faith inquiry, if at all.

The internationalisation of education

Moving to the consideration of the overseas education sojourn, it is worth noting the ways in which research on the international student experience has evolved over the decades, with early studies focused particularly on areas subjects such as culture shock, international education and cross-cultural pastoral care. Scholars focused on a range of issues generally limited to academic impact, including pedagogical approaches, linguistic challenges, psychological studies of the university sojourn, and acculturation stress (Brown 2009; Bochner & Hutnik 1986; and many others). This was backed by several overviews of research into the ‘international student experience’ (Andrade 2006; Bailey 2006; Pelletier 2003;) which revealed that much of the literature was situated in the social

sciences, particularly in psychology, sociology, anthropology, education studies and issues related to Teaching English as a Foreign or Second Language (TEFL/TESOL), as well as service management in international student advisory services. Such research often appeared to be economically motivated, driven by a need to achieve ‘excellence in the international student experience’, primarily to increase student numbers and university ranking. This was described as the ‘commodification’ of international education (Walker 1999).

Broader studies of the international student experience (such as Brown 2009), however, identified areas requiring further study, including new models for integration and adaptation (Campbell 2012; Brown & Richards 2011; Butcher & McGrath 2007; Kashima & Loh 2006). Within such literature, it was not unusual for researchers include references to the specific cultures and backgrounds of students as part of their analysis and theorisation (for example, East Asian Masters students, Durkin 2008; Japanese students, Gelbtuch 2007; Chinese students, Gu 2009; and a summation by Pelletier 2003), precipitating a move away from unhelpful generalisations, while increasing specificity and focus.

In recent years, an important corrective to the literature has been the identification of problematic portrayals of international students using a ‘deficit model’ (Page & Chahboun 2019). Page and Chahboun, for example, observe that researchers conducting empirical studies of educational sojourns have been noted to conclude and report on participants’ ‘failure’ to achieve goals or aims, based entirely on researcher-set targets and measures which are inaccurate or idealistic (2019:875). Although affirming the vigour and depth of extant studies, particularly in the area of intercultural interaction, Page and Chahboun critique the underlying assumptions which ‘frame the international

student experience in terms of a set of predetermined expectations'¹¹, concluding that where sojourns are 'subsequently framed as failures', these have often omitted to consider the goals of students themselves (2019:875). Their argument has specific relevance to this thesis. First, researcher-stated aims of acculturation and cross-cultural bonds, for example, may be of little relevance for international students who recognise the transience of their sojourn. Such students thus desire other outcomes from their sojourn, including fewer tangible commodities which have yet to emerge (2019:876). Next, Page and Chahboun assert that a shift of focus is required to redress this imbalance, moving from researcher-imposed assumptions of the meaning and goals of education sojourns, to those articulated by participants themselves. This would lead to greater empowerment of research participants and more accurate depictions of their experience within the literature (2019:880). An increase in portrayals of students as interactors exercising significant agency (rather than 'passive reactors'), and a renewed focus on students' own desires and concepts, would have the effect of effectively 'de-muting' international students' voices, placing their own objectives in the foreground (2019:875).

Chinese students' identity in international education

It is perhaps unsurprising from the statistics on international student representation that Chinese students are heavily represented in the literature, both as objects of study and increasingly, as those conducting the research. Mainland China is currently the biggest contributor to the growing numbers of international students around the world, with 703,500 Chinese embarking on an overseas education in 2019¹². Over the last decade, they have accounted for the largest numbers of international students in the UK: from

¹¹ Throughout their paper, Page and Chahboun (2019) identify some of the 'noble' researcher assumptions identified in the literature on intercultural interaction in transnational education, including the views that 1) social isolation is detrimental; 2) students imagine a global space facilitated by knowledge acquired abroad; 3) they aspire to an elite habitus of transnational capitalists; and 4) they acquire symbolic membership as global citizens.

¹² Statistics from the Chinese Ministry of Education website.

http://en.moe.gov.cn/news/press_releases/202012/t20201224_507474.html Accessed 3 Jan 2022.

2020 to 2021, 143,800 Mainland Chinese were studying in UK universities, forming almost a quarter of all non-UK domiciled students¹³ at UK universities, although in the same year, Chinese entrant enrolment fell for the first time since 2007-2008¹⁴. The body of scholarly literature exploring the Chinese student experience has expanded exponentially in accordance with the boom in student numbers.

Given the value of international education in the GDP of some of the world's leading providers of higher education¹⁵, it is thus unsurprising to find that discussions related to enhancing international student experience tend to feature Chinese students, whether from Mainland China or elsewhere, though again, stereotypes and constructed identities have increasingly come under focus. The systematic analysis of Henze and Zhu (2012) for example, using a literature-based overview of the range of issues affecting Chinese studying overseas, demonstrates how Chinese students can become, at best, 'constructed entities' and at worst, as 'a source of irritation and challenge' in the literature¹⁶. This provides further evidence of disempowering depictions of international students as 'passive reactors' in the literature (Page & Chahboun 2019).

A sizeable body of studies has its focus on broader aspects of the Chinese student's life, predominantly, though not exclusively, in Western academia, moving from pedagogical concerns to questions around socialisation and pastoral care. Ding (2016)

¹³ From HESA, the Higher Education Statistics Agency website. The total number of non-UK domiciled students in UK higher education for 2020-2021 was 605,130. <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-from>. Accessed 4 June 2022.

¹⁴ From the HESA website, *ibid*.

¹⁵ For example, the UK's International Education Strategy 2019 aims to 'increase revenue from education exports to £35 billion per year by 2030' [online]. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/799349/International_Education_Strategy_Accessible.pdf Accessed 30 Nov 2021.

¹⁶ Henze and Zhu (2012:91) list five main perceptions of Chinese students as a heuristic for analysis: 1) as customers, as a source of revenue for higher education institutions primarily in the West; 2) as a source of 'irritation' or 'fear', due to the perceived impact of Chinese learning styles on teaching and learning at host institutions; 3) as catalysts and obstructions for mutual learning and mutual enrichment in theory-building and developing practice; 4) as the world's 'largest floating academic potential', creating intensive competition within the international education market in terms of top-level manpower and a growing share in the international student body; 5) as a special reference group for general research on culture shock, adaptation and adjustment.

provides a bibliographic analysis based on Wenger's (1998) Communities of Practice theory. Citing several studies on Mainland Chinese students' overseas education experience¹⁷, she highlights recurring themes: the need for cultural adaption, as well as psychological and emotional support. Rather than using the deficit model identified earlier, Ding identifies the high degree of agency exercised by Chinese students in order to achieve both their explicit and implicit motives through active engagement with host academic practices (2016:127).

Xu (2022) provides a significantly more nuanced analysis through a post-colonial lens. Using a thematic-narrative review of 128 English-language and 74 Chinese-language peer-reviewed articles from 2015-2020, she notes parallels with the findings of Henze and Zhu (2012) and Ding (2016) in the studies addressing pedagogical subjects, but asserts that 'monolithic understandings' (2022:151) of Chinese students in the dominant English-language discourse have created a 'knowledge gap', overshadowing the contributions of the smaller body of Chinese-language literature. Of particular significance to this thesis is Xu's assertion that knowledge production is clearly 'shaped by a country's social and political contexts' (2022:153). She comments that within the English-language literature, globalisation and academic capitalism should be recognised as creating 'certain discursive orientations' which fit the 'political agenda and policy climates of (Western) host countries' (2022:153). This has had the effect of creating 'subject positions' for Chinese international students which create and reinforce stereotypes among those being researched. Chinese students have therefore been uncritically subject to 'ideological constructions' and 'undifferentiated monolithic portrayals' with scant regard for their economic, political, ethnic, epistemic backgrounds and beliefs (2022:153). She therefore echoes Wu and Tarc's call (2019:16) for 'deeper,

¹⁷ Works cited include Gu & Schweisfurth 2015; Goff & Carolan 2013; Briguglio & Smith 2012; Wang 2012; Singh 2009; Edwards & Ran 2006; Jiang 2005, among many others

more compelling and existentially significant ways' of engaging with Chinese students' transnational experiences. Within this thesis, for example, addressing the post-colonial bias identified by Xu would entail an interrogation of Chinese students' interactions with Christianity which goes beyond the current assumptions of intercultural exchange and adhesive bonds. The implications of this will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

University as a habitus for spiritual inquiry

A discussion of faith inquiry in the varsity necessitates an acknowledgement and critique of the known link between higher education and student religion. University life has been acknowledged as creating a liminal space which encourages spiritual inquiry and growth (Dutton 2008), but the significance of spiritual change or development as a part of life as an international student remains muted (Reid 2017; Virkama 2017). Some scholars have attempted a fuller understanding of the transformative potential of the international academic sojourn (Gu & Schweisfurth 2015; Gill 2010; among others). Pelletier notes that 'one is immediately struck by the emphasis on the problems and need for help which international students are perceived to have' (2003:15). As such, it is felt that the study of the existential and spiritual aspects of international students' lives are urgently needed, alongside political issues as hybridisation and transnationalism (Smith 2010).

One key assumption in the literature is that Western universities – for better or worse - produce a distinctive subculture, as described by Guest, paraphrasing Berger (1999): 'Higher education not only frames the perspectives of influential elites, it also, in so doing, imposes itself on the versions of social reality elevated by Western cultures as authoritative' (Guest 2013:346). Hill (2011), however, describes the limited impact of the secular context of North American higher education on religious students. The work by Guest et al (2013) emphasises the 'small but vocal minority' of evangelical Christians

among the religious representation on campus, an observation which is echoed by other scholars (Ma 2021; Yu 2017; Li 2012) and used to critique the experience of Chinese students participating in events organised by evangelical Christian faith-based groups.

While Berger's work was on the secularizing influence of Western (British) universities, a thesis which is disputed by other scholars (for example, Guest et al 2013a, 2013b; Reimer 2010; Mayrl & Oeur 2009), there is general agreement that Western universities both create the potential to, and do, shape social realities with a specific emphasis on the values of liberal democracies. In view of this it is perhaps understandable that scholars note the opportunities to re(construct) new and possibly multiple social identities while studying overseas, including a religious identity where none might have existed prior to arrival on campus (see, for example, Ding & Devine, 2017; Jiang, 2009; Hall, 2006; Yang, 1998, among others). More recent research into the Christian experience at British universities has begun to address such questions, recognising the university as a 'site of contestation of religious identity' (Aune & Guest 2017, Guest et al 2013a, 2013b). Although Guest et al write primarily from the perspective of British students, it is clear from the literature reviewed later in this chapter that such contestation is also experienced by international students, including students from mainland China.

Religious contestation and factors leading to change

Before addressing the literature regarding Chinese students' participation in Christian activities and the potential for religious contestation, it is helpful to consider Yang's assertion of the range of factors involved in religious change (1998). These are identified as 1) social contextual issues and institutional factors, both pre-migration in the home country, and during the immigrant experience in the West, and 2) individual factors, such as personality, personal crisis and interpersonal bonds within social networks.

Amongst the social contextual factors of greatest influence in modern Chinese students' pre-migration experience are firstly, the history and background of religion in

China, including the question of ‘Chinese religion’ and disputed interpretations of ‘Chinese atheism’. These are important as scholars have historically recognised as Chinese religious ideologies as having an implicit influence on Chinese thought, even if individuals do not explicitly self-identify as being ‘religious. Secondly, the unique contours of generational identity shaped by events in modern Chinese history. A third social contextual factor is the phenomenon of Chinese individualisation resulting from increased globalisation and modernisation, and its impact on long-held values and practices such as filial piety.

Although these three factors have not explicitly been identified within the discourse on Chinese students encountering Christianity overseas, they appear in the wider literature mapping cultural and social change in China, especially in the decades following the economic liberalization initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, followed by the subsequent increase in modernisation and globalisation, particularly under President Xi Jinping.

In the next section, each of these factors will be discussed in turn, developing a picture of the multiple worlds of Chinese students in their pre-migration childhood and early development. This will inform and add clarity to my later discussion of the assumptions and conclusions of scholars entering the discourse on Chinese students engaging with the Christian faith while overseas.

Chinese religion - historical and social contexts

In the study of the twentieth-century history of Chinese religions, scholars have debated the question of the notion of ‘religion’, which could be described as a contested term in the literature (see for example, Clart 2013; Fan 2011). As a preamble to discussing the religious context of Chinese students, it is thus important to outline the multiplicity of understandings of ‘Chinese religion’ across academic disciplines beyond Western academia. Tan (2020:41), for example, summarises the two main approaches to religion

in Western academy as the substantivist (or essentialist) approach, which defines religion in terms of its belief content, and the functionalist approach, which seeks a definition in terms of its social function, as per Durkheim (1912/2001), and as a unified system of beliefs and practices related to sacred things.

However, scholars of Chinese religion such as Philip Clart (2013), Fan Lizhu (2011), Vincent Goossaeart and David Palmer (2011), Yao Xinzhong and Zhao Yanxia (2010), as well as Malaysian Chinese theologians like Tan (2020), have noted the absence of a term corresponding with the modern Western concept of religion in classical Chinese. Tan (2020:41) asserts that the modern Chinese term used to describe ‘religion’ (*zongjiao*¹⁸) has its roots in the Japanese kanji term ‘shukyo’. The term has been determined to be preferable to and distinct from *mixin*¹⁹, meaning ‘superstition’ (Clart 2013). Despite using a borrowed term for ‘religion’, however, Tan (2020) and others²⁰ indigenize the term by equating the characters *zongjiao* to religious practice in China. The term involves a combination of Chinese characters, whose pictograms embody family lineage, transmission and devotion in the character *zong* 宗, together with those for filial piety (*xiao*) 孝 and culture (*wen*) 文 in the character for teaching (*jiao*) 教 (Yao & Zhao 2010). In Tan’s view therefore, the term points to teaching which is inherited from the past or given by ancestors.

Conversely, Fan asserts that the adoption of a Western term, translated into Chinese, led twentieth century Chinese scholars to use a process which she describes as ‘reverse analogical interpretation’ (2011:88). Scholars erroneously defined ‘religion’ based upon post-reformation Christianity, with its institutional structures, trained clergy roles, well-developed doctrines and ‘a distinct dichotomy between the sacred and profane’ (Fan

¹⁸ 宗教

¹⁹ 迷信

²⁰ Including C.K. Yang’s seminal work, *Religion in Chinese society: A study of contemporary social functions of religion and some of their historical factors* (1961:20), cited by Fan Lizhu (2011:91).

2011:89), none which had existed in Chinese religious discourse previously, and had little to do with the rich religious dynamics and deep spirituality of Chinese culture. Aspects of this discussion will be applied to my analysis in Chapter Seven.

Whereas other definitions of ‘religion’ might limit its purview to social relations or ritual belief, an accurate understanding is particularly important when considering the place of religion within Chinese society. Scholars such as Chau (2011, 2019), Fan (2011) and Goossaeart and Palmer (2011) for example, assert that the (mis)application of Western religious theories in the study of Chinese religion has led to misplaced emphases on propositional belief and the institutionalisation of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, to the detriment of more contextualised practices within Chinese folk religion. C.K. Yang’s theory of ‘diffused religion’ attempted to encompass elements of both, in stating that premodern Chinese diffused religion included ‘theology, rituals, and organization intimately merged with the concepts and structure of secular institutions and other aspects of the social order’ (Yang 1961:20, cited by Madsen). For C.K. Yang, the primary site of religion was the family, embedded within the wider community, with its identity and continuity maintained through ancestral worship rituals, with oversight of multiple family lineages overseen by community gods.

In addition, Chinese scholars are increasingly debating new theoretical frameworks for the role of religion, particularly within indigenous studies of Chinese society and culture (Law 2017). These include the ‘Religious Ecology’ model propounded by Mou Zhongjian, in which the main religions in China (Marxism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism) fall under the plural/harmonious type and are perceived to co-exist peacefully, as opposed to the dominant ‘Religious Economy’ models developed by Stark and Finke (Chau 2011:547), which take a supply-and-demand approach to religious growth. This latter model has been extensively developed by Yang Fenggang (2012), especially to explain the rapid growth of Christianity amid social

change in China, though he is not without detractors. Chau, for example, argues that religious economy models are dependent on religious cultures – such as those in the European and American church context - which involve congregational modes of religious practice, requiring exclusive membership, with members actively ‘practising’ their religion and promoting their ‘religious products’. The goals of such members are expansionist and conversionist, and the religious economy is open and competitive, with ‘free and open availability of diverse religious products’ for consumers to choose from (2011:548). The Western context is therefore perceived to differ significantly from the Chinese situation.

Religious and philosophical foundations

Despite the literature contesting definitions of ‘Chinese religion’, scholars broadly agree that Chinese religious thought and practice has been significantly shaped by what is known as the Three Teachings (*sanjiao*), comprising Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism²¹, although as noted in the previous section, disagreement exists regarding the process by which the teachings came to be perceived to be ‘institutionalised religions’ in China²². The Three Teachings form the complex and fluid confluence of religious thought which has been the cornerstone of traditional Chinese ideology, culture and society for thousands of years (Yao & Badham 2007:5, among others). It is therefore important to briefly trace how each major stream has developed, shaping Chinese thought in different ways.

²¹ Additionally, Tan cites the latter influence of Chinese ‘folk religion’ in his analysis of ritual practices and beliefs surrounding Chinese festivals. Citing Fowler and Fowler’s work on Chinese religions (2008), Tan defines this as the religion of ordinary folk which lies ‘to some extent outside the realms of institutional, established beliefs and practice’. Chinese folk religion encompasses the ritual practices involving, for example, the Jade Emperor, along with deified historical figures, local spirits, and household gods, none of which are found in the formalised teachings of Buddhism, Taoism or Confucianism (2020:121).

²² Chau, for example, provides an alternative conceptualization in his *Modalities of Chinese Religion* (2011, 2019), which I refer to later in this chapter, as well as throughout this thesis.

Confucianism (*Rujia*²³)

Confucian teaching has its roots in the teachings of Kong Qiu (born 551 BCE, according to tradition), whose reverent title Kong Fuzi was later Latinized to the more commonly known Confucius. Confucius served in the royal courts during the Chou dynasty (1121 – 249 BCE), when the decline of the royal house and rise of feudal princes created societal chaos and widespread misery for the populace. This could be righted, in his perspective, through just and benevolent government, which should be based on mortal virtues (Yao 1996).

Among other requirements, good government should perform rites and ceremonies (*li*²⁴) correctly, thus serving as models for the people who would then cultivate the virtues and habits of good behaviour, the aim being to become so-called ‘people of virtue’, or *junzi*²⁵. Moral excellence therefore was achievable through the determined will and a consistent habit of good behaviour: ‘A chun-tzu²⁶, who was full of sincerity in relation to his world and full of harmony in relation to his true self, would in turn be the most suitable person to do administrative work’ (Yao 1996:27). In his later years, Confucius believed he had come to understand the Mandate of Heaven (*tianming*)²⁷ and would later describe himself as ‘a person of virtue faithfully devoted to learning the ancient classics’ (Analects, Book VII, 1), with his thoughts and writings collected in the *Lun Yu* (also known as The Analects of Confucius). This consists of twenty books and nearly five hundred chapters, recorded and compiled by Confucius’ disciples and their students.

Having built his school of thought and teaching on pre-existing Chinese culture, the Confucian brand of secular humanism has maintained its influence on everyday life in China through eras of varying religious hostility and accommodation from the governing

²³ 儒家

²⁴ 礼

²⁵ 君子

²⁶ Yao uses the Giles-Wade method of romanized Chinese script, the pinyin of which is *junzi*

²⁷ 天命

bodies, followed by the relative renaissance of Confucian thought of the last twenty years. Although having lost some of its religious character in Republican China (from 1912 onwards), in recent years Confucianism has regained popularity and influence as ‘an element of inspiration for modern state-sponsored civilizing and social reform projects’ (Goossaeart & Palmer 2011:87), possibly as a rebuttal to the increasing globalisation and consequent Westernisation of Chinese society.

The Communist government’s move to Sinicise philosophical thought has led to a reclamation of Confucianism as a national religion and philosophy, emphasising its historical role in maintaining relationships within Chinese society. This has been applied particularly with regards to ethical concerns and the preservation of filial piety as a core value, although the latter is also being moderated by the combined onslaught of globalisation and modernisation, as I show later in this chapter. It could be said that the influence of Confucianism is so embedded within Chinese thinking that the current generation embodies many of its ideals and values without even understanding its influence on their worldview and culture²⁸ (Fan & Chen, 2015:31).

Taoism/Daoism (*Daojiao*)²⁹

In comparison, Taoism, which arose in the second century CE, relies not only on philosophical texts but includes institutional organizations, rites and ceremonies and a pantheon of terrestrial and celestial deities and physical and hygiene practices which lead to immortality. Key Taoist images and symbols representing the cosmological and ritualistic concepts include the *Bagua*, the Eight Trigrams, which in combinations of two make up the 64 hexagrams of the I-Ching, which reveals the principles by which humans can align themselves intelligently with the *qi*, and so achieve the balance of *Yin* and *Yang* (depicting dark and light, respectively) which determine the positive flow of health and

²⁸ Fan and Chen describe this using the term ‘the multitude use it every day without knowing’ 百姓日用而不知 (2015:31).

²⁹ 道教

energy in human life. In everyday life for the ordinary Chinese adherent, Taoism is seen to have relevance mainly to the larger notions of success and well-being.

Buddhism (*Fojiao*³⁰)

Buddhism, the third major contributor to Chinese religious thought, was introduced from India via Nepal by monks and merchants during the Han dynasty (150 CE). It subsequently succeeded in becoming assimilated into Chinese culture through significant integration with Taoism, through the borrowing of ideas and lexical concepts. As Yao and Badham note (2007:97), the core Buddhist doctrinal beliefs, such as the ‘Four Noble Truths’, ‘The Noble Eightfold Path’ and ‘The Twelve Nidanas’ are particularly influential within the Chinese worldview based on ‘everything arising from conditional causation’, the understanding of the existence of suffering, and the means to overcome suffering by adhering to the Noble Eightfold Path. However, in general the more profound doctrinal concepts are the preserve of monks and Buddhist scholars rather than the ordinary adherent, for whom Buddhism is probably most influential in shaping a view of the afterlife, a concept which receives little attention in Confucianism or Taoism.

The traditional Chinese cosmology originally consisted of three dimensions: heaven, the human world and the underworld, which was the dwelling place of the ancestors. The subsequent addition of the Buddhist doctrine of karma and reincarnation, alongside the Confucian focus on filial piety and ancestor veneration, formed a potent combination which has been incorporated into Chinese Folk Religion. The syncretistic spiritual world of Chinese Folk Religion includes not only deities derived from Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism but includes ghosts and ancestors (Tan 2020:122; Yao & Badham 2007:5).

Christianity in China

Although considered an ‘incomer’ to the Chinese religious landscape, Christianity has a long history in China dating back to the seventh century Tang dynasty, brought by

³⁰ 佛教

Nestorian missionaries, with a subsequent imperial decree in 638 CE permitting Christianity to spread freely within the empire (Walls 2017). The Western missionary movement from the sixteenth to the twentieth century included both a Catholic phase from Southern Europe and a Protestant phase from Germany and Central Europe (Walls 2017:218-219). The forced opening of China to European trade through ‘gunboat diplomacy’ from 1842 resulted in rapid missionary expansion by denominational missions from the West, with the establishment of mission stations, Christian schools and hospitals as growth in the missionary movement led to a burgeoning of institutional infrastructure. These were followed by faith missions such as Hudson Taylor’s China Inland Mission, whose focus was on the rapid evangelisation of China’s millions in the inland territories. The historical connection between Christian evangelisation and Western colonisation, however, has left its mark in the enduring belief among some that the Christian faith is intrinsically linked with ‘Western cultural hegemony and religious colonialism’ (Clart 2013:191).

Madsen notes the transformation of religion in China after 1949, during the first three decades of Communist control, when Stalinist policies were adopted by Chinese communists, leading to the control and elimination of religion (2014:17). Nonetheless, following the social and economic reforms introduced by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, Chinese churches have more or less independently practised their faith’ (Yao & Badham 2007:70), with Protestant churches officially functioning either under the Communist Party-established Three-Self Patriotic Movement³¹ or the China Christian Council, alongside the unregistered ‘house church’ movement (Clart 2013). Clart notes the work of Chinese sociologists like Mou Zhongjian and Li Xiangping, who, while recognising the existence of Christianity as one of the main religions of China, continue to see its growth as a ‘religious question’ to be solved (2013:187).

³¹ Based on the principles of self-government, self-support and self-propagation

Since the 1990s, the rapid development of Christianity in China has been widely noted, with Goossaeart and Palmer noting its strong appeal to ‘educated urbanites and affluent entrepreneurs’ (2011:302), albeit having initially taken root in rural communities. This corroborates Yang Fenggang’s earlier theory (2005) that the attraction to Christianity for young adults joining Bible studies in McDonald’s represented not only an interest in the faith, but a participation in globalisation and Western modernity. Yang Huilin’s research (published in 2002) on students at the Renmin University indicated that only 3.6 percent explicitly acknowledged belief in Christianity. Nonetheless, over 70 percent ‘considered that Christianity would enrich social culture, help Chinese people to understand the West, and increase Sino-Western cultural exchange’ (cited by Goossaeart & Palmer 2011:302). Interestingly, this opinion has continued to be held almost two decades later by contemporary students, as seen in the discourse on Chinese students interacting with Christianity overseas (see Yu 2017, 2019, for example).

Two observations from the literature on Chinese Christianity are particularly significant to this thesis. The first is a comment from Madsen (2014) that while evangelical Protestant Christians in China express their Christian identity through ‘voluntary acceptance of faith in Jesus’, ‘belief is less a matter of assent to doctrines and more a matter of profound emotional experiences’ (2014:21). This leads to ‘a churning of the ambivalent mixture of belief and unbelief’ which is not stable and might be combined with ‘contradictory beliefs’ from Daoism and Buddhism in ‘syncretistic packages’ (2014:21). Such a comment highlights the importance of understanding how belief change and doctrinal understandings might develop as Chinese students participate in Bible studies, apart from the socio-cultural reasons which are currently propounded.

The second is the phenomenon of ‘cultural Christians’ (Yang 2012; Goossaeart and Palmer 2011) consisting of Chinese intellectuals who are openly sympathetic and take an entirely cultural approach to Christianity, translating ‘Western books of Christian

theology, philosophy, and history into Chinese language’; publishing books and articles about Christianity and lecturing on campuses to introduce Christianity to academia (Yang 2012:54). As academics based in universities and involved in research, cultural Christians claim to be studying Western culture and not religion per se. Yang observes that the reading of publications by cultural Christians forms the initial contact with Christianity for many college students (2012). The existence of cultural Christians in China serves as a plausible explanation for two notable features in the discourse: first, the phenomenon of Chinese postgraduate students participating in church or Christian activities citing a desire for intercultural exchange. Second, the studies of Chinese conversion to Christianity overseas conducted by Mainland Chinese researchers, which are framed entirely in terms of intercultural exchange or transnational learning, as I will discuss at the end of this chapter.

Non-Western atheism/ ‘No religious background’

Despite the prominence of the Three Teachings and Chinese Folk Religion in the Chinese religious context, most of the literature notes that the majority of students arriving to study overseas identify themselves as non-religious or ‘having no religious background’ (see for example, Ma 2021; Yun 2017; Ding & Devine 2017). Just as traditional understandings of ‘Chinese religion’ have been contested, as described earlier, so the use of the term ‘atheist’³² has been called into question within Chinese religious studies. Yao and Badham define an atheist as one who ‘totally denies the existence of spiritual beings, has no faith in the power of supernatural deities and does not engage in any activities associated with worshipping any form of the divine’ (2007:169) but based on results of their quantitative research, state that this is compromised in the Chinese context. Yang (2012:43) notes the continued propagation of Marxist-Leninist atheism

³² *wushenlunzhe* 无神论者

among Chinese Communist Party members³³, but the notable Chinese preoccupation (Yao & Badham 2007:36) with fate³⁴ and luck/fortune³⁵ within the wider population contradicts the assumption that contemporary Chinese – including Chinese international students - are predominantly ‘atheist’, ‘secular’ or ‘agnostic’. The scholarly works also refute the general belief that Chinese atheists subscribe to the Western understanding of a purely materialist or secular worldview.

Similarly, Fan (2011) asserts that it is impossible, if not entirely erroneous, to define Chinese religious identities – including the non-religious – in terms of Western understandings. She notes that both ‘secularization’ and ‘agnosticism’ are prominent terms in Western religious thought: ‘Having developed within the context of Western modernisation, this distinctive social dynamic is intimately rooted in the history of Western Christendom’ (2011:97), particularly following the Enlightenment period. Thus, she critiques the common description in the West of Confucianism as ‘agnostic’, ascribing this to the neglect or ignorance of Confucius’ reverence for the transcendent forces of *Tian* and *Dao*. This and similar erroneous understandings form examples of ‘the careless application of Western concepts to Chinese culture’ (2011:97).

As an alternative to Chinese term for atheism, *wushenlun*³⁶, which is literally translated as ‘the argument for no god’, Yao and Badham (2007) suggest that the term ‘non-religious’ *feizongjiaotu*³⁷ is perhaps a more accurate descriptor, being less subject to the assumptions of a post-Christian non-deist or purely Western materialist/humanist worldview. For many Chinese growing up after the era of Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms of 1978 and the relative liberalisation of education under him, the roots of

³³ A development in Marxist atheism was the ‘mild atheism’ endorsed by Mou Zhongjian which ‘sees the social and epistemological roots of theism and religious effects in human history’, promoting mutual respect and upholding freedom of belief (Yang 2012:60).

³⁴ *mingyun* 命运

³⁵ *yunqi* 运气

³⁶ 无神论

³⁷ 非宗教徒

Chinese atheism lie predominantly in the Marxist education they received in school. However, the belief that Chinese young people are therefore ‘militant atheists’ is refuted by the evidence that non-religious Chinese continue to be influenced by Buddhism and folk religions (Yao & Badham 2007:163). The initial findings of research into the beliefs of atheists and agnostics around the world by Lee et al (2019), still in its interim stages at the time of writing, corroborate their conclusions.

A ‘collective unconsciousness’ of religious thought

Based on the preceding discussion, it is clear that while an understanding of the Three Teachings is useful as the foundation of Chinese philosophical thought, it is more difficult to discern the individual role of each, or even articulate the religious beliefs held by those who profess to be adherents of the three strands of religious belief and practice. As Yao and Badham (2007:96) conclude, ‘(the Buddhist) faith, in combination with Confucianism and Daoism, has been deeply integrated into the Chinese mind and become part of their ‘collective unconsciousness’³⁸ or ‘subconsciousness.’

This lack of clarity in ordinary religious beliefs is particularly true regarding understandings of religious practice, including acts of worship and rituals. Madsen, for example, states unequivocally that Chinese religion is ‘more about belonging than belief’ (2014:13), in contrast to Grace Davie’s theory devised in 1994 that religion in the West has evolved into ‘belief without belonging’ (Davie 2015:79). A more contextualised approach might be that of Adam Yuet Chau (2011, 2019), researching religious diversity in China, who has developed ‘modalities of religion’. He asserts that this is a more accurate framework with which to describe religious diversity in China, which he asserts as having less to do with confessional faith in the traditional Western understandings. He finds instead that the Chinese approach to religion has its basis in an instrumental approach which is based on the marking of various occasions.

³⁸ following Jung’s concepts of ‘unconsciousness’

Thus, for example, the Chinese embody religious diversity by the employment of ‘ritual service providers’, instead of confessional beliefs in religious doctrines and teachings (Chau 2019:24). Chau’s system of religious styles or ‘modalities’ are identified as *Discursive/Scriptural*, primarily using texts; *Personal-cultivational*, involving long-term cultivation and transformation of oneself; *Liturgical*, involving ritual procedures performed by specialists; *Immediate-practical*, aiming at simple ritual or magical practices; and *Relational*, emphasizing human-deity (or human-ancestor) relationships and relationships among humans in religious practices (2019:25). These proposed modalities are far more real to Chinese people than the conceptual beliefs of Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism, consisting of ‘a congruence of local customs, historical accidents, social environment, personal temperament, configurations of modalities and the makeup of the local ritual market’ (Chau 2019:25).

Based on the above analysis by Chau (2019), and in line with the views of Fan (2011) and Madsen (2014), Chinese religion might be perceived as significantly shaped by social identification, including the communal acts of occasion-based ritual, and pragmatism. In addition, his assertion that ‘service providers’ are employed to facilitate such practices might suggest a certain distancing from the heart of belief itself. Although Chinese students are portrayed in the literature as having no religious belief at the outset, the unique contours of the Chinese understanding of religious belonging, belief and practice – including non-religious belief - suggest that it would continue to exert an ‘unconscious influence’ on students’ ensuing interaction with religion in the West, especially with Christianity. This has implications for the findings of this project and will be discussed in greater detail in Chapters Seven and Eight.

The changing role of religion in China

Having established the foundations and distinctives of the modern Chinese religious context from the literature, it is also necessary to survey the ways in which events in

China's history might have shaped the social identity, values and attitudes of Chinese students arriving in the UK from 2015-2019³⁹. Scholars have identified salient periods in Chinese history when key events have impacted participants' sense of identity and the existential issues that they face. This section thus charts key societal and religious changes which might have specific significance for the participants in this project, some of which have been briefly mentioned earlier in the chapter.

Identifying key stages in China's long history is a complex task, particularly with regard to the impact of state events on the religious landscape. As a leading voice in the study of Chinese religion, Yang Fenggang (2012) provides a helpful and concise summary of the two 'eras' of Mainland Chinese religious change which I highlight as significant to Chinese students born since the 1980s⁴⁰:

Period 3, 1966–1979: Eradication (Yang 2012 loc1150-1168). Chairman Mao Zedong launches the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution. Destruction of the 'Four Olds': old customs, old culture, old habits and old ideas. Ban of all religious activities and destruction of countless religious sites and irreplaceable monuments of historical significance. Freedom of Atheist Propaganda added to the Constitution (alongside Freedom of Religion clause from 1949).

Period 4: 1979–2010: Strengthening the Regulation (Yang 2012 loc1178-1222). Death of Chairman Mao Zedong. Deng Xiaoping emerges as leader of CCP. New focus on modernisation and economic development. Limited tolerance of religion – a small number of Protestant and Catholic churches, Buddhist and Daoist temples and Islamic

³⁹ This is the period during which my fieldwork took place.

⁴⁰ For further reference, Yang (2012) delineates two earlier periods as follows: Period 1, 1949-1957 Co-optation and Control. The banning of religious organizations, including cultic or heterodox sects. The Religious Affairs Department drives out foreign missionaries and pressures the Catholics and Protestants to cut off ties with foreign countries. Formation of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM). Period 2, 1958-1966 The Socialist Reformation. Increased economic production. Religious clergy converted to physical labourers. Disbanding of Christian denominations (the so-called post-denominational era). Amalgamation for all five religions under the Party-state: temples, churches, mosques closed down or converted for non-religious use. Christians amalgamated for joint services under the TSPM.

mosques reopen. Economic development (tourism, foreign investment) used as motivation for the construction of temples and churches, reversal of these political decisions due to disagreements within the party, and crackdown on certain sectarian groups (Qigong, Falun Gong).

When Chairman Mao Zedong launched the Cultural Revolution in 1966, he instructed the people to destroy 'Old Ideas, Old Cultures, Old Customs, and Old Habits'. As this included the destruction of religion, places of worship, religious beliefs and practices, including any trace of Chinese contact with foreign (Western) powers, Christianity became an obvious target. Bays suggests that Chinese Christians were most affected during this early phase of the Cultural Revolution (2012:185), terming the decade from 1967 to 1978 'a black hole' due to the dearth of details about Chinese Christianity.

From 1979, the new Premier Deng Xiaoping's policies to initiate rapid economic development and modernisation in 'The Great Leap Outwards' can be described in his own words: 'Reform is China's second revolution' (He 2001). Tremendous change for the entire nation of 1.2 billion people resulted in a 'quasicapitalist economic miracle' (He 2001:ii) as people experienced greater freedom in many areas of life, including de-collectivization of agriculture, a growing market economy, private ownership of housing and vehicles, and the reduced monitoring of cultural and religious activities by the government (Bays 2012:185). Mass migration to urban areas and a general increase in the economic and educational standards of the population saw the awakening of traditional and new religions and practices such as Buddhism, Daoism, Falungong, ancestral practices, as well as various doctrines, including nationalism, neo-Confucianism, neo-Maoism and liberalism, all of which continue to jostle for primacy.

In the last fifty years, against a backdrop of varying tightening and loosening of control on religious activities with successive CCP leaders, including a great range of regional variations, religion and religious activities in various forms have revived and

grown rapidly in China. Although Christianity seemed to take root primarily among the rural communities in the 1980s, the movement of rural workers in search of employment in the rapidly growing development zones led to the ‘evangelization of urbanites’ and the accelerated growth of churches in the cities (Huang 2014). This has given rise to the phenomenon of the ‘cultural Christian’, as mentioned earlier (Yang 2012).

An important development since the presidency of Xi Jinping took place in 2017, when the Chinese government formerly responded to President Xi’s call for the Sinicisation of religion in China at a conference on the issue, stating that ‘all religions – those of foreign origin as well as indigenous religions – must be Sinicised (i.e., made Chinese)’.⁴¹ The then-Director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs, Wang Zuo’an, explained that within a socialist society, Sinicisation was ‘a strategy for solving problems in the religious sphere, in particular infiltration from abroad by way of religion, the spread of religious extremism and ‘anti-Sinicisation’⁴². This comment is pertinent considering that Chinese President Xi Jinping, on a visit to the US, asked his Mainland Chinese student interviewer: ‘Why do more and more Mainland Chinese scholars become Christians during their studies in America?’⁴³ The fact that President Xi himself called attention to this phenomenon highlights an aspect of university life and experience in the Western world which is recognised even within the Chinese government, but has received relatively little research until recent times⁴⁴.

⁴¹ Quoted in ‘State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA) holds conference on the Sinicization (sic) of Religions’, a report compiled by Wenzel-Teuber, K. & Weith, K. (2017) *Religions & Christianity in Today's China*, 7(1), 5.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ ‘为何越来越多的中国留学生在美信仰基督教?’ [online] Report (in Chinese) from the Voice of America website. Retrieved from <https://www.voachinese.com/a/china-student-christian-20160218/3196378.html>. Accessed 18 June 2022.

⁴⁴ Since 2017, Communist Party pressure on religious groups in China has intensified, putting Christians as well as those of other religions classed as ‘incomers to Chinese culture’ or new religions, under extreme duress. Much of this is associated with President Xi Jinping’s increasing domination of the Chinese leadership. Although the implications and consequences of these dramatically changed circumstances are still unclear, it has already become evident that many of my participants will have returned to a China on the edge of a new epoch, in which the religious freedoms of the 1990s and first decades of the 2000s will be vastly curtailed.

While changes to the religious context in China continue apace, it is clear from the events I have discussed in this section that even Chinese students growing up in a period of relative economic prosperity since the 1980s have been subject to dramatic changes in their social and religious landscape, both within their immediate community as well as in the wider national context. As with previous generations, their shared experience gives them a unique identity and lends salience to scholarly theories on generational identity, which I will now elucidate.

Generational identity

Although the outline in the preceding sections provides only a summary of complex events in China's history, it provides an important historical context for the discussion of Generational Identity, a second social cultural factor of significance to this thesis within the wider literature on developments in Chinese society.

Social research into young adults will often refer to the Generation Theory developed within Mannheim's work 'The Problem of Generations' (originally published 1927/1928), which generally uses the notion of 'social cohorts' as a heuristic tool intended to help scholars 'understand differences between age groups' and locate 'individuals and groups within historical time' (Pilcher 1994). Each cohort within a generation is perceived as significant not only in terms of chronological order or succession, but in terms of dominant influences. Derived from 'the prevailing intellectual, social, and political circumstances', such influences are formative not only in childhood and adolescence but later in life. Mannheim thus asserts that the importance of contemporaries: 'they constitute one generation, just because they are subject to common influences' (1927/28:282).

Mannheim's theoretical assumptions have come under scrutiny by social scientists and others, who express scepticism about the use of chronologically based distinctions to generalise entire groups of people. Many of these also cite the lack of empirical evidence

regarding generations (Rudolph et al 2021:946). Nonetheless, Rudolph et al (2021) observe that such generalisations can serve as social constructions and provide useful heuristics for understandings of social sensemaking. This enables the capturing of major transitions such as aging and human development, which are highly complex and nuanced stages within societies in the midst of change. Perrin (2016), for example, utilises generational differences as a marker to delineate a distinct group of emerging adults within the British church as she interrogates their Bible reading habits.

Generational differences contextualised to China, however, have not escaped the attention of scholars as well as ministry practitioners. In 2001, the Overseas Mainland Chinese Ministry in America identified 4 major groups of students responding to Christian missions to Chinese around the world (Su 2001). These were named, based on their year of birth (Su 2001:19): the ‘Old Generation’ *Laoniandai* (pre-1937), the ‘Middle Generation’ *Zhongniandai* (post-1949), the ‘Green Generation’ *Qingniandai* (post-1966, during the Cultural Revolution) and the ‘New Generation’ *Xinniandai* (post-1978, also known as the Liberation era).

The majority of today’s Mainland Chinese students fall outside the categories identified above; having been born in the 1980s and the 1990s, they are termed in the literature as the *Balinghou* (Post-80ers), *Jiulinghou* (Post-90ers) and *Jiuwuhou* (Post-95ers) Generations and formed the first generation of children that did not grow up under Mao Zedong. Born under Deng’s post-Cultural Revolution reforms and the implementation of the One-Child policy (1979), many of these so-called ‘small emperors’ and ‘little princesses’ grew up in a new socioeconomic era in China, surrounded by rapid change and greater market competition (Constantin 2013).

Constantin (2013), who carried out quantitative research among the cohort born in Beijing in the 1980s and early 1990s, examined the notion of collective memory which characterizes a ‘generation’. She concluded that Post-80ers and Post-90ers are most aware

of the opportunities and risks created by globalisation, yet are also the most de-politicised generation (2013:16), whose collective memory has nonetheless ‘been largely manipulated and rewritten by the Party-State’ (2013:22).

Among Post-90ers the contrast with older generations is stark, as increased spending power and openness to the West, fuelled by online connectivity, has created a uniquely Chinese form of individualism which is denoted by consumerism, an entrepreneurial spirit, tinged with disillusionment as material success seems unable to provide spiritual or moral guidance (Moore & Chang 2014).

Although writing as a practitioner rather than a scholar, Liu’s analysis (2014), based on his ministry and interaction with Chinese students over several decades, provides an added layer of detail to the existing generational identities, particularly as he distinguishes Post-95ers from Constantin’s Post-90ers, reflecting the impact of the rapid growth in China of online and smartphone technology, China’s place as an early adopter and adapter of social media platforms such as WeChat both as a means of interaction as well as everyday financial transactions and living arrangements, and the ensuing increase in globalisation since 2010.

According to Liu (2014), Post-95ers have lived entirely in the era of China’s greatest economic growth along with the fastest pace of globalisation and technological advancement since the economic reforms of Deng. Most Post-95ers were born in urban centres to parents who were too busy with work to raise their children. This generation has therefore grown up in an artificial environment shaped by television, anime, the internet and social media. In Liu’s description, they are isolated, socially inept and lacking in spiritual resources, with many whose entire life revolves around their mobile phone.

Among the Post-90ers and Post-95ers, the counter-cultural yet inter-related movements known as *neijuan*⁴⁵ ('involution'), *tangping*⁴⁶ ('lying flat') and *bailan*⁴⁷ ('let it rot') are examples of attempts by their generation to resist the relentless societal pressure to work and achieve social mobility. The resistance of *neijuan* which expresses 'growing without progressing'⁴⁸ (following the anthropologist Clifford Geertz) might be avoided by *tangping*, literally refusing to overwork or participate in the norms of graduation, work and family life. Similarly, to *bailan*⁴⁹ is to retreat from pursuing goals which seem unachievable. Movements such as these are examples of the existential challenges faced by the current generation, including those seeking overseas university qualifications.

Chinese individualisation: creating structural constraints

A third and final social cultural factor of note in the wider literature is the influence of globalisation and modernisation on the traditional collectivistic nature of Chinese culture. Scholars like Yan Yunxiang (2010, 2013, among others) have applied perspectives from modernisation and the market economy to social phenomenon such as the impact of individualisation on marriage and divorce in China. The co-relation between individualisation and religion, however, remains a subject needing deeper examination.

Yan's thesis consists of a modification of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's theory of individualisation (2003, mentioned in Yan 2010). He is not alone in suggesting that since modernisation and globalisation have had a worldwide impact, there must be more than one way to understand pathways to individualisation; this is also the focus of Shim and Han (2010), whose Korean-based study posits that East Asian individualisation is more

⁴⁵ 内卷

⁴⁶ 躺平

⁴⁷ 摆烂

⁴⁸ Concepts described in blogposts such as <https://dasreispapier.at/2021/the-pressure-of-neijuan-in-contemporary-china/>, accessed 3 June 2022.

⁴⁹ Quoted in <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/26/the-rise-of-bai-lan-why-chinas-frustrated-youth-are-ready-to-let-it-rot>, accessed 3 June 2022.

accurately described as both individualising and family-oriented in nature, involving a ‘delicate culture-bound balance’ negotiated by the individual in the face of the family community.

Yan’s adaptation of Beck’s individualisation theory for the Chinese context – disembedding, detraditionalisation and re-embedding⁵⁰ - refers primarily to structural changes in Chinese society. Although these are theoretical considerations, there are parallels with definitions of migration as ‘a site for the reconstruction of the meanings of the human condition...bringing...socio-cultural and religious identity de-formation, re-formation and transformation’ (Cruz 2012, quoted by McGill 2016:185).

Such comments must also be considered in the light of the Western individualism, which is prevalent in the UK university setting, thus creating the potential for a so-called ‘clash of individualisations’. Chinese international students have therefore been observed to be in the midst of re-negotiating the identities and roles they will inhabit as they face their impending return to China (see for example, Koehne 2005).

Chinese students’ participation in Christian activities

As interest in Chinese students’ overseas experience has grown significantly in the last two decades, academic recognition of their interest in Christianity has also been noted, with Huang and Hsiao (2015) noting the spread of the Christian faith among Chinese students and scholars overseas and the growth of Chinese churches and Christian fellowships in Chinese cities led by foreign-educated returnees.

Several core theories related to Chinese student involvement in Christian churches overseas can be identified in the literature.

The first is reasons for conversion. While it is clear that many conversion theories consider social interaction to be a major influence in decisions to commit (Carrothers

⁵⁰Yan draws specific parallels between the liberation (disembedding), loss of stability (detraditionalisation) and reintegration (re-embedding) of China under Mao’s socialist regime, with Beck’s theorem (2010:495).

2010), the process is, I would suggest, more nuanced and less deterministic than some scholars (such as Zhang 2006) might suggest.

To date the largest body of studies considering spiritual inquiry and subsequent religious change in transnational Chinese migrant populations has been conducted by the Chinese sociologist Yang Fenggang (1998, 2006, 2016 and others), whose landmark study in 1998 examined Chinese students expressing interest in evangelical Christianity and their involvement in the Chinese church in the United States. As stated earlier, Yang's key conclusion, that conversion is affected by both the social and cultural contexts influencing individuals' choices and decisions, as well as institutional factors, was intended to provide a balance to the process model proposed by Lofland and Stark (1965). Yang argued that while the process model accurately interrogates the individual psychology, interactive bonds and networks which play a part in conversion, its origins in research conducted in the individualistic cultures of Northern America and Europe was a limiting factor when applied outside the West. He asserted instead that when considering group conversions among those of similar national or ethnic identities, explanations which form the metanarrative for such groups should be sought, including 'social, cultural and institutional changes'.

Much of the subsequent literature around Chinese conversion while overseas has used Yang's thesis and his later works as a basis for comparison and/or critique. Brian Hall (2006), for example, applies the relevance of contextual background factors to Lofland and Stark's concept of 'predisposing conditions for conversion' in order to understand the interest in evangelical Christianity among American Chinese college students. Since immigrant student populations from the Middle East and elsewhere did not display such a high level of interest, Hall concludes that 'immigrant status' has less influence on the Chinese interest in Christianity, than cultural and ethnic issues. Hall's framework of predisposing conditions for propensity to conversion, subdivided into

‘openness factors’ and ‘receptivity factors’, was subsequently utilised by Wang Yuting and Yang Fenggang (2006) in their study of conversion patterns of PRC students and scholars at US universities.

Wang and Yang’s study (2006) significantly highlights both the contextual factors, such as the political climate and situation in China, ‘ecological factors’ such as the local church environment, as well as the ethnic factors, where the presence of Christian compatriots was seen to contribute to Chinese students’ and scholars’ receptivity to Christianity. Their study finds that ‘the broad contextual factors of social, political and cultural changes in the coerced process of modernisation of China are still prominent issues in conversion narratives’ (Wang & Yang 2006:180).

However, given the rapid pace of political and economic change in China described earlier, there have been dramatic changes in the Mainland Chinese political and economic context in the sixteen years since Wang and Yang’s research. For example, their empirical data cites the continuing impact and influence on the American Chinese church of scholars who converted to Christianity following involvement in the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989. Such experiences are vastly different from those of Chinese international students studied by more recent researchers such as Yu Yun (2017, 2019) and Ma Lin (2021), who have grown up in a period when China has undergone a period of great economic growth, technological advancements and relative social stability. These changes emphasise the urgent need for a re-examination of the ecological and cultural factors contributing both to student interest in Christianity as well as conversion.

In 2017, Qun Ding and Nesta Devine’s study of 24 Chinese doctoral students at New Zealand universities explored conversion to Christianity in nine participants who reported involvement in church communities during their studies. While making no reference to Wang and Yang’s factors influencing ‘openness’ and ‘receptivity’, Ding and Devine acknowledge both that individuals exercised agency in choosing to go to church

in response to their personal needs and crises created by life transitions, but also express the impact of local church people's attempts to draw individuals into church life through acts of kindness. Activities such as hospitality, language assistance and holiday trips are described as 'proactive helpfulness' which has been described as a 'favour fishing approach' (Abel 2006). However, Ding and Devine query Abel's (2006) 'cynical' description, asserting that Chinese students actively managed their involvement in churches and were neither as passive nor as naïve about their choices and decisions as Abel suggests.

UK-based studies: a contrast

The preceding section has analysed the discourse on Chinese students' interaction with the Christian faith across university contexts in several different national contexts. Within the US-based studies which form the largest body of literature, the high numbers of Chinese students and scholars converting to Christianity at US universities led Wang and Yang to label the phenomenon a 'surge of Chinese conversion' (2006:179). A significant role in this was played by ethnic Chinese churches which actively welcomed new arrivals to the US, providing an attractive programme of hospitality and Bible teaching which met the social, existential and religious needs of Chinese students at the time (Wang & Yang 2006). These are described as 'institutional factors' (Yang 1998). However, although many arrivals to the US professed a desire to migrate on a more permanent basis, Yang debunked the desire for inculturation and assimilation as an explanation for conversion in his early work (1998:242). Instead, he attributed conversion to the Chinese social and cultural context, as I outlined earlier in this chapter, highlighting the suffering caused by coerced modernisation, the cumulative impact of political upheaval including the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989 as well as the spiritual vacuum and fragmented Chinese identity left by the Cultural Revolution (1998:253).

The North American literature differs somewhat from the British-based studies, which while numerically fewer, are more diverse in their approach. The works of Li (2012), Dickson (2017), Yu (2017, 2019a, 2019b) and Ma (2021) look specifically at Chinese students' interest in (including conversion to) Christianity at British universities, albeit through different theoretical lenses. Dickson (2017), for example, studies the ways in which master story (following Taylor 2007) and values were perceived to have changed for Chinese students who became Christians in the UK, based on ethnographic research and retrospective interviews conducted several years after their conversion and return to China. While Dickson's work provides a useful contrast to other works, it is less helpful to my present study, first, in its emphasis on self-reported values change in established believers a significant time after their return to China. This chronological gap increases the inherent risks of narrative reconstruction. Second, she studied issues of changing religious identity and emergent Christian belief in an older cohort, for whom the Chinese ecological factors differ greatly from my participants' generation.

The number of Christian converts in the work of Li (2012), Yu (2017) and Ma (2021) is relatively small, but their findings reflect some of the distinctives of the British context. Li Daguo's 2012 study of the religious beliefs and identities of a group of Chinese postgraduates at Reading University involved eleven interview subjects, of which two professed faith in Christ. He divides the responses of his participants to Christianity into four groups: 'believers', 'doubters', 'empathisers' and 'commentators'. Highlighting the internal anxiety and conflict experienced by these postgraduates, as well as the tensions created within the group identity surrounding the different responses to religious change, Li's conclusion depends heavily on the psychological impact of a collectivist mindset within a small, fixed group, such that those who converted were perceived to be influenced by 'strong affiliation' with the Christian 'local volunteer group'. This is apparent from the comment that for one of the 'believers', 'her decision to embrace this

new opportunity for change was only partially rational'. However, as a comment on one of two converts, it is impossible to derive generalisations from his analysis.

A similar perspective is expressed by Yu (2017), whose doctoral thesis studies the rationale behind Chinese participation in church activities based on their desire for intercultural understanding. Utilising a mixed-methods business model as a means of analysing the motivations of organising churches, Yu assesses the effectiveness of intercultural exchange between Glasgow churches and Chinese students. Again, Yu's analysis of conversion is based on three students who professed faith, out of a total of 15 who participated in in-depth interviews. Few details of the conversion process are given, apart from factual reasons for conversion. Yu's thesis is based on the motivations of host churches, predicated by an assumption that implicit and explicit pressure from host churches form a major factor in the student conversions reported in the literature. She thus depicts church activities as a 'marketing strategy' within British Christian organisations to 'export Christianity' to China via these students. Following Li (2012), Yu's study divides student response to Christianity into 'recognisers of universal values', 'deniers', 'believers' and 'hesitators', concluding that since her participants faced little or no pressure (from the Glasgow churches they attended) to convert, they were able to resist the urge to believe in Christianity.

The research by Ma (2021) on Chinese students' pursuits within a religious setting involves fifteen reported conversions, out of 31 interviewed. While her focus is on those who did not convert, she classes one group as 'faith explorers', highlighting their positive attitudes to local integration and diversity, and their interest in British culture and the English language. Interest in Christianity, however, appears to be reduced to perceptions of Christianity in Britain, with a heavy emphasis on the link between cultural, language and religion. Again, the empirical data makes passing reference to participants reading the Bible and perceptions of Christian practices such as preaching, prayer and evangelism,

but fails to reveal any meaningful interaction with Christian teachings or belief. Ma's work, however, helpfully identifies three features which contrast with the US-based studies (2021:5). First, she notes the absence of 'mass conversion' in the UK studies, and advocates further study of those who attend church explicitly to explore the Christian faith. Secondly, attention is drawn to conversions which take place within the 'multi-ethnic local Anglophone church settings' in Britain, in contrast to the ethnic Chinese church locations of the US studies. Finally, and importantly, she describes Chinese students who convert in Britain as articulating 'a biblical evangelicalism' in which they espouse beliefs that 'Jesus is God and their personal saviour' and that 'true Christians are biblical and derive meaning for their lives from witnessing and evangelising'. In this respect, it is Ma's findings which this thesis seeks to build upon.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to provide an overview of international student representation in the literature before focusing on the lived experiences of Chinese students interacting with the Christian faith. A lengthy account of Chinese religion and ongoing societal change was provided to provide a context for the discourse.

Chinese students have been observed to engage in spiritual inquiry in university settings around the world, and this has been studied through a variety of theoretical lenses, most often sociological. However, a detailed evaluation of the accounts of conversion provided in the extant literature reveals very little analysis of professed belief change or spiritual inquiry, despite these being intrinsic to Yang's definition of religion⁵¹.

Whether reporting small numbers or 'mass conversions', the literature shows that understandings of belief change and the nascent construction of theology in new believers

⁵¹ Yang Fenggang defines religion as 'a unified system of beliefs and practices about life and the world relative to the supernatural that unite the believers or followers into a social organization of moral community. Four essential elements of a religion: 1) a belief in the supernatural, 2) a set of beliefs regarding life and the world, 3) a set of ritual practices manifesting the beliefs, and 4) a distinct social organization of moral community of believers and practitioners.' (2012)

remain scant. Given the instability of beliefs and the lack of doctrinal profession noted within Chinese Christianity (Madsen 2014), this is perhaps to be expected from studies which use a strictly sociological framework. Studies such as that of Wang and Yang (2006) have tended to focus on the moment of conversion, reporting the acts of decision-making and the affective reasons, wherein decisions to convert were attributed to feelings of dissatisfaction with Chinese materialism and corruption; and criticisms of Chinese religion and culture, and the ensuing moral crisis (2006:185). Participant observation accounts of Bible studies reveal little about students' interaction with the biblical text or specific teaching, with only generalised references to beliefs in God and Christianity (2006:187-188). In addition, despite the inherently theological nature of the faith inquiry process, the extant literature fails to recognise that conversion in Christian theology is predicated on the work of the Transcendent God in self-revelation, and the human response as an act of 'faith seeking understanding'.

Viewed through the twin lenses of Practical Theology and missiology, these gaps in the knowledge have profound implications. Unless the emerging doctrinal beliefs and biblical learning of new converts can be articulated, even in emergent or unsophisticated terms (Astley 2002), it is impossible to know how spiritual inquirers gain an understanding of their beliefs. Similarly, the discernment of new converts' beliefs in the Christian faith can only be a positive step towards their nurture and spiritual growth.

Having outlined the questions raised by the extant literature, I now turn to the research process itself. The next chapter will briefly present the underlying theoretical considerations which form the foundation of this study, followed by an explanation of the research philosophy, methodology and methods which were used.

CHAPTER THREE

SHAPING THE RESEARCH: THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS, RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY, METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

Introduction

In the previous chapter I introduced the discourse on Chinese students' involvement in Christian activities during their sojourn in the UK, which notes the phenomenon of conversion among some of these students. Although the literature provides some limited accounts of these conversions, they are situated entirely within sociological understandings, linking professions of faith with socially defined or ecological explanations.

However, apart from individual choices determined by personality and experience, Christian identity comes with specific theological content and beliefs. Scholars have acknowledged that this is true of the evangelical Christian context of the international student activities mentioned in the literature. Ma, for example, explicitly describes her finding that a common feature shared by both US and UK Chinese converts is 'the articulation of a biblical evangelicalism' (2021:5). While researchers familiar with the Chinese concept of 'cultural Christians' might find validity in utilising purely socio-cultural frames of analysis, Ma's assertion highlights the urgent need to investigate the nature of such a 'biblical evangelicalism,' and to frame the process through which it is developed, using the lens of Practical Theology. This will not only develop new areas of understanding; crucially, it will provide a more holistic view of Chinese students' lived experience. There are three areas in which the need for theoretical engagement has been identified:

First, the current discourse reveals very little understanding of what it means for Chinese students to begin engaging with Christian beliefs when they often profess few of their own. The first theoretical concern addressed in this chapter is therefore the nature of religious belief, and how it is understood in the scholarly literature.

A second question arises from the process through which they come to acquire beliefs from multitude of sources, whether through interacting with biblical texts, socialisation with British Christians or, as will be demonstrated in Chapter Seven, as a matter of imbibed and implicit absorption from their earlier years in China. While this is a multifaceted and complex question, preliminary understandings will be sought from theories of faith development and ordinary theologising, alongside epistemological understandings of ‘knowing God’.

Finally, since the Christian faith is not merely a matter of propositional belief but of internalised belief which leads to embodied religion and living faith, it is necessary to understand how religious beliefs might come to be internalised and inhabited even by those who are at the early stages of learning faith.

It is essential for this project that any theoretical frameworks mentioned above are further interrogated using a postcolonial lens. This will ensure that due consideration is given to non-Western perspectives of faith development and nascent theologising.

This chapter therefore begins with an analysis of some of the core theoretical considerations which shaped the development of the research framework. The resultant choice of research philosophy, methodology and methods employed will then be described and explained.

Theorisations of identity

Although this project foregrounds the emergent theologising of international students, issues of identity are intrinsic to the faith inquiry process, particularly when considering the experience of migration which leads to a state of liminality, followed by the subsequent (re)evaluation, followed by potential rejection and acquisition of beliefs and values which shape identity.

Through a sociological lens, following Giddens (1991), identity in the fluidic modern social worlds is ‘forged in the social sphere located within temporal relations’

(Bauman 1998, cited by Kehily 2009). Rather than the previous understandings of identity as fixed, determined by rigidly imposed structures such as geographical location, occupational cultures or class, modern selfhood is a process of negotiation. Such is the premise, for example, of Hecht's Communication Theory of Identity (CTI)⁵², which conceptualises identity as multi-layered (Hecht & Lu 2014). Based on symbolic interactionism, and building on traditional identity theory and standard identity theory, CTI takes an interpretivist, constructivist approach to understanding how individuals formulate and convey their perceptions of their own identity in the context of their interactions with others. Of particular interest to this project is the encompassing within CTI of elements of fluidity and paradox in interpenetrating identity layers comprising the personal, enacted, relational and communal layers (Hecht & Lu 2014), echoing the multi-cultural and potentially contradictory aspects of international students' identity (de)construction, enactment and evaluation.

Hall makes the important point that identity is often formed as a result of the interplay of modalities of 'power and exclusion' (2000:4), involving on the one hand, the discourses which place an individual in a subject-position, and on the other, the processes which produce subjectivities. These are 'sutured together' at 'points of temporary attachment' (2000:6). This has the potential to render an individual as 'Other', but he asserts that individuals have the power to take up subject positions as a matter of choice, requiring a degree of investment. Thus, to the degree that international students exercise agency in acquiring new identities, these should be acknowledged to be the result of acting on desire and ability to choose, rather than the outcome of imposed subjectivities (Koehne 2005:107).

Globalisation and the experience of hybridity

⁵² CTI is a theory of identity based in communicative science, developed by Michael Hecht (Hecht & Lu 2014).

A further theoretical concern is the impact of globalisation and intercultural contact on the (re)construction of identity in international students. Faced with the multiple layers at which identity is shaped, as CTI describes, Hall asserts that some will try ‘to reconstruct purified identities, to restore coherence, “closure” and tradition’ (Koehne 2005:108, quoting Hall 1992). Where changes and contradictions occur in the (re)construction of identity, what might emerge is a form of hybridity.

As Bhabha posits (1994:207), the process of hybridity creates the ‘third space’ which enables the emergence of other positions. Koehne’s (2005) description from her research on the ways in which international students describe their identity is particularly helpful to our understanding of hybridity in international student identities. In the context of flows and closure of subjectivity (Koehne 2005:110), students can begin to find new ways of talking and thinking about themselves. Being seen as ‘different’ from local people, or ‘other’, can be both constructive – where one is attracted to sameness and common experience and is able to adopt new storylines – as well as destructive, forcing individuals into closed positions. The impact of difference can be subtle and transient, but following Hall (2000), where a complex mix of subjectivities is sutured into a new storyline, the result is hybridity. Hall (1993:310, cited by Koehne 2005) describes how those living within hybrid cultures ‘inhabit two identities, to speak two cultural languages, to translate and negotiate between them.’

Taking a less positivistic perspective, hybridity can also create feelings of being both a stranger at home, and a stranger overseas. The sense of freedom can equally lead to sensations of dislocation and alienation. Within this thesis, I would assert that hybridity characterises my participants’ sense of identity: not only in terms of cultural belonging in China and the UK as a result of their academic sojourn, but also within their faith inquiry. As those attracted to Christian community and wanting to learn more, they find themselves inhabiting hybridic spiritual identities. They are simultaneously those who no

longer feel rooted within the social imaginary of their home culture, and experience the freedom to engage in the habitus of Christians, yet remain on the fringes of Christian communities, outsiders and observers within the Christian community whose beliefs they are still investigating. This contributes to the internal dissonance and conflict which I describe in Chapters Four and Eight.⁵³

Locating ‘religious belief’ across multidisciplinary fields

Within the study of religion in Western academia, the term ‘belief’ has acquired different meanings and uses across the disciplines of sociology, psychology, anthropology, religious studies and theology. Day asserts that belief ‘has its own genealogy as it moves through time and spaces, taking on the assumptions and hues of the people who use it’ (2010:9). The nuanced and varied ways in which ‘belief’ exists in different disciplines, as explicated in Day’s multidisciplinary survey of ‘the genealogy of belief’ (2011), is an indicator of its ‘embeddedness’ (2011:3) and centrality to human existence, while simultaneously revealing the difficulty involved in providing satisfactory definitions. This is no less the case with ‘religious belief’, which has been differently defined and contested in the literature. A significant question lies in the location of belief: from propositional, faith-based, individualised formulations, to that which is socially and culturally oriented, giving order to collectives.

A move away from purely theoretical conceptualisations of belief leads to the consideration of approaches to apprehending religious beliefs in non-academic settings, described by Astley and Christie as the theologising of ‘ordinary people’ (2007). In adult inquirers and non-believers such as Chinese students, the acquisition of beliefs leading to faith development is a matter of learning prior to or alongside praxis, unlike those who grow up within a Christian family identity. Learning the Christian faith in non-academic

⁵³ See pp 130 and 249.

social settings, albeit as postgraduate students, the articulation of what they believed and were growing to believe is best described as ‘emerging ordinary beliefs’ (Astley 2002).

An alternative approach: defining ordinary theology

The term ‘ordinary’ in Practical Theology is not pejorative but is based upon the Latin *ordinarius*, variously defined as ‘normal’, ‘regular’, ‘orderly’, ‘usual’. Ordinary theology is defined as both ‘the theology and theologising of Christians who have received little or no theological education of a scholarly, academic or systematic kind’ and ‘the content, pattern and processes of ordinary people’s articulation of their religious understanding’ (Astley 2014:2). This study follows Astley’s assertion that ‘if theology is understood in an unrestricted way as our reflection on what we take to be ultimate, then everyone has some sort of theology as everyone has some sort of faith, believing in something or someone. Even if we insist that ordinary theological discourse must have some form of explicit reference to God, even unbelievers – and certainly those who embrace other theistic traditions – have some beliefs about God.’ (2014:6)

A missiological defence for taking unbelievers’ beliefs seriously lies in Hiebert’s definition of a centred-set Christianity which, while maintaining a clear division between those who are and are not Christians, places less stress on maintaining the boundary and ‘institutionally excluding those who are not truly Christian’ (Hiebert 1978:28). This opens the possibility for those who are pursuing an interest in the Christian faith – though not professing conversion as such – to be defined as being *oriented towards* Christ and potentially moving towards, rather than away from Him. The theologian Simon Chan posits that conversion in Asia may be progressive, ‘a gradual process that may begin with a hazy awareness and understanding of the person of Christ and progress to where certain essential Christian truths are formed over time’ (Chan 2014:122).

Whether leading to a growth in understanding, ‘progressive conversion’ or the more traditional normative *ordo salutis*⁵⁴, the perceived spiritual hunger and desire for biblical learning in Chinese students raises the urgency of the need for ministry practitioners ‘...to know about the beliefs, patterns and processes of believing, of those who receive its communicative and pastoral ministries (including those outside the church).’ (Astley 2013: 2) This question will be the focus of my conclusions in Chapter Eight.

Considering Fowler’s faith development theory

Having defined the religious beliefs of inquirers as a form of ‘ordinary theology’, it is also necessary to consider an appropriate schema which explains the development and change of belief from propositional truth (‘Belief-That’) to inhabited faith understanding (‘Belief-In’). Since a central question of this thesis is the process of faith inquiry and development, it is necessary to briefly consider Fowler’s seminal work, *Stages of Faith* (1981), in which he defined faith as ‘a universal feature of human living’, involving ‘alignment of the will in accordance with transcendent value and power, one’s ultimate concern’, thus orientating the total person, ‘giving purpose and goal to one’s hope and strivings, thoughts and actions’ (1981:14).

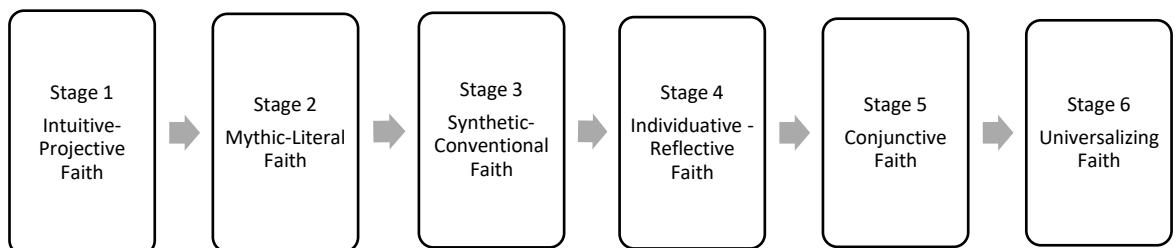


Figure 3.1 Fowler’s Stages of Faith

Fowler’s theory recognises disparate stages⁵⁵ and movement from one stage to the next, based around development from one period of life to the next, and prompted by

⁵⁴ Latin for ‘the order of salvation’, which has its roots in Reformed Theology, ascribed to Buddeus and Karpov in the 1700s (McGowan 2004:147).

⁵⁵ Fowler quotes Piaget in defining a stage as ‘an integrated set of operational structures that constitute the thought processes of a person at a given time’, with development involving ‘the transformation of such

crisis. It is possible to detect some resonance in faith inquiry with Stage 4 (Individuative-Reflective Faith), particularly where there is the ‘critical distancing from one’s previous assumptive value system’ and ‘the emergence of an executive ego’ (which might be equated with the exercise of agency). These have limited application for my research purposes however, as his basic assumptions apply progressive understandings of the Christian faith within the Western context to the stages of child development, with little or no recognition of other influential factors which shape and define faith. Further, his theory seems entirely individualistic in its conclusions, despite the nodding acknowledgement that faith beliefs are held by communities. A more fruitful, and possibly more organic approach might be found in Meek’s description of the epistemic act, as I outline below.

Beliefs leading to ‘knowing God’

One question which is central to this project, in its interrogation of Chinese students’ participation and accounts of learning from Bible studies and the surrounding Christian activities, is what is meant by ‘knowing God’. From a ministry perspective, among the international student activities which could be described as overtly evangelistic, Bible study represents a specific approach to communicating the good news of Jesus Christ by inductive study of biblical texts. Sociologically, Guest et al (2013b) characterise evangelical Christianity on British university campuses as marked by ‘cognitive, propositional belief’. Similarly, Strhan’s (2013) study of embodied religion in an evangelical Protestant church in London describes the ‘self-consciously rational, cognitive, word-based lifeworld’ of the students attending the church.

Synthesising the three aspects leads to an understanding of Bible study as central to evangelical Christian methods of communicating the gospel, wherein examination and

‘structures of the whole’ in the direction of greater internal differentiation, complexity, flexibility and stability’. (1981:49).

discussion of the biblical text leads to the development of cognitive theological beliefs. Such beliefs are not merely intellectual fodder, but, as observed in the scholarly works by Guest et al and Strhan mentioned above, form the basis of a word-based lifeworld for those who come to 'know God', profess faith in Jesus Christ and join the evangelical church.

Developing a Christian social imaginary

Christian beliefs can thus be understood to form the basis of Christian identity. Smith (2009), however, asserts that the reduction of human identity to 'thinking, ideas and doctrines' (2009:63) wrongly places an emphasis on the cognitive, and fails to recognise the human person as intrinsically affective and bodily-centred. Eschewing the notion of 'worldviews', he draws instead on Taylor's concept of the social imaginary⁵⁶, defining the Christian social imaginary as 'more a kind of affective noncognitive understanding of the world' (2009:68) than a 'cognitive knowledge or set of beliefs'. Smith identifies worship as particularly key to the implicit formation of a Christian understanding of the world. The same could be said of embodied practices, such as Christian ritual or enacted faith, resonating with Madsen's (2014) description of Chinese understandings of religion⁵⁷ as outlined in Chapter Two. As will be asserted in Chapters Five and Eight, 'enacted faith' in Chinese students finds its foremost expression in relational action⁵⁸, which will be discussed further in this thesis in the consideration of 'transformative habitus'⁵⁹.

⁵⁶ Taylor (2007:171-76) defines a social imaginary as 'much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode'. Smith elaborates on this, stating that a social imaginary is 'not how we think about the world, but how we imagine the world before we ever think about it' (2009:66), based therefore on the stories, pictures, images and narratives which fuel imagination. The implications of this are discussed in Chapter Five.

⁵⁷ Chapter Two (p46ff)

⁵⁸ The limited mention of corporate worship within my interview data is highlighted and discussed in Chapter Five, from p162.

⁵⁹ See discussion of 'transformative habitus' on p196.

Theologically, Christian belief in revelation (*apokalypsis*) asserts that all ‘knowing’ originates in God, who makes himself known as an act of his own agency. As McGrath puts it, ‘God chooses to be known, and makes this possible through self-disclosure in nature and human history’ (2007:153). He thus asserts:

‘Knowledge of God’, understood Biblically, does not mean simply ‘information about God’, but a life-giving and salvation-bringing self-disclosure of God in Christ. (2007:154)

The concept of relationality is intrinsic to such a definition. God’s revelation of himself is personal, in the form of Jesus’ human incarnation, as well as communicated in the biblical text. Frame differentiates such knowing from other epistemological acts, describing ‘knowing God’ as ‘utterly unique since God himself is unique’. Faith inquiry within evangelical Christianity is thus the act of ‘seeking to know the Lord Jehovah, the God of Scripture, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (1987: 9). ‘Knowing God’ is intrinsically oriented around the covenantal relationship between God as Creator and all his created beings (cf. Isaiah 24:5), incorporating both the transcendent and the immanent: the triune God is covenant head, ‘exalted above his people; he is transcendent’ while simultaneously ‘deeply involved with (his people); he is immanent’ (Frame 1987:13).

Trinitarian theology further asserts that Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the Three-in-One, are central to knowing God. ‘That which we know of the Trinity is that which the Trinity has chosen to reveal’ (Wan & Hedinger 2006:11). The interpersonal perichoretic relationship between the three persons of the Trinity lies at the heart of relationality, which also characterises the relationship between the triune God and his creation. The relational nature of the Trinity is

not simply an element that allows us to apprehend in analogy to human relationships. The personal nature of the members of the Trinity stands in stark contrast to ideologies which consider the divine to be impersonal. (2006:14)

This trinitarian, relational aspect of ‘knowing God’ is thus deeply personal, denying pluralistic or syncretistic assertions that the Christian God is merely a life-force or transcendent power among others. In contrast, the Chinese philosophical understanding of the ‘unity of Heaven and Humanity’ (*tianrenheyi*⁶⁰) or the mutuality of the human heart-mind and the Way of Heaven, which while pointing to a transcendent vision, is entirely based in the interconnectedness of created beings as part of human self-realization (Tu 2001:245).

To know God from the Bible, therefore, cannot merely be an intellectual exercise of textual comprehension and changed cognitive understanding. Instead, the truths found in the Bible must be relied upon, inhabited and embodied in order to represent a genuine relational response to the living triune God. Meek’s (2011) theorisation of the epistemic act, involving the subsidiary-focal integration of ‘clues’ as an outworking of personal commitment, is helpful in this regard. Her account of ‘knowing God’, founded in a covenantal relationship between the Knower and the known, leading to ‘indeterminate future manifestations’ provides an epistemological justification for the expectation of holistic change within the development of relational faith, with the person’s relationship with God as the central paradigm of all knowing.

Knowing...is not information so much as it is transformation. This makes sense if knowing Christ the Truth - having been known by Christ the Truth – is central epistemically. It isn’t about mere information, but about being transformatively known. (2011:63)

Having established some of the theoretical considerations which were pertinent to the problematisation of my research topic, I now turn to the research philosophy, design and methods which undergirded my fieldwork and analysis.

Research philosophy

Epistemology is the science of understanding how we ‘know’. Central to this philosophical stream is the ontological question of what is ‘real’ and what can therefore

⁶⁰ 天人合一

be apprehended as constituting 'knowledge'. Since the creation of 'new knowledge' is central to any research project, it is self-evident that the methodology adopted should have at its base a rigorous epistemological understanding which gives integrity and coherence to the ontological approach utilised, particularly because this project relies heavily on social scientific approaches.

Bryman (2008) briefly divides approaches to research into two main categories, positivism and interpretivism. Of the two, positivism applies natural science research methods to social reality, based on the assumption that absolute certainty is a necessary condition for knowledge. As a corollary, positivism concludes that anything outside the sense-experience evidence cannot be true. Positivistic research thus generates hypotheses which can then be tested, relying heavily on empirical evidence for sources of knowledge which can be relied upon. Such approaches rely heavily on objectivity, utilising the perspective that knowledge is neutral and value-free.

As a contrasting approach, interpretivism 'respects the differences between people and the objects of the natural sciences' (Bryman 2008: 16), thus recognising the subjectivity of social contexts, and places the imperative on the social science researcher to correctly grasp the subjective meaning of social action. Such an approach lends itself to phenomenology, research which seeks a hermeneutic of social phenomenon and acknowledges the role and meaning of human action in social reality. A further approach is symbolic interactionism, in which 'the individual is continually interpreting the symbolic meaning of his or her environment and acts on the basis of this imputed meaning' (Bryman 2008: 17).

As a work in the field of Practical Theology, it is important at this point to state my ontological assumptions, from which an appropriate research philosophy might then be devised. Having already asserted that the theological basis of this work is a belief that the international student ministry being studied is part of the *missio Dei*, it is important that

the research reflects an ontology which acknowledges that the Ultimate Real, the being and source of reality, is the biblical triune God himself, and that any understanding or knowledge of God comes from his revelation of himself.

Philosophers have divided ontological approaches to research into two categories: Objectivism views social realities as external to ourselves, such that they have ‘an almost tangible reality of their own’. They therefore act as external influences which have a constraining or controlling influence on us. In Constructivism, conversely, social phenomena are given meanings by the actors alone. Constructivist approaches therefore assume that all we have as researchers is a specific version of social reality. There is no definitive version of reality and ‘knowledge is indeterminate’ (Bryman 2008:19).

Swinton and Mowat (2006) elucidate the usefulness of constructivism for Practical Theology research:

Constructivism assumes that truth and knowledge and the ways in which it is perceived by human beings and human communities is, to a greater or lesser extent, constructed by individuals and communities. (2006:35)

Further, in contrast with the objectivism of natural science, they assert that ‘reality’ within constructivism is subject to multiple interpretations and can never exist in a purely objective ‘uninterpreted form’ (2006:35). Such an approach is helpful as a philosophical basis for my research for two reasons. The first is the positioning of the researcher within the research process ‘not as a distant observer, but as an active participant and co-creator of the interpretative experience’ (2006:35). As a researcher bringing my experience as a ministry practitioner and former international student to this project, such a positioning will lead to greater integrity in my analysis than attempts to bracket myself, although attention will be given to limiting my inherent biases and presuppositions. The second reason is that, as mentioned earlier, my theological basis is consistent with Swinton and Mowat’s assertion that ‘the Christian tradition claims to have received revelation’ (2006:37), leading to the conclusion that ‘reality is both real, and in principle, accessible’.

The latter provides the grounds for what Swinton and Mowat describe as the process of ‘conversion’ necessary for qualitative research to be of importance in Practical Theology terms (2006:92). Conversion moves qualitative research ‘from a position where it is fragmented and without a specific telos or goal, to a position where it is grafted into God’s redemptive intentions for the world’. (2006:92)

In terms of a research paradigm and research philosophy therefore,

the suggestion that reality is nothing but a social construction requires a movement towards some form of critical realism. Above all, conversion relates to a movement which recognises the reality of God. (2006:92)

It is important therefore to next outline the aspects of critical realism which might enhance the telos of this research within God’s redemptive purposes.

Critical Realism as a research philosophy

Critical Realism, developed in the 1970s by British philosopher Roy Bhaskar⁶¹, emerged in reaction to scientific positivism. In contrast to naïve realism, which seeks a single perception of objective truth from a ‘detached, unbiased researcher’ (Johnson 2018:10), critical realism considers seriously the question of ontology, and in so doing moves away from entirely socially constructed approaches. Instead, by embracing ‘multiple perceptions of a single mind-independent reality’ (Johnson 2018:10), it appeals to the real ontological distinctions between the various layers or ‘strata’ in the natural and social worlds (Gorski 2013:659).

In this project, I follow Gorski (2013) in the proposition that critical realism mediates between naïve realism and ‘strong forms of constructivism’. It is therefore ‘a much more internally consistent and philosophically developed framework for those who have decided to follow the ‘realist turn’ away from positivism and constructivism’ (2013:659).

⁶¹ Although not the only version of Critical Realism, only Roy Bhaskar’s work is under consideration here.

The application of the critical realist approach has implications for those who hold to an evangelical Christian ontology. More than two decades ago, Hiebert (1999) sought to address the question of the absolute truth of Scripture in response to an increasingly relativistic post-modern Western worldview by proposing a solution in critical realism. He argued that critical realism could strike a helpful middle ground between traditional positivism ‘with its sense of intellectual superiority and rejection of the knowledge of other cultures’ (1999:68) and instrumentalism, ‘with its stress on the subjective nature of human knowledge’. Instead, critical realism accepts the ontological position that we live in an ordered world, in which that order can be ‘comprehended by human reason’ to some degree (1999:71). He thus asserts that ‘critical realism offers a third, far more nuanced, epistemic position’ (1999:68), providing ‘a more humble but also more proactive’ response (1999:69).

Hiebert affirms that evangelical Christian theology necessitates realism as an ontological perspective in assuming a real world that exists independently from human perceptions or opinions of it. He qualifies that the content of knowledge is testimonial and irenic in nature, is contextualised in history and culture, and draws not only on individual perspectives but community hermeneutics (‘communities seeking Truth’), metacultural grids and rational analysis.

Such an exposition of Critical Realism is helpful in affirming both that there is an absolute reality which we can apprehend, but also that there are also a range of means by which we apprehend this reality, in which the ideas, feelings, values and purposes of real people are central to our understanding. Hiebert is clear that knowledge in Critical Realism is not totally objective but instead, ‘the correspondence between our mental maps and the real world; it is objective reality subjectively known and appropriated in human lives’, it comprises ‘ideas which interacts with feelings and values in complex ways to produce decisions and actions’ (1999:74). Of particular help as a philosophical approach

to this project is the fact that a critical realist approach validates the evangelical Christian theological stance on the Bible as God's revealed word to humanity, yet acknowledges that truth is 'subjectively apprehended', restoring emotions and moral judgements as essential parts of 'knowing'

It follows that an emic hermeneutical approach is crucial to the understanding of the empirical evidence in this project. Following Hiebert, emic⁶² statements are the people's view of things: 'the observer attempts to acquire a knowledge of the categories, rules, and logic one must know in order to think and act as a native (sic)' (1999:75). Such a stance enables us to respond to those seeking a knowledge of God from other religions with grace and respect, whereas those with positivist or idealist epistemic approaches might be compelled, as Hiebert argues, 'to reject other religions as totally false, and with them beliefs and customs associated with them...The result is a combative approach to other religions' (1999:114). This can be seen in approaches which identify 'conversion' utilising narrow definitions based upon specific declarations of faith. At the opposite extreme is the pluralistic perspective that all religious understanding is culture bound and that dialogue and consensus leading to an understanding of 'conversion' as mere acceptance of non-specific Christian beliefs, even without submission to the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ as Lord. Such an understanding might seem harmonious but results in syncretism at worst, and mere intellectual assent to tenets of deism at worst, neither of which amount to the genuine faith leading to transformation as defined within evangelical Christianity.

In practical research methodological terms, Critical Realism's recognition of three 'ontological domains' (Bhaskar 1979) are of significance to my research: the 'real', the 'actual' and the 'empirical'.

⁶² In contrast, an Etic hermeneutic as defined by Hiebert involves 'the use of the categories and logic developed by science based on the analysis and comparison of many different cultures' (1999:75). The means of testing adequacy relies on scientifically productive theories.

As has been established above, the domain of the 'real' refers to structures, powers, and mechanisms that exist in the world, 'of all the various levels and types of entities with their various powers and tendencies' (Gorski 2013:665). This project asserts that the God of the Bible, Yahweh, the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is the Ultimate Real. The domain of the 'actual' consists of 'all mechanisms that have been activated', where events take place in time and space, although they might not be observed. The domain of the 'empirical' is the domain of experience, consisting of mechanisms activated and observed. The assumption that mechanisms in their combinations lead to specific outcomes thus leads to the need to discover the possible relations between causal mechanisms, actual events and experience (Jindra 2014). Further, the use of domains in this way provides coherence with both the Christian understanding of an Ultimate Real, as well as the demand within the social sciences to examine multiple perceptions of constructed realities. Within missiological research, Johnson (2018:11) concludes that a critical realist epistemological framework 'allows a researcher to see ordinary people's accounts as both constructed and capable of being empirically verified'. A more comprehensive understanding thus requires both careful analysis of the interview data as participants' subjective interpretations of reality, as well as the application of theological principles to apprehend the significance of their accounts.

Research methodology

Having established Critical Realism as my research philosophy, I now explain my use of grounded theory as a qualitative inductive research methodology. By so doing I hoped to maintain integrity with a constructivist approach which permits theory to develop inductively from the data. Inductive methodologies involve

- Simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis.
- Constructing analytic codes and categories from data, not from preconceived logically deduced hypotheses.

- Using the constant comparison method, which involves making comparisons during each stage of analysis.
- Developing schema or conceptualisations based on the emergent concepts and connections derived from the data.

Further, in taking a constructivist turn since the early 2000s, inductive methodologies are coherent with Critical Realism in assuming that social reality is multiple, processual, and constructed, while considering the researcher's position, privileges, perspective and interactions. This enables 'inductive, comparative, emergent and open-ended' (Charmaz 2014:12) study within the domain of the 'empirical'. The methodology is also appropriate for Practical Theological research in permitting the assumption of the domain of the triune God as the Ultimate Real. This serves as a good example of the conversion necessary for Practical Theology, as endorsed by Swinton & Mowat (2006:92).

Utilising grounded theory also enabled my research to give full attention to the voices of the Chinese students who participated in my research. By devising a research instrument which was not driven by a pre-determined theory, but involved in-depth narrative interviews, permitting theory to emerge from repeated iterations of data analysis, my desire was to adopt an approach which could, as far as possible, resist tendencies towards coloniality, let alone the bias inherent to my role as practitioner-researcher.

Research method

This project utilised a qualitative⁶³ approach, with the core of data collected by means of in-depth narrative-based interviews in two phases in 2017 and 2019.

⁶³ Although my proposal mentioned use of a qualitative ethnographic research method, I became aware that descriptions of research as 'ethnographic' might entail immersion in field for extended periods (as suited to its anthropological origins) which were not appropriate or practicable for this project (see Bryman 2008:432). I have hence removed that detail from descriptions of my research method, although it includes participant-observation.

Throughout this time, I also carried out participant-observation of international student events in churches, such as international cafes, Bible studies, informal gatherings and large Christian gatherings such as Word Alive, where the ‘track’ for international students includes daily Bible teaching, discussions, topical seminars and outings. During participant-observation I also had numerous informal conversations with students, ministry volunteers and church or Friends International workers. A further source of primary data came from the analysis of literature related to such activities, including ministry publications, prayer letters and resources produced for internal use within Friends International.

Following a grounded theory approach, I did not want my research interviews to be shaped by a pre-determined theoretical framework. Rather, it was preferable for findings to emerge from the interviews spontaneously. However, it was important to be aware of the extant discourse as well as the wider context of Chinese students in order to develop ‘theoretical sensitivity’. I therefore read widely around both Chinese culture and history as well as international student issues, with a focus on studies of Chinese students on overseas campuses. The bibliographical review conducted was presented in Chapter Two.

Sampling

My fieldwork relied on obtaining research participants initially by purposive sampling and then snowballing. Participants needed to fulfil the following criterion:

- Non-UK domiciled Chinese students studying at British universities at the time of interview. The distinction between Chinese international students who were not normally resident in the UK, from British-born Chinese students or other Chinese diasporic communities, for example, meant that participants would be able to provide information as sojourners and temporary residents, rather than long-term UK residents. In my second phase of interviews, I narrowed the sampling to include only Mainland Chinese students.

- Participation in seeker Bible studies, primarily in English. As mentioned above, within international student ministry, Bible studies are considered the primary means by which international students learn about the Christian faith. This might take various forms, including inductive group Bible studies based on set questions, Alpha-type talks with discussion groups, one-to-one Bible studies using Bible study resources or a free-flowing discussion of a set Bible passage, teaching on a Bible passage in the context of conversational English classes. Although some biblical teaching is given through regular church sermons, these are not generally contextualised to a non-British audience. In addition, anecdotal evidence and my own experience in the field would suggest that international students generally attend small group Bible studies more consistently than church services as part of their spiritual inquiry.
- Attendance in Bible-focused activities on a regular basis for a duration of at least 6 months. The international student sojourn varies in length depending on the purpose and qualification earned, ranging from a semester of ten weeks (for exchange students) to several years for a postgraduate degree. Based on Friends International's statistics⁶⁴, the majority of students who take part in international student ministry events are Master's students on a one-year course. Over 12 months, such Master's courses generally include lectures and group project work, as well as research leading to a final thesis. For many international students, adaptation to studying in English as a second or other language, and the British academic approach are additional challenges. The stipulation that participants should have been in studies for a minimum of 6 months was felt to signify the seriousness of their interest and their commitment to faith inquiry and interest in

⁶⁴Based on research by Dr Adam Kinnison, Friends International staff worker in Bath

spiritual matters, distinguishing them from the many who might respond to initial invitations at the start of the academic year (during the welcome and orientation events), but cease to attend after a few weeks.

- Self-identifying as Christian or non-Christian. As my primary focus was the process of faith development in the context of spiritual inquiry conducted by Chinese students, rather than conversion, there was no initial requirement for participants to have professed faith in Jesus Christ. In fact, in my initial proposal I felt that having participants at different stages of faith development, even where there was no real faith reported, would provide an interesting basis for comparison. However, my first set of interviews revealed the limited ways in which participants with no professed faith or interest in spiritual inquiry really interacted with the Bible studies and Christian community, and the data for that group reached saturation relatively quickly. I therefore focused in my second phase of interviews on participants who had begun to profess an interest in the Christian faith to gatekeepers, only to find that some had begun to self-identify as Christians only weeks before their interview. As has been stated previously, this provided a unique window into the early stages of commitment to the Christian faith, including the doubts and moments of indecision inherent to that stage of faith development.

Widening the pool of potential participants

An active decision which I took at the outset to broaden the pool of potential participants was a clear stipulation that interviews could be conducted in English or Mandarin, based on participant preference. From my professional and personal experience, and from anecdotal evidence in the work of Friends International, I was aware that Chinese students can have conflicting feelings about their level of spoken English. I knew therefore that interviewing only in English would automatically cause a good

number to exclude themselves due to their felt lack of confidence in English conversational skills, rather than their actual linguistic ability⁶⁵.

I also felt that English interviews would limit potential participants to students who are socially and linguistically comfortable in an English-speaking milieu and would therefore fail to be broadly representative of many Chinese students who take part in international student Bible studies and activities with the explicit purpose of improving their spoken English and understanding of British culture. As I mention in the next section, my participants expressed their appreciation at being able to respond in Mandarin, even if they occasionally used terms or expressions in English. The removal of English as a potentially significant linguistic barrier was evident in the depth, fluency and degree of detail and nuance displayed in the data.

Obstacles and limits to participant recruitment and fieldwork

In 2016, when I began fieldwork, Friends International had staff and associates in some 70 university cities throughout the United Kingdom, and there would normally be at least one or two Bible study groups in each of these centres. The beginning of fieldwork was initially hampered by the phases of the postgraduate academic year. Since students generally arrive for the start of the university year in September (in some universities there is a second Master's intake in January), any attempt to interview students after they had participated in at least 6 months of Bible study meant automatically that Masters students would only meet the criterion from March the following year. In addition, with some Master's examinations taking place in late April or May, it was only possible for me to interview participants in the summer months, before their focus turned to thesis

⁶⁵ In a paper from the 2021 5th International Seminar on Education, Management and Social Sciences (ISEMSS 2021), Xu Chang expressed the opinion that despite an increase in school-based English lessons, Chinese young people lack 'the ability to express opinions or communicate with others on social hot issues, while the sixth level is the one that speakers should be able to discuss with others on social hot topics. Furthermore, 'dumb English' is widely spread in China, which refers to the phenomenon that students have learned thousands of words but still cannot speak English fluently; some of them do not even have the courage to speak English.'

writing and submission deadlines in early Autumn. This narrow window of recruitment therefore limited the possibilities of gathering suitable participants and delayed the start of fieldwork for several months, even after ethical approval had been granted for my proposal.

Initially I made a general request to colleagues and associates within Friends International advertising my research purposes and sampling criteria. Following initial interest, I then approached three people who responded, suggesting that they might know students who could potentially be participants. These then acted as gatekeepers: two were actively involved in international student ministry in their own locality as group leaders and key stakeholders. They introduced a number of participants, who in turn, at my request, introduced others of their friends and contacts. One of my participants also turned out to be surprisingly active recruiter, canvassing her friends and contacts on my behalf.

My first request for participants drew a total of 18 participants who satisfied the selection criteria. They also represented a diverse demographic, which included both Mainland Chinese as well as overseas Chinese from Taiwan, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

Following a grounded theory approach, the first phase of data analysis in 2018 produced a range of codes and emerging themes, which guided further in-depth reading. At this point I decided to narrow my research criteria to participants from the People's Republic of China only, due the richness of data and the need to delineate the boundaries of the project more stringently. Based on theoretical sampling, I then sought to recruit a further set of participants, focusing only Mainland Chinese students who had professed faith, preferably in the UK, narrowing the sampling criteria from before. In July 2019 I was able, through the introduction of other gatekeepers, to interview a further seven participants in two new locations, including an additional two who had become Christians in China. At this point I felt that my data had reached saturation in terms of satisfying theoretical sampling as well the representation of participants.

This resulted in a total of 25 in-depth interviews with Chinese students who were actively involved in leading or co-ordinating international student groups and activities. All participants were ethnically Chinese, with 18 from the People's Republic of China, 2 from Hong Kong, and a further 5 from Taiwan, Malaysia and Indonesia. As a result of deliberate delineation, my findings are derived principally from analysis of data from Mainland Chinese participants. Nonetheless my interviews with those of other nationalities provided a helpful background for comparison and added colour and nuance to the interpretive process.

Conducting interviews

Location

All interviews were conducted in the university city where the respective participants were studying. Although I was able to travel to each location, I was not always able to identify suitable settings for interviewing, and often relied upon participants to suggest a place to meet. When fieldwork began, I realised I had not given sufficient attention to factors such as background noise and privacy, and occasionally had to suggest that we move location to permit a better quality of audio recording and reduce the chances of our interview being overheard. In some instances, participants chose locations for interview which they later informed me were personally particularly meaningful places to them, adding a further dimension for me of 'entering their world'.

Adopting a narrative interview style

Grounded theory foregrounds empirical data, which in this project was primarily represented by the perspectives and experiences of my participants. I was aware that although existing empirical research is based on qualitative studies, the conclusions drawn suggest that researchers relied upon semi-structured questionnaires which were devised in reliance upon certain pre-existing assumptions of their participants' experience. In order to avoid a similar tendency towards positivism (and to some extent, determinism),

I sought to use a more inductive epistemological approach, seeking to uncover the stories which lie behind my participants' prior experiences in China, allowing the data to reveal their motivations for choosing to come overseas, and the factors which have led to their involvement in the British church.

Wanting to impose as few pre-suppositions and as little structure on my participants as practically possible, I therefore encouraged a strongly narrative approach to my interviews. Described as 'unstructured tools, in-depth with specific features, which emerge from the life stories of both the participant and cross-examined the situation context' (Muylaert et al 2014: 184), narrative interviews aim to 'encourage and stimulate the interviewee to tell... something about some important event of his/her life and the social context'.

I wanted to encourage my participants to recall their personal circumstances in China and Britain, particularly those which they felt had shaped their motivations, while enabling them to put their experience into chronological order, finding or deriving their own new explanations, and giving meaning to the chain of events in which they found themselves. By so doing I hoped to give them ownership of their own story. Rather than requiring answers to a set of established questions based upon my pre-determined assumptions of their values and logical decisions, I wanted to gain a sense of their own interpretation of events, including the emotions and decisions which drove their experiences and the ways in which they sought to make meaning of their life choices. As Jovchelovitch and Bauer describe, 'There is no human experience that cannot be expressed in the form of a narrative' (2000:1).

In addition, the existing literature indicates that researchers tend to make some key assumptions of Chinese culture and worldview, as well as the background and self-identity of students who choose to study overseas. Studies of student choice and motivation have utilised quantitative surveys, which while providing heuristics for quick

analysis for marketing data, reveal little or nothing about the emotional, spiritual, and psychological reasons for choices made.

Nonetheless, despite my desire to allow deeper perspectives to emerge from the narratives, and my intention to interpret the data critically, I was aware of the inherent dangers of unreliability in my data. As Kraft (2008:244-2245) comments on her narrative interviews with Muslim converts, citing Gubrium and Holstein, 'The writing of a narrative fixes it in time: it is not only limited by who said it (the interviewee) and who transcribed it (the researcher), but also by the fact that it is a snapshot of an individual's perspective at one moment in time. Stories are, in a sense, windows into a specific moment of a specific world, which present not just people experiences but how they perceive those experiences at the time of telling.'

Researcher identity and choice of interview language

It is important to note that collaboration is an important part of such interviews, as the story is 'produced' by the interaction, exchange and dialogue between interviewer and participant, requiring researcher reflexivity. I was aware of my own identity both as a ministry practitioner, as an 'older person' (by some decades) and as ethnically Peranakan Chinese, as well as my Singaporean origin, all of which had the potential to influence participants' responses, both positively and negatively. There was also the potential that unconscious narrative reconstruction might occur as participants sought to assist my research by giving me only positive accounts of their experience. Yet I was also aware, as mentioned previously, that as native speakers of Mandarin, participants would be able to give a far more in-depth and nuanced narrative if they were speaking in their mother tongue. I therefore sought to redress the power imbalance and encourage detailed accounts somewhat by giving participants the option to speak in either English or Mandarin, since, as Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000) note, the interviewer should be careful to use the language which informants might prefer to use as a spontaneous choice,

avoiding imposition, since choice of language expresses a worldview and indicates what the informant desires to investigate. This is perceived to be the way approach to revealing the informant's perspective (Muylaert et al, 2014:185).

As Mandarin is very much a second language for me, it was felt that my willingness to converse only in Mandarin sometimes served, indirectly, to flatten the power dynamic between myself and my participants. A few expressed considerable relief that they would not be expected to speak at length or in-depth in English, which they felt was 'still weak' even after several months in the UK. Being an overseas Chinese interviewing Chinese students in Mandarin, meant that in many cases a rapport was easily and quickly built. Participants expressed their happiness at being able to speak 'from the heart' and 'with ease of language' to a fellow Chinese, described as 'our own people' (自己人)。 This advantage has been demonstrated in studies on choice of language used in interviews, as seen in the work of Cortazzi et al (2011).

The use of Mandarin also enabled me to discern an interesting aspect of the Chinese identity expressed in the interviews, as my participants made repeated reference to British people as 'foreigners' *wai guoren*. This was particularly striking as my participants were very aware that I am Singaporean, albeit of Chinese ethnicity. Nonetheless they would often refer to our common understanding, citing 'we Chinese'⁶⁶, a point discussed at length by Fong (2014) in her ethnographic work on the educational ambitions of young people from Dalian. This is a small factor but suggests that participants were more likely to consider me an insider and confidant.

Data storage

All interviews were recorded digitally by prior signed permission. These are stored on my mobile phone which is locked with a pin and fingerprint. They were subsequently

⁶⁶ The terms most commonly used were *womenhuaren* 我们华人 (we ethnic Chinese) or *womenzhongguoren* 我们中国人 (we Chinese people). I perceived the difference in use to be more a case of mutual identification rather than that of wanting to distinguish differences in our nationality.

transferred to my personal laptop which is also password protected, with data stored in the iCloud for safekeeping.

Interview transcription

My interviews produced, in total, 1,265 minutes of audio data in Mandarin, not including the additional interviews with participants who were not from the People's Republic of China. Each interview ranged from 27 to 84 minutes in length, averaging 70 minutes per interview. I purchased a small clip-on microphone which improved the quality of recordings significantly. As my interview technique improved, I also became more adept at identifying an appropriate stage when interviews should be concluded, thus producing shorter interviews albeit containing the essential information.

As can be imagined, this volume of data created a daunting task from the outset, as transcription in Chinese would again require several hours of work per interview. Manual transcription at the early stages took 15 minutes of work for every minute of interview time, comprising listening, typing, checking character accuracy, followed by iterations of the same process and rechecking.

This was clearly untenable. I therefore sought alternative ways in which recordings could be transcribed more quickly and at an affordable cost. After some investigation and numerous experimental attempts with different software and apps, I found an appropriate tool in Sonix.ai, an online transcription software which utilises artificial intelligence to convert audio files to text and includes capability for numerous languages including Mandarin Chinese.

Sonix.ai provided the capability to produce transcripts of audio files with a high level of accuracy, adding helpful audio markers which divided the text into manageable blocks based on timing, and at a relatively low cost. I then went through a detailed process of listening to several iterations of the audio files and making corrections to each script, particularly when the quality of recording was poor. The use of unusual vocabulary also

added to the need for careful editing and correction. Nonetheless the online app enabled this stage of the research to proceed at a far quicker pace than before.

Bilingual analysis

In qualitative research involving the use of more than one language for data generation and data analysis, the process of translation and analysis of empirical data creates issues of accuracy, consistency and reliability. In this project, for example, the research proposal was written entirely in English, and stipulated the intention for interviews to be conducted in English or Mandarin. In the event, the majority of participants chose to be interviewed in Mandarin as their heart language. Having transcribed the interview data in Mandarin however, the subsequent analysis and reporting would then be completed in English. It was important therefore that any translation employed in the process of data analysis should demonstrate methodological rigour as well as sensitivity to the languages utilised, to protect the subtle complexities of the data generated.

A number of studies have highlighted the potential issues of trustworthiness in cross-language research, with most (see Chen & Boore 2010; Sutrisno, Nguyen & Tangen 2014 for example) noting that there are currently no standardised procedures for bilingual data analysis in the literature, but recommending complex approaches such as back-translation, parallel translation and the employment of independent translators to aid accuracy. Most PhD projects are smaller in scale and lack the resources to employ professional translators. Additionally, some of the literature above makes the assumption that the researchers themselves are not effectively bilingual. Sutrisno et al (2014) suggest a helpful protocol for projects like mine in which the lone bilingual researcher assumes the role of interviewer as well as transcriber and translator. This protocol, in the interests of transparency and rigour, includes requiring a sufficient level of bilingualism and

experience of translation while noting the limited resources available to most doctoral researchers.

Sutrisno et al (2014) point out that equivalence in translation is an important factor, requiring the bilingual research to have familiarity not only with the (two or more) languages used, but the context and common terms and phrases used, since this makes the difference between literal translation and dynamic equivalence. The weakness of literal translation for a project such as this, which relies heavily on the richness of data, is evident, since word-for-word translation is both wooden as well as lacking in the holistic view which adds nuance.

The fact remains that absolute equivalence is difficult to achieve if not impossible. In this project, for example, the words which participants used for Christian meetings ranged from the social language of *tuanqi* 团契 or *juhe* 聚合 to the more religious language of *libai* 礼拜, *jiaohui* 教会 and *jiaotang* 教堂. Lexically, each of these terms refers to gatherings of Christians, but convey different inherent meanings, with *tuan qi* 团契 and *juhe* 聚合 placing a slight emphasis on informal fellowship (among students, for example), while *libai* 礼拜, *jiaohui* 教会 and *jiaotang* 教堂 variously mean worship service, church (informal), and church (formal – could also mean church building) and carry overtones of the more formal acts of Christian worship⁶⁷. Given the demographics of my participants, it was sometimes also unclear whether their choice of language was a matter of clear choice and distinction, or the mimicking of spiritual language absorbed from others. My understanding of the contexts for these terms served as a helpful guide in terms of ascribing relative value to the choice of vocabulary during coding.

For the current project, I made the decision based on the recommendations of cross-language studies in the literature that dynamic equivalence would be the most acceptable

⁶⁷ This is discussed further in Chapter Five.

goal for translation. In particular, Sutrisno et al (2014), citing Constaninescu (2010) and Nida (1969), place an emphasis on ‘producing the message from the source language to the target language in the most natural manner for the target language user’.

Squires (2009) synthesised a group of 40 studies utilising bilingual qualitative research methodologies and developed a set of 14 criteria which can be utilised as a consensus to evaluate the trustworthiness of translated qualitative data. Following the criterion of some of the protocol outlined by Squires, I felt that I satisfied the requirements to a satisfactory level to carry out a single translation procedure. Although I am not a native speaker of Chinese, I lived in East Asia for half my life, including some time in China and spent the first twelve years of my formal education learning written and spoken Chinese as a second language. In my daily life, I heard Chinese spoken in the vernacular both informally and formally, and since leaving education have had professional experience translating a university student handbook from Chinese to English for publication, provided simultaneous translation of sermons and talks from Chinese to English on numerous occasions, including translating for myself on more than one occasion. Finally, having conversed with Chinese students and studied the Bible with them for twenty years, I am also familiar with the terms used in reference to university and academic life and also the biblical language and terms referring to church and international student activities. A copy of my translations was sent to a colleague who is both a native speaker of Mandarin and holds a postgraduate degree in translation to ensure that I had accurately captured the nuance of participants’ responses. Finally, I have included a section of the direct transcription of key quotes in Appendix 6 so that the accuracy of my translation can be verified. These translations were given prior approval by a native speaker of Chinese with a postgraduate degree in translation.

Coding practice

Grounded theory relies on detailed and iterative process of coding, the initial or open coding usually consisting of the study of ‘fragments of data – words, lines, segments and incidents – closely for their analytic import’ (Charmaz 2014:109). This is followed by more focused, advanced coding, involving the identification of significant or frequent codes which are classed as core categories or concepts, which may form the components of an emerging theory. At this later stage many of the initial codes become subsumed under broader themes or are discarded entirely. Strong analytic directions become evident which can then be applied to enable synthesis, analysis and conceptualization of larger segments of data (Charmaz 2014), with the proviso that ‘(c)onsistent with the logic of grounded theory, both initial and focused coding are emergent processes. Unexpected ideas emerge. They can keep emerging’ (2014:143). This proved to be my experience when, as a result of focused coding, I chose to give up on the use of one selected theoretical framework which proved inadequate for the emerging hypothesis.

Silverman (2000:174) stresses the importance of both validity, ‘the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers’ (Hammersley 1990:57) and reliability, ‘the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observer on different occasions’ (Hammersley 1992:67) in data analysis.

Apart from the challenge of transcribing and translating empirical data, the volume of data generated also proved to be a significant challenge when it came to coding. In the first instance, as I transcribed my first interviews, I attempted to produce a simultaneous translation in English. I then used nVivo software for open coding in English. At this early stage, however, I realised that a decision was necessary as to whether to translate (from Mandarin to English) and then code, or code in Mandarin in nVivo and then translate the codes.

Although nVivo can be used to code data of many languages, my own lack of fluency in written Chinese meant that entering data into the software was immensely time-consuming. My other concern was that entering English translations of the interviews into nVivo would effectively flatten the data, removing the subtlety and nuance which my Mandarin data conveyed, since this contained the richness of detail which comes from interviewing in their heart language. Finally, it was increasingly difficult to do the coding electronically based on individual words and phrases, as my interviews were narrative rather than responses to questions, thus lacking in structure. Solitary words represented isolated bites of data which might convey random, unstructured thought (possibly of less importance), compared to the more comprehensive and thoughtful descriptions expressed in sentences and paragraphs. This was particularly as I was increasingly moving towards using nVivo coding as a next stage, in my attempt to honour my participants' voices⁶⁸. I felt that breaking my data up into small chunks would hamper the more holistic understanding which is needed for the development of hypotheses leading to a new theory.

That said, I am aware that without the use of software it is difficult to prove that analysis has been done with the necessary rigour and in a reproducible manner. In the interest of demonstrating my process of data analysis, I thus decided on a more traditional approach to analysis using pen and paper, coloured highlighters and post-it notes to code, all of which was then transferred to Excel spreadsheets. I did this first by listening and re-listening to the audio files in Mandarin to gain an overview of the interview recordings. I then coded the printed version of the Chinese transcriptions used highlighters and post-it notes, including memos. Codes were then charted in English on large sheets of paper with references to specific quotes and noteworthy comments written in Chinese. These written

⁶⁸ InVivo coding (as opposed to the nVivo software) is also known as 'inductive coding', 'natural coding' and 'emic coding', referring to words or short phrases from the actual language found in the qualitative data record, 'the terms used by [participants] themselves (Saldaña 2021:137)

charts helped me visualise the key concepts which were emerging and enabled me to experimentally create different connections between concepts and codes.

While interviewing in Mandarin, I had also made memos with detailed written notes of key points in the interview in English, with permission from participants. These were used to supplement coding by providing information about the non-linguistic aspects of the interviews: facial expressions, my reactions, the mood of the participant.

In the advanced coding stage, I engaged in concept coding, extracting and labelling the codes which formed 'big picture' ideas as suggested by the data (Saldaña 2021:129). This allowed me to code larger segments of data and begin to conceptualize a theoretical framework, although there continued to be flexibility and repeated iterations in order to verify the plausibility of emerging ideas.

As codes continued to be reorganized and reanalysed, a number of categories could be assembled, providing a coherent synthesis of the data. At this stage major themes and concepts became more apparent, as will be demonstrated particularly in Chapter Four, Five, Six and Seven.

Generalisation of small-scale qualitative data

In a small scale in-depth qualitative project such as mine, it is important to address the question of generalisation, which has been described as 'an act of reasoning that involves drawing broad inferences from particular observations' (Polit & Beck 2010:1451). This creates questions, especially where the sample is small, regarding the potential restricted scope of the findings as well as the degree to which they are representative of a wider population. Although Firestone's seminal work (1993, cited by Polit & Beck 2010) provided three possible models applicable to evidence-based research⁶⁹, qualitative researchers argue despite the problems of generalisation, the rich

⁶⁹ These are (Firestone 1993, cited by Polit & Beck 2010): the classic statistical generalization model, analytic generalization, and the case-to-case transfer model (transferability).

detail found in ‘thick descriptions’ reveal higher-level concepts and theories that are not unique to a particular participant or setting, and therefore facilitate extrapolation well. Nevertheless, the burden in research utilising small samples such as in this project lies in proving both reliability and validity.

Since statistical generalisations were not within the scope of this project, the following precautionary steps were taken. First, as part of the grounded theory approach, it was possible to carry out a second stage of purposive sampling which deliberately sought participants who had not been represented in the first stage of interviewing, thus increasing the potential validity of my initial findings across an extended group. Second, in the interests of transparency, I have been intentional in highlighting the inherent generalisations within my analytical framework, as seen in the discussion of generational identity in Chapter Two. Finally, I have sought to apply the *moderatum* generalisation approach discussed by Williams (2000) and Payne and Williams (2005:297), such that the scope of generalisation remains modest, avoiding overblown claims of transferability. Further, the generalisation remains open to change, thus giving it a hypothetical nature. The need for reliability was ameliorated by ensuring that, as far as possible, sampling was diverse, and data was triangulated using alternative means of collection apart from narrative interviews, such as participant-observation and focus groups. Additionally, the grounded theory methodology places an emphasis on iterative coding and flexibility based on emerging theories, and thus lends itself well to openness to change and adaptability, rather than claiming excessive applicability.

Theorising – the synthesis of a new emergent theory

The primary emphasis of grounded theory is, as its name suggests, the production of a theory grounded in the data which (based on a list compiled by Saldaña 2021:348):

- Expresses a patterned relationship between two or more concepts;
- Predicts and controls action through if-then logic;

- Accounts for parameters or variation in the empirical observations;
- Explains how and/or why something happens by stating its cause(s); and
- Provides insights and guidance for improving social life

As a result of inductively seeking concepts and categories emerging from the data, my research questions were also changed from a study of the impact of Christian activities on Chinese students, to the proposal of a new emergent theory of how they learn about God as a result of their participation. A specific outcome of this approach to coding was that the emergent theory captured a far more multi-dimensional and fluidic process than was initially anticipated.

Conclusion

I began this chapter by identifying and outlining the theoretical considerations which arose from the literature review. This was a means of providing an account of the location of my research, followed by an explanation of how this has determined the research philosophy and methodology utilised. The remainder of the chapter has outlined my research method, including the steps taken to incorporate and/or ameliorate the potential concerns and biases which might reduce the reliability and rigour of my emergent theory.

As a study of spiritual inquiry in Chinese students, I have asserted that their experience cannot simply be studied through the lens of discrete areas such as values change, sociological need, theological understanding or existential crisis. Instead, a holistic view is required, which considers the abovementioned factors, but seeks an underlying framework which adequately describes and encapsulates the complex interplay of factors which takes place when spiritual inquiry leads to transformation and change. The grounded theory methodology adopted has enabled theoretical understandings from the data to emerge, rather than imposing preconceived frameworks on my participants.

This concludes the foundational section of my thesis, formed by Chapters One, Two and Three, in which I established the approach adopted in order to problematise the issues at stake and develop my research questions. The literature review in Chapter Two and the theoretical considerations in this chapter demonstrated the work that has been undertaken in order to identify the key elements of the discourse, set against an understanding of the foundational context and premise of the questions I am researching. In explaining the research design, I detailed the research skills applied to the fieldwork in order to ensure that the data generated, albeit generalised, is reliable and can withstand interrogation.

I now move to the empirical section of my thesis, beginning with an introduction to my research participants in Chapter Four. I have sought as far as possible to foreground their voices in Chapters Four, Five, Six and Seven, with the aim of allowing their narratives to demonstrate each participant's striking individuality of focus and purpose, the multifaceted nature of their spiritual interest, as well as the tremendous degree of agency which many of them exercised in conducting spiritual inquiry, much of which is absent from the existing discourse.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Introduction: some cameos

The previous chapters provided an account of the discourse in which this project is located, along with the theoretical and philosophical foundations upon which the research methodology and methods were then developed.

In this and the following three chapters, I present the findings from my fieldwork, beginning with an introduction to the students who contributed their personal accounts of participation in Christian activities to this project.

Andrew decided to pursue a postgraduate qualification in Britain where most of the authorities in his field of study are located. With no prior knowledge of UK universities, he simply applied through an educational agent in China and accepted an offer based on the rationale that the cost of living in the north was cheaper and the city would be less crowded than London. He struggled with his language ability from arrival, but an aunt who had lived overseas told him that he could always find people happy to give him conversation practice in church. He therefore began to attend every meeting and service possible as soon as he arrived and was quickly introduced to the international student activities offered by the church. For several months he attended Bible studies for the language practice but found himself intrigued by the stories of Jesus. He had good friends in the church, and he came to respect their values and lifestyle. After some months, he felt he had learned enough to believe in a Creator God whose son Jesus died on the cross for him. Despite an awareness that his decision to be a Christian would disappoint his grandmother, who was expecting him to continue the family's ancestral customs, he made a profession of faith, but refused to be baptised for his grandmother's sake.

In high school **Gail** spent one semester as an exchange student in Texas, USA. Despite having no previous interest in Christianity, she began attending church with her host parents as well as a Bible discussion group led by a Taiwanese couple. Their warmth,

welcome and engaging teaching about the Christian faith made a lot of sense to her but upon return to China, much of it was forgotten. However, when her parents offered the opportunity to pursue a Master's degree, Gail made up her mind that she would continue to explore the Christian faith in Britain, along with any other Christian activities she could involve herself in. She was paired with Clare, a retiree in the church, for weekly Bible studies. These were often relaxed chats followed by discussion of a passage. Clare became someone Gail trusted greatly. Eventually Gail felt that she wanted to be a Christian. Although she sometimes entertained doubts about her growing faith, she could feel God helping her with difficult decisions and experienced deep peace. When we met, she had recently been baptised.

Helen lost her mother at a young age and was raised by her grandmother. When she started her postgraduate studies, she was drawn to the international café on campus by the friendly volunteers who were always very welcoming. After some months at the café, she was invited to the attached Bible study. This she found extremely boring. Not only did she lack knowledge of the Bible, but she also struggled to understand what was being said in English. The little she understood seemed to be strange stories from the Middle East. The only reason she continued to attend, albeit intermittently, was the friendships she had developed at the café. In early summer she decided to join in the student weekend to Cornwall organised by the café volunteers. Each evening there was a Bible study on Genesis 1-3. As Helen relaxed with the group, she began to engage more with the study. She felt more confident to ask questions and express her opinions and increasingly was intrigued by the idea of a creator God who has a plan for creation, especially for the human race. Thus began a deeper interest in the Bible. Helen began to seek out other Bible studies she could attend, including a one-to-one led by a Christian student. When her grandmother passed away, Helen had a supernatural experience of God speaking to her from the raising of Lazarus. For the first time she felt that Jesus was a person she

could trust, because he could understand her feelings and experiences. She continued to join Bible studies, attend church services and read Christian books voraciously to help her understand more about biblical teaching. At the time of interview, she had been a Christian for two years.

These cameos give just a hint of the range of backgrounds and experiences represented by the students who offered to be interviewed about their Bible study experience. In all I interviewed 25 participants, though in the interests of delineating the scope of the project, I have chosen to focus on the accounts of students from Mainland China only. The following table shows the varied demographics represented by my initial set of participants in 2017 (Phase 1), with the second phase of participants recruited through focused sampling in 2019 (Phase 2)⁷⁰:

	Gen	Professed Christian faith? Baptised?	COURSE	Inte rview phase
Andrew	90s	Yes. Profession of faith 2 weeks before interview, not baptised	Master's, environmental engineering	1
Amy	80s	Yes. Became a believer during academic exchange in Singapore.	Postdoc, chemistry	1
Belinda	90s	No	Master's, business	1
Cathy	90s	Yes. Profession of faith a month before interview, not baptised	Master's, law	1
Diane	90s	Yes. Profession of faith and baptised a month before interview.	Master's, education	1
Ben	80s	Yes. Became a believer in China. Baptised in 2012.	Postdoc, engineering	1
Charles	70s	Yes. Profession of faith. Baptised 8 months before interview.	PhD, philosophy of religion	1

⁷⁰ This table can also be found in Appendix 5.

Dan	95s	No	Bachelor's, accounting & finance	1
Ed	80s	No	Academic visitor, engineering	1
Emma	90s	Yes. Profession of faith. Baptised 15 months before interview.	Master's, accounting & finance	1
Fern	90s	Yes. Became a Christians and was baptised in the UK 5 years before interview.	Master's, tourism studies	1
Gail	95s	Yes. Profession of faith 3 months before interview. Not baptised.	Master's, finance	2
Frank	95s	Yes. Profession of faith 3 months before interview. Not baptised.	Exchange student, Finance	2
Helen	95s	Yes. Profession of faith two years before interview, baptised a year later.	Master's, TESOL	2
Irene	90s	Yes. Became a believer in China at university and was baptised there.	Master's, social work	2
Jen	95s	Yes. Father a believer. Profession of faith one year before interview. Baptism not known.	PhD, electrical engineering	2
Kelly	95s	Yes. From a Christian family but a profession of faith a few months before interview. Not baptised.	Master's, data science	2
Greg	90s	Yes. Became a believer and was baptised in China.	Master's, town planning	2

Table 4.1 List of interview participants⁷¹

⁷¹ In the interests of confidentiality, I have anonymised participants, including removing references to the cities which they came from. I have also given English names to participants, reflecting the common practice among Chinese students to adopt English names while overseas. During interviews, however, all identified themselves to me using their Chinese given name.

Family-of-origin: variations in relationships

Where shall I begin? Where do you want me to start – with my family?

(Diane, Master's, education)⁷²

A large part of my fieldwork involved narrative-style interviews in which participants were simply invited to tell me their story⁷³. Questions like the above provide an indication that my participants sense of identity and origin led them automatically to a brief explanation of their family circumstances, including their immediate family relationships, or their Family-Of-Origin⁷⁴. Participants generally listed their closest relations as their parents, siblings if they had any, and occasionally, grandparents. Wider family relationships with aunts, uncles and cousins were mentioned but were not perceived as influential.

Despite their natural emphasis on family, several participants described troubled or unhappy childhood experiences. Two had experienced parental divorce or separation, with one expressing some distress over his relationship with his mother: 'I have never experienced a mother's love' (Frank, exchange student, finance). Diane had lived apart from her parents since high school.

Three participants (Andrew, Helen and Frank) had been raised by their grandparents due to divorce or bereavement and felt greater loyalty to this older generation than their own parents. Here, the generational difference in religious affinities demonstrated themselves in these participants familiarity with traditional Chinese

⁷² All direct quotations from interviews have been anonymised with participants names Anglicised for the purpose of ease of reference by examiners.

⁷³ A list of questions acting as memory prompts is provided in Appendix 6. I began by having this list available in case participants wanted to know what to talk about. In the event most participants expressed their appreciation for the chance to reflect and tell their story.

⁷⁴ Ambassadors for Christ, a North American Christian ministry to Chinese students and professionals, produced a white paper in 2014 giving six dimensions of analysis of the current generation of Chinese students, termed the Post-85/90 Generation. One dimension examines the continuing influence of Family-of-Origin, 原生家庭, helpfully describing this unit as distinct from the marriage family or family of adoption.

ancestral/Buddhist practices⁷⁵, in which they were required to actively participate. Despite self-identifying as atheist/non-religious before arrival in the UK, these rituals were important considerations for Andrew and Helen, as well as Cathy, throughout the process of spiritual inquiry. Concerns about family reactions to the perceived inability of Christians to offer incense and eat sacrificial foods were noted in the codes generated.

Twelve participants self-identified as being products of the one-child policy⁷⁶, although a few had one or more sibling: Emma, who is paraplegic as a result of a form of childhood meningitis, Helen had an elder sister, and Belinda, who had grown up in a relatively comfortable family in a rural part of Southern China. Emma and Belinda gave reasons for why their families had legally been allowed more than one child, a demonstration that even in anomalous circumstances, the one-child policy had a clear role in shaping even the most intimate detail of my young participants lives.

Family obligation is an enduring characteristic of Chinese social structure, legitimated and rationalized in neo-Confucian thought (Qi 2014). As might be expected, given the perceived importance of filial piety (*xiao*⁷⁷) in traditional Chinese society, parental opinion emerged as a key theme in the data. Although current theories on individualisation suggest that young people in China now experience freedom in many life choices, such ambivalence was rare among my participants, who readily noted their parents' potential approval or disapproval, in some cases, to both justify and/or validate their choices. Communication with family in China was in no way curtailed by geographical distance. Mobile apps and ease of internet connectivity meant that even with

⁷⁵ Participants were not always clear about the distinction. Their responses are coded in the analysis as 'Buddhist/ancestor worship' since the response were typically a variation on this: 'I don't know if she believes in Buddhism, but she is Buddhist. She goes to the temple and makes offerings to our ancestors'. (我不在知道她是不是信佛教 可是她有烧香拜祖宗) – for example, Andrew (Master's, environmental engineering) and Helen (Master's, law)

⁷⁶ The one-child policy was introduced under Deng Xiaoping's leadership in 1979 as a measure to keep the population size under 1.2 billion. Under the policy, married couples were restricted by law to one child, with restrictions applied more flexibly in some rural areas and among ethnic minorities. In October 2015, this policy was officially replaced by a universal two-child policy (Xu & Woodyer 2020).

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a separation of several thousand miles, it was possible for those who desired to maintain strong family ties even if physically far apart.

I'm very close to my family, especially my father and grandmother. We WeChat every day. And they love to celebrate the (ancestral) festivals with food together, so they always send me videos and photos of every time they get together with my other aunts, cousins and so on, to eat or do anything. I feel I am not so far away from them. (Andrew, Master's, environmental engineering)

I use WeChat to talk to my daughter, wife and mother almost every day. (Ed, academic visitor, engineering)

Ed, the second oldest of my participants, appeared to have the greatest sense of stability in his identities as father, husband, son and academic visitor. Despite his one-year stay as an academic visitor, he viewed the overseas sojourn as a brief interlude for advancement and experience in his career. Of all my participants, he seemed the least changed or affected by his interaction with the Christian community.

Thinking collectively, choosing individualistically

While Andrew described a more stereotypical picture of Chinese family collectivism, it was clear that for others, societal changes had already had a part to play in the weakening of these links. Three participants hinted that family separation while they were overseas was merely a continuation of a process of distancing which had begun at a young age.

Diane, for example, referred to decisions to study far from her hometown from high school age, which meant that she had lived apart from her parents for almost 12 years by the time she arrived in Britain:

I haven't lived with my parents for many years. For secondary school (aged 11) I moved to GX to study, which is 5-6 hours away from my hometown. And for university I went even further away, to TJ, and went home only very occasionally.

So (in making choices about education) the distance from my parents has not been a consideration for a long time. (Diane, Master's, education)

As mentioned before, the majority of my participants (13 out of 18) were financially dependent on their parents. This however did not seem to create a sense of obligation, and decisions for children to live far from home for their education could be seen as a factor which has contributed to the sense of independence expressed by Diane, for example, who expressed unhappiness at her parents' desire to influence her decisions:

I don't feel I should have to explain to them. I'll just tell them. I've been very independent since young and have always made my own choices. Sometimes my parents try to help me, they want to make decisions for me – I feel very negative about that, even though I know they want the best for me. (Diane, Master's, education)

One phrase which was reiterated a number of times in her interview:

I don't care what others think, I'll do what I want.

Such comments are not restricted, of course, to Chinese students of this generation. Wu's study of Chinese college-age students (2017), for example, recognises the desire to make individual decisions as one of the universal traits of emerging adulthood beyond the American context of Arnett's thesis (2000).

It is clear that family relationships remain one of the foundational structures of Chinese society. However, one noteworthy difference which emerged from my data which contradicts assumptions of continuing neo-Confucian filial piety, was the change in hierarchical power. Whereas Confucian values prescribe parental authority as moving from parent to child and stipulate that children express appropriate reverence and honour to their parents, my participants seemed to express a flattening of those structures, expecting that their own wishes should prevail over parental thoughts and desires, while

simultaneously expressing the need to maintain harmonious relationships. They did not, however, view the two as antithetical.

Cathy, for example, was brought up in a Buddhist background. Her mother continued to be an active Buddhist, going to the temple regularly, and had often tried to persuade her to read the Buddhist sutras more. She seemed keen for Cathy to become more serious about her involvement in Buddhism. Despite this, Cathy was among those who expressed that their parents would be 'okay' whatever she chose to do. Talking about her recent decision to become a Christian, she felt that this would be considered with some ambivalence, using the phrase 'wusuowei'⁷⁸, meaning 'It doesn't matter'.

C: My mum says, if you yourself are happy, that's fine. If you feel that your life before was terrible, then if your faith makes you live more happily, then just do whatever you like. At first her attitude was... why don't you wait, don't [be anxious to] make a quick decision. I told her, I said, I seem to believe more, the more I understand. My mum replied, whatever you like.

LT: She doesn't feel that your faith is different so you might have a barrier between you?

C: If we don't discuss it, it will be fine. I'll believe (my own thing) and she believes hers. [laughs]

LT: What about your dad?

C: He also says 'It doesn't matter' - you all believe your own thing, and don't bother me, and I won't bother you. So between us we have mutual freedom of belief.

(Excerpt from interview with Cathy, Master's, law. Phase 1 interviews)

These expressions of mutual 'live and let live' and the expectation that parents should agree to their children's decisions has been much debated in the literature about

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the changing nature of Chinese filial piety – considered a key Confucian moral and ethical value. Yan (2011) notes in his study of the changing moral landscape in China the developments which challenge the conventional understanding of Chinese ethics as collectively oriented among the young adults he encountered. He notes that for these young adults, their pursuit of happiness was perceived to be a source of pleasure for parents, thus fulfilling their filial duties.

Such an interpretation of filial piety in terms of one's own happiness is obviously quite different from the traditional definition in which one is expected to sacrifice one's time, labour, wealth, and even life to make one's parents happy. (2011:37)

Observations like this not only challenge the traditional shape of filial piety and the assumed reciprocal nature of the parent-child relationship but add nuance to current evaluations in the literature of Chinese students' relationship with their parents and the kinds of traditional values they adhere to. Yan's study and others like his (see, for example, Qi 2014) express the continuing debate over the weakening of filial bonds in China and the increased prevalence of the individual's rights and desires on the individualist-collectivist scale. Some scholars have asserted that China is becoming increasingly individualistic as modernity pushes personal satisfaction and high subjective wellbeing (Steele & Lynch 2013) to the forefront of societal goals. Chinese researchers like Yan and Qi, however, describe more nuanced findings which suggest that a move towards greater individualism must nonetheless be understood as different from Western models. Chinese individualism should be understood to be shaped by the context of a larger societal landscape which maintains a focus on interdependent family relationships and mutuality in care. In other words, while individualism and a desire for independence were important values to my participants, they did not perceive these as antithetical to the importance they placed on family relationships. Nevertheless, they could not be described as maintaining or retaining the traditional priorities of family over self.

Additionally, in my analysis of the language used by participants, their expressions of individualism - particularly in expressions of their aspirations and their expectations that parents would be accepting, no matter what their choices and decisions – differed again from Western perspectives of individualism. The turns of phrase used by some participants emphasised ‘personal freedom’ rather than ‘individualistic decision’⁷⁹.

It was striking that in three participants, Andrew, Charles and Ed, traditional collectivism continued to dominate, as was evident from their emphasis on what others might think and the awareness of familial bonds and responsibility. This was particularly evident in those who were married with children, such as Charles (PhD, philosophy of religion) and Ed (academic visitor, engineering), which might suggest that their views and ideals were shaped by responsibility for dependents. In addition, these traits were observed particularly in these older participants, from the Post-70s and early Post-80s generation, who could be described as being at a different stage in their life course.

Prosperity – a means of escape and exploration

An important aspect of this project was a desire to understand how Chinese students articulate the emotional and existential reasons for their studies in Britain, in order to discover the rationale for the decisions they were making. Within the wider literature describing the basis of student choice, researchers list reasons as ‘push and pull factors’⁸⁰. I have utilised this in outlining the themes which emerged in coding due to the ease of demonstrating the range and contrasts in rationale:

PUSH FACTORS	PULL FACTORS
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⁷⁹ 自由, rather than 个人主义

⁸⁰ Studies of student choice of international education comprise large-scale quantitative studies to analyse students’ motivations for further education overseas, with the aims of improving the marketing potential of international education. The Push-Pull model is utilised by Mazzarol & Soutar (2002), among others, where Push factors are described as factors which operate within the country of origin and form the impetus for the student’s decision to go. Pull factors originate in the destination country and increase its relative attractiveness to students (see also Wilkins et al 2012).

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Career advancement – area of expertise not available in China • Opportunities for change/growth not available in China • Escape – emptiness, chaotic mind, lack of work-life balance • Search for answers to specific questions: disillusionment over breakdown of relationships in society, for example, romantic (Cathy) or family (Charles). • Inability to cope with personal suffering such as maternal death (eventually led to whole family coming over to the UK to help support this participant) • Parental endorsement of life overseas, family investment in their future 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Career advancement – Britain was where their subject originated • English language perceived as instrumental to career progression • Possibility of thinking and living in a different way, even if only temporarily • Opportunities for new life and new beginning • Opportunity to experience different cultures (not just British but global) • Sense of freedom of choice (lifestyle, beliefs, ethics) • Perceived increase of independence and opportunities for disabled people • Western culture a source of fascination, generally as well as specifically (participants mentioned music, art, classical literature, British costume drama)
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Table 4.2. Push and Pull Factors for overseas education given by participants

My participants were typical of the kinds of students encountered on British campuses today: not necessarily the intellectuals but those with more ordinary academic qualifications and aspirations. In contrast, much of the focus in the literature of the last two decades has been on Chinese intellectuals and scholars⁸¹, suggesting a certain gentrification of the Chinese student. Fong (2014), however, describes how study overseas remains highly desirable in present day China, while simultaneously being more achievable, even among students from poorer rural families.

In terms of financial background, the majority of my participants were from moderately middle class families. Not many could be described as the *FuErDai*⁸² (wealthy Second Generationer), or *GuanErDai*⁸³ (Second Generation child of the ruling classes) depicted in the literature. Participants had parents who were retirees or had been low level civil servants or ran small businesses⁸⁴. Of the 12 who were only children, it was clear that heavy financial investment had come from parents. Those who had come from more humble backgrounds, such as Ben and Charles, had either achieved sufficient financial success to pay for their own postgraduate studies or had relied on a wider group of relatives who had made significant sacrifices for them. This finding is confirmed in Fong's longitudinal study (2014), which revealed the sacrifices made even by rural families in the lower income bracket in Dalian who had invested heavily just to give their children an opportunity to study overseas.

Participants expressed their awareness of the personal and familial cost of studying. Several struggled with stress and sleeplessness, even before their formal academic courses began (Kelly, Master's, data science). Although Kelly and Andrew were able to

⁸¹ See, for example, the collection of essays edited by Ling and Bieler (1999). This important collection on evangelism strategies among Chinese scholars in the US following the Tiananmen Massacre in 1978 describes the Tiananmen Square Generation as 'the younger graduate students' (p54) and addresses a vastly different generation from Chinese students in this project.

⁸² 富二代

⁸³ 官二代

⁸⁴ Based on their own reporting of their parents' jobs. For example, Diane and Frank had parents who were in business. Cathy's parents were retirees, while Ben and Charles were both from farming families.

successfully apply for a place on a Master's degree course, circumventing the IELTS requirements for spoken English, their lack of fluency added to the pressure experienced in the early months after arrival.

Although none were studying to satisfy parents, one participant, Emma (Master's, accounting & finance) made the comparison between young Chinese undergraduates who were more likely to be wealthy and 'came overseas just to play', and postgraduate students like herself and other postgraduate participants who viewed themselves as being more serious about life and having a purpose to fulfil. This also led to a discussion about how Chinese undergrads were therefore perceived as 'not taking anything seriously', would choose to socialise with other Chinese students and return home to jobs provided by wealthy parents. These were the true *FuErDai*⁸⁵ or *GuanErDai*⁸⁶ who had no financial obligations. When compared to Master's students like my participants, Emma explained:

They don't care about getting an education as they will go back to jobs provided by their parents. We want to gain as much as possible from our overseas experience and so participate in as much as possible and seek British friends so as to make our time very rich and beneficial. (Emma, Master's, accounting & finance)

In contrast, a white paper for Ambassadors for Christ, a mission organisation reaching Chinese students (2014: 12) found that student decisions to study in America were much more akin to typical findings in the wider literature: obedience to parental decisions, for the purposes of career advancement/inheriting the family business/avoiding the competitive Chinese education system. Such reasons stem from a collectivist rationale but may also be indicative of the perception of greater opportunities for work in the US⁸⁷;

⁸⁵ 富二代

⁸⁶ 官二代

⁸⁷ While the AFC white paper suggested that few Chinese students in the US return home immediately following completion of studies, this is simply not currently possible under current UK visa rules for international students. See also Footnote 21. The US situation is likely to have changed since my

the higher overall cost of American education; or perceptions of America as much more conducive to career advancement and the possibility of long-term emigration, as compared to Britain, which was described by at least one participant with some disappointment as ‘technologically backward’ (Andrew, Master’s, environmental engineering).

In some ways, my oldest, Post-70s participant, Charles, exemplified the aspirations of those who had grown up under Deng’s economic reforms. Very much a self-made man, he had grown up in a rural farming family (whose circumstances, it would seem, had not changed) but he had seen some success after graduating from university, developing his own business in Shanghai. However, after 10 years in the financial industry, marital and family breakdown led him to give up industry life in favour of pursuing two Master’s degrees in Liverpool and Birmingham, followed by a PhD in Philosophy of Religion. For this participant, money was clearly no object as he had not only self-funded three postgraduate degrees in the UK but had brought his wife and two children to Britain as dependents, enrolled his son in a private secondary school, and bought a house in a comfortable middle-class Birmingham suburb next door to the Anglican church he now attends.

An expectation of transience

All of my participants appeared to perceive their time abroad as a short-term sojourn, possibly a step towards further opportunities in Europe and beyond, though not necessarily within the UK itself. Given that initial interviews took place in 2017, some months after the Brexit referendum, it was clear that my participants were aware of a perceived public antipathy towards immigrants, of which they felt a part⁸⁸. They therefore

interviews in 2017 and 2019, particularly as new immigration policies were created by the Trump administration (2017-2021).

⁸⁸ At the time of writing in 2022, the number of anti-Asian racist incidents experienced by Chinese students as reported within Friends International and in the national press following the Covid 19 pandemic outbreak has increased sharply as compared to my Phase 1 interviews in 2017.

felt that the greatest benefits of their education would be an improved grasp of the English language and a better understanding of British, and therefore Western, culture. None of my participants mentioned an ambition to emigrate or stay on permanently following graduation. Those who expressed a desire to find a job in Britain, such as Andrew, Gail and Frank, often also noted ruefully that they knew others who had failed to do the same and so assumed that it was not likely to happen⁸⁹.

Instead, participants spoke of what would happen when they returned home and appeared to perceive their studies as a stage rather than an aspiration towards permanence. This perception of lack of permanence adds a significant contour to the study of international students as members of the Chinese diaspora. Most consider themselves temporary voluntary migrants and are aware of expectations from their own government that they will return home⁹⁰, even if they might have aspirations to remain overseas⁹¹.

In contrast, much of the literature cited earlier asserts that major factors drawing Chinese students into the Western church are social, such as loneliness, lack of community, and an inability to assimilate into the local student population⁹². Such factors play into the deficit model perceptions of Chinese international students. My data would suggest that the picture is far more nuanced. While these factors were present in the

⁸⁹ Khanal & Gaulee's review (2019) of challenges faced by international students pre-and post-study identifies visa control as a significant post-study challenge for international students in the UK, with the so-called 'hostile environment' towards potential overstayers still in place in 2019. They quote a statistic from Amy (2017) that 97% of international students in the UK return home after graduation. This has bearings on the older literature which cites a desire to assimilate into Western society as a reason for conversion and/or identifying with Western Christians.

⁹⁰ The Chinese Ministry of Education website reports that from 1978 to 2019, 86.28% of all students pursuing further studies abroad returned to China after graduation.

http://en.moe.gov.cn/news/press_releases/202012/t20201224_507474.html

This highlights the temporary nature of overseas education for the majority of today's Chinese students.

⁹¹ The comments of Khanal & Gaulee (2019, *ibid*) notwithstanding, the re-introduction of the Post-Study Work Visa (<https://www.gov.uk/graduate-visa>, accessed Nov 2022) for students beginning courses from 2020 onward allows graduates to remain in the UK for 2 years after completing their courses. Although this could potentially change the perception of transience expressed by my participants, I would not expect to see a return of the desire to assimilate into Western society captured in earlier literature, due to current trends in globalisation and Chinese students' increased confidence in their national identity.

⁹² While researchers mention homesickness, isolation and culture shock as major challenges faced in the UK, my participants reported experiences more akin to 'cultural bumps', rather than 'culture shock' (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019:568).

accounts given by my participants, they were balanced by a great deal of agency. Fern for example, actively chose to join the local church since it represented a multicultural, multigenerational community. As a Master's student, she expressed annoyance that her flatmates were 'typical young British undergrads who enjoyed partying' and 'frequently left the kitchen in a mess'. Whether this would be coded as loneliness or lack of community in the existing literature really appears to be a matter of emic/etic perspective. In fact, one participant, Diane, went as far as to say that she had been so busy participating in other campus activities that she did not visit a church until the second term, and then only because she made a Christian friend prompting a reminder of her previous interest in church.

As mentioned above, research on international students at American universities has highlighted not only the desirability of an American qualification, but the attractiveness of the American way of life. High on the list of pull factors in the literature is the perception that an American university education represents an open door to work in the USA and eventually, the opportunity not only to emigrate, but to help the wider family do so as well (Yang 1998: 97). None of these desires was expressed by my participants.

This finding speaks directly to the conclusion in previous literature that students begin their spiritual inquiry as part of a desire to assimilate and become more Western. While the desire to cultivate a more Western adhesive identity might have been a strong motivator for Chinese students settling in America in the 1990s into the 2000s, my data would appear to contradict that for those currently studying in Britain. Some of the older research applies to a generation of Chinese students with vastly different aspirations. Some of my participants expressed not only that they had no intention of becoming more British, but also stated that a Christian identity - as a minority religion in Britain - would not help their process of inculturation. Andrew, Helen and Frank were among those who

indicated an awareness that upon return to China, their new status as ‘overseas graduates with a Christian faith’ was more likely be a disadvantage than a desirable trait.

Overseas studies as part of a quest

In and among those who expressed significant ambitions and who were strongly driven by the possibilities offered by being overseas, were those who described themselves as having *already* achieved their goals in terms of career success prior to coming to Britain. Cathy was a lawyer in a thriving corporate law firm in Shenzhen, while Charles had come from a rural background, as described above, and made a success of his own company in Shanghai. Both described having arrived at a juncture where their achievements and the tumult of working life had produced a growing sense of emptiness (*kongxugan*⁹³) and chaos (*hunluan*⁹⁴). As such, coming to Britain was an escape (*taobi*⁹⁵ /*kaitou*⁹⁶), a chance to find peace.

At the time (when I left China), my thoughts were confused and my family situation was fraught. My personal life was in chaos. I really wanted to find an escape, an exit. My heart was filled with anxiety and doubt, and I really wanted a change of environment. (Charles, PhD, philosophy of religion)

I came to UK because life was too tiring, the Shenzhen working environment was too fast-paced, I had overtime every day, and basically no weekends, getting home still having to do OT. Meeting clients, preparing documents... I felt very dazed, really wanted a different environment but didn't know what to change or what to do. (Cathy, Master's, law)

Others simply chose to come because finances and opportunities presented themselves at an opportune time. Exchange or work abroad programmes meant that

⁹³ 空虚感

⁹⁴ 混乱

⁹⁵ 逃避

⁹⁶ 开头

several had previously lived overseas: Fern had not only done a work placement in India but had spent a semester as an exchange student before returning for a Master's degree. Gail had spent a few months in the US on exchange, a positive experience which led to her Master's degree in the UK. Frank was an exchange student at the time of interview but was planning to return for further studies. Compared to Chinese students in the earlier literature, the educational opportunities for my participants seemed far more numerous, including repeat sojourns.

Nonetheless, two of my participants (Cathy and Fern) expressed the fact that education was a lower priority among their considerations.

To be honest, education was not my primary consideration. I was looking for freedom and the chance to have a different life. (Fern, Master's, tourism)

Jen, whose father was an overseas graduate and a Christian, reported that he had sent her to study in the UK with the express purpose that she might also become a Christian.

Participants such as Andrew and Kelly expressed uncertainty about the quality of universities to which they were applying. Andrew had used the notorious Chinese education agents, an industry which has gained some notoriety in the Chinese media, charging exorbitant and disproportionate fees for overseas university places.

From the data, the reasons offered by my participants for overseas study seem more varied and nuanced than are generally documented in the literature. Following Page and Chahboun (2019), participants cited motives which differed from the discourse in which internationalisation and 'membership of a transnational elite' are specific goals of the overseas sojourn. Quantitative research on the choice of universities might frame aspirations towards upward mobility as desired outcomes but fails to explore the existential reasons and the *ennui* expressed in my data.

A paradox of identity and values

The majority of my participants (16 out of 18) were postgraduate students, aged 19 and up at the time of interview, the youngest being a one-year exchange undergraduate student. The oldest, a PhD student who had already completed two Master's degrees in Britain, was 41, and married with children. My participants therefore fell largely within the age bracket of the so-called Post-80s and Post-90s Generation, apart from one from the Post-70s Generation. As mentioned earlier, thirteen were funded by parents and wider family⁹⁷, with Cathy, Ben, Charles and Greg having chosen to give up thriving careers in order to pursue further education. Only one, Ed (academic visitor, engineering), was classed as a 'scholar' in an official capacity.

The cohort of Chinese students since 2015, particularly those dubbed the Post-80ers, Post-90ers and Post-95ers, has been identified as being significantly different from their predecessors who were born during or immediately after the Cultural Revolution. Constantin (2013), who researched college students in Beijing, asserts that those born in the 1980s and early 1990s share autobiographical and collective historical memories which have shaped their subsequent emergence into adulthood (the so-called reminiscence bump). Research from the last twenty years noted the rapidity of change and economic growth in modern Chinese society, but the worldview and culture of the Chinese people was assumed to remain relatively stable, preserving a Confucian-based social and relational stability, maintaining ethical standards based on a collectivist mindset, as well as remaining influenced by a Communist education and atheistic worldview.

My data however affirms the emerging literature which questions these assumptions, citing the impact of China's one-child policy, as well as the effect of

⁹⁷ This corroborates the Chinese Ministry of Education statistic in 2017 that 88.97% of overseas students were self-funded. http://en.moe.gov.cn/News/Top_News/201804/t20180404_332354.html

growing up surrounded by the onslaught of increased wealth, technological advancement and China's dominance on the world's economic and political stage. Far from maintaining stability, scholars have identified a trend towards individualistic values, even in the face of traditional collectivism (for example, Zhang et al 2021; Yan 2013; Hansen & Pang 2010), with a consequent increase in rates of depression and mental health issues (Sun & Ryder 2016). This was true even in my relatively small sample, with one participant having come overseas after a breakdown at the height of his career, and another having experienced extreme and prolonged depression as a result of family bereavement.

Ritual belonging or spiritual longing?

Although the majority of my participants described themselves as being non-religious before arriving in the UK, seven described the influence of family traditions and culture⁹⁸, which while not referred to as religious per se, provided a background of ritual meaning. Fan Lizhu (2011), identifying the problems of viewing Chinese religion through Western religious theories, quotes anthropologist Li Yih-yuan in asserting that Chinese religious practice, 'rather than being distilled into the organizational structures and systematic doctrines common to the West, was immersed in the usual activities of daily life and expressed through the various elements of Chinese culture' (2011:95). In particular, participants from southern China - where ancestor rituals continue to be followed - drew a sharp distinction between their family's traditional practices, which involved food offerings at QingMing and tomb visits on specific occasions (these are labelled by some as tradition *chuantong*⁹⁹, or superstition¹⁰⁰ *mixin*), and modern religious practices which aim to attract professionals and white collar workers seeking relief from stress through Buddhist retreats and the competitive chanting of sutras.

⁹⁸ The issues of ancestor worship and familial bonds are discussed in greater detail in Chapter Seven.

⁹⁹ 传统

¹⁰⁰ 迷信

In some cities, Buddhist and Daoist groups have clearly made attempts to modernise in an effort to appeal to the younger professional generation.

Actually, before coming to the UK, I did try reading the sutras. My mum asked me to read them. Maybe I don't really understand Buddhist culture and my family don't really either... but they feel there is some special sustenance that comes from doing that. Everyone around says it good – they say after reading, their life changed in some way, so my mum also follows them and believes. (Cathy, Master's, law)

This corroborates studies which assert that Chinese young people have returned to the practice of aspects of the traditional beliefs, albeit with modern adaptations (for example, Kleinmann 2011:274; Yao & Badham). Those of my participants, such as Cathy and Charles, who had explored various Chinese religions, had given Buddhism and Taoism serious consideration and sought answers in a decisive way but found them ultimately unable to provide satisfaction.

It is likely that for many, their secular upbringing which might have led them to shun traditional superstitious beliefs also led to a perception of the Bible as cultural and moral teaching:

For the first 29 years I only knew that I couldn't rely on anyone but myself, because, as a Chinese saying puts, There is no fairy or god, all that you have is yourself and your own strength. Therefore, I didn't want any religious input, but I didn't mind Christianity.¹⁰¹

The existing literature expresses a continuing dichotomy in characterisations of the Chinese ideological landscape. While some scholars persist in describing China as being firmly secular and atheistic in its outlook, shaped by a Communist socialist history and the materialist value system which is heavily encouraged and endorsed by the authorities,

¹⁰¹ Testimony given in a church in city B by a former Chinese postgraduate.

others argue that since the 1990s, China has been in a new post-era, shaped by a Chinese postmodernism which rejects Western metanarratives (Yin 2018), while simultaneously seeking spiritual realities which are free from Chinese historical roots (Pan 2014). One could argue from my data and the literature (for example, Yang 2014) that it has already moved to a new post-post-era, where Christianity, set free from its Western hegemonic moorings, is newly attractive to those who have already examined frames of reference from the Chinese traditions and are still searching. Such an understanding might provide a partial explanation for Ma's observation that Chinese students prefer multi-ethnic Anglophone church settings in the UK, over the ethnic Chinese churches favoured by their counterparts in the US (Ma 2021:5).

Kleinman (2011), for example, describes how the individual quest for meaning has led to a rejuvenation of religion in contemporary China, with a noticeable rise in popular hunger for religious values and sentiments in the midst of a society which is 'hypermateriastic and wildly commercial, a world bereft of moral authority, aesthetic significance, and a spiritual center. The hyperpragmatism of everyday political life is also a stimulus for this quest.' (2011:273) He adds that Communist ideology has 'tarnished Confucian conventions' and 'undermined traditional Chinese moral values'. In contrast, religion offers 'special sanctioning for values', the opportunity to share in a community of believers and a framework that makes sense of the uncertainty of everyday life.

Unlike other studies which suggest that Post-80s and Post-90s have overwhelmingly rejected traditional Chinese religions, a number of my participants described how traditional ancestor worship customs gave vital identity and shape to their family and community life, while simultaneously expressing ambiguity as to their own religious identity:

I can't be sure my Grandma is a Buddhist – but she believes in Buddhism.

She definitely believes, so I will go (with her to temple). If I don't perform the

rituals, she will suffer. I'm very sure about this. It doesn't matter to my mum. It completely doesn't matter, because I have already told my mum, I will become a Christian. It won't matter to her, but my dad and my grandmother, I haven't told them because I am looking for a better time. (Andrew, Master's, environmental engineering)

For those who had decided to profess faith in Christ and self-identify as Christians, participating in familial ancestral practices were huge considerations. Andrew, for example, had only professed faith 2 weeks prior to his interview. In contrast, Helen who had been a Christian for 2 years by the time of interview, was still aware of the pressures she would face upon her return home. Both expressed the potential challenges in strikingly similar language:

If I tell them I'm a Christian, (my family) won't be too shocked, because they are not 100% Buddhist... but if I tell them from now on I won't worship Buddha, I won't offer incense, I won't eat the food offerings, I won't burn fire cannons on the first day of Chinese New Year, I won't hold joss sticks, I won't worship the Earth Deity...I feel that even though I'm told, 'you can pray to God (for help),' it really will take time. I don't feel they will accept it as soon as I return home. (Andrew, Master's, environmental engineering)

Of course, if everyone is doing these things, and I don't, they will ask, 'Why aren't you doing them?' if I refuse, at Qingming to clean the graves with everyone, to worship my ancestors, to burn incense to them, to bow to them and similar deeds... (Helen, Master's, law)

Helen, however, had received teaching from Chinese believers on how Christians handle such issues and expressed trust that God would help her. She also explained that there were a number of options she could try in order to fulfil her filial responsibilities.

This is confirmed by Madsen (2014) who asserts that indigenous Chinese religion has always been more about belonging than belief. Tracing the history of ritual belonging in China, Madsen demonstrates that while belonging to a community of common practice has been a part of everyday patterns of life for many centuries within Chinese traditional religions including Buddhism and Daoism, the same can now be said of Christianity, a relative latecomer to the religious world of China as the result of seventh century Nestorian missions. Nonetheless, he asserts, since its later re-introduction to China by European powers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Christianity has largely conformed to Chinese patterns of life. This has remained unchanged even through the tumult of the Communist Revolution and can be detected both in the Chinese Catholic church as well as the fast-growing Protestant Church movement of the last two decades. And even here, Madsen claims, the spread of new religious practices is due more to the development of new forms of community than to the plausibility of new forms of belief. (2014: 21)

While this might seem to cast doubt on the emerging faith and religious change expressed by Chinese students, it would seem that such a background of potentially syncretistic belief makes it all the more urgent that those interacting with them should have a clear understanding of the early theologising and God-talk of those who profess faith in Jesus.

‘Indirectly globalised’ – tourism as a globalising influence

While most of my participants (15 out of 18) had never previously lived outside China, at least three reported being strongly influenced by encounters with people who had travelled extensively. Belinda (Master’s, business) expressed her interest in religion as arising solely from her friendship with a local high school English teacher whom she admired greatly:

She was the first to introduce me to religion. Maybe we were fated to meet. She studied in Cambridge in the 1980s, lived and studied overseas for many years. She told me that it is fearful thing for a person to be a true atheist¹⁰².

I really trust that teacher – more than my parents, who only have secondary school education. She taught English as a vocation, because she didn't need to earn money. She doesn't have a faith but believes in God. Wherever she goes, she will worship – whether in a Buddhist temple or church. She also has an altar at home. But she doesn't have a fixed religion. She's extremely cultured. I was deeply influenced by her, so I was determined to investigate, to learn as much as possible as soon as I arrived in Britain. She told me, if I want to understand Western culture, I have to understand two books – one is their textbooks, and the other is the Bible. Without her influence I would not be interested in this way.

Similarly, Emma (Master's, accounting & finance) had made the acquaintance of a young Christian woman who became like a big sister to her, encouraging her to seek help from the church if she needed it.

E: She said, when you're overseas on your own, the people in church are all very good. If you need any help, you can go find them and ask for help. She travelled overseas but didn't study there. But whenever she travels, she will go to church. She told me, 'Churches overseas are not as security conscious as for us here.' That's what she told me.

LT: How did you feel, talking to her?

E: I felt especially warm, she was very kind, and so I thought maybe it's because she has some kind of faith, so she can't be a bad person [laughs]

(Excerpt from interview with Emma, Master's, accounting & finance)

¹⁰² 一个人如果真的无神论 是很可怕的。

One under-researched area of globalisation in China is the increased awareness and appreciation of outside cultures and worldviews which is brought back by the growing numbers of those who have opportunities to travel abroad. According to Nielsen, statistics from the China National Tourism Administration report that Chinese tourists travelled overseas on 131 million occasions in 2017, an increase of 7% from the previous year¹⁰³.

Interactions such as those described by my participants demonstrate both the active engagement of Chinese tourists with Western culture and religion, as well as the different ways in which their journeys overseas are viewed, not only as recreational, but also as spiritual experiences in their own right. The richness of these experiences was so infectious that they left an indelible impression on my participants.

Three overarching questions

As I began to analyse the data from the interviews, it became possible to group participants' disparate comments and questions under three overarching themes. From these it was possible to identify 'metathemes' which form the basis of their spiritual inquiry. These themes are:

The question of Relevance to life, singular and corporate – beginning with perceiving Scripture, and subsequently the existence of God and the Christian faith, as having meaning in everyday life and in any context (not just in the UK, which is perceived as a sojourn or interlude).

The question of Relationality – building first on relationships with Christians who provide unconditional welcome (this was the perception in the data), kindness and through them, demonstrations of God's love and care. Relationality within Christian communities built an understanding of how humans can respond to God practically and

¹⁰³Of these, almost two-thirds had travelled to other Asian countries or regions and 51% to Hong Kong, Macao, or Taiwan, while more than one in three had been to Europe, one in four to North America, and one in five to Australia/ New Zealand.
<https://www.nielsen.com/content/dam/nielsen/global/cn/docs/Outbound%20Chinese%20Tourism%20and%20Consumption%20Trends.pdf>, accessed 1/4/19

in affective ways. Participants acquired knowledge of Jesus in Bible study settings, but this only came to be embodied belief through their relational interactions with Christians as people representing the redeemed life. As their beliefs grew in the existence of God, they were also increasingly aware of their participation in the mystery and dynamic of the redeemed life in their growing relationship with God himself.

The question of Ultimate Reality – many participants, like Chinese students I have met, said, ‘I didn’t believe that there is a god.’ In view of polytheistic Chinese religious beliefs, this might seem paradoxical. The difference lay in the absence of belief in a transcendent God who is also immanent, thus having a personal interest in humanity, as compared to anonymous deities who served specific functions or had to be appeased. Participants who became Christians had a continued change of beliefs over time which led to a transformed ontology. Their non-theism was replaced with belief in the triune God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - as the Ultimate Real. Belief in the Creator God as depicted in the Bible created a new ontology and framework for life (or worldview), which enabled understanding of the Gospel narratives of Jesus’ life: not only as an exemplary human being in ethics and morality, but as God himself initiating and making possible a Father-child relationship with those who believe in him.

Conclusion

The three overarching themes above formed a set of implicit criteria against which participants could be observed – through their narratives – to evaluate the value of Christian belief. The process of evaluation however appeared to involve not only learning but the negotiation of conflicting values and the overcoming of intellectual doubt, among other things. This produced a significant degree of dissonance within some participants.

The Chinese expression *zixiangmaodun*¹⁰⁴ is a descriptive term meaning self-contradictory. The phrase is a pictogram, derived from the story of a street merchant

¹⁰⁴ 自相矛盾

trying to sell his wares: the world's strongest spear, which could penetrate anything, and the world's strongest shield, which could repel anything. The obvious conclusion is that since each could oppose the other with equal strength, neither would be able to overcome the other¹⁰⁵. Analysing my data, I could not help feeling that many of my participants expressed their sense of values and identity, their reasons for coming overseas, and their ongoing spiritual quest as a process fraught with paradox, providing peace and fulfilment while simultaneously arousing new anxieties and unanswered questions.

Far from being driven purely by traditional Chinese ideals of the value of education, my participants told complex stories of their search for meaning, using words such as escape, chaos, desire for peace, describing pre-existing experiences of a greater spiritual power which led to a search for transcendence, for spiritual answers to the *ennui* which characterises modern Chinese young people. For many, increased financial stability in their family and personal circumstances has not led to stronger bonds, a greater sense of security or a better emotional life, but merely serves as a means to an end. Their narratives describe how the onward rush towards greater technological development and financial gain has left them feeling relationally bereft and in need of deeper spiritual truth. An overseas education then represents so much more than prestige and career advancement, or satisfaction of parental demands – it represents freedom, choice, the pursuit of individual happiness and meaning, even if there is an associated emotional and social cost involved.

While previous research suggests that the overseas sojourn results in a liminal state, my data suggests that Chinese young people already find themselves in a state of liminality, created by rapid change in society and in the relationships from which they seek to derive stability. Many of my participants reported circumstances in which they were already 'betwixt and between' (Turner 1960), and therefore arrival in Britain and

¹⁰⁵ There is further discussion of this term in Chapter 10.

early encounters with the British church became rich spaces for meaning making, as has surfaced in the data as emerging ordinary theology.

Having introduced my participants and outlined some broad characteristics which emerged from the data, my next chapter will begin the process of understanding their faith inquiry journey, beginning with the activities which participants chose to be part of, and the motivations which drove them.

CHAPTER FIVE

COMMUNITY: BELIEF NURTURED IN RELATIONAL SETTINGS

Introduction

In this chapter I explain the ways in which Chinese student involvement with Christian activities and hence, Christian community groups, is often motivated, at least initially, by desires for intercultural learning and English conversation practice, as the literature describes. It will appear that I use the words ‘Christian activities’ and ‘Christian community’ interchangeably. This is a deliberate decision as it was not always possible to distinguish the two from participants’ accounts. My perception was that participants attended the events for the people they would meet; conversely, it was the people involved who determined the ethos, atmosphere and content of the events. While this might not be true of other research in the literature, it is an assumption I have made in this thesis. However, the data shows that such communities go on to play a vital role in participants’ engagement with the Christian faith in several different ways. While extending the current understanding of Chinese student participation in Christian faith-based groups, these findings also recognise the deeper persuasive influence which Christian communities, including church-based international student groups, and interpersonal relationships, can have on individuals.

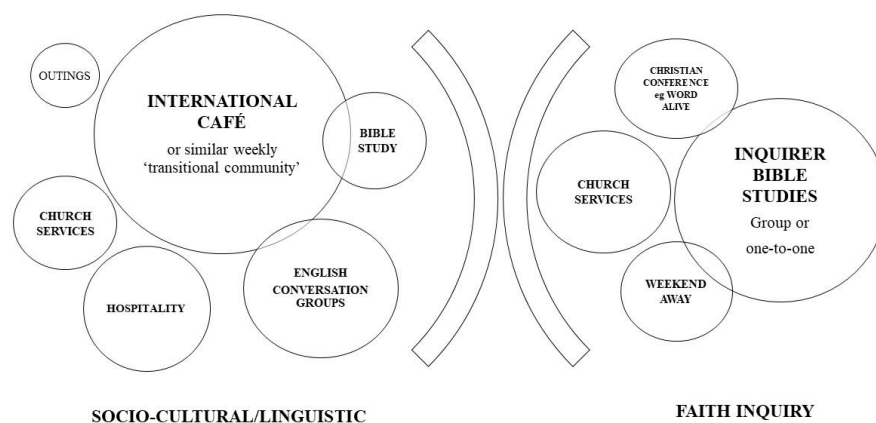


Figure 5.1 Activities mentioned by participants

Figure 5.1 provides a visual schema of the different international student activities mentioned in the data. The relative size of each circle provides an idea of the frequency of mention of each activity in the coding, although the data is not quantitative. The activities are self-explanatory, but three in particular require some elaboration:

International cafés

The interview data demonstrated that ‘international cafés’¹⁰⁶ were often the first point of contact for participants. Such cafés create social groups which welcome any international student regardless of their nationality or religious background, with specific events to explain British culture, customs and local festivals, and provide opportunities for students to share their own cultural practices, food and customs with others. International cafés generally take place in a range of venues, such as church halls or, more rarely, in the university chaplaincy or other room on campus. The types of activities offered proved attractive to students who were interested in learning about local culture and festivals (for example, Cathy, Master’s, law; Helen, Master’s, TESOL; Frank, exchange student, finance), and wanted to practise spoken English with native speakers who were likely to be ‘patient with a slower pace of communication’ (as cited by Andrew, Master’s, environmental engineering; Kelly, Master’s, data science). These very pragmatic aims, coupled with the perceived lack of religious pressure even in a church setting, were significant attractions to students.

In general, international café clientele tends to change annually as international students graduate and others take their place. These cafés can therefore be described as ‘transitional communities’ for international students. Weston’s thesis is that such cafés

¹⁰⁶ As noted by Yu (2017), the term ‘international café’ refers to informal weekly evenings organised with the specific purpose of providing international students the opportunity to meet local Christians in a non-academic context. To emphasise the multi-cultural nature of these evenings, titles such as ‘Global’, ‘International’ or ‘Wee World’ are used. While Yu describes this as a marketing ploy for Christian evangelism (Yu & Moskal 2019b), this is a somewhat limited interpretation, as the stated intention of such events is genuinely to enable social interaction between international students and British people (Weston 2017). As has been noted by Yu and Moskal (2019a) and Ma (2021), such opportunities are valued by international students but are not generally offered by universities.

form a ‘third space’, a safe space of welcome on campus which provides a relatively greater degree of equality between cultures and nationalities (Weston 2017).

International cafés also serve as springboard events, from which a range of other activities are offered, including sports events, sightseeing trips, walks and outings to local attractions, and hospitality schemes.

Inquirer Bible studies

Scholars have noted that Christianity is widely represented among the student population on British university campuses, with evangelical groups forming a ‘vocal minority’ (Ma 2021, following Guest et al 2013), with the implication that this presents an imbalance in the representations of Christianity encountered by international students (Yu 2017). Conversely, Yang (1998) and others have noted that evangelical Christianity is particularly attractive to Mainland Chinese international students specifically because of the opportunities afforded by such groups to gain a systematic understanding of Christian beliefs and doctrines. Consideration must also be given to the assertions of scholars of Chinese religion such as Chau (2011, 2019), Madsen (2014) and Fan (2011) that Chinese people have traditionally eschewed institutionalised religious practices based on creedal and doctrinal understandings, in favour of the performative meeting of social and spiritual needs through collective activities, rituals and practices. Propositional faith, from their perspective, is less important than community and collective belief.

In light of these paradoxical depictions, an explicit aim of this project was to explore the impact of activities organised by evangelical Christians on Chinese students exploring the Christian faith. Inquirer Bible studies such as those described by Yang (1998) are therefore central to this study¹⁰⁷, with extended attendance at Bible studies used a basic indicator of interest and commitment.

¹⁰⁷ A significant way in which Friend International’s vision to ‘work with the church to communicate the good news of Jesus to international students in word and deed’ is fulfilled is through inquirer/seeker Bible studies offered by evangelical Christians.

Bielo describes evangelical group Bible studies in the USA as rich sites for explicating the way in which Scripture ‘remains present as an embodied and remembered text structuring Evangelicals’ engagement with the world’ (2009:159). While British evangelicals hosting inquirer Bible studies might have a similar rationale, the empirical data shows that most Chinese students express a high level of ambivalence at the initial stages of their participation, attributable to factors such as: lack of prior contact with the Bible; not knowing what ‘Bible study/discussion’ involves; a background of Chinese ‘scientific atheism’¹⁰⁸; lack of confidence with conversational English. Nonetheless, Chinese students attended Bible studies in spite of these factors. In fact, their narratives reveal that the initial motives for participation are significantly more nuanced than has previously been recognised, as Table 5.2 will show.

The invitation to Bible studies was extended in or through the international cafés, with some cafés offering a chance to ‘investigate the Christian faith’ as part of the evening’s programme. Eight of my interview participants decided to attend Bible studies after getting to know volunteers on the team and finding them ‘friendly and approachable’. Cathy (Master’s, law), for example, attended a talk at the international café about local history. Her express desire was to learn more about her university city, but she was drawn into conversation with the speaker, a retired academic (described as ‘the old grandfather’ in the data), met his wife, and received an invitation to their home to study the Bible. Her only knowledge of the Bible until then had been through a reference to Max Weber during undergraduate law classes in China, but as her interest grew, she began to attend the Bible studies more regularly than the café.

Helen (Master’s, TESOL), similarly, attended the international café on campus regularly, primarily because she was impressed by the friendliness and warmth of the volunteers and enjoyed the chance to socialise. She noticed that a Bible discussion was

¹⁰⁸ Which should be recognised as distinct from Western atheism, as defined in Chapter Two.

offered each week at the café, but was initially reluctant to take part because of her lack of knowledge about the Bible. Persistent invitations led her to begin taking part even though by her own account, she learned nothing at the start and was only intermittent in attendance.

The route taken by Charles (PhD, philosophy of religion) was rather different, possibly because he is older than the average postgrad international student (a fact he feels deeply, as those were his first words to me during the interview). A successful businessman in Shanghai, Charles chose to pursue further studies in the UK as an escape from an increasingly difficult family life. He had completed two Master's degrees in philosophy of religion and was on a PhD programme at the time of interview but had not initially read the Bible with any understanding, though impressed by Jesus' teaching on the Sermon on the Mount as 'a higher standard of human existence'. He began attending Bible studies when he and his family moved into a house situated next door to an evangelical church, which attracted him with their community events.

Church

The extant literature refers to Chinese student involvement in 'church' as a generic term, whether referring to ethnic Chinese churches or multi-ethnic English-speaking local church. However, researchers have not made distinction between the different forms of 'church' life available to international students, even though Chinese Christians themselves use a range of terminology. These could be translated generically in English to mean 'church', but actually describe Christian fellowship groups, Christian gatherings, church building and church services. Such distinctions are important, particularly in terms of discerning what participants intended to convey regarding their adopted practices and language.

Coding of data regarding the Christian events which participants attended produced a number of different Chinese terms ranging from the social language of *tuanqi* 团契 to

the more religious language of *jiaohui*教会 and *jiaotang*教堂. These describe a range of gatherings and locations in terms of formality, organisational structure and inclusion/exclusion. While it is possible that participants were simply mimicking terminology they had heard others use, there is also the likelihood that their specific choice of terms gives some indication of their understanding of the ritual content of Christian belief, as well as the degree to which they might desire to identify with the Christian community.

It should also be noted that the frequency of the use of the word ‘church’ was not indicative of student attendance at church services. In general, a significant number of participants did not regularly attend Sunday church services until they had come to a clearer understanding of Bible teaching and were beginning to consider some form of Christian commitment. In my data analysis, therefore, although ‘church’ was used as a label for church-organised social groups and Christian gatherings, distinctions were made in the language where I was aware that participants were referring to informal activities or locations. These were rather more prevalent than codes denoting church services as a ritual act.

Exploring participants’ motivations for attending Christian activities¹⁰⁹

In the process of analysing and coding the motives given, it became evident that the motives given could be divided between three main areas of interest: cultural/linguistic, social, and existential/spiritual. These areas of interest were representative of the needs which participants felt that Bible-focused groups could meet, whether implicitly or directly. It was also clear that interests overlapped and combined to different degrees

¹⁰⁹ Although referring only to Bible studies, the data indicated that all participants were involved in a range of activities organised by church-based groups. However, this study focuses on the development of Christian belief and therefore starts with Bible study as a defining criterion.

according to individual circumstances, forming a useful heuristic for capturing participants' self-identified impetus for involvement in Bible studies¹¹⁰.

Any heuristic carries an inherent risk over-simplifying the data. Nonetheless, considering the complexity of each individual's lived experience, Table 5.2 developed from my data goes some way towards providing while filling the following gaps in the literature:

First, despite referring to 'a complex dynamic interaction' of personal and contextual factors' (Ding & Devine 2017), most existing research does not engage with the nuances of self-reported reasons for Chinese student involvement in Christian activities.

Second, although a substantial body of studies on Chinese students at overseas universities now exists, there is still relatively little investigation of their stated aims for activity and involvement in spiritually oriented groups and activities.

Further, the suggestion that students are drawn by the 'bridging social capital' generated by religious community participation (Ding and Devine 2017, Huang 2015) is insufficient motivation, especially when applied to students who are not in a 'deficit mode' (Page & Chahboun 2019).

The Purpose-Proximity Table: Mapping initial motives for joining Christian activities

This table charts 'initial motives'¹¹¹ for involvement in Christian activities, particularly Bible studies, providing a baseline from which the impact of their subsequent involvement on faith formation or development can be studied. Participants were mapped

¹¹⁰ Typologies have been effectively utilised in qualitative studies within practical theology and other fields to discuss movements or shifts in religious practice and belief, by describing changes within a range of characteristics of distinctive identifiable subgroups. Examples of typologies in existing research include studies of the British student experience of Christianity at university (Guest et al 2013), and the Bible reading of church-going millennials (Perrin 2015), for example.

in terms of self-reported reasons for involvement in Bible-focused activities and the degree to which they were drawn to the wider Christian community.

The columns in Table 5.2 categorise the different groups of student participants and demonstrates the differences between them based on two general components: PURPOSE, used to describe their underlying motivations for getting involved, and PROXIMITY, which serves as a measure of their desire to identify with the communities formed around such activities. Capturing only participants' reports of their *initial* rationale for seeking out Bible-focused activities and their desire *at the beginning of involvement* to identify with the Christian community running it, it does not depict the entirety of their experience, since their individual accounts diverged as their sojourn progressed.

Motives were not mutually exclusive. Although several participants mentioned cultural interest and language practice as reasons for participation, only one or two maintained that those were the sole attractions, while others reflected that those initial motivations were very rapidly replaced by spiritual/existential interests. Similarly, no participants expressed purely social reasons for involvement although for some it was more significant motivation than any of the others.

		PURPOSE			PROXIMITY
		Cultural/ Linguistic	Social	Spiritual/ Existential	
Andrew	'Immersed Tourists'	X			Low
Ed		X			Low
Helen		X			Low
Dan	'Ambivalent Befriender'	X	X		Low
Belinda	'Primed Observers'		X	X	Low
Emma			X	X	Low
Cathy	'Jaded Wanderers'			X	Low
Charles				X	Low
Frank				X	Low

Diane	‘Providential Seekers’		X	X	Moderate
Fern			X	X	Moderate
Gail			X	X	Moderate
Amy	‘Motivated Believers’			X	High
Ben				X	High
Irene				X	High
Greg				X	
Jen	‘Reluctant Conformers’	X	X		Negative
Kelly		X	X		Negative

Table 5.2 Charting motivation for participation in Christian activities

‘Purpose’ as an indicator of initial motivation

In Table 5.2, Column 3 maps ‘Purpose’, defining the motives described by participants, which range from cultural/linguistic, social, to spiritual/existential. These are explained as follows:

Cultural/Linguistic

Participants reporting this as a reason for attending Bible studies were seeking insider knowledge of British culture, and free opportunities to practise their oral English. Some had been taught in school in China that the Bible is the source of culture in the Western world. Apart from wanting to know more about British culture, some professed neither knowledge nor interest in the Bible. Others had heard a little about the influence of the Bible on Western economic systems, citing Max Weber, Adam Smith, lessons in economics or philosophy on their Chinese undergraduate courses which introduced the Bible as foundational to Western thought and ethical systems.

Some had the notion that the Bible ‘was an important book in Western history’ and were aware that it was not commonly read. For these participants, Christian social gatherings and Bible studies provided lessons in British culture as a means of learning more about how society functions ‘from insiders’, and opportunities to practise spoken English. Spiritual interest seemed entirely absent at the outset.

Yu (2017) comments that Bible studies fail to teach Chinese students about culture, and that even the ‘language practice’ provided is of limited use since it revolves entirely around biblical language which is not used in day to day conversation. Ed (academic visitor, engineering) expressed a slightly different opinion when he said that ‘at least you will get a chance to converse informally, and certain vocabulary can be used’ within the group attending the Bible study.

Social

The opportunity to socialise with British people and make friends was closely allied with the cultural reasons cited above. Participants reported finding churchgoers ‘friendly and welcoming’, ‘kind and helpful’. I had an informal conversation with a Chinese student who experienced racist verbal abuse early in her time at university and felt that the local church served as a refuge where her fears and concerns were taken seriously, forming part of her reported ‘daily triangle of safe places: university, accommodation and church’. The difficulty of forming meaningful relationships with local students and within the wider British community is commonly expressed in the literature, as well as by my participants.

Some participants had been advised by friends or acquaintances to seek help from the church if they were in need. This often came from non-Christian Chinese friends who seemed to generally have a good impression of churches in the West. Additionally, such advice seems to have been persuasive as all these participants reported visiting churches within the first few weeks of their arrival in Britain.

Spiritual/Existential

As described in the previous chapter, a number of my participants decided to embark on further studies overseas to escape from difficult situations at home or at work. For some, the achievement of career success and financial stability was marred by an increasing sense of frustration that they lacked peace and could not find contentment in

the life they were leading. A number had experienced the breakdown of relationships, either in their parents' marriage, or in their own marriage.

These participants had existential questions which they articulated quite clearly. Prior to arrival in the UK, some had investigated traditional Chinese religions or begun meditative practises in their efforts to find answers to their increasing sense of *ennui* and confusion. While these participants would not describe their experiences as 'crisis' situations, their arrival in church was expressed as a search for meaning. Even though they were relatively ambivalent as to what Christianity itself was about, it was clear that they strongly associated church attendance and involvement with Bible studies as potential solutions to their search.

The desire to provide for those with spiritual interest is the espoused purpose for international student activities and Bible studies, as stated in the literature of hosting churches and parachurch organizations. Ironically, apart from Chinese students who were professing Christians in China, few of my participants stated that their initial motivation for attending Bible studies was spiritual growth or understanding. Where spiritual reasons were given, these were expressed in relational or experiential terms, linked with learning the values modelled by Christian friends or exploring what it means to have a religion. Significantly, two of my participants expressed their later interest in spiritual matters as being somewhat 'providential' (Diane, Master's, education; Gail, Master's, finance), reporting that they had always had a curiosity or interest in Christianity, but had never actively pursued the opportunity to find out more until they arrived in the UK.

'Proximity' as a measure of desire to identify with Christian community

Column 4, described as 'Proximity', seeks to provide a measure of the degree to which my participants sought inclusion in the community of Christians they joined. It serves as a marker for participants' sense of positive identification or desire for 'belonging' within the Christian communities created by these activities. Significantly, the data shows

that at least initially, participants did not feel that their physical attendance and regular presence at such activities indicated a desire to be known as ‘Christian’. As can be seen from the table, 9 out of 18 participants expressed a low desire for inclusion, despite being introduced by gatekeepers as ‘regular attenders from the start’. This corroborates the perception of Chinese researchers such as Yu (2017) and Ma (2021) that church-based international groups are initially seen as providing intercultural learning experiences, rather than being communities to whom students desire inclusion.

The highest level on the Proximity scale applies to participants who self-identified as Christians from arrival. Their desire to be ‘insiders’ in the British church included an awareness that they had a role to play in meeting the spiritual needs of other Chinese students.

Two participants who reflected negative values for Proximity (Jenny, PhD, electrical engineering; Kelly, Master’s, data science) were from Christian family backgrounds but had no professed Christian identity when they arrived in Britain. Both were involved in Christian activities such as the international student café and even Bible studies, but this appeared to be a compromise, and was reported as ‘church attendance’ to concerned Christian family back home. Their initial impulse was to remain at a distance from the local Christian community, expressing ‘neither believing nor belonging’.

In the following section, I explain each category further, giving descriptive titles which are illustrative of the motivations expressed in the narratives.

Examining the categories

Immersed Tourists - Purpose: Cultural/Linguistic, Proximity: low

Andrew, Ed, Helen

Participants in this category said that they were only attracted to opportunities to learn British culture and practise their spoken English. Their desire for inclusion was low, since their perception was that Christian church activities functioned as service providers. A prime example was Ed (academic visitor, engineering), whose choices of activity and

socialisation were clearly defined and delineated by what he aimed to gain from each. Close connections with co-nationals satisfied his need for companionship, practical assistance (accommodation, household equipment, advice on everyday necessities) and support through the initial stages of culture shock. Thus, church activity was limited to learning the origins of British culture and did not extend to identifying with the Christian community in any way. He was unique among the group of participants in that his connections with home in China remained strong and were reinforced by weekly video calls with them. After 9 months away, his primary thoughts were on his imminent return home to an academic role as before, and his reunion with his young daughter, wife and mother. It was perhaps natural therefore that he expressed no interest in greater proximity to the Christian community.

Ambivalent Befrienders - Purpose: Cultural/Linguistic + Social, Proximity: low

Dan

Dan (Bachelor's, accounting and finance) as the sole participant in this group, expressed his primary desire as friendship with local people to augment his large group of international student friends. He reported being struck by the welcome he had received in church even as an outsider, specifically outlining practical ways in which friendship had been shown, including hospitality in local homes, help with language, assistance with written submissions, trips and outings to local attractions, all of which provided a significant impetus for regular attendance at midweek activities. Interestingly, however, Dan seemed satisfied with being purely a recipient of kindness. His low desire for proximity indicates his resistance to identifying as an insider of the Christian community.

Dan clearly demonstrated a strong sense of agency and an awareness of the risks of involvement in groups on the basis of relationships built on obligation. His responses contradicted the theory that Chinese students respond easily to 'favour fishing', where kindness from local people was perceived to create an unhealthy dynamic. Students drawn into 'favour fishing' groups responded to kindness, but eventually felt duty-bound to

repay favours with commitment to the Christian faith. It also perhaps reflects the movement within Mainland Chinese culture towards greater individualism, as discussed by Yan (2010). Participants in this group thus felt able to benefit from the kindness of others while retaining a sense of self-determination and agency.

Primed Observers - Purpose: Social + Spiritual/Existential, Proximity: low

Belinda, Emma

This category applies to those who had been urged, or ‘primed’, by others to make contact with the church even before they had left China, yet described their initial experience as ‘watching from the sidelines’, ‘taking the opportunity to learn’. Many were actively advised by family or acquaintances that churches would be good places to go for a myriad of reasons, particularly for spiritual teaching, emotional understanding, practical help, friendship and other support. Interestingly, the people who had recommended contact with the church were not uniformly Christian. Belinda (Master’s, business) for example, was actively encouraged by a teacher she greatly respected to explore ‘all religious faiths’ while she was overseas. She explained that this teacher was not a Christian, however ‘she was widely travelled and would visit churches and temples everywhere she went. In her words, ‘it is a tragedy indeed to have no faith at all.’

Both Belinda and Emma articulated similar advice which had been given to them by compatriots who were more widely travelled: ‘It’s a good thing to have a religious faith’.¹¹² Nonetheless, they had no inclination initially to identify with the Christian community. Although they arrived with favourable impressions of Christianity, many of them kept a distance, placing an emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge about the Christian faith: ‘I was learning but I was definitely not a believer.’ (Emma, Master’s, accounting & finance) In addition, Belinda was also attending discussions with members of the student Islamic Society on campus in an attempt to learn more.

¹¹² 有信仰是一个好事

In contrast to the Providential Seekers, who seemed to have been quickly drawn into deeper relationships within the church, Primed Observers were preoccupied with gaining propositional knowledge as a means of weighing up the relative efficacy and trustworthiness of each religion.

Jaded Wanderers - Purpose: Spiritual/Existential, Proximity: low

Charles, Cathy, Frank

This group refers to those whose decision to study overseas was motivated by being in a state of *ennui*. All three participants in this category seemed somewhat bewildered by their predicament; they were self-confessed ‘high achievers’ or successful professionals who were making strides in their career of choice, but felt lost and adrift. Charles (PhD, philosophy of religion) for example, had amassed a significant fortune doing business in a Special Economic Zone. Nonetheless each of the participants in this category referred to their life in China as ‘troubled’, ‘filled with unrest’, ‘lacking in peace’, driving them to seek a new beginning through overseas education. None of these participants had significant knowledge of Christianity prior to arrival, although Frank had a close friend in China who was a Christian. Charles and Cathy had previously interacted with Buddhism, Daoism and other more ‘traditional Chinese’ religious practices. All were unclear about what the church signified but described being individually drawn to discover more by the spiritual atmosphere in church services, the mutual affection and lack of friction observed between Christians, or an unexpectedly emotional response when hearing Christian worship music for the first time. Both Cathy and Frank described the admiration they felt for individuals they had met who seemed to embody their desired values of wisdom, kindness and peace, which then prompted their search for biblical answers.

Providential Seekers - Purpose: Social + Spiritual/Existential, Proximity: moderate

Diane, Fern, Gail

This group comprised those who sought friendship in the church, having come with an existing notional interest in the Christian faith prior to arrival in the UK. Diane had been invited to church in China, while Fern had been attracted by sacred choral music. Gail had regularly attended church with her host family during her exchange abroad in the United States. Each of these participants expressed great openness to Christianity and Christian friendship, but had previously lacked the opportunity or context to go further. Diane and Gail both described their arrival in Britain as ‘providential’ or ‘fortuitous’ because they now had the opportunities to learn more about Christianity.

This group expressed a moderate desire to find belonging within the Christian community, and were self-motivated to learn more, but did not immediately identify themselves as Christians. Fern (Master’s, tourism studies) described how her experience of answered prayer led her to declare that she would get baptised, despite knowing nothing about Christian beliefs. Diane (Master’s, education) went as far as to say that she ‘became a Christian quickly because I was fated to be a Christian. So I feel a strong sense of belonging to my church family.’

Motivated Believers - Purpose: Spiritual/Existential, Proximity: high

Amy, Ben, Irene, Greg

This category consists solely of those who were professing Christians. The high desire for proximity in this group indicates their strong desire to be included in the local Christian community. Participants in this group also had a strong sense of spiritual purpose in joining the British church, and most were simultaneously attending the local Chinese church for diaspora Chinese believers. All four had made a clear decision for Christ while they were undergraduates, three in China, Amy during an exchange programme in Singapore. None had come from a Christian family background - in fact Greg and Ben had experienced family opposition to their newfound faith. All of these participants in this group also expressed a strong desire to share their faith with their fellow Chinese students and saw this not only as one of their reasons for being overseas,

but also for participating in British churches known to be attended by Chinese students who were not believers.

These Chinese Christians proved not only to be astute observers of their fellow students' responses to Bible teaching, but as Christian 'insiders' giving an emic perspective, provided helpful shade and nuance to some of the presuppositions expressed in the literature by Chinese researchers.

Reluctant Conformers - Purpose: Cultural/Linguistic + Social, Proximity: negative

Jen, Kelly

As mentioned earlier, Jen and Kelly were both from Christian families, but were not professing Christians at the point of arrival and sought to maintain a distance from the Christian community, even while they attended Christian events. Both reported an unwillingness to attend church services while experiencing an overwhelming obligation to appease concerned Christian parents and/or grandparents that they were not 'going astray' while overseas. They therefore expressed a high degree of conflict, reluctant to be in church, wary of identifying closely with Christians, and yet feeling the welcome of Christians in the church. Jen reflected that her father had stated explicitly that his specific purpose in sending her overseas was 'so that I would become a Christian'. It is interesting to note that the gatekeeper who had introduced us described Jen as a 'keen member' of the international group despite her own admission of reluctance. It also interesting to note that both Jen and Kelly began to attend Bible studies after experiencing crisis situations and feeling that there was a welcome in the church which they had not found elsewhere.

Experience and observations of community interaction

I now turn to examine participants' experiences and observations of Christians in relationship with other, specifically, relating to outsiders, to each other, and finally, to God. Although the Christian theological understanding is that relationality originates with the triune God, whose relationship is mirrored in Christian community life, I have chosen

to use the order as described by participants to reflect their own growing realisation that ultimately Christian relationships are founded on God's love alone.

It is important to note that some of the codes were observed so frequently that I have listed them as concepts rather than giving individual quotes.

Christians relating to outsiders

The most common codes associated with Christians' attitudes to international students could be grouped under 'Welcome', 'Practical help', 'Warmth' and 'Kindness'. Among the most common stated motivations for joining international student activities based in church was the desire to practise spoken English and to learn British culture. The individual reasons ranged widely: a number had an urgent need to improve their English as TOEFL score requirements had to be fulfilled in order to progress from the foundation courses on which they were enrolled¹¹³. Kelly, experienced stress and sleepless nights due her anxiety over English tests and found the accommodating nature of British Christians at the international café with her struggles reassuring.

The volunteers at the café are very kind. I particularly remember once when I was chatting with one lady and wanted to use a particular phrase to explain something. I tried to ask, using a long, roundabout explanation to describe what I was saying. Finally I said, 'I guess you understand me now.' And she said, 'I understand, but I wanted to hear you say it to improve your English.' She then wrote the phrase on a piece of paper and explained it. I was so touched. Actually no-one has an obligation to help you, but she was especially warm and sincere.

¹¹³ English proficiency has been identified as a significant pre-departure challenge for Chinese international students studying in English-speaking countries (Khanal, J & Gaulee, U. *Challenges of international students from pre-departure to post-study: literature review*, Journal of International Students vol 9, issue 2 (2019), pp580-581.) The data suggests that British universities sometimes circumvent their own language requirements by recruiting students with lower TOEFL scores onto one-year foundation courses with progression onto a degree course contingent upon evidence of improvement. It is possible that my participant group included more students with language challenges since I offered to conduct interviews in Mandarin, but this is not likely since even participants fluent in English expressed a preference for responding in their heart language.

(Kelly, Master's, data science)

Christians showing patience with halting English proved to be a major reason for attendance in Bible studies. Continuing attendance was not always driven by interest in Bible teaching, which could be patchy, as noted in Chapter 6. Participants reported enjoying the friendship shared, even if they did not always feel interested (Helen) or agree with the discussion (Emma).

The absence of conditionality or pressure from Bible study leaders was a notable attraction, including the willingness to answer questions (Cathy). Conversely, Emma expressed her unhappiness at the pressure she experienced within a Bible study group led by Jehovah's Witnesses which had a British leader fluent in Mandarin.

They would always pray as if I already believed. I felt really uncomfortable, because I didn't believe. I would think, why do they need to pray like this? The more they acted as if I was a believer, the more uncomfortable I felt. If I disagreed with them, they would put pressure on me to accept their perspective, even though I didn't want to argue with them.

Prayer was valued, even when participants did not believe in God. Gail was touched to hear that her homestay mum in America continued to pray for her weekly, even two years after her return. Emma (Master's, accounting & finance) enjoyed a deep friendship with a Christian peer, whose prayers for her formed a model which she began to imitate.

We talked about many things and she would pray to God about my concerns, so it felt very comfortable. Even though I didn't believe in God, I was thankful that she would pray and ask God to help me. I was touched, I felt she really cared about me, so she told God these things. Because she believed in God, I began to feel more comfortable when praying. I could talk to God about my life, so I learnt to pray to Him.

It was noted, however, that participants sometimes had an almost unrealistic impression of the Christians they were meeting.

When I first began to believe, I thought Christians were much kinder people than Buddhists, because I'd seen too many recite the sutras and then do very dirty things. Later I realised that my feeling that (Christians) were good, their hearts were kind, because they really lived according to the Bible. That kind of kindness and goodness, to me at the time when I first accepted Christianity, I was wondering why they gave me a feeling of stability. (Cathy, Master's, law)

Overall, however, participants noted both the intergenerational and international nature of the communities they encountered, which could include British undergraduates as well as retirees from a range of different nationalities and backgrounds. Seven participants mentioned the self-sacrificial attitudes of volunteers leading activities, particularly in comparison with peers. These were seen to be demonstrations of different values and an attitude of concern for others which was noteworthy. Dan (Bachelor's, accounting), for example, noted the simple lifestyle of the volunteers at his local international café, pointing out that this was significantly different from Chinese lifestyles:

Based on our materialistic values, everyone just wants to make money. This is something I feel is very different (here), because especially in Christians I see it. Take the old gentleman MF, for example, leading Bible studies for more than a decade. We have very little of this in China...of course as a retiree he has lots of time but in China a retiree wouldn't do this...maybe he would play mahjong, if he was an old man.

One-to-one relationships with Christians were particularly significant for many participants. These generally fell into two categories: friendships with peers, and friendships with older people who acted as Bible teachers.

Eight participants reported the ways in which close friendships with Christians similar in age to themselves were instrumental in demonstrating the plausibility of the Christian life. International Christians were particularly helpful. Belinda was introduced to the Chinese Church by Ben, a Chinese Christian. Having become a believer at university in China, Ben was able to answer many of Belinda's questions in her quest for ontological answers. Similarly, Fern benefited from her friendship with a Malaysian Chinese contemporary who sat with her during church services. Emma learned a completely different approach to Bible studies and prayer through her friendship with a Christian postgrad from Inner Mongolia.

Participants also appreciated friendships with older people, most often retirees who were helpers at the international cafés and led Bible studies in their home. Despite the age difference, these 'grannies' and 'old grandfathers' were exemplary in their hospitality to students, 'sources of Bible understanding' (Cathy, Master's, law) and were often the first port of call for participants with questions about the Bible. Although not considered to be 'friends' in the same way that peers were, there was an ease of communication. Gail likened the lady with whom she did one-to-one studies to 'my old neighbour who used to babysit me in primary school'. They were not considered 'equals' in friendship due to the Chinese cultural regard for age difference but there was warmth between them. The sacrificial lifestyles of these older people were noted as demonstrating a simplicity of life derived from obedience to Jesus (Dan, Bachelor's, finance).

Christians relating to one another

The majority of my participants (16 out of 18) described the Christian communities they frequented as 'attractive', with a magnetism which superseded the risk of 'being preached to', even if other Chinese students had avoided activities for this reason. Diane (Master's, education), although expressing little awareness of biblical understanding, expressed the affective impact of being in church:

Every time I go to church I like it very much. No matter what I am concerned about, I can put it down. I feel it is the most comfortable place to be. So I always want to be there.

Participants also commented on their observations of Christians in their relationships with one another, though this was often conflated with comments on how they themselves were treated. Codes included ‘Encouragement’, ‘Trust’, ‘Co-operation and unity’, ‘Sense of family and mutual belonging’.

This is not to say that Christians were always observed to behave faultlessly with each other, merely that participants did not noticeably comment on negative examples or observations. However, one Friends International staff-worker writing in the organisation’s newsletter notes that during weekends away with international students, it can feel like Christians are presenting their ‘best selves’: ‘If students were to scratch too deep below the surface of our lives, they would find a reality of sin and brokenness. But we hope and pray that the students will see something different in us.’¹¹⁴

Participants relating to God

Since Christian belief fundamentally involves a relationship with the Living God, it was important to note the references which participants made to their own relating to God as a person.

Codes emerging from the data include:

Creating an atmosphere of God’s peace (Diane, Master’s, education)

Knowing God as Father (Charles, PhD, philosophy of religion)

Telling him everything (Emma, Master’s, accounting & finance)

Trusting him in difficult circumstances (Gail, Master’s, finance)

Belief in his will and his purpose for life (Frank, exchange student, finance)

¹¹⁴ Friends International Cambridge team leader Joshua Bell quoted in ‘Softening of hearts in Cornwall’. *Opportunity*, the magazine for the organization’s supporters, June-August 2022, 9.

Receiving his love (Frank, ibid)

The sacrifice of Jesus for the whole world (Frank, ibid)

Jesus died for my sins (Emma, Master's, accounting & finance)

Helen also detailed a longer account of how Jesus became a 'real person' through her reading of the Bible.

I was reading the Gospel of John about Lazarus when my grandmother passed away. It was like God was speaking directly to me, it felt so mysterious. In that moment Jesus opened my heart and began to be like a real person who existed, someone who really lived in history, who had real friends. He was able to cry. I felt that Jesus was not a distant person in a story. He could feel all the pain, the suffering we feel. All that we feel, he can feel. (Helen, Master's, TESOL)

Agency and pragmatic participation

Pragmatism has been identified as a major factor in Chinese people's engagement with religious activity. Chau (2019:24) describes the Chinese approach to religion as 'primarily instrumental and occasion-based' (coining the term 'efficacy-based religiosity') rather than 'confessionally-based'. Based on the empirical evidence, participants' pragmatic choices had more to do with clarity of purpose than merely 'wanting something that worked'.

Additionally, the strength of pragmatism over ethnic identity showed itself in the decision of Cathy, Jen, Kelly and Emma, in particular, to avoid the Chinese church when they first arrived – they were aware of the reputation of the Chinese church for heavy proselytising, and also cited practical reasons such as the Chinese church being too far away (this contrasts with previous studies which cite ethnic identification as a major reason for Chinese students' participation in American Chinese Christian groups). Yang (1998) proposed that Christian Bible study remains attractive due to their conservative values as well as the systematic approach to Bible study. My participants could see the

benefits of picking and choosing the locations and groups which would permit spiritual inquiry to take place in a way which best suited their own needs: thus the British church was favoured for openness and lack of pressure to know or understand anything, and the freedom to choose and decide for oneself was definitely a pull factor. Nonetheless, participants such as Belinda, Ben, Frank, Kelly and Irene, who described a serious quest for truth and answers, recognised that Chinese Christians would be uniquely able to answer questions and help with understanding of the Christian faith in a Chinese context.

Evangelical understandings of Christian community

Christian community is often considered to be synonymous with church. Biblically, the Greek words denoting communities are variously translated as ‘fellowship’ *koinonia*, which is more inward-facing, or ‘church’ *ekklesia*, which in normative theology denotes the worshipping community. Chan (2014) asserts that the Christian theology of gathering, ecclesiology (derived from the Greek for gathering, *ekklesia*) pertains both to the communion of saints as well as to the new eschatological community created by allegiance to Christ. This allegiance is particularly important in Asian cultures where family relationships take priority even over the individual. In the face of multiple home-based religious influences such as is found in China, Chan asserts, ‘The new community created by the Spirit at the very least distinguishes itself from the social and familial bonds that have shaped Asian religions for millennia’. (2014:163)

This forms something of a conundrum within international student ministry, where informal Christian communities are formed around the missional purpose of serving international students. This is understood to be an enactment of the Great Commission given by Jesus in Matthew 28:19-20a:

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

International student ministry practitioners have therefore long emphasised the value of Christian community, while not always expressing a clear understanding of the

theological and missiological value of community relationships in communicating the gospel to non-believers. In fact, although only loosely governed by volunteer policies and mission statements, it could be said that the disparate groups of Christians from many different churches (working together on café teams, for example) are inherent to the formative first impressions of ‘Christian community’ for most international students. My own ministry experience suggests that Chinese students might be attracted to these groups significantly because they neither represent the official church, nor involve participation in ritual practices, both of which represent negative aspects of religion with which Chinese people might be familiar. In addition, anecdotal evidence suggests that some students actively avoid the Chinese diaspora church, due to prejudice based on stereotypes, fear of religious pressure, or antipathy towards co-nationals, preferring instead to socialise with British people.

Ministry literature written for practitioners and church readership highlights the following values:

Welcome and friendship

Catherine Weston, describing the aims of church-based social activities, states that ‘The heart of effective, biblical, international student ministry is one-to-one friendship’ (Weston 2019:67). Taking a cross-cultural perspective, Weston notes that community is rated very highly by students from group-oriented cultures, and a welcoming community ‘attracts more people and everyone (hosts included) can grow and learn in their understanding of one another’s cultures.’

Katie Rawson, like Weston, emphasises the cultural attraction of community in her work on cross-cultural evangelism in international student ministry, ‘For people from collectivist backgrounds, loving community is a magnet’, highlighting the work of Jesus in creating a community that displays the nature of God.

Building trust

A further aspect of Christian community is the desire to build trust with international students and ‘point to Jesus by arousing curiosity’ (Weston 2019:68-69). The concepts of trust and curiosity are developed by Rawson (201:125), based on Everts and Schaupp’s concept of ‘thresholds of faith’ for international students (2008), highlighting relational evangelism in reaching postmodern sceptics. Rawson notes that the thresholds play out differently depending on the pre-existing perceptions of Christians which might breed distrust, as well as the cultural strongholds which might form barriers to faith. The role of relationships and community in building trust in helping seekers from a place of scepticism to curiosity is therefore crucial.

Incarnational theology

Embodied welcome by Christian communities demonstrates the value which God places on the individual. Samuel Wells helpfully delineates four models of social engagement which he observes within the British church¹¹⁵ (Wells 2018:10-11), of which *Working For* is familiar in international student ministry. This model functions on the basis that the way to address disadvantage or distress is for those with more education, social capital, abilities or experience to introduce those capacities to enhance the situation of those who are struggling. The ‘needy’ are defined by their deficit: if they have capacities, these are seldom noticed or harnessed.

Increasingly, international student ministry is moving towards the *Being With* model, driven by the growing awareness of the need to equalize power differentials in mission. This focus shifts from doing things for others to make life better, to the acknowledgement of people’s assets, not their deficits. It seeks to model the goal of all relationships - enjoying people for their own sake - and addresses post-colonial concerns which have been identified in international student ministry (Callow 2020).

¹¹⁵ The four categories are: Working For, Working With, Being With and Being For

Christian community – the need for new perspectives

My participants proved to be astute observers of the Christian community around them, and their reflections demonstrate not only their experience interacting with other Christians, but the ways in which these interpersonal relationships were significant in shaping the knowledge acquired from Bible studies, first, as a catalyst for biblical imagination, and second, as a form of ‘living hermeneutic’ for Jesus’ teaching on how to live with others, acting as an apologetic for the existence of God and the truth of Scripture and the gospel communicated within. I will address each of these in turn.

As a catalyst for biblical imagination

‘The imagination generates new metaphors for synthesizing disparate aspects of reality that burst conventional assumptions about the nature of things’ – Wallace, commenting on Paul Ricoeur’s argument for the power of the productive imagination (Ricoeur 1995:8)

Graham, Walton and Ward (2019:206) observe that interpretation of Scripture ‘takes place in order to understand how to live – the imperative of reading and hearing the word in order to exemplify it in practice’. Bible learning then is not purely about knowledge or facts. It should fuel the ‘practical imagination’ by which one learns to inhabit the world faithfully (2019:206).

For participants who came from backgrounds with no knowledge of the Bible, one of the earliest problems identified was the inability to imagine Jesus in such a way as to realize the relevance of His teaching for modern life. The lack of biblical imagination led to one participant likening the Synoptic Gospel accounts to stories from the Arabian Nights (Helen, Master’s, TESOL). Others, such as Emma, Dan, Ed and Gail, expressed an inability to imagine that the numerous accounts of Jesus’ miracles might be true. The lack of an imaginary bridge between Bible study and their lived reality formed a significant obstacle for a number of participants.

Veith and Ristuccia (2014) observe that we all develop ways of thinking and imagining from the people around us, such that the church (or in the case of this research, the international café team or Bible study group) has a vital role to play in helping

cultivate scriptural imagination. The reality of biblical truth evidenced by witnessing Christian life enables new ways of approaching the Bible text. Every level of church life can help cultivate a Christian imagination, including formal and informal gatherings: ‘participating with your fellow members in the potluck dinners and Bible studies, service projects and fellowship activities, that make up the ordinary life of a congregation’ (Veith & Ristuccia 2014:114). The ordinariness of shared life together not only demonstrated the validity of Christian ethics but empowered participants to seek practical applications from their own readings of the Bible, thus rendering their learning of beliefs to be more than merely propositional (as mentioned by Gail, Master’s, finance). While Madsen (2014) asserts that religious belief in China has never revolved around doctrinal or creedal beliefs, Chinese students who note the observance of biblical teaching in the Christian community report forming a similar expectation that they could embody their newfound beliefs.

As a ‘living hermeneutic’

It was clear that several participants had overcome significant challenges in order to persevere with learning from the Bible. The data shows that a good number (11 out of 18) overcame those hurdles and developed a nascent ordinary theology, which led to a growing faith in Jesus Christ. It is clear from the data presented in this chapter that community life and the acts of other Christians contribute a great deal to what is gained from participation in Bible studies. As Frame (1987) and others state, knowing God requires more than propositional understandings of the Christian faith. For Chinese students coming with no pre-existing understanding of the Scriptures, their understanding of biblical truth and its relevance for their lives has to come from somewhere outside of themselves, particularly in the initial stages.

To many participants, the Christian community became a demonstration of the truths they were learning in the Bible studies. This might have begun as something similar to Berger’s concept of the ‘plausibility shelter’, wherein ‘a religious world will present

itself to consciousness as reality only to the extent that its appropriate plausibility shelter is kept in existence' (1967:150). However, whereas Berger uses this concept as a cause of secularisation in the post-Christian West, his conclusion that a weak plausibility structure causes doubt to arise over previously held 'self-evident reality'. This is clearly not applicable to Chinese students.

My assertion is through the acts of creating welcome, showing kindness, building trust through commensality and hospitality, Christian community enabled participants to see the gospel demonstrated in everyday life, visibly portraying its relevance and reliability. I posit that these visible demonstrations of the Christ-life in the community enabled participants to overcome the problems which they encountered in the Bible studies, which include the linguistic challenge, the sheer volume of knowledge they felt they had to acquire before understanding the Bible, and the limited time which they had, outside of academic life.

Going deeper, community became a 'living hermeneutic', a lens through which biblical teaching on the existence and character of God, and His plan of salvation for humanity could be apprehended. For example, it was within relationships with Christians that students could comprehend that biblical teaching was not simply about rules but were an outworking of the Holy Spirit. Thus, an important development of faith understanding took place when participants realised that perceived goodness and kindness in Christians was not due their own inherent goodness but due to the work of the triune God:

An important question for me was the Buddhist question of self-redemption, but (I learned) in Christianity we have been redeemed by Christ, we only need to believe, and then obey the Bible. I feel this was a big issue for me. (Cathy, Master's, law)

Having realised that others were living as redeemed by Christ, Cathy felt able to have the faith to believe in such a reality.

The evidence of God at work as seen in Christian people's lives might also be considered a form of religious experience bearing evidential force (Netland 2022). Netland describes this as 'the principle of testimony' (2022:87), where a person might be at least one step removed from the experience but hears or reads a report of the experience, and accepts this as *prima facie* evidence for the reality of their own experience, particularly where many others report similar experiences. Helen (Masters, TESOL), for example, was deeply influenced by time spent in the midst of a large gathering of Christians at the Easter Christian conference Word Alive, which played a role in helping her interpret biblical miracles as feasible. She describes the impact of being surrounded by several hundred Christians worshipping God together.

There were so many people, they were all saved by God, and each had new life. Their lives were all real, so many people, like so many miracles – they were all walking miracles! These weren't just the miracles I read in the books. They were all Christians walking the same road as me. If they were real, why shouldn't the miracles in the Gospels be real too?

Accounts such as this demonstrate that corporate worship bears the evidentiary power of testimony, along with being 'a site of divine action, a means of grace' (Smith 2013:135) and the formation of 'transformative habitus', as will be discussed in Chapter Six.

The question of church attendance and corporate worship

Given the high value placed on relationality and the Christian community which emerged from the data, one might anticipate participants' accounts to contain multiple references to corporate worship and attendance at church services. However, apart from participants who identified as Christians prior to arrival in Britain (Amy, Ben, Irene, Greg), only four participants mentioned regular attendance at church services with any degree of commitment. These were Andrew, whose professed intention was to practise his spoken English; Diane, who saw herself as 'fated to become a Christian' and thus

wanted to be ‘part of God’s family’ each Sunday morning; Charles, whose academic interest in Christianity led him to attend services in a neighbourhood church; and Fern, who was drawn to sacred and church music. A closer analysis of the language in the data indicated that for the remaining participants, activities such as cafés and Bible studies were used interchangeably with ‘church’, revealing a potential lack of awareness of the distinction between church services as communal acts of worship and the more informal social activities.

Such a finding raises significant challenges and an urgent concern for praxis. Within evangelical Christianity, acts of corporate worship along with participation in the sacraments such Holy Communion (or the Lord’s Supper) in commemoration of Christ’s sacrificial death, are understood to be core practices in a believer’s life, but this did not seem to be reflected in the emergent beliefs of roughly half of my participants. This calls into serious question the content of their nascent theology and its doctrinal rigour. Further, corporate worship plays a significant role in spiritual formation, representing the embodied and affective enactment of faith. Going further, Smith helpfully draws the distinction between the impact of the Scriptures read in the context of study, and when read and heard in the context of the ‘rhythms and rituals of Christian worship’¹¹⁶, during which they are encountered ‘as a conduit of the Spirit’s transformative power, as part of a pedagogy of desire’ (2013:135,139). In worship, there is a sense that God meets with us, such that love and desire for him precede doctrine and belief in forming the Christian worldview, in a ‘bottom-up, practices-first model’ (2013:136). This has powerful implications for the transformation of belief-that to belief-in, as articulated in Chapter Six.

¹¹⁶ It should be noted that Smith does not distinguish between informal styles of worship from which specific elements of confession or the recital of creeds are absent, and so-called ‘high church’ liturgical worship. I agree with his assertion that ‘all Christian worship is liturgical’ (across diverse denominations, styles and theological traditions) in being governed by norms and traditions, including ‘bodily rituals or routines’, and involving ‘formative practices’ (Smith 2013:152).

I agree with Smith that human beings are ‘more fundamentally affective than cognitive’ (2013:138). Further, given the assertions of Chau (2019), Madsen (2014) and others that Chinese modalities of faith prioritise communal and affective belonging rather than doctrinal belief, it would appear that the low incidence of regular church attendance for worship services among Chinese students represents a significant challenge to their nascent ecclesiology, potentially leading to an impoverished Christology.

Reframing international student activities

The discussion above demonstrates that evangelical understandings of Christian activities for international students would benefit from reinterpretation and reframing. The observed lack of attendance at regular church services among my participants is indicative of a wider question which needs to be urgently addressed. Social gatherings such as international cafes and other events - formal and informal - should be viewed within the evangelical community not only as the ‘social events’ running in parallel with the ‘faith building’ activities like Bible studies, but should equally be viewed as opportunities to participate in ordinary Christian practices, while simultaneously directing students to the more formal acts of corporate worship and ritual which are intrinsic to the Christian life. Since participants showing spiritual interest perceived the various organised social events as being imbued with meaning, a greater intentionality regarding acts of worship as part of the body of Christ would serve to encourage the essential habitus for spiritual formation. Dykstra and Bass, exploring the practice of theology in the ordinary Christian life, describe the distinctives of Christian practices which become ‘elements in a way of life that becomes incarnate when human beings live in the light of and in response to God’s gift of life abundant’ (2002:21). They should, firstly, ‘address fundamental human needs and conditions’ (2002:22), secondly, ‘involve a profound awareness, a deep knowledge: they are activities imbued with the knowledge of God and

creation' (2002:24) and thirdly, 'share in the mysterious dynamic of fall and redemption, sin and grace' (2002:27).

Although international student activities are not explicitly described as 'Christian practices', it is clear from the data that they became imbued with spiritual significance as participants reached deeper understandings of the Christian faith. Participants came to express both the lived and affective impact of café evenings, weekends away and Bible studies in language which demonstrated the incarnational aspects of the Christian life as they both observed and interacted with ministry workers and volunteers.

In indirect ways, the three distinctives highlighted by Dykstra and Bass (2002) above correspond with the key questions of Relevance, Relationality and Ultimate Reality identified in Chapter Four as intrinsic to my participants' inquiry. As previously mentioned, these were not explicitly expressed by participants but emerged from the data as they described the factors which motivated them to deeper interaction with the Christian faith.

Conclusion

The data from this chapter demonstrates that Christian activities, and the communities of people therein, are rich in meaning for Chinese students beyond the intercultural learning and opportunities for language practice which have been noted in the literature (Yu 2017). As Ma (2021) observes, for Chinese students, language, culture and religion are intertwined in evangelical Christian activities, although the depth of that reality has not been explored until now. Participants' accounts revealed that beyond places where God's love and care were seen to be real, their observations of the lives of Christians prompted 'scriptural imagination', provided evidentiary power and enabled them to envisage that the Gospel accounts, for example, were believable and could be explored further.

Further, Christian community served as a site for the verification of Christian belief as a viable way of life, which added plausibility and value to learned biblical and doctrinal beliefs. First, on an individual basis, one-to-one relationships involving friendships and ‘authoritative guides’ (Meek 2011) were opportunities not only for mutual care and learning between peers, but also, as the latter served as sources of answers for difficult questions and life experience. On a collective basis, participation in group activities, primarily at international cafés and Bible studies, but occasionally also in church, served as places of cultural learning for some. However, those who began to seriously investigate the faith also found that Christian communities served as catalysts for biblical imagination and a ‘living hermeneutic’ (following Ricoeur 1995) of biblical truth.

The extant literature on international student socialising patterns has referred to student participation in Christian churches as a desire for belonging and cultural assimilation. Ministry practitioners, on the other hand, view community primarily as a place of inclusion, a platform for building trust, from which the gospel can be communicated. However, my research has shown that while those elements are somewhat true, they are only partially accurate. Instead, the data shows that participants’ individual and communal interaction with Christians plays the important role of triangulation in their faith inquiry. Observation of Christian conduct both towards ‘outsiders’ (like themselves) as well as fellow believers, relationship building within those friendships and ultimately with God himself, served to verify the truth of the Bible and provide evidence for the existence of God in tangible ways.

That insight should not be surprising when one considers the importance of relationality in Chinese culture, including Chinese religious practice. However, once again, where relationality has been mentioned as one of Chau’s modalities of Chinese religion (2019:25), the implication is that Chinese students seek the communal aspects of religious practice, such as ritual belonging, as boundaries of belonging. While this may

be true to some degree, it is only part of the story, particularly where participants had little previous knowledge about communal religious practices within Christianity. A renewed theological understanding of the purposes of God as demonstrated in and through Christian communities is therefore urgently required. Further, the low occurrence of church and corporate worship within participants' narratives suggests that a lack of understanding of church life and its centrality to the Christian faith is a significant concern which will be addressed in Chapter Eight.

Having set out the ways in which Christian communities form sites in which embodied Christian belief could be observed and imagined, prompting deeper evaluation and acceptance, I now turn to participants' reports of their engagement with Bible studies in order to discern some of the specific beliefs gleaned from the Bible texts, and the process by which such beliefs became internalised and espoused in participants' emergent theological construction.

CHAPTER SIX

BIBLE STUDIES: BELIEF EXPLORED THROUGH SCRIPTURAL LEARNING

Introduction

As outlined in Chapter Two, scholarly voices within the discourse on Chinese students interacting with Christianity overseas have heavily emphasised the social benefits of participation in local church groups. These have been expressed in terms of ‘favour fishing’, with its implication that Christian kindness creates a sense of obligation (Abel 2006); ‘bridging social capital’ gained when students attach themselves to the local religious community (Huang 2015, also Ding & Devine 2017); or intercultural exchange as part of the evangelistic agenda of the ethnic/diaspora Chinese church (Wang & Yang 2006) or faith-based organisations (Yu 2017, Li 2012).

In the previous chapter, however, I demonstrated that the discourse is accurate to some degree, but entirely neglects the deeper existential and spiritual aspects of student interaction. While the social needs met by international student activities should not be underestimated, my findings showed that friendship and discussion with evangelical Christians, both individual and as a community, play a significant role in communicating and corroborating beliefs learned in Bible studies in an embodied and transformative way. This should not be surprising considering the assertions within Chinese religious studies that Chinese people value inhabited faith and practices over propositional truth (see for example, Fan 2011 and Chau 2019).

Chinese students have, however, also been observed within the discourse to adopt the ‘biblical evangelicalism’ (Strhan 2015, Bielo 2009) of evangelical Christian groups on campus. Their espoused beliefs are that a) Jesus is God and their personal saviour; and b) true Christians are biblical and derive meaning for their lives from witnessing and evangelising (Ma 2021, following Yang 1999:66). It is with these beliefs in mind that I

now turn to discussing the findings from participants' narratives about their attendance in Bible studies.

Table 5.2 charting Purpose and Proximity in Chapter Five revealed that participants approached Christian activities with a range of motives and understandings, which were clearly related to their conceptions of the Christian faith prior to arrival in Britain. Since many self-identified as having had no previous religious beliefs or understanding of faith of any kind, it is important to elucidate how these views influenced their decision to join and persist in activities centred around Bible learning.

Some of the questions I seek to answer are: how did participants' involvement turn from cultural interest and language practice to interaction with Christian belief? How did they come to perceive the Bible as a source of (religious) truth rather than legend or myth? And finally, for those who later professed faith, how did 'propositional beliefs' become 'inhabited beliefs' leading to faith? What were the challenges and how were these overcome, if at all?

Having outlined some of the matters requiring investigation, I now focus on themes which emerged from the reported experiences and reflections of participants, beginning with initial perceptions.

'Learning the Bible'¹¹⁷

"I'm not a Christian but I want to know more so that I can believe" (from a Chinese student responding in a Bible discussion group at a weekend away)

Inquirer Bible studies are the core activity providing Christian teaching for international students wanting to know more about the Christian faith and take place in a range of venues which include Christian homes (often with a hot meal provided), and international cafés locations, such as church halls, meeting rooms on campus, and

¹¹⁷ This is the phrase commonly used by Chinese students when they join Bible studies – their stated purpose is to 'learn the Bible' (*xueshengjing*) 学圣经

chaplains. Group studies might cater to a group of up to 10 or 12 students from a range of nationalities, although in some cities Bible study groups solely for Chinese students take place usually because this is the dominant group of students represented at the city's international student events overall. Although attendance might be intermittent, students often formed close friendships with those who were in their Bible study group. Among my participants, several were from the same group and were very familiar with others who were being interviewed from their city. Belinda (Master's, business), for example, acted as a gatekeeper and introduced Diane (Master's, education), Dan (Bachelor's, accounting) and Ben (postdoc, engineering) to me. All were in her various Bible study groups, although she noted that Ben, a Christian, had been significant in introducing her to the Chinese church.

Some participants, usually those who had expressed interest in the Christian faith from the outset, also undertook one-to-one Bible studies. These often involved the student meeting with an individual for weekly Bible discussion of an hour or so, in many cases with an older person or retiree (Frank, exchange student, finance; Gail, Master's, finance), although as Gail described,

We chat for a while about what's happened and then we read a passage, maybe a few paragraphs or a few verses. We don't study long passages as it's tiring for me to do it in my second language. (Gail, Master's, finance)

Participants often voiced great appreciation and respect for those who led Bible studies with them. The Chinese regard for age and experience meant that older people¹¹⁸ leading Bible studies were held in high regard, perceived to have the wisdom and knowledge to teach. These 'old grandfathers' and 'silver-haired grannies' thus played

¹¹⁸ Belinda, Cathy, Diane, Gail and Frank described the retirees leading Bible studies with them as old gentleman 老先生, grandfather 老爷爷, elderly man, 老人家, elderly lady 老太太. These terms were often used with affection. Gail described the lady she was meeting with as 'like my old neighbour in China who babysat me as a primary school pupil'. Refer to the discussion on the value of individual relationships in Chapter Five.

roles of authority and teaching, helping participants to integrate the strands of their biblical understanding and experience. Participants in one-to-one studies also reported the freedom to ask questions about situations which arose in their lives; these were instrumental in helping understand the relevance of biblical teaching to everyday life.

My interviews did not focus specifically on the use of resources as I wanted to hear participants' stories rather than assessing the quality of Bible study guides. It is striking however that resources were not mentioned by name and did not seem to have made an impact on participants' learning. While specific texts in the Bible were mentioned, Bible study guides seemed to be perceived as unimportant, with most participants saying they 'couldn't remember' what was used. It is also common for the more experienced Bible study leaders to create their own bespoke material which would not have been noted by participants, as I found during participant-observation and general conversation with leaders.

Depicting an ordinary evening¹¹⁹

Having been part of numerous inquirer Bible studies for international students over several years, and based on fieldwork experience, there is a general format which these studies follow. Settings are informal, with the most relaxed taking place in the home of a local Christian. Some include a hot meal, recognising that students might come directly after lectures or from the library. Bible discussions which take place as part of 'English practice groups' (as described by Yu 2017) are more likely to be located on campus. In most cases the setting is not overtly 'religious' – the emphasis is on relaxed interaction and friendship, although such 'informality' sometimes arouses suspicion among students and researchers, as has been noted in the literature (Yu 2017).

¹¹⁹ Notes from participant observation of a church-based Bible study group, June 2019.

The following consists of an excerpt from my participant observation notes from a church-based Bible study evening. The group was small, but the interactions and atmosphere were fairly typical, based on my previous experience.

NOTES	COMMENTS
<p>Bible study tonight with 2 Chinese students, ZY and DX, led by M, young British female volunteer. Three others from the church joining in as part of the international student team.</p> <p>Dinner is relaxed, people join in setting the table and clearing up afterwards. Everyone knows what to do.</p> <p>BIBLE STUDY Everyone gets settled in easy chairs. There's a sense of informality, people seem to know each other and there's some banter esp between team members.</p> <p>Study using UCCF resource, Uncover Mark, which has attractive layout. ZY has a Chinese translation while everyone else is using the English version. She has done her preparation ahead of time, with miniscule notes written in English and Chinese – prep to contribute?</p> <p>Passage studied: Mark 5:21-43, the healing of Jairus' daughter. M leads with an explanation of the historical context of the passage. Assigns different members to read the passage.</p> <p>M explains the process of the study clearly, explains about synagogue, and focuses on the story in Mark 5, asking specific questions to get the group thinking: How does Jairus feel? What do we think of him begging Jesus?</p> <p>M's focus on Jairus' attitude to Jesus, his lack of shame in approaching Jesus. Discussion does not centre on the</p>	<p>Meet in church hall – informal, tables and comfortable chairs. No obvious religious visuals in sight. Uncover Mark and NIV Bibles on the tables.</p> <p>Hot meal of rice and casserole before Bible study, prepared by a volunteer.</p> <p>Conversation during meal is limited. ZY seems very tired, says she was travelling at the weekend.</p> <p>H, leader of the group, say it's hard to keep continuity as attendance can be intermittent. Although Uncover goes through the Gospel sequentially, it's hard to know if students get a sense of the movement depicted in the book with such irregular attendance.</p> <p>The wording of questions seems a bit wordy for ZY. DX's English is a bit more fluent, but he is also hesitant. Discussion is slow. M works hard to stimulate responses with team members chipping in.</p> <p>Many of the Uncover studies seem to be about healing. Wondering if M will address the question of whether God heals today (<i>later note: she didn't</i>)</p> <p>Everyone very quiet. People venture one reply but don't keep talking. There isn't a flow of discussion, but from my own experience, this is quite normal. I am trying to be as 'relaxed' as possible so as not to affect the dynamic.</p>

<p>healing itself. What do students make of this?</p> <p>Group splits in two to encourage more discussion on how Jairus asked Jesus to heal his daughter. Comments from ZX and DX about their own reaction to Jairus: desperation, use of plain words.</p> <p>Concept of being ceremonially unclean. Someone on the team likens this to Muslim belief.</p> <p>ZY doesn't understand the word or implications of being unclean. M draws parallels between Jesus dying on the cross to make us clean.</p> <p>At the end, M prays a short prayer asking God to give everyone a good rest and safe journey home. People stay and mingle for a while afterward. There isn't a rush to leave, although it is mid-week. After some chat, everyone disperses. ZY gets a lift home from one of the team whom she seems to know well.</p>	<p>M focuses on the dynamics of Jesus' interaction with Jairus. At no point is the question of actual healing addressed. The passage is used as the context for talking about Jairus' respect for Jesus, his worship.</p> <p>There is no discussion of the miracle – eg. does Jesus still heal today? In the previous passage the healing of the demoniac had been studied (the previous week?). No reference to prayer. No application question so what is the takeaway from the study?</p> <p>ZY didn't see the relevance of this point. Asked again.</p> <p>M seems to assume that everyone is interested in the question of uncleanness. Maybe wanting to avoid the word 'sin'?</p> <p>M is a competent and experienced leader and works at inviting discussion. Am curious that the healings themselves were not the focus of the study, instead moving to clean/unclean, which seemed hard to ZY and DX to grasp.</p> <p>Thoughts: it might be hard for students to see the relevance of this study to their lives.</p>
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Figure 6.1 Notes from participant-observation of Bible study, June 2019

Understandings about the Bible: cultural text or sacred book?

Having described a typical Bible study in logistical terms, with some of my observational comments highlighting the difficulties inherent to these studies, I now discuss my participants' reflections on their own learning. Although they represent studies in a range of locations, with different leaders and churches involved, my intention is not to assess the efficacy of Bible study practices per se, but to gain an understanding of participants' narratives, especially with regard to the learning of Christian beliefs¹²⁰.

¹²⁰ While aware of Hill's caution that 'reliance on self-reported change is subject to memory distortion and social desirability bias' (2011:535), I did not feel that participants' account revealed a desire to please

Comparative religion: the uniqueness of the Bible

It would be fair to say that participants had no prior awareness of the unique Christian understanding of the Bible as God's special revelation or the Christian expectation that God speaks through his Word.

Chinese religions have no shortage of significant ancient sacred texts, with classic, sutras and scriptures playing a significant role in Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism. In fact, Yao describes Confucianism as 'a tradition of books' (2000:47). However, practices for handling Chinese sacred texts differ greatly (Starr 2016). Adam Chau describes the handling of religious texts as the 'Discursive/Scriptural modality of doing religion', which in practice involves, for religious experts, the compiling and editing of scriptures, discoursing about 'the Way' (*dao*), as well as preaching, whereas the ordinary believer might participate in reading, thinking about, discussing, and commenting on texts, often the preserve of the more highly educated and literate in the population, and those with a propensity and interest in philosophy and 'theology' (2019:26). Working on religious scriptures might also be seen to constitute acts of self-cultivation.

Among my participants, Charles (PhD, philosophy of religion) had read extensively from the key texts of the Three Teachings through personal interest, and Cathy (Master's, law) had previously attended classes on the Buddhist sutras as a solution to her 'inner confusion'. It was, however, unclear whether any participants had these goals in mind in attending Bible studies. It is also likely that by the time of their interview, most had sufficient experience to reinterpret their original anticipations, since the interview data reflects, retrospectively, an awareness that the Christian understanding of the Bible is markedly different.

me; nor were their accounts intended to prove or disprove 'conversion' as my study focused primarily on learning within Bible studies and associated events.

Emma's (Master's, accounting & finance) first experience in Bible study was with British Jehovah's Witnesses who spoke Mandarin. She lamented that they spent more time studying their 'little booklets' while making passing reference to the Bible. This she found deeply dissatisfying, citing it as a significant reason for her decision to discontinue the studies and join an English group run by Friends International at a local evangelical church instead. At the time she did not know the difference between the groups and decided to go to both 'to make a comparison between the two'.

Belinda (Master's, business) attended Bible studies marking the different stages of faith exploration, beginning with Bible study in the home of a retired British couple from Church S. These examined topical issues such as family and finance. However, as her inquiry progressed:

I believe that God exists, but I don't know who he is. I want to make sure who Jesus is. The Bible studies in Church C help me to compare the Old and New Testament, so I go there on Sunday evenings. Now I believe in God, now the door is open, I can't turn back. (Belinda, Master's, business)

At the same time, she was regularly meeting with a student from the Islamic Society to learn about Islam, though she readily admitted,

At the moment I am biased towards Christianity, so I discuss with him from a Christian viewpoint. Maybe I say wrong things, but I spend more time with Christians so I know more about Christianity. (Belinda, Master's, business)

Such active 'exploration' (described by Belinda) suggests that the Bible was perceived by some as more than a cultural/language textbook. As a source of religious teaching, it could be used as a basis for comparison with other faiths.

“What even is the Bible?”

The Bible teaches you to be a good person.
(Andrew, Master's, environmental engineering)

Most participants described these studies as their first meaningful contact with the Bible, citing lack of interest but also, lack of ease of access in some cases. Cathy (Master's, law) managed to obtain a copy of the Bible 'from her father's friend' for a project during her undergraduate education but did not read much of it. Charles (PhD, philosophy of religion) had managed to buy a copy in China several years previously but found it too hard to understand. Diane's (Master's, education) mother had given her a book of Bible stories for children, but she remembered very little about it. The participants from Christian families, Jen (PhD, electrical engineering) and Kelly (Master's, data science), claimed not to have read the Bible prior to coming overseas.

Most participants perceived the Bible to be a source book for cultural learning, citing its historical influence on Western culture. Emma's rationale (Master's, accounting and & finance) was that it was a 'very popular' book and she 'wanted to know why it was influential for so many people'. Ed had arrived with the expectation that 'Britain is a Christian country' and wanted to learn how the Bible was the foundation of morality and ethics for Western society. He describes being 'astounded' to be told that Christians were a minority in British society and felt that British laws did not uphold what he felt were 'Christian values'¹²¹.

The New Testament Gospel accounts as introductory texts

Participants uniformly described Bible studies starting in the Gospels, with those of Mark and John most frequently mentioned. Although many international student inquirer Bible study groups use a study guide, participants did not mention Bible study resources or materials by name, although both Helen and Emma mentioned the use of 'discussion questions'¹²². Rather than quoting chapter and verse or scriptural references, most

¹²² As my research focused on the transformation of knowledge acquired by Chinese students through Christian activities, using lived experience rather than pedagogical approaches or analysis of specific resource materials, I avoided directing participants to comment on Bible study guides or teaching approaches in the interviews, preferring to an inductive approach to understanding their process of learning.

participants broadly mentioned 'learning about Jesus', specifically citing Gospel accounts of his miracles and interaction with people, as memorable. These received more mention than his teaching or parables. However, their understanding of the context of Jesus' life within the biblical narrative lacked clarity.

Helen reported feeling no connection with the Gospel accounts:

Reading the Gospels, at first it just didn't have much resonance for me. Even though the Gospels are stories about Jesus, they had nothing to do with me. At the time it felt as though the Gospels were just stories from the Middle East, so I didn't pay much attention when listening or reading. (Helen, Master's, TESOL)

There was also a question of believability, with the inherent confusion apparent in these comments:

There were too many stories of miracles, impossible for me to believe. Jesus was only an ordinary human being; he couldn't have so many stories about him or done so many miracles. (Helen, Master's, TESOL)

(The Bible studies) were all about Jesus. They would talk about the story of Jesus, his life, his death, the meaning of his death...at the beginning I found it just ridiculous to think that Jesus died for us. And I didn't know the meaning of sin. (Emma, Master's, accounting & finance)

Pragmatically, participants also reported feeling that their level of English was insufficient to cope the dual challenge of understanding a different genre of text as well as participating in an inductive study and discussion.

I listened to the (Gospel) stories and felt very confused. It felt like I knew every word that was spoken but put them together and I just didn't know what they were saying. My English at the time was not very good, so reading for the first time, very quickly, I couldn't understand them...and I didn't feel good asking. (Helen, Master's, TESOL)

Similarly, after 6 months, Ed (Academic visitor, engineering) reported feeling that he still only knew very little, describing literally, a skin-deep understanding: *pimao de lijie*¹²³.

These accounts raise the issue of Relevance¹²⁴ for those who decided not to persevere with the studies. There are, naturally, a multitude of factors which might affect a Chinese student's interest and understanding of Bible studies. Based on the data and reflections from the studies themselves, it seems that Relevance was a major consideration. For Ed, the lack of relevance to his life both in the UK and back home in China with his family meant that he saw little reason to continue with the Bible:

My life in China and here are totally different. I had never come in contact with the Bible before - that is to say, at the time there wasn't the environment to do so. Even after studying a bit...let's say I buy a Bible and bring it home, there won't be the environment, the atmosphere to do so, because nobody else will be interested. I don't have the background. And if there is no-one in your environment, not even one, reading the Bible, how can you do so? At work, at home. It would be 'weird'. (Ed, Academic visitor, engineering)

Understandings from the Bible

Participants coming from an entirely non-Christian background had to begin by developing an understanding of what the Bible is. Although the Gospel narratives formed the basis of many studies reported, participants recounting their experience also articulated some of the beliefs which they interpreted as being core to the Christian faith that was being presented. The key beliefs which were discerned from coding of interview data are:

¹²³ 皮毛的理解

¹²⁴ Discussing secularisation, Peter Berger states that the 'relevance of religion' in the private sphere enables its reception as meeting therapeutic and moral needs of the individual (1967:147). This is, at least in part, resonates with the data although it is doubtful that participants had moral needs in mind when they joined Bible studies.

- The Bible is a source of truth
- God exists as creator of the whole world and is involved in the world today
- Jesus Christ is both Son of God and God himself. He performed great miracles, and taught people how to live in harmony with one another.
- Jesus Christ died on the cross to redeem of the human race (this encompassed concepts of forgiveness, salvation, restored relationship with God).
- The church is God's family and Christians are all brothers and sisters with God as our Father.
- Being a Christian is described as following Jesus, reading and obeying the Bible, praying to God, being in relationship with God.

These beliefs are considered orthodox within evangelical Christianity. To some degree, the clarity with which participants were able to articulate some of these beliefs was representative of their engagement with the Bible teaching, wider reading of Christian books (Cathy, Master's, law; Helen, Master's, TESOL; Fern, Master's, tourism) and the copying of language from Christian friends (Diane, Master's, education; Belinda, Master's, business; Dan, Bachelor's, accounting). Often, these were not expressed as propositional statements. Rather, participants gave examples, anecdotes, and descriptions of situations that illustrated beliefs they professed. This is similar to the expressions which Day encountered among British informants reporting professed Christian belief (2010:19).

Conversely, there were participants who would state that 'God is love' (Dan, Bachelor's, finance) or 'Christians are God's family' (Diane, Master's, education) as propositional comments about Christianity but gave little evidence of biblical understanding or personal acceptance.

While participants might have been able to retrospectively articulate learned Christian beliefs, their initial impressions of inquirer Bible studies do not indicate much

progress. A common obstacle to learning from the Bible was ontological. As Emma, for example, reiterated: *'I just didn't believe in in the existence of God!'*¹²⁵

A significant barrier to understanding and belief even after several months in Bible studies is encapsulated in the statement above, with several participants commenting that their scientific-materialist school education created philosophical objections even if they were attracted to aspects of biblical teaching. However, it could also be seen that once this question was resolved, participants could develop faith in Jesus quite rapidly as it became 'a straightforward matter'¹²⁶ to believe the rest of the Bible (for example, Emma).

Such objections were voiced by several participants:

At the beginning I couldn't accept that God really exists, or that the Bible is a record of true events... in addition, the Bible is so thick. I only had some beginner knowledge...such Adam in Genesis, Noah's Ark and so on. But I couldn't just accept it all, even if someone taught me for ages I still wouldn't understand.

(Gail, Master's, finance)

I'm still asking if there is a god or not. I want to reconsider a few questions about human life - one of them is, is there a god at all? Or maybe not. I used to be in between. Before coming in contact with Christianity I wouldn't have said I was entirely scientific- minded. Many things cannot be explained. But if there is a god, who created him? (Dan, Bachelor's, accounting)

Some were able to overcome the barriers mentioned above and seemed to reach a new stage in persevering with Bible study in different groups. A growth in understanding took place even though there was a constant conflict between the fundamental inability to believe in God and a desire to learn more about Jesus. This helped them to start developing a nascent 'ordinary theology' beyond descriptive facts about Jesus.

¹²⁵ 我根本不相信神的存在!

¹²⁶ 顺其自然

Doctrinal understanding

Continuing interest in Bible studies was usually attributed to a changed or deepened understanding. This was occasionally linked with studies in specific biblical books, but equally could be attributed to relationships which encouraged perseverance. Participants reported the following issues which emerged as they moved on in Bible study.

Learning the biblical context

As mentioned earlier, Helen reported learning very little from her initial studies. However, reading the Creation account on a weekend away with the international café group proved to be pivotal to her understanding.

When we studied Genesis 1-3, I suddenly realised that there was an added dimension to the story of Adam and Eve. There is a Creator God. It started to make sense then. (Helen, Master's, TESOL)

For Cathy, reading the popular teaching book 'God's Big Picture'¹²⁷ helped her to grasp the metanarrative of the Bible, which then gave meaning to the Gospel accounts they were reading.

I asked (my Bible study leader) why the God of the Old Testament was so different from the God of the New Testament. He told me to keep reading the Bible to see how He was the same God as Jesus who died for us. (Cathy, Master's, law)

It was only then that the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross made any logical sense to her.

Developing Christological understandings

Participants reported struggling to understand the portrayals of Jesus from the Synoptic Gospels, citing their lack of belief in God as a key question which had not yet been answered.

¹²⁷ Roberts, V. *God's Big Picture: tracing the storyline of the Bible*. IVP: UK. 2003

Even though I want to believe in Jesus, I still thought the miracles were unbelievable, especially for scientific people (Frank, exchange student, finance)

In contrast, Jesus' high ethical and moral standards led to difficulty working out how to put his teachings into practice, especially when participants lacked an awareness of the transforming power of God and the work of the Holy Spirit. It appeared that they were simply being presented with impossible standards to meet through self-cultivation.

I was so impressed when I heard The Sermon on the Mount, it set the standard for human ethics higher than anything I've studied (Charles, PhD, philosophy of religion)

Jesus is so wonderful, so perfect.... (that) I feel so far away from Him (Gail, Master's, finance)

Emma initially found the non-trinitarian theology of Jehovah's Witnesses more in accord with her own thinking than the evangelical group, i-Explore, which she later joined:

I had learnt some things (from Jehovah's Witnesses). So (in i-Explore) I was quite resistant, some views I couldn't really accept. (Jehovah's Witnesses) didn't believe in the Trinity. So, when they mentioned the Trinity at i-Explore, I couldn't accept it, I found the sect's teaching more acceptable, since they believe Jesus is only a man. Because I didn't believe in God... I would sometimes argue with them on this. But I really liked going there. (Emma, Master's, accounting & finance)

Without an understanding of transcendence, Jesus' identity as God could not be accepted.

I could see that Jesus was a good teacher, a good leader. He was so kind. But I couldn't believe He is God. (Frank, exchange student, finance)

Frank struggled to believe that one man's death might save the world. He came to a resolution of this question in an unusual way and reported having reached an understanding of Jesus' death on the cross by watching the Netflix anime, 'Devilman

Crybaby’¹²⁸. Despite the violence and explicit sexual themes, Frank saw parallels between the sacrificial death of Akira, the Devilman protagonist, a demon-human hybrid, in his quest to save the world from an invasion from Satan and his demons, and the biblical account of Jesus’ death. While Akira ultimately failed to save the world, Frank reasoned that since Jesus was able to do so successfully, as demonstrated by his resurrection, he must therefore be God, since only God could successfully overcome death.

Frank’s reasoning contained a logical progression which, while leading to the possibility of Jesus’ divinity, appears to work in reverse from the rationale expected from inductive Bible studies. While he struggled to accept Jesus’ atoning and sacrificial death as a valid solution to the problem of sin in the world, he readily accepted Jesus’ resurrection, reasoning that only a good man could conquer death. It is a good example of the different routes through which participants arrived at rational conclusions, albeit in unexpected and complex ways.

Inhabiting learned beliefs

By the time of interview, participants who self-identified as having made a faith commitment and called themselves Christians, seemed to have worked through a significant number of theological issues and questions pertaining to biblical understanding. As shown in the previous chapter, their interaction with Christians was instrumental to developing new understandings of biblical teaching. Although Bible study leaders or other Christians could not always offer a satisfactory response, participants could be seen to accept partial answers as evidence that answers existed (Gail, Master’s, finance).

However, the affective impact of moving towards a position of faith could be seen as significant from the data. In addition, participants’ thinking developed from the early

¹²⁸ ‘Devilman Crybaby’ (2018) is a Japanese animation series rated 18+, directed by Masaaki Yuasa, based on Go Nagai’s manga series ‘Devilman’. The anime is widely available in the UK for subscribers of Netflix, the online streaming channel.

theological questions such as the identity and salvific work of Jesus Christ (Frank); the origin of man (Helen); an overview of the Bible narrative (Cathy), to applying their biblical understandings to existential questions and Christian practices such as prayer. Ordinary theologising led to lived theology in a more or less seamless way.

Some mature Christian friends told me; prayer is like a child asking their father for a gift. You say you want so many sweets, maybe your parents feel this isn't good for your health and so they might not give that to you. So even if you always ask by (sic) Jesus' name, you might be asking for His name's sake, but maybe these were just your own thinking... He might not answer you so quickly.

(Gail, Master's, finance)

At the stage when participants felt they had come to know God, they expressed new understandings of the meaning and purpose of life.

As a Christian you want to work for God's Kingdom, you have to be willing to help others, to forgive others as God has forgiven us.

(Andrew, Master's, environmental engineering)

Andrew also reported a changed concept of the Bible, although this filled him with mixed emotions:

At first, I thought this Bible teaches you how to live, it actually tells you about Jesus and the events before His birth. It's full of stories...but more than that I think it gives praise to God.

The Bible gives me a kind of peaceful (sic), makes me feel there is someone by my side. I want to say that it gives me a kind of psychological comfort but because I know I want to say I believe in God, I still can't say 100% that there is an all-powerful God. But I am willing to believe.

(Andrew, Master's, environmental engineering)

Andrew's reflection contrasts greatly with Diane, who expressed great confidence in her decision to believe in Jesus. This was not matched by an understanding of the reality of Christian life, for example, in relying on Bible reading for help when given a difficult assignment:

I decided to pray about it. Then I read a Bible passage which basically said 'If you want to do something, you should do it. Because you have the ability and shouldn't complain.' So I felt better and felt I could definitely do anything, and in fact I was able to give a good demonstration. So even though I didn't believe because of reading the Bible, when I do read the Bible, I receive some comfort and encouragement and it makes me feel very good.

(Diane, Master's, education)

At the time of interview Diane had been baptised, but her example raises the issue of the degree to which some Chinese students fully understand or know biblical teaching even when their professions of faith seem confident and sincere.

Competing dichotomies in emerging beliefs

Several dichotomies could be discerned in the nascent beliefs of participants as their understanding of the Bible deepened. These dichotomies contributed to the sense of conflict and dissonance which students grappled with even as they moved towards inhabiting a confessional faith in Jesus Christ:

The Performative: conduct versus spirituality

The tendency to focus on the external behaviour, the patterns of what makes 'a good Christian', versus for a settled internal spirituality based on an understanding of the cosmological implications of the lordship of Jesus Christ in order to address their questions of spiritual realities. For example, participants might be taught orthopraxic approaches to dealing with the questions of ancestral practices and demonic interference, through prayer and Bible reading. While this was helpful, they lacked the necessary

Christological undergirding to resolve these issues from a theological and ontological perspective (see Chan 2014:120). In addition, there was the danger that participants had come to associate the Christian life with daily devotional practices and concerted efforts to ‘be a better person’. While I am aware that these were the comments of participants who had only professed faith in Jesus not long before the interview, it raises the concern that their knowledge of what it means to live as a Christian at that stage was still only expressed in performative terms.

The Temporal: historicity versus eternity

Participants reported difficulty in balancing the need to understand that the New Testament Gospels are historical accounts of Jesus’ life, that God has worked through human history, while understanding that Christians live in anticipation of His imminent return, eternity and the fulfilment of a biblical eschatology. The dichotomy is not so much one of belief but of the lived implications. Theologians often speak of the ‘now and the not yet’, but for Chinese students whose focus is on the ‘now’ and whose upbringing has conditioned them to work for a progressive future, it is harder to grasp the importance of Christianity as an ancient historic faith whose traditions have shaped Christian culture and belief. Further, they are then challenged to consider the eschatological truths of the gospel – which is not the result of progressive improvement of the human condition, but a once-and-for-all transformation of those who have believed in Jesus Christ. This is entirely the work of God and not the fruit of human striving.

The Relational: individualized versus corporate and universal

Finally, there was the need to balance their sense of belonging and desire to belong to God and relate to him as his child, with the recognition that as Christians they belong to his church, including the Chinese church (which some might shun due to pre-existing prejudice), and the worldwide catholic church of which most had no concept. Although attending church-based events, the number of participants who went to church services

regularly was very small. Their main experience of ‘church’ was therefore the informal gatherings of Christians at international cafés or other international student activities, where formal spiritual practices remain few. Participants who professed faith in Jesus sometimes had a limited view of their Christian identity beyond a nascent faith in Jesus and obedience to his teaching which characterised their personal relationship with God.

The centrality of the Bible within evangelical Christianity

The British pastor and theologian J I Packer (1979/2016) once described the Bible as ‘the fountain-head for knowledge of God, Christ and salvation, but it presents this knowledge in an incomparably vivid, powerful and evocative way.’ The evangelical Christian theology of ‘specific revelation’ has meant a historical belief in the unique place of the Bible as the vehicle of God’s self-disclosure to humanity in written form, powerful to ‘penetrate even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart’ (2 Timothy 3:16).

Scripture has foundational status in evangelical Christianity. The danger lies in evangelical rigidity based on tradition. Treier cautions that given the diversity of global evangelicalism, certain evangelical traditions might potentially ‘occlude openness to the illumination of the Holy Spirit via engagement with Scripture’ (2007:45). Power differentials within the evangelical spectrum might also hamper the valuable work of contextualisation in allowing the Spirit to enliven Scripture within a range of interpretations. Treier thus rightly asserts that ‘evangelicals hear and read the Bible for application and guidance, not just doctrine...expecting to encounter the living God when doing so’ (2007:36). To be truly contextual, evangelicals would do well to carefully listen to Scripture and to each other within the global church.

Scripture identifies Jesus Christ as the ultimate and final divine Word, and hence, God’s revelation is seen to be propositional, making truth claims with cognitive content, yet dynamic, empowered by the Holy Spirit. It is therefore important to know and

understand this Word, attending to the details of how each word contributes to the divine revelation, shaping core doctrinal beliefs. A natural corollary is that Bible study (in its many forms¹²⁹) sits at the heart of Christian activity. Dorothy Bass asserts that ‘Every Christian practice... depends on ongoing, lively encounter with Scripture’, for it is in Scripture that Christ Himself is encountered. Jesus was famously critical of those who studied in the mistaken belief that the act alone would achieve immortality: ‘You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life’ (John 15: 39-40)¹³⁰. Hermeneutics, therefore, with its focus on interpretation of the biblical text is seen as key to understanding God’s revelation of himself.

Treier (2007:43), mentioned above, also highlights the challenges of culture and ethics within modern evangelicalism, creating diversity and consequently, hermeneutical tension. The rise of global Christianity has thrown into sharp relief the differences in emphases and foci between Western and non-Western evangelicals, not least in terms of the priorities and assumptions of Western evangelicals regarding the primacy of the Bible in God’s revelation of himself within the immanent frame as mentioned in Chapter Seven.

¹²⁹ For the purpose of clarity, ‘Bible study’ refers to active engagement with the written Word of God, the Scriptures, both individually and in a group. Inquirer Bible studies take the form of inductive, question-based studies, free-flowing Bible reading and discussion, and topical discussion. The aim of such inquirer studies is primarily to engage non-believers in understanding the biblical text, grounded in the belief that God is able to reveal Himself both through the biblical narrative in its entirety as well as in individual passages of teaching. For a theological and theoretical discussion of inductive Bible studies, see Bauer and Traina (2011).

¹³⁰ Clearly, the ‘scriptures’ which are the subject of John 15:39-40 and 2 Timothy 3:16, as quoted in this section, refer to the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament), a distinction which some might use to refute the authority of the Protestant ‘canon’ comprising the 39 books of the Old and 27 books of the New Testament as held within evangelical theology, particularly with regards to the relation of the New Testament to the Old. Evangelical Christianity views the Old and New Testaments as an organic whole. The principles derived from these passages concerning the power, authoritative role and life-giving revelation of the Hebrew Bible apply equally to the New Testament, since the authors of the latter, following Jesus’ example, viewed the life of Christ as part of a single revelatory process which continued, complemented and completed the Old Testament. Packer (1958:58) states that ‘the Gospels assure us that the historic Israelite belief in the divine authority of the Old Testament was the foundation of Christ’s whole ministry’, adding that while Jesus challenged the interpretations of (Old Testament) Scripture of his time, he shared and endorsed the accepted view of its nature and status as the ‘authoritative utterance of God’, as seen in his declarations in John 12:48, Matthew 19:4, Mark 12:24 and so on. Further, it is clear that he not only endorsed the authority of the Old Testament but submitted to it himself.

The findings derived from my participants' narratives, for example, might some to ask whether they were truly developing an evangelical Christian theology, given their unusually significant recourse to relational evidence, affective responses and engagement with the numinous for spiritual transformation, albeit alongside biblical learning.

For instance, as seen in Chapter Five above, the emergence of Community as a key element in my participants' faith inquiry process might cast doubt on the degree to which a similar reliance on biblical authority could be detected in the emergent ordinary theology of my participants. Having stated that the literature notes a 'biblical evangelicalism' in Chinese student converts (especially Ma 2021), my findings might suggest that participants placed somewhat less reliance on biblical authority than might be expected. This is exacerbated by the apparent lack of understanding and perceived irrelevance of the biblical text - at least initially - reported in the narratives earlier in this chapter. Yet, while it is certainly true that my participants' interaction and relationships with the Christian community were of critical importance in forming the habitus for developing embodied faith, the centrality of biblical teaching held by the Christians they observed, as well as participants' own expressed desire for systematic learning of Christian beliefs could be seen to drive them back to the Bible time and time again. One could therefore conclude that although the Bible might not initially have held a central place in shaping my participants' emergent theology, it nonetheless *became*, over time, a significant influence, if not the core of their nascent beliefs. Even participants such as Belinda, who did not profess faith, stated her desire to gain an understanding of the texts upon which her understanding of Christian beliefs could be clarified. For those who came to profess faith, the Bible became the source from which their inhabited beliefs were shaped and articulated.

Consequently, it is not surprising that the discourse on Chinese student conversion notes that involvement in Christian activities often includes Bible study of some

description. As noted in Chapter Five, inquirer studies and other opportunities to study the Bible are intrinsic to evangelical Christian activity among international students. Despite the centrality of this practice, the body of empirical studies of Bible study or Bible reading for ordinary believers is tiny, with even fewer in relation to Bible study for inquirers/non-believers. Bielo's (2009) study of evangelical group Bible studies, mentioned in the previous chapter, was a ground-breaking work in the field, but his work was restricted to groups of professing Christians and depicted vital aspects of North American evangelicalism. Few other studies have followed. In Britain, the work of Ruth H. Perrin (2016) into the Bible reading practices of young evangelical Christians in denominational churches has been a significant qualitative study with relevance for this project. Andrew Village's empirical study of ordinary hermeneutics, albeit using a quantitative methodology, seeks an understanding of how Anglican churchgoers interpret the Bible (2007). Nonetheless, it is clear that the extant literature is concerned primarily with the practices of 'ordinary believing readers' within the church (Perrin 2016:80), rather than those who identify as non-believers, are unchurched or even those known as 'seekers' who are investigating the Christian faith for themselves.

The espoused purpose of inquirer Bible studies within Friends International

Inquirer or seeker Bible studies – which in general, are group or one-to-one discussions designed specifically to help non-believers understand the gospel - are central to international student ministry, where the espoused aim is to lead international students to salvific knowledge of the Lord Jesus. A Friends International resource on leading Bible studies states,

Why Study the Bible? Our aim when studying the Bible with international students is to introduce them to the person and claims of Christ. Christianity is

*not a religious system but a personal relationship with Jesus e.g. the 'Come and see' approach found in John 1:46.*¹³¹

Three key perspectives can be understood from this paragraph, which encapsulates the espoused theological understandings of the organisation and those in the local church who volunteer in its evangelistic activities:

First, the purpose of such Bible studies is described not as the impartation of biblical information or theological knowledge, but knowledge which leads to relationship with the Person of Jesus Christ. Writing about 'knowing God', Alister McGrath makes a clear distinction between 'knowing about someone', which amounts to 'cerebral knowledge or an accumulation of data about an individual' and 'knowing someone', which results from self-disclosure (2007:154)¹³².

Second, the explicit definition of Christianity, *not a religious system but a personal relationship with Jesus*, appears in this as well as other similar literature and resources produced by Friends International, indicating the underlying principle that Christianity is fundamentally experienced and expressed as an interpersonal relational response to Jesus Christ, rather than in a set of doctrinal beliefs which one must subscribe to in order to experience 'religious conversion'. Conversely, Christian beliefs are therefore assumed to lead to a relationally embodied faith.

Third, the use of the biblical reference to Philip urging Nathanael to 'Come and see' in John 1:46 places an emphasis on the expectation that Jesus' revelation of Himself can be discovered by the learner. As Philip directs Nathanael's focus onto Jesus, the Bible study leader is not sharing from a place of expertise and power, but encouraging mutuality, of 'learning alongside one another'. This is relational, rather than pedagogical language, which might entail the use of the word 'teach' or 'instruct'.

¹³¹ From <https://www.friendsinternational.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/bible-study-preparing-and-leading-how-to-prepare-and-lead-an-international-bible-study.pdf>. Accessed 31 Jan 2022.

These theological understandings undergird the normative evangelical understanding and assertion of both the authority of the Bible as well as its central role in revealing the person of Jesus Christ to those who would seek him. As Packer (1958:69) helpfully asserts, the expectation is that the words, actions and lives of Christians are ‘in continual process of reformation by the written Word of their God’.

Bible study for ordinary non-believers

A key question arising from this research is, how do ordinary readers with no background in the Christian faith and no reported belief in the existence of God understand the Bible? As mentioned in Chapter Five, participants who expressed a Cultural/Linguistic purpose approached their study of the Bible entirely as a cultural book or as a language text¹³³. As Yu (2017:211) points out in her doctoral thesis, studying the Bible inductively satisfies neither approach, even though international student Bible studies continue to be advertised as ‘opportunities to practise English and learn British culture’. Referring to these as ‘fake language classes’, her critique of the Bible study classes notes that intercultural engagement was not the focus of the sessions:

As a religious institution, the Christian churches concentrated on the teaching education of Christianity through the introduction of Christianity to non-Christians, while the Chinese students intended to acquire cultural resources in the process of their cross-cultural adaptation. (2017:211)

This is a reflection of the ways in which those engaged in international student ministry appeal to the expressed needs of Chinese students, as is evidenced by the high frequency with which codes for ‘cultural learning’ and ‘language practice’ emerged from the data. It is clearly not the espoused theological stance of Christians offering Bible studies.

With cultural learning and English practice as specific goals for many, it is probably unsurprising that at least three participants (Belinda, Ed and Dan) reported limited benefit from attending Bible studies even over a period of almost half a year.

¹³³ p139

Discussion

The ‘progression’ of movement in participants’ understanding and knowledge of the Bible above raises doubt about the overall effectiveness of English Bible studies as a means of helping Chinese students understand the gospel message, as is the stated aim of British churches hosting such studies. Based on my analysis of the three key questions above, it would appear that the content and methodology of inductive inquirer Bible studies alone lack effectiveness in communicating biblical truths. Even so, biblical understanding provided a rigour and stability for several participants despite their ongoing hesitation and doubts. A more holistic analysis might reveal that the ensuing development of faith and ‘knowing God’ professed by participants is dependent on other factors which provide a positive impetus for participants to persevere with Bible studies despite the linguistic and other challenges.

Listening to the ‘ordinary beliefs’ of Chinese students

Ward & Dunlop (2011) make the point that described, common, popular and ordinary theology are all referenced against a dualistic ‘other’, usually (Western) academic theology, which serves as a corrective. This is important in a study of practical theology, since ordinary theology is a tool for critiquing and interrogating the practices of the local churches which host such students.

However, considering that most Mainland Chinese students come with little or no awareness of the evangelical Christian theology of their British host churches, there is a need for any analysis of Chinese students’ emerging ordinary beliefs to consider their religious landscape of origin – even if this is affective rather than persuasive - rather than relying purely on a Western-based, post-Christian context.

In this respect, Chau’s (2011) modalities of doing Chinese religion provide a vital layer of triangulation and nuance for any analysis of Chinese students’ ordinary beliefs. Of particular significance are the *Discursive/Scriptural*, which includes compiling,

editing and preaching scriptures, with paradigmatic forms including reading, discussing, debating and commenting on religious texts; the *personal-cultivational*, which generally involves physical activity such as qigong or meditation, as well as the more esoteric keeping of a merit ledger to further the goals of transformation and cultivation; and the *relational*, which emphasises practices which are seen to enhance human-spirit links, such as ancestral offerings and going on pilgrimage, emphasising connectedness and ‘social comings and goings’.

Formulated as a corrective to more Western-oriented literature¹³⁴, Chau provides a helpful rationale for the religious pluralism existent in China. Just as Dickson notes the interplay of these modalities in her study of Chinese Christian returnees (2013), their influence could be detected even in my participants who asserted that their pre-existing (non-)beliefs stemmed from their atheistic Marxist upbringing.

A framework for discerning emerging ordinary beliefs

Astley’s adaptation of Wittgenstein’s ‘two moments of religious learning’ (Astley 2002, 25-33) provides a possible approach to mapping how Chinese students’ process of ‘learning Christianity’ can lead to ‘transformation’.

Learning about the faith

The first movement refers to second hand or third-person religious learning, in which the primary expression of knowledge is ‘Belief-That’. In this movement, learners acquire beliefs about what religious people believe. For example, one may only come to believe that Christians believe that God exists, while holding that belief dispassionately, or objectively, not yet the situation of grasping religious faith for oneself.

Learning in this movement can occur by socialisation or enculturation as well as intentional instruction, such as the international student Bible study context, which entails both equal elements of instruction as well as socialisation. These processes give students

¹³⁴ For example, Stark and Finke’s 1988 model of ‘religious economy’

an understanding of the great concepts of faith, as well as rules for religious discourse. As Astley (2002) notes, part of this stage is the learning of religious language. This might only produce knowledge ‘about God’ rather than ‘of God’ (2002:29).

Sixteen out of eighteen of my participants reported having come from non-religious backgrounds. However, their accounts of the ritual practices of the older generation contained references to deities which betrayed a certain ambiguity as to their theological beliefs. In comparison, their terminology and statements about ‘learned beliefs’ concerning the God depicted in the Bible were assured and clear. This is not to say that these participants had come to have ‘belief-in’ God, more that they had constant practice in the ‘language of God-talk’ especially through participation in Bible studies and so had become conversant in the vocabulary and grammar of the Christian faith.

Such learning is ‘dispassionate and uncommitted’, all done in subjunctive mood, or ‘as if’ mode (Astley 2002, 26, quoting Kelsey 1992). Much of the initial learning done by Chinese students in Bible studies and discussions is therefore cognitive learning. That is not to say that their expressions of belief were insincere or parrot-fashion repetition. My observation in Bible studies revealed that there is some sort of appreciation of the affective dimension or accompaniments of religious concepts, through what Astley describes as an ‘imaginative rehearsal’ or ‘bracketed make-believe’. As such, participants tended to entertain the reality of such central concepts as God, the Risen Christ and the Holy Spirit as possibilities, in a hypothetical mode. This could sometimes lead listeners to misinterpret their comments as signals that they were ‘embracing the faith’.

Embracing the faith

In Astley’s second movement of religious learning, third-person belief may become something that is more authentically the learner’s own, turning into ‘first-person’ mode of religious learning; ‘Belief-that’ is built on and transcended, becoming ‘Belief-in’.

‘Belief-in’ embraces both beliefs about God’s nature and existence, and affective states such as trust in God and other pro-attitudes towards God.

Such a distinction is helpful in distinguishing knowledge *about* God from knowledge *of* God, especially when expressed by learners who are ‘experimenting’ with the language of faith. The learner who has moved to ‘belief-in’ acquires knowledge which engages the affections and is embodied in the religious person’s life.

Genuine embracing of faith is not neutral or passionless, but ‘self-involving’ and ‘confrontational’ of existent values and practices, since religious learning does not take place in a vacuum (Astley 2002:28). This was clear in my participants who reported having embraced the Christian faith in some way, most of whom also described experiencing tension or conflict in the process of their decision-making.

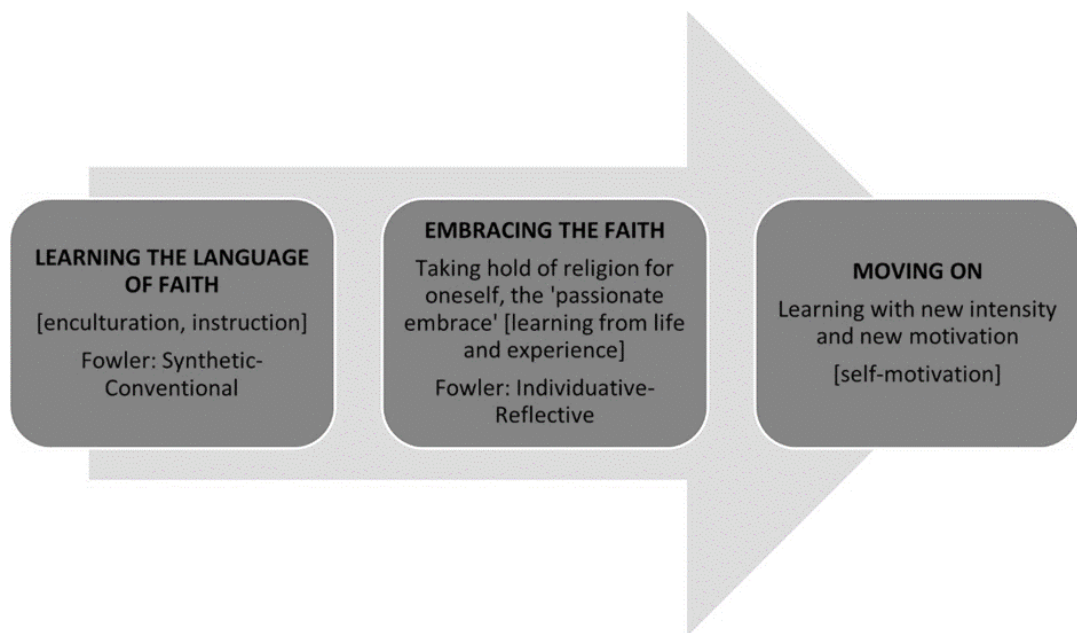


Figure 6.2 Diagram based on Astley’s description of moments of religious learning

‘Transformative habitus’: developing a Christian disposition

Among my participants who made the movement between ‘Belief-That’ and ‘Belief-In’, it was possible to discern other interacting factors in which knowledge of God could be applied, lived and ‘practised’, becoming what Ward describes as ‘absorbed

theology' (2017:16), theology which has made the transition from being external and expressed by others, to something that is part of us. Edward Farley describes such internalisation as the way in which theology becomes a 'habitus'¹³⁵:

A knowledge that became a habit, 'an enduring orientation and dexterity of the soul... a cognitive disposition and orientation of the soul, a knowledge of God and what God reveals' (Farley, quoted by Ward 2017:16)

Using Farley's words, habitus then is a 'practice ground' in which students practise the use of spiritual language, experiment with forms of operant theology such as prayer and worship and test the compatibility of their faith with their cultural and social norms. Unlike Farley, however, my participants reported specific transformations in their perspectives and values, going beyond the mere internalisation of learned vocabulary, acquiring the 'Christian social imaginary' described by Smith (2009), above. Astley rightly observes that adults change and learn, involving at some point, a 'transformation' (2002:31). Interestingly, this can be likened to Meek's idea of the moment of insight, or integration (2011).

A similar concept is helpfully described by Chan in his discussion of the acceptance of the divinity of Christ by Christians in Asia, where the truth of Jesus' divinity comes not in ontological understanding, but 'from answered prayer, such as during a personal crisis', or from a personal encounter with the Risen Christ, leading to a worldview change. He argues,

it is more appropriate to discuss Christology not as an abstract question of ontology but within the rubric of salvation and mission...it is out of the experience of the Risen Christ that the ontological question is settled. (Chan 2016:91-92.)

An initial approach might therefore be to use the term 'transformative habitus' for that process of internalisation in which 'beliefs-that' are not just absorbed but form an

¹³⁵ Such a definition of habitus follows the French sociologist Bourdieu who asserted that knowledge that truly forms us is 'corporeal knowledge' or 'a system of dispositions' that we acquire in non-explicit, bodily ways, formed by social conventions and day-to-day tasks (Kreider 2016:39). Formed within a community of practice as 'handed down' and embodied, habitus 'inclines me to constitute the world in certain ways, conditioning my construction of meaning' (Smith 2013:81).

orientation to the world that forms a new ‘logic in practice’, a bodily orientation towards being-in-the-world in a practical way (Smith 2013). For instance, new beliefs might be repeatedly tested under specific circumstances such as specific answers to prayer or response to crises, which, mediated by the Holy Spirit, enabling participants to embrace ‘beliefs-in’ with genuine passion, to orient themselves towards an acceptance of God’s divine revelation.

Kreider, describing the contested formation of Christian character in the believers of the early church, uses habitus to emphasise the importance of repeated patterns of behaviour, based upon learned catechism, worship and the imitation of role models, ‘people who have authority in our lives’, such that knowledge becomes internalised, ‘habitual, reflexive and borne in our bodies’ (2016:39). We acquire such learning, Kreider asserts, ‘without being aware that we are learning’ (2016:39). Borrowing from his model, transformative habitus comes to constitute one’s ‘profoundest sense of identity’, forming a person’s ‘deepest convictions, allegiances and repulsions’, and shaping their responses to ultimate questions (2016:40).

Historically, the formation of habitus within the Christian faith has involved both orality and performance, creed and ritual, elements of the liturgical worship which Smith (2013) asserts as central to spiritual formation. Kreider, for example, notes the importance of both catechesis and worship within the early church communities (2016:41). Catechesis was central to the ‘rehabilitation of new believers’ through teaching and relationship. This applies to the creeds central to evangelical Christianity, such as the Nicene Creed and the Apostles’ Creed, which historically have formed a means by which doctrinal belief is learned orally, becoming internalised by repetition and recitation. Such is the emphasis in Smith’s quote from Oscar Wilde, ‘the Creeds are believed, not because they are rational, but because they are repeated’ (2013:183). For the early Christians,

Kreider observes, habitus was formed by ‘the recitation of certain phrases that people can repeat day by day’ (2016:50), much as creedal based faith is formed.

In the same way, Kreider describes the way in which worship served as the location for the enactment of new habitus and embodied faith. Rituals of worship, performed week by week, formed the community’s habitus kinaesthetically as well as verbally (2016:50). Agape and Eucharistic meals, shared as prisoners’ final meal, as well as the kiss of peace, were distinctive actions of the persecuted Christians, reflexive ritual gestures by which embodied faith was demonstrated (2016:50).

For Smith, then, formation of the ‘Christian temperament’ is inextricably linked with liturgy which is formative through repetition (2013:186), whether this is seen in oral recitation or performative practice. Whereas Chinese modalities of religion have been described as less doctrinally focused, the role of orality and performative faith in forming habitus should not be underestimated in the transformation of beliefs.

In order to illustrate this, I have produced an adapted model of Wittgenstein’s two moments of learning seen below:

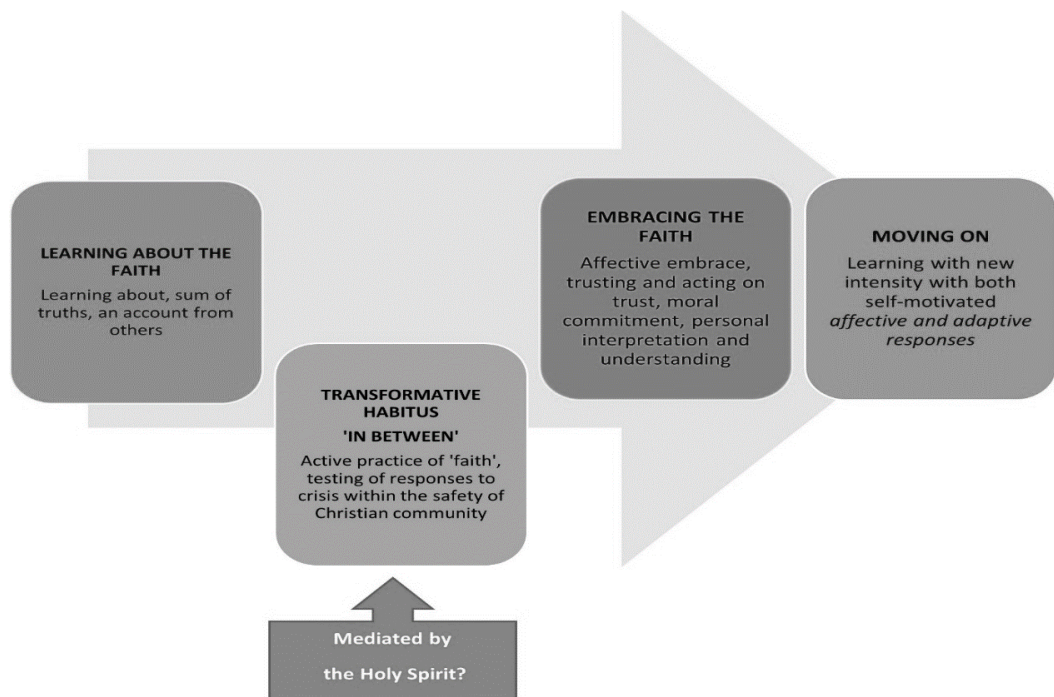


Figure 6.3 Adapted model including ‘transformative habitus’

Despite the potential of such a model however, the empirical data suggests that participants underwent a far more complex process. In particular, the two-step model, even with adaptations, lacks the nuance to capture my participants' experience. This can be seen in a number of ways.

First, in terms of linear progression. Astley's model of religious learning denotes clear linear progression from one stage to the next. While my participants' narratives described clear progressions as noted above, their interactions with knowledge of biblical faith would more accurately be described as non-linear, often even cyclical. Several participants articulated both growing understandings of Christian beliefs, along with their doubts and hesitation, such that the movement to 'belief in', or the internalised beliefs, seemed to happen in an unexpected way. Growth in understanding sometimes led to greater doubt rather than greater faith.

Next, in terms of language. Astley bases his model on the language of faith. Although participants definitely expressed their understandings by imbuing words with specific meanings, it was hard to know from their use of language if they understood the implication of the words used. In addition, their use of language sometimes failed to indicate the inherent internal conflicts which accompanied linguistic change.

Finally, even the addition of transformative habitus was felt to be an oversimplification of the process of learning. Participants learnt aspects of faith which were not explicitly taught by others. They were neither enculturated nor instructed, but observed and interpreted the faith from observations of the Christian life. There is also no room in Astley's model for the transformative work of the Holy Spirit. This must be recognised but is impossible to indicate in a linear diagram.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed participants' reflections and accounts of learning from Bible studies, describing participants' interaction with The Word as a significant category of codes which emerged from the data.

It is not difficult to surmise that based on participants' experience, inductive Bible studies on their own had limited success in communicating the relevance of Bible teaching, even to those who committed themselves to regular attendance for a significant period of time. Linguistic difficulties, lack of context and understanding of the nature of biblical literature, as well as ontological differences meant that participants had to persevere in order to reach a point of learning about Jesus, let alone get to the stage when they could articulate beliefs from the Bible.

Although Astley's model of the two movements proved inadequate for the capturing of the process of faith inquiry, his recognition of the value of the beliefs of 'ordinary believers' (and non-believers) and the denoting of their expressions of religious belief as ordinary theology provides a justification for taking the religious language of faith inquirers seriously. It is only by so doing that their questions, doubts, erroneous understandings and statements of faith can be acknowledged. From a Practical Theology perspective, this is invaluable.

To this point, I have taken note of the human factors and influences involved in my participants' faith inquiry. In the next chapter I present the data on their experiences with the supernatural. Although generally absent from the discourse on Chinese students, this should not be a surprising finding considering that the implicit awareness of spiritual reality in Chinese religion has been noted in the wider literature (as discussed in Chapter Two). This element not only acknowledges participants' sensitivity to the transcendent, and the action of God in his self-revelation, but provides an added dimension to our understandings of how propositional beliefs might become faith claims. Following that,

in Chapter Eight I present a schema which replaces my adaptation of Astley's model as a depiction of the process of theological construction.

CHAPTER SEVEN

WONDER: BELIEF SHAPED BY ENCOUNTERS WITH THE TRANSCENDENT

Introduction

When I was a teenager in boarding school, I had a phone call from my mother saying she was distressed and unwell. Her relationship with my father was very bad so she didn't want to contact him. I was distraught. Not knowing what to do, I prayed to 'god' - though I'm not sure which 'god'. Immediately I felt deep peace and calm. The next day my mum said she felt so much better. Do you think this god who heard my prayer is the Jesus in the Bible?

(Yvette, medical student)

Last night I had a very bad dream. A ghost appeared and strangled me. For a moment I was paralysed and could not breathe, but I called the name of Jesus and it disappeared. I talked to the pastor of the church, but he said 'Christians don't believe in these things.' I'm afraid that it will happen again tonight though.

I begin this chapter with two accounts from Chinese students, the first from one of my interview participants, and the second from informal conversations I had with Chinese students during participant-observation.

In the preceding chapters I outlined two of the three elements which emerged from the interview data as significant to participants' theological construction: Community and Bible studies. Both appear in the literature as events of significance to Chinese students' conversion experience. This chapter, however, highlights a phenomenon which has little or no mention in the discourse, that of Encounters with the Transcendent, or 'Wonder'.

Through the rest of this chapter, I discuss the impact of participants' reports of supernatural experience on faith inquiry. These ranged from answered prayer and

miraculous healing, to experiences of God speaking through the Bible in a specific way. Ancestor rituals were also significant, with participants expressing a variety of interpretations of these familial rituals and their own sense of commitment and identification. I also give an account of an incident which took place during my fieldwork which raised disturbing questions about demonic attack.

In analysing the findings surrounding this topic, I found it striking that the Western literature on supernatural experience emanates mainly from Pentecostal scholars such as Keener (2011). As a matter of contrast and contextualisation, I also interact with the views of Chinese religious scholars, many of whom note the continuing awareness of the supernatural, even in mainstream modern Chinese religious practices. Finally, using Taylor's metaphor of the immanent frame (2007:542), I address the paradox of students struggling to understand the Gospel accounts of Jesus' miracles, while reporting their own experience of miraculous healings. This raises the question of how awareness of the transcendent might be indicative of the hybridic nature of Chinese students' faith inquiry, such that their process of theological construction indicates traits of evangelical Christian Bible teaching as well as an implicit Chinese bias towards the awareness of supernatural realities, as described by scholars like Yao and Badham (2007) and Fan (2011). I query whether a greater awareness of the inherent supernatural elements from students' home culture in China, which produce questions during their UK sojourn, might serve the purpose of strengthening and contextualising their theological understandings in readiness for their return home.

Experiencing the supernatural

Encounters with the transcendent are often described as 'supernatural experiences' in the literature, and these are laden with contested meanings and definitions. It is helpful to identify the ways in which variations in language shape understandings even within academia, let alone within Ordinary Theology. James' work *Varieties of Religious*

Experience (VRE 1902/1985) remains one of the most significant works within the psychology of religion, though he places a significant focus on the Protestant conversion experience and on mysticism. Such descriptions of mysticism, however, connote out-of-body experiences, which were not present in my data.

Perrin, seeking to describe the hermeneutical understandings of ordinary millennial believers in the British church, used the term ‘engaging with the supernatural’ in her discussion of young evangelicals studying the biblical miracles, noting that while modern British evangelicals have been taught by their rationalist education to prioritize scientific understanding, the influence of the charismatic/Pentecostal movement raises expectations among some that God might perform dramatic actions such as the miraculous (2016:116). The Pentecostal theologian Keener notes, however, that in general, while most people do not subscribe to narrow epistemological skepticism, they live with a kind of ‘epistemological agnosticism’ (2011b:609) with regard to the biblical miracles.

The Western theological literature must also be contrasted with Chinese research which takes a more pragmatic perspective on supernatural entities and deities. Chau for example notes the ubiquitous nature of seeking help from a deity, although pointing out that divine power is also ‘a sociocultural construct’ (2019:36). The pragmatic nature of supernatural belief in China is further demonstrated in his use of the label ‘ritual service providers’ for those who might be engaged to carry out interactions with supernatural beings during significant festivals and occasions (2019:100).

With these contrasting standpoints in mind, I now turn to the evidence presented in the interviews.

In this chapter I use the term ‘supernatural experience’ as a general term to encapsulate the categories of contact which participants described and attributed to a higher power or presence, although as I demonstrate below, not all encounters were, at the time of occurrence, attributed to the God of the Bible, Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit.

One defining factor of the encounters described is that they were perceived and understood by my participants as indicative of a personal, transcendent presence capable of intervention in their daily lives, making a tangible difference in their emotional, physical or spiritual wellbeing.

Linking ‘experience’ with ‘transcendence’

‘Experience’ describes the process of acquiring knowledge by means of the sense or through performing actions (seeing, feeling, doing) (Bowie 2020:262).

To my participants, their experiences represented not merely a change in their own consciousness or having an affective impact. They were interpreted as being indicative of a spiritual reality, a transcendence, beyond themselves. This contributed to the process of ontological change which many of them subsequently underwent. A survey of the interview data on this topic uniformly revealed that participants perceived these incidents as formative to faith inquiry, paying particular attention to the affective aspects and the ongoing process of increasing their biblical understanding and knowledge of God, despite some of these being incidents dating back several years, and even into childhood.

Where participants reported encounters with powers or forces not known to them, they were not always attributed to good or benevolent forces. Further, some participants did not perceive their experiences as relevant to the question of religion until much later, when they had begun interacting with the Christian faith. Therefore, although most theological works discussing the experiential in faith development tend to use *Religious* or *Spiritual* as descriptors, sometimes interchangeably, it is clear that the terms connote different realities which are highly dependent on the frames of reference and context relating to the context of use.

There was also the question of what constituted ‘answered prayer’ or a ‘miracle’. The former was perceived to indicate the reality of transcendence, although for participants like Fern and Gail, there was a delay of some years before their experience

prompted faith inquiry. Although the inclusion of experiences of answered prayer might be surprising from a Western perspective, my data demonstrates that participants did not interpret the answers to their prayers as merely having a psychological impact, nor as wish fulfilment from an efficacious religious act, as Chau (2019) suggests. Instead, participants framed their experience as personal interaction with the biblical God, even if their encounter with him occurred before they could give him a name.

The same question could be asked about descriptions of ‘miracles’, though I note that participants themselves did not explicitly use the Chinese word for miracle, *qiji*¹³⁶, to describe their experience. Bowie suggests that the extent to which supernatural interventions are perceived as unusual or miraculous depends greatly on definitions within a particular culture (2020:273), wherein supernatural beings are ‘assumed to intervene directly in human lives and to have power to manipulate events’. Participants’ descriptions of the results of prayer clearly demonstrate that they perceived these to be ‘outside the realm of nature’ (seen in Charles’ story on p210, for example), though they seemed to be viewed as different from Jesus’ miracles in the Bible.

Understanding supernatural experience in those with ‘no religion’

But do spirits exist? What if I am an atheist who does not believe in the existence of God, gods, ancestors, ghosts, or evil spirits? (Chau 2019:5)

Many of my participants would relate strongly with Chau’s question, above. Although spiritual experiences were described by participants, many of these incidents took place prior to participants’ engagement with Christian activities, and in several cases, even predating their arrival in the UK. This might be surprising since, as discussed in Chapter Four, 11 out of 15 participants who professed faith in Christ at interview described themselves as having had no religion when they first arrived in the UK¹³⁷. Of

¹³⁶ 奇迹

¹³⁷ As can be seen in Appendix 5

these, 9 said they came from families with no professed religious beliefs. My findings correlate with the interim findings from the *Understanding Unbelief* programme 2017-2020 (Lee 2019). This interdisciplinary study of self-professed atheists and agnostics across six different countries¹³⁸ and settings found that 87% of Chinese participants described themselves as having been raised with no religion. However, when asked if they were naturalists (defined as ‘those who ‘strongly’ or ‘somewhat’ disagree with all ‘existence of supernatural beings/phenomena¹³⁹’), fewer than one in ten Chinese atheists in the study classed themselves as such, leading to the conclusion, ‘...among our atheists, Japanese are the least, and...Chinese the most, ‘supernaturally inclined’. This was particularly so among Chinese agnostics.’ (Lee 2019:14) In fact, among the Chinese respondents to their programme, fewer than 1 in 10 atheists, and fewer than 1 in 50 agnostics said that they had ‘no belief in supernatural phenomena whatsoever’. This correlates with the findings of Yao and Badham (2007), Fan (2011), and Chau (2019), mentioned in Chapter Two.

Positive supernatural experiences

A number of participants (eight in total¹⁴⁰) reported supernatural experiences which they felt had contributed to their growing awareness and understanding of God. This does not mean that the data represents the sum of their life experiences with the supernatural – on the contrary, the narratives of certain participants might suggest that coming from family backgrounds rich in ancestral practices, they might previously have had other experiences which they did not choose to mention in the interview.

¹³⁸ The *Understanding Unbelief* project involved a large-scale survey across six national settings: Brazil, China, Denmark, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States.

¹³⁹ Lee 2019: n2. The research instrument defines supernatural beings as follows: ‘There exist supernatural beings, who might be good, evil or neither, such as angels, demons, ghosts or spirits.’ [NB: culturally appropriate entities were suggested for each country].

¹⁴⁰ Interviews with Cathy, Charles, Emma, Fern, Gail, Helen, Jenny and Kelly.

Understandings of prayer

Prayer in the Chinese religious world stems from a different theological and ritual understanding from Christian theology. Within Chinese ritual practices, burning incense or making food offerings demonstrates respect for the deity, with ‘the ethereally rising incense smoke...thought to communicate the worshipper’s thought and prayers’ (Chau 2019:40). Participants like Fern reported coming with similar understandings from her family’s religious practices:

We don’t have any beliefs, but traditions, so we would do the things which a traditional Chinese family would do... At Chinese New Year we would go to the temple to worship and make a wish. If the wish was granted the next year we would return to repay the wish. I generally understood that it was about protection. When we offered incense to my grandmother, we would ask for her protection, or go to the temple to ask for a peaceful new year.

It was mostly about seeking protection, or about wish fulfilment.

(Fern, Master’s, tourism studies)

In comparison, the Christian understanding of prayer is more holistic, including worship. The Christian who worships God brings all the human attitudes before him, bringing adoration, confession, praise and supplication into prayer. Thus, the biblical doctrine of prayer ‘emphasizes the character of God, the necessity of a man’s being in saving or covenant relation with him, and his entering fully into all the privileges and obligations of that relation with God.’¹⁴¹

It would seem, therefore, that participants’ attempts to pray could be understood as syncretistic attempts to plead for assistance from ‘an unknown god’, rather than being shaped by Christian theology. Even so, perceived answers to their prayers emerged as an

¹⁴¹ Entry on Prayer. In Marshall, I.H., Millard, A.R., Packer, J.I., & Wiseman, D.J. (eds.) (1996). *The New Bible Dictionary* (3rd ed.). Leicester: Intervarsity Press. 945.

important factor in their understanding of the existence, transcendence and immanence of God, with seven participants recounting specific incidents when experiments in praying contributed to their desire to persist in finding out more about God.

Answered prayer: initiating spiritual inquiry

Several participants recall their journey of inquiry as beginning with prayer, even though they could not name the god to whom they were directing their prayers. Often these were prompted by circumstances in which they felt helpless.

I tried praying when I was very young, but I didn't know who I was praying to. My mum's health at the time wasn't very good. At the time I prayed in a childish way...about my hope that my mum would be healthy and there would be no problems. After that prayer, the medical test result was that there weren't any major problems. At the time I was actually mystified, it felt like there was someone listening to your words and doing as you asked...it just seemed mysterious. Afterwards I felt that there must be someone in this world or a very strong power helping those who ask and truly believe. (Gail, Master's, finance)

This seems to have led to a series of different incidents over the years when it seemed that she experienced many answers to prayer, and increasingly attributed the answers to God. Interestingly she describes not only an affective reaction but a bodily sensation of peace:

Each time after praying I would feel my whole body relax...I felt that this was God's strength, and he was always helping me. (Gail, Master's, finance)

It is likely that the attribution was retrospective since she had described herself as having no religion in her family background and no prior interest. She only began to describe her prayers as 'addressed to God' after conversations with a teacher in China whom she coincidentally discovered was a Christian.

An impetus to seek out Christians/the church

Kelly came from a Christian family in China but did not self-identify as a Christian there, admitting that she knew very little about the Bible or Christian teaching. She describes anxiety over exams.

I felt... too much pressure, sleeplessness, I didn't know who to call and couldn't call my mother. So, I knelt down and prayed to God to help me...I hope he would give me courage, because the pressure had been with me for so long. But the second day I awoke and there was completely no stress or pressure. I was completely astonished. During the exam I felt that God was constantly helping me and my heart was very peaceful. From that time on I felt I should go to church.

(Kelly, Master's, data science)

Being alone overseas was also significant for Fern, who described having a fever, and feeling anxious and fearful of death during a volunteer placement in India.

At that time I prayed saying 'If you are God, please bring me home and I will believe in you.' I just prayed like that and the next day... I was able to leave India. After I arrived home, I felt I should fulfil my promise and believe. Since I had been to a Christian church before, I felt I must have been praying to their god and I should become a Christian, so I registered to be baptised, but my parents opposed. And since I didn't know what it was I really believed, I agreed with them.

(Fern, Master's, tourism studies)

Having made this decision however, one of her first acts upon arrival in the UK was to visit a church and ask for baptism. It was only then that she began to seriously consider Christian teaching and discovered what Christians believe 'by using Google'.

I Googled why I should believe in Jesus, who is Jesus, what is the message of the gospel...slowly I realised those were all the answers to the philosophical questions about life. So I was willing to believe, even though I had some questions

I didn't understand, but I thought eventually I would know. At that time it could be considered to be a leap of faith...I arrived at the end of September but I was baptised in early November. And after that I grew through a one-to-one Bible study. (Fern, Master's, tourism studies)

Interpreted as confirmation of God's presence

Charles (PhD, philosophy of religion) related that a key experience in his quest for spiritual truth was when his 4-year-old daughter suffered severe abdominal pain after school in Britain, while he was away from the family in Shanghai.

I felt helpless. I could hear my daughter crying very distressingly, and at the time as a father, my heart just sank. I felt that I could do nothing because I was so far away. It was just horrific...so I decided to experiment, because they were in the UK, I prayed to God and asked him to help me. I even thought I should make a deal with God. I said, if you can help me, I will become a Christian. It felt very dramatic.

Charles reports that not long after this, he was told that his daughter had fallen asleep in the ambulance and doctors found that she was 'completely fine' upon waking up.

I was really mystified – it felt like something magic. After that the process continued, slowly reading the Bible, slowly understanding and experiencing more. There are so many things to accept – it's not easy for those from China, with Chinese background.

Charles' experience is interesting in that the answer to prayer was perceived as miraculous, but it did not lead to overnight conversion or even significantly accelerate his faith development. It was only as he then continued studying the Bible that he overcame what he refers to as 'the biggest hurdle' to faith, which was Jesus' resurrection. This

question was not solved by his experience of God's answer to his prayer, but through understanding the apostle Paul's Christological teaching in Colossians 1.

An emotional response as a precursor to existential security

For some participants, experimenting with prayer led to a deeper awareness that a transcendent and powerful personality might exist, even if they had not determined the identity of that power. Cathy (Master's, law) learnt that through prayer, she could engage relationally with God, although she described her early attempts to pray to 'a god':

When I first started studying the Bible, my friends described me as 'multi-religious'. I believed there was a god. He could be the biblical God but could also be some other god. When I started learning to pray in my heart, I wasn't sure it was to God, but it was to some god.

She prayed for a close friend whose marriage was in difficulty and was told later that the husband had come to reconcile of his own accord, leading to a much happier marriage.

This made me think, was it because of my prayer? There were lots of similar examples...at the time things were not so great but I found I was completely filled with peace. When I arrived in the UK my life was very empty, but slowly I felt that emptiness was gone...instead I had the feeling that no matter what difficulties I faced, as long as I prayed, God would be with me and help me overcome those difficulties. If I did something wrong and I was aware of it, He would definitely direct me to the right path in His own way.

For Emma (Master's, accounting & finance), answered prayer had the effect of helping her shift from an attitude of scepticism towards the Bible, to a rapid transformation in her belief in God, and then to acceptance of biblical teaching. She had been enjoying studying the Bible in a small group including a Chinese Christian but had reached an impasse. She did not believe in the existence of God, describing that she found

some parts of the Bible ‘ridiculous’, including the existence of the Trinity and the fact that Jesus died on the cross for her salvation.

She recounted a week which began when her wheelchair broke down in the university library, leaving her unable to move and ‘feeling helpless’. Emma was entirely reliant on her wheelchair, which represented freedom and independence, particularly as this was her first experience of living without her family around her. Reminded of her Christian friend’s encouragement that God would always hear her prayer, she prayed very specifically that ‘if God exists’, for a British friend to help her, that her wheelchair would not require an expensive battery replacement, it would be quickly repaired as it was essential to her independence and mobility, and that it would be covered by the guarantee, as she would not be able to afford a replacement.

Although God did not answer give me exactly what I asked for, he helped me in a different way. I suddenly felt that everything would get better. It was the first time I felt moved, that prayer actually worked...Then I started to think, everyone is so kind, and God answered my prayer. I vaguely had the feeling that there could be a supernatural being in existence.

Emma attended the week of evangelistic talks on campus,

By Friday, after listening to many talks and meeting new friends, I decided to believe in Jesus.

She reflects,

I already had some Bible knowledge, and was continuing to learn, but I started to cry. I don’t know why, but in that moment I decided to believe in Jesus. The whole week I had a sense of security, and it was from God. Even though so many bad things had happened, everything was solved, and with a better solution. I felt really safe, and I felt this must have come from God. Even though there were

many things I didn't know, I felt really peaceful. I had a firm confidence that things would work out.

This confidence and new faith in God meant that she was able to believe what was taught in the Bible.

When you believe God exists and believe the Bible is true, your whole value system changes. When you believe this is true, you can believe what he says. Say I believe someone, I will believe everything he says, that he won't lie to me. When I believed that God does exist, I felt he wouldn't lie, so I could accept everything he tells me. When the Bible tells me that Jesus died for me, I could accept it.

For Emma, the immediacy of having her prayer answered acted as a plausibility structure that a different Reality existed, which included a transcendent God. Although it is significant that she 'felt moved for the first time' and interpreted her circumstances as proof of God's existence, her account does not indicate that the experience shaped her understanding of God's character or nature. As she herself observes, the incident was preceded by weeks of Bible study and followed by listening to a week of Gospel teaching and interaction with evangelical Christians.

Theologians like Griffith-Dickson note that while religious experience has taken a subjective turn, it still has a place in the Christian tradition. Similarly, Netland creates a strong case for the evidential power of religious experiences, describing these as 'veridical'¹⁴² (2022:17). However, privileging personal experience over divine revelation can lead to an imbalanced emphasis on 'speaking about self rather than God' (Griffith-Dickson 2020:81).

Emma's narrative also demonstrates Griffith-Dickson's view that religious experience does not merely concern an emotional moment but is itself 'a realm of

¹⁴² To be defined as 'veridical', an experience should entail that God exists and the individual does actually experience God (Netland 2022:17 footnote 1)

meaning' (2020:80). Having become more open to the existence of a transcendent God, she viewed the difficult events of that week as 'filled with peace', 'God gave me a sense of security'. As such, the spiritual significance of her trials led to a re-interpretation of an inconceivable difficulty. As Griffith-Dickson asserts, 'this broader understanding – experiencing the whole of life as an encounter with a loving God - ...characterizes a theological approach to understanding the significance of religious experience' (2020:80).

Negative supernatural experiences

Not all experiences reported, however, were positive. Jen (PhD, electrical engineering) came from a Christian family but was urged to pursue further studies overseas by her parents: 'My father hoped that I would study in England and believe in Jesus...he feels the churches here are more developed. I'm not sure why.'

She was not involved in church or Christian activities for the first year of her undergraduate degree but describes the circumstances which prompted her to start attending church:

In second year, I went to church (with a friend) and came into contact with Christianity...it was my first time in a British church. I don't have much impression or memory of going to church in China. I liked the British church. At the time it made me think about God...listening to sermons.

Hearing about Jesus' death on the cross and His resurrection made an impression on her although she did not completely understand, due to difficulties with language. In her final undergraduate year, she attended Bible studies 'a few times', looking at the Gospels, the psalms and Revelation. Following graduation, she decided to believe in Jesus, but 'does not remember' how she became a Christian. After some prompting, she replied,

J: I remember at the time I first believed, when my faith wasn't deep, I experienced some testing and after that there were demons that attacked me. I studied the Bible on my own and deepened my faith and believed in Jesus. It's

hard to describe (the demonic attack), I only remember them screaming in my ears and accusing me.

LT: How did you face this?

J: I believed in Jesus.

LT: Did the attacks stop after that?

J: Not really, but I was not afraid of their accusations. (long silence)

LT: Do you still experience this?

J: Yes...It's hard to describe.

LT: When this happens, how do you solve the problem?

J: I don't know how to solve it.

LT: Have you spoken to anyone? How did they advise you?

J: The problem is not about advising me. It's a problem of the demons.

(Excerpts from interview with Jen, PhD, electrical engineering. Phase 2 interviews)

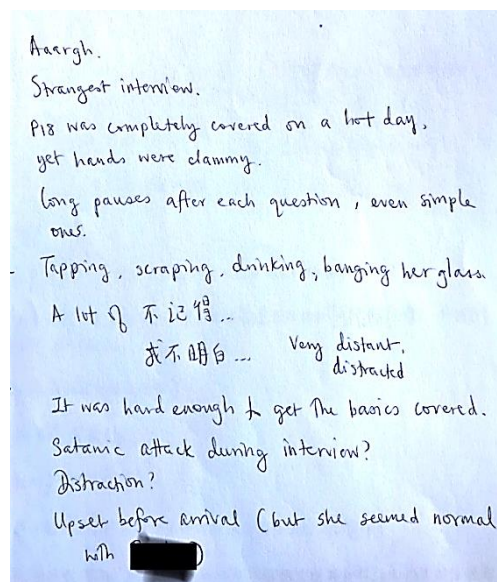
An evangelical cosmology would agree with Engelsviken's statement (2008) that the work of Satan and the spiritual forces of evil includes deceiving, tempting to sin; afflicting the body, emotions, mind and will; and taking control of person (possession, demonization). The fight against the evil one and his forces in spiritual warfare or conflict is based on the victory of Jesus on the cross and through His resurrection, and on the work of Jesus through prayer, righteousness, obedience, and setting the captives free.

My exchange with Jen, though brief and lacking in detail, highlights some key issues when considering Chinese students' experience of the supernatural. As a practitioner of twenty years as well as through informal conversations during fieldwork, I am aware of Chinese students who have reported experiences of demonic interference, (including physical sensations of strangulation while they were asleep and sleep paralysis). Although there are details missing from Jen's account, it is clear that reading

the Bible on her own, she seems to have developed a partial theology of *Christus Victor* which enabled her to deal – even if incompletely – with the spiritual attacks.

Among the empirical data supporting the importance of supernatural experience, Jen's interview stands out not only because of the narrative she provided but the incident as a whole. Since qualitative research involves not only reportage but participant-observation, my own perceptions during the interview process contribute to the body of data collected¹⁴³.

A memo from the interview notes I kept during fieldwork shows how I regarded the circumstances at the time as anomalous. Listening to the audio recording later reinforced the sensation that things were not 'normal' during the interview.



Aaergh.
Strangest interview.
P18 was completely covered on a hot day,
yet hands were clammy.
Long pauses after each question, even simple
ones.
Tapping, scraping, drinking, banging her glass.
A lot of 不记得...
我不明白... Very distant,
distracted
It was hard enough to get the basics covered.
Satanic attack during interview?
Distraction?
Upset before arrival (but she seemed normal
with [redacted])

Figure 7.1 Memo from interview with Jen

¹⁴³ Until then, my interviews with participants had all been fairly relaxed as I sought to put them at their ease in order to reduce any distance they might feel due to my role as an experienced, older ministry worker. In addition, the interviews in this city were conducted in the home of the gatekeeper who had introduced participants to me. This was a venue familiar to those who were being interviewed that day and I had no reason to expect that they would experience discomfort. My interview notes describe Jenny's late arrival, her attire (fully covered, with a long-sleeved hoodie over a long-sleeved top on one of the warmest days that summer) and her demeanour, which was sullen and hesitant. She did not look me in the eye during the interview. When even the simplest request for an introduction of her family background was greeted with reluctance, I used gentle questioning, keeping my voice as calm and low as possible in order to maintain the conversation. Jenny's restless movements, little grunts, repeated tapping on the table, her whispered responses and loud gulps of water after each reply (followed by banging her drinking glass on the table) are audible in the audio recording. When I asked if she was alright, she maintained that she was fine. The long pauses between her one-line responses and their lack of detail are visible on the interview transcript. This was by far one of the briefest interviews as I saw no point in persisting after it became clear that she would not become more responsive. At no point did she offer an explanation for her behaviour although she could easily have chosen not to participate in the interview.

It is entirely possible that there is a simple explanation for my observations that day, such as some illness or emotional upheaval prior to Jen's arrival. However, even taken without the fieldnotes from the day, Jen's narrative poses the question of how such topics and narratives would be addressed in the Bible studies attended by Chinese students.

The immanent frame

Experience of the transcendent – even more than religious or spiritual experience – has been a source of contention even within theological and missiological studies. Taylor's metaphor of the immanent frame describes the impact of secularisation on society and Christianity in the West resulting in the high value of 'instrumental rationality', and the contrast of a 'natural' order over a 'supernatural' one, an 'immanent' world over a 'transcendent' (2007:542). He asserts that the 'self-sufficient immanent order can be envisaged without reference to God' (2007:543).

An outcome of this is the potential neglect of issues addressing the supernatural in ordinary church life. Despite occasional anecdotal reports of experiences like Jen's, deliverance or spirit possession are more often found in missiological research or Pentecostal theology. Kelly (Master's, data science) provided a helpful insight on the different handling of texts on the demonic in Bible studies, comparing two separate occasions when different groups studied Jesus' encounter with a demon-possessed man (Mark 5:1-20), one led by a British leader and at another time, by a Chinese leader. She commented that the British leader had focused on Jesus' power over evil: 'God's strength is pure and complete, greater than the strength of the demons'. Conversely, in the Chinese study, she had asked personal questions about demon possession, wondering if she had 'stayed away from church as a child because of a demon'.

This demonstrates a Western bias which can result in 'blindness to the reality of the unseen world of spirits ('the excluded middle')' (Wan 2006). Chan (2014), writing on Asian grassroots theology, cites the ways in which encounters with spirits are classed as

‘primitive’ or ‘folk’ religion. Chau comments that ‘scholars and readers will look upon some of the religious practices discussed [in Chinese religion] ...as ‘magic’, ‘sorcery’ or ‘superstition’, not quite belonging in the category of ‘religion’ (2019:5). However, this can greatly hinder a broad-based understanding of religious life in any society.

Fan (2011) has discussed the difficulties of framing Chinese religion according to Western concepts, especially since the dawn of rationalism following the European Enlightenment, arguing, ‘If the Confucian tradition was questionable as a religious system, then their country’s heritage of folk belief was deeply embarrassing’ (Fan 2011:92). She quotes the philosopher Qian Mu’s account of the spiritual atmosphere in his hometown, where village life was replete with traditional rituals and beliefs, including occasions such as weddings and funerals when residents would offer sacrifices to the ancestors, ‘Thus, the human world and the world of the ghosts were closely intertwined.’ (2011:93)

Engaging with Western culture however, Qian discovered ‘a sharp difference between Western religious philosophies and (Chinese) views on topics like the universe and human life’ (Fan 2011:93). As was noted in Chapter Two, the Western analysis of China as ‘non-religious and devoid of traditional beliefs’ has resulted more from the global tide of modernisation and a belief in the pervasive nature of secularization (C.K. Yang, quoted by Fan 2011:93) than empirical analysis. Nonetheless, as the preliminary findings from ‘Understanding Unbelief’, the ongoing study of atheism and agnosticism, have demonstrated (Lee 2019), professions of ‘no religious belief’ around the world do not necessarily exclude beliefs in the supernatural. As mentioned earlier in this chapter the interim report from this study asserts that atheists in China, along with those in Brazil, are the most ‘supernaturally inclined’ (2019:14). Chinese agnostics, meanwhile, are described as ‘strikingly more likely to believe in supernatural phenomena than those from other countries’ (Lee 2019:14).

Varying categories of supernatural experience

It is clear from a survey of definitions of ‘religious’ or ‘spiritual’ experience that categorisations remain as contentious and contested, depending to no small degree on the ontological framework of those seeking to make those distinctions. Nonetheless, it remains difficult to establish the boundaries as to what constitutes ‘spiritual experience’, even if one accepts that to have religious meaning, such experiences must involve ‘an experiential awareness of God’, or an external transcendent presence (or some other supernatural being).

Contrasting the ‘esoteric’ with the ‘pragmatic’

A preliminary survey of literature in religion and psychology of religion reveals specific categories of spiritual or religious experiences which have attracted research and analysis. The historical definitions within Western theology, however, appear to have little bearing on the Chinese definitions. In particular, Western definitions appear to be esoteric, while the definitions within Chinese religions appear to apply largely to the meeting of human need. Two examples demonstrate the vastly different nature of understandings of the supernatural, particularly with regard to the experiences described by my participants.

Mystical experiences are understood to comprise an intimate union with the Divine, or a penetration of the Divine within the soul and a disappearance of the individual. This includes theistic mysticism, which seeks ‘a sacred oneness’ with God, defined by Williams James (1960) as having four key characteristics: ineffable, noetic, transient and passive. These qualities helpfully distinguish mysticism from the evangelical Christian understanding of ‘unity with Christ’ where oneness with Christ is the goal of Christian discipleship through conformity with the will and commands of Jesus Christ yet maintaining the individual’s personality and ego. However, James’ definition of mysticism, including ‘divinations, inspirations, demoniacal possessions, apparitions,

trances, ecstasies, miraculous healings and productions of disease, and occult powers’, would suggest that some of my participants’ experience would fall within this definition (Taves 2020:26).

Experiences of the Numinous were first coined by Rudolph Otto in ‘The Idea of the Holy’ (1923) as, firstly, the most elemental feeling of being in the presence of a greater other, ‘a power or being of a different kind from us – which excites mixed feelings of dread, wonder and awe’, and secondly, the moralistic influence of such encounters (described by Peterson 2020). For Otto, the Numinous Power was seen as also being identified by humanity as being the guardian of morality, creating an obligation to obey.

Such esoteric language contrasts with the quantitative, yet contextualised, work carried out by Yao and Badham in 2005 (published 2007) which takes more pragmatic approach to classification. This ground-breaking study highlights several distinctives from the existing literature which are pertinent to the current project.

First, seeking to indigenize their research to the Mainland Chinese context, Yao & Badham found that the specific terminology for ‘religious experience’ (translated as *zongjiao tiyan* or *zongjiao jingyan*¹⁴⁴ as unfamiliar to most Chinese people, even to those who were intellectuals and university humanities students (2007: 28). They therefore adapted their research instruments to be descriptive rather than based on definitions, producing responses which, while not identical with that of my participants, bear similar traits.

Second, their detailed questionnaire sought responses from Han Chinese people of a range of religious backgrounds, including those self-describing as non-religious *fei zongjiaotu*¹⁴⁵ (as opposed to atheist, *wushenlunzhe*¹⁴⁶). As both researchers point out, and as my participants have experienced, most Chinese born in the last 60 years since the

¹⁴⁴ 宗教体验、宗教经验

¹⁴⁵ 非宗教徒

¹⁴⁶ 无神论者

Communist Revolution have undergone an atheist education, with scientism forming the basis not only of ideological thought but also of the dominant culture and worldview. In addition, Confucianist rationalism continues to be a strong influence on cognitive patterns. These distinctives can also be discerned in my data.

Finally, in seeking descriptive rather than theoretical categories, Yao and Badham's data places an important emphasis on the experiential rather than the rational, from which seven general types of experience are elucidated (2007:32):

- experiencing the influence or control of a superhuman or spiritual power
- experiencing a sudden insight or new understanding of the meaning of life that cause change to the way of life
- having a dream which 'is extraordinary but is believed to be true'
- having a mysterious feeling which involves one or some of the five physical senses of sight, sound, touch and so on
- having a visionary experience alone or collectively
- experiencing one body (or 'union') with the universe, 'in which one has forgotten the existence of one's self and become one body with the universe'
- and a broad general category covering all other experiences which do not fit into the previous six.

It must be noted that these categories were devised as means of eliciting responses from Chinese people since their initial study indicated a general lack of understanding of the phrase 'religious experience'. Certainly, while my participants had experiences of their own to report, they did not fall neatly into the above criterion. Of greatest significance to this project is Yao and Badham's observation that

Chinese religiosity in general places more emphasis on the experiential than on the rational, in which religious truths must be experienced before being accepted and taken as the principle for life. (2007:33)

This is a crucial statement which resonates strongly with the findings of this project. It is important to note, however, that the relative importance of the experiential does not imply that Chinese people do not place value on the rational in considering religion or matters of faith. Certainly, among participants such as Cathy, Charles, Emma, Fern, Gail and Helen, continued biblical teaching and the provision of rational explanations and answers were cited as vital to the knowledge of God, as demonstrated by the findings in Chapter Six. This is stated pithily in Charles' comment:

From my experience, you have to confirm the truth of the Christian faith, you have to establish the truth of the Bible, and after that from the lives of other Christians. Confirming the Bible has to be a matter of thought. You have to do this personally, from a rationalistic understanding. Apart from that there is also your own personal experience. It's from these two angles that you understand the Christian faith. (Charles, PhD, philosophy of religion)

Yao & Badham's observation calls into question the peripheral value which British churches and Bible study leaders place on spiritual experience as influential to Chinese students' faith enquiries, and this will be further discussed in my analysis of these findings.

It is also clear that spiritual experiences are not taken simply as evidence of the transcendent - to be spiritually persuasive, such experience must also provoke feelings of awe, or wonder (2007:33). Nonetheless, they perceive a close correspondence between the Chinese awareness of spiritual powers and the bounds of traditional religious practices in all their diversity, including 'ancestors' (*zuxian*¹⁴⁷) and 'ghosts and spirits' (*guishen*¹⁴⁸), which are believed to be beyond human comprehension. Ancestors and ghosts are believed to intervene to rescue humans from accidents, illness and other disasters. However, this is an optimistic belief, with the expectation is that ancestors will

¹⁴⁷ 祖先

¹⁴⁸ 鬼神

‘strengthen human efforts in getting a better life or to protect them from evil’ (Yao & Badham 2007:57).

My participants’ reports of spiritual experiences emerged from the data rather than through directed questioning during the interview. The decision of participants to include these accounts in their reports of faith inquiry demonstrates their own lack of bias towards more secular thinking. This renders my findings distinct from those of Yao and Badham, who sought quantitative data directly pertaining to their research into religious and spiritual experiences in contemporary Han Chinese, and whose research instruments and methodology were tailored to capture such experiences explicitly.

Ancestral practices

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the data contained a significant number of codes for ancestral practices, with participants describing family rituals, local customs, celebrations at significant festivals. Often the chief worshipper in their family-of-origin was the paternal grandmother.

These practices were notably mentioned in the accounts of Andrew, Belinda, Cathy, Charles, Dan, Ed, Fern, and Helen – most of whom were from the south of China, where such customs continue to be prevalent, although Ed was, at the time, resident in the north.

The significance of ancestral practices differed from family to family, and from region to region, and were generally reflective of familial bonds rather than participants’ personal religious or spiritual beliefs. Belinda described a complex set of rituals which were commonly followed in her region and stressed their importance to her family, although asserting that the younger generation would not be expected to continue the observances. Ed, on the other hand, was more ambivalent and mentioned that it was only expected of him ‘when it was convenient’, depending on travel and work arrangements. Fern’s participation in rituals primarily involved invoking her late grandmother’s spirit in

order to achieve good examination results, protection and on one occasion, for a successful application for an American travel visa.

Charles, who is now resident in the UK, strongly expressed his understanding that ancestor rituals represented remembrance and respect. Following the customs and offering incense should be seen as external rituals which had no impact on internal obedience to Jesus Christ. It should be noted of course, that with a planned long-term stay in the UK, these customs were likely to have little impact on his life in the immediate future.

Of all the participants who mentioned this subject, Andrew and Helen were most vocal about the affective impact of ancestral practices, albeit in diametrically opposite ways.

Ritual practice and family bonds

For Andrew, ancestral practices in the family were maintained by his paternal grandmother and his father. Daily observances included food offerings and burning of joss sticks at the home altar, especially to his late grandfather. Other special occasions for his family throughout the year included the first day of Lunar New Year, the worship of the local Earth Deity and the Spring Qing Ming Festival¹⁴⁹ when family graves were swept and special offerings made, including the burning of paper money. In addition, his family would regularly include him in online video calls when remembrance meals were observed. These formed the structure of family ritual belonging for Andrew's family.

Having professed belief in Jesus two weeks prior to his interview, Andrew expressed a high level of internal conflict regarding ways to communicate this decision

¹⁴⁹ *Qing Ming* 清明 is the annual visit to the ancestors' tombs 104 days after the winter solstice and is also known as the Clear and Bright Festival or Tomb Sweeping Day. 'It is a time for remembering the deceased', when descendants will visit the cemetery, clean and clear tombs of weeds and offer food to the ancestors. Ritual offerings including specific foods (pork, duck, steamed buns and fruit) and paper effigies are sacrificed as a sign of loyalty and piety (see Tan 2020:46). It is worth noting that in accordance with the lunar calendar, *Qing Ming* often falls close to or during Easter, and has thus been contextualised in Asian countries enabling some Christians to celebrate Jesus' resurrection as an act of remembrance and honour to ancestors whilst eschewing the traditional ritual practices.

to his family. He asserted that he had definitely put his faith in Jesus Christ but knew that the implications of his decision would grieve his grandmother and father (although he felt his mother would be supportive). Having been brought up by his paternal grandmother, following the death of his grandfather, this relationship was particularly important to him. Although he seemed aware of the conservative views of evangelical Christians in his church – which would advise non-participation or at the very least, avoidance of the elements requiring worship of idols – Andrew seemed to try to convince himself that these were only acts of memorialising his grandfather, which could not possibly be wrong. A look at my coding and analysis under the theme of ‘Ancestral Practices’ showed that Andrew repeated his quandary several times, particularly with regards to baptism. While having made a decision for Christ within his immediate circle of friends in church, he told me he would not get baptised as this would be the watershed moment in his faith life:

I haven't been baptised, because once I am, I will need to set a good Christian example. But at the moment I can let go of my family, it's too sudden.

I have to take the time to tell them face to face. When they have truly accepted (my faith in Jesus) I can then formally get baptised. But I have made a decision in my heart.

To be honest I feel sometimes that these rituals are not important. I'm not the representative of the gods, only my ancestors. It's a kind of respect, that's what I feel in my heart, but if you really become a Christian, you must set an example. You know if people meet me, and I'm still involved in worshipping ghosts and spirits...people might think I actually believe in Buddha. That's why this matter definitely is preventing me from immediately getting baptised.

I've been performing these rituals since I was a child and have always done this. Every year when I return from university as soon as I get home the first thing my grandmother will do is say, first offer incense to your grandfather. I feel this

is a good thing, it's nothing. It's a form of remembrance to the elderly, just like you Christians every day at mealtime pray to God, it's the same thing.

(Andrew, Master's, environmental engineering)

Fear of ghosts and ancestral spirits

Ancestral rituals were also mentioned as an area of concern for Helen following her profession of belief in Jesus, particularly considering her imminent return to China following graduation from her Master's degree course. While Andrew's concerns revolved around the potential discontinuation of participation on cherished rites and rituals, these practices were a source of deep terror and abhorrence for Helen. Having lost their mother at a very young age, Helen and her elder sister were raised by their paternal grandmother who, similarly, was the main organiser of family rituals. Helen described the annual mid-August Ghost Festival¹⁵⁰ *Zhong Yuan Jie* observances:

When I was young, we would always make offerings with my paternal grandfather during Zhong Yuan, burning lots of paper parcels...it was horrible...fake parcels filled with jewels, houses, cars, mobile phones...and they all had names written on them. I just felt very scared, it was as if everyone had gone mad. But my grandfather believed it was real... it terrified me. And because people seemed very sincere, I was convinced there were really ghosts. Even though I thought I was an atheist, actually I really believed this. You just imagine you are a person who doesn't believe in ghosts and spirits, but actually in my heart it seemed that they exist.

My elder sister was even more scared. She claims that she saw our late mother's spirit once. I don't know if this was true or false, but she hated seeing

¹⁵⁰ *Zhong Yuan* 中元 falls in the seventh lunar month when 'the Chinese believe that the ghosts or the spirits of the dead are freed from hell and roam the world looking for food during this month...(they) suppose that it is very important to appease the ghosts, especially those spirits that do not have any descendants or anyone to make offerings to them.' (Tan 2020:46).

ghosts. I used to visit my mother's grave with my grandmother and watch her talking, crying and burning money at her tomb, and it would fill me with fear about death.

(Helen, Master's, TESOL)

Compared to the supernatural experiences mentioned earlier in this chapter, ancestral practices seem to fall within an entirely different category of religious experience since the reasons given for observation range from the pragmatic, as a method of having one's desires fulfilled, as mentioned in Chau's critique (2011), to the communal, a means by which familial bonds are strengthened and belonging affirmed. Although observance of such rituals is clearly not uniform across China, the fact that such practices were reported by seven of a random sampling of eighteen participants indicates that this remains a current practice for families, with special significance for the older generation. Further, Chinese students remain divided as to the spiritual meaning of such practices, with their varied accounts demonstrating that even those who professed faith in Jesus Christ had different understandings of the significance of practices. Whether burning incense, eating sacrificed food and tomb sweeping should be considered idolatrous practices, as some had been taught by other Christians, remained contested issues in need of clarification.

Helen's account demonstrates that while ancestral practices might not hold religious meaning for Chinese students, the rituals can have a deep impact on their perceptions of the supernatural, or using Hiebert's term, 'the excluded middle' (1982), which although established in missiological teaching, receives little mention in evangelical Christian teaching. While the two accounts differ greatly in the perceived affective impact, it is clear that the observance of such rituals and their intrinsic significance must be addressed in both pastoral terms, whether these are threatened familial bonds or fear of death and terror of the unseen world, as well as theological terms.

Spiritual experience in evangelical theology

The Scriptures describe a wide range of emotional responses to direct encounters with the Triune God. It might be true to say that the record of biblical characters faced with the direct revelation from God defies academic attempts at classification as Yao and Badham (2007) have done. Although Moses' encounter with God in the burning bush could be described as an experience of an external transcendent power, for example, there is also a dramatic turning of life direction as well as a response of awe and wonder, rather than love and adoration. The affective response seen in Moses foreshadows the New Testament accounts of Jesus' transfiguration or the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, both of which produce in Jesus' disciples not only an awareness of the transcendence and sovereign power of God, but form a significant turning point in history, leading to the birth of the early church.

Chinese students like my participants appeared to have a cultural and ontological tendency to interpret supernatural experiences as indicative of different realities. This forms a paradox when they are simultaneously adamant that in terms of religious belief, they are 'atheist'. The question remains as to how to incorporate such understandings into the Bible study context rather than simply dismissing them as subjective and irrelevant. It is clear from my data that such experiences are perceived by students to add to the plausibility of biblical teaching, despite their highly secularised environment of the British university.

Encounters with God in the form of dramatic rescue or miraculous answers to prayer seemed to play a key role in proving the truth and validity of the Bible. Answered prayer (crying out to 'God' with little or no notion of Jesus) became attributed to the Jesus they were learning about in the Bible (Gail, Master's, finance). Further, such experiences led Emma to an immediate decision to believe in Jesus, cutting through her outstanding doubts and inability to accept the biblical concepts and ideas she had previously decried

as ‘ridiculous’ (for example, the virgin birth, the Trinity). More importantly, recognition of the existence of a transcendent personal God who had intervened in the struggles of daily life in response to a cry for help, increased the acceptance of biblical teaching, especially around the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ miracles and His death and resurrection, that pointed to Jesus’ divinity and identity as God.

Western ministry practitioners such as Philip and Rawson express caution that any ongoing interest might be dominated by cultural pragmatism, rather than a genuine search for God. Philip, for example, suggests that Chinese students visiting overseas churches might be wondering if Christianity ‘works’: ‘They want to see if this ‘God’ – or perhaps this process – will give them their desired exam results, career or marriage’ (2018:44).

Similarly, Rawson cautions that international students might interpret healings as proof that ‘Jesus is a powerful shaman or magician and commit to following him in hopes of having every prayer answered positively’, expressing concern that students should understand the relationship with God is ‘dynamic and living, not magical’. (2015:48)

Although some participants’ experiences contain elements of conditionality and the potential for misplaced faith (particularly those of Fern and Gail), it would be inaccurate to describe their ongoing spiritual inquiry as ‘shamanistic’ or seeking to control God through promises. The incidents reported did not indicate participants’ belief in ‘magic, a mechanistic view — a formula approach to reality that allows humans to control their own destiny’ (Hiebert 1982:46). On the contrary, it could be argued that such experimental ‘transactions’ with God demonstrate a growing understanding of Christianity as a dynamic and living relationship, rather than the purely confessional faith which has its roots in Western traditions.

These perspectives also contrast with Chan’s (2014) analysis of ‘grassroots Christian theology’. Although Chan’s work is not based on empirical research, he notes the pragmatic impulses of folk religious roots in Asian Christianity (as described by

Rawson), but observes that Asian Christians, specifically Pentecostals, readily incorporate an everyday belief in ‘divine immanence and transcendence’ which finds practical application in ‘praying for the sick, exorcising demons and so on. God encounters us in concrete realities, in worship and in dreams and visions’ (2014:61).

He also notes that in many Asian contexts, conversion is often experienced as a spiritual, rather than an intellectual, encounter in which ‘concrete problems are overcome, such as healing of sickness and deliverance from demon possession. Where the gods failed, the Christian God came and overcame. This *Christus Victor* theme runs through many conversion stories and testimonies’ (2014:120).

Thus, while Western churches might express doubt and wariness of accounts of God’s practical intervention, it is not uncommon for such encounters to be accepted as contributing to Christian conversion in the non-Western world.

This raises a further question about the hybridic nature of Chinese students’ faith inquiry. Based on my participants’ accounts, their interest in systematic learning of the Christian faith matched Rambo et al’s (2012) account of conversion processes in China, in which Fengjiang recognised Lofland and Skonovd’s description of the ‘intellectual motif’ of conversion in Chinese university students. This starts with ‘individual, private investigation of possible ‘new grounds of being’, alternate theodicies, personal fulfilment etc’ (2012:899), similar to the processes of faith inquiry noted here. Along with intellectual inquiry, however, participants’ implicit acceptance of the supernatural and the possible intervention of a transcendent God must be noted. These can largely be traced to similar traits within Chinese religious thought, demonstrating that despite the secularisation inherent to the British university context, Chinese students display characteristics in their faith inquiry which contains aspects of both ‘individualised intellectual inquiry’ as well as an openness to the supernatural which belies their professions of scientific atheistic belief. A greater recognition of this duality in those

leading Bible studies could therefore lead to the construction of nascent theology which is more contextualised to their home context in China.

Conclusion

My participants displayed a propensity to ascribe significance to their experiences of the supernatural, both positive and negative. Answers to prayer and healings could be observed to play an evidential role, providing a basis for the existence of the transcendent, even if they did not know his identity at the time. The experiences also played a role in signposting the existence of an immanent supernatural power that could influence events and situations for participants' wellbeing. Further, the experiences took on an affective role as participants' interaction with the supernatural produced a sense of emotional wellbeing, or, in the case of Helen and Jen, feelings of fear and oppression which needed to be overcome.

Although the practitioner literature expresses caution that experiential faith might have a weak foundation, my participants' accounts demonstrate that far from shaping their theological understandings of God or producing an expectation of wish-fulfilment, their experiences of a transcendent, personal power who had taken an interest in their detailed personal needs provided the impetus to discover more from the Bible.

This chapter has demonstrated that experiences of wonder, of the supernatural, should not be lightly dismissed. Each participant who had had such an encounter commented on the affects which remained long after the incident. In fact, the inclusion of such encounters in their faith inquiry narratives indicates the value which was intrinsically ascribed to them.

My data also demonstrates that ancestral practices and awareness of malevolent ghosts and spirits continue to be part of everyday life for some Chinese families. Familial acceptance of a participant's new Christian beliefs can significantly influence the faith inquiry process, even where a student professes no actual belief in the need to appease

ancestors and ghosts. Finally, the importance of biblically grounded beliefs regarding the power and authority of Jesus Christ over the spiritual realm and the powers of evil and death should be noted.

Despite the pragmatic approaches to faith noted by Chinese scholars, supernatural encounters had the effect of forming a positive motivation for faith inquiry. Each participant displayed a greater propensity to believe and study the Bible, with their encounters serving to build faith and reduce scepticism. Given the ‘immanent frame’ of British society, including the Christian church, my findings highlight the importance of sensitivity to accounts of spiritual encounters – both positive and negative – in Chinese students’ experience.

This chapter concludes my discussion of the three central elements which emerged as significant to my participants’ faith inquiry. None of the elements stands alone. In fact, the dominance of one element over the others in one participant could be seen to result in a development of beliefs which, while strongly relational, was biblically deficient. In the next chapter, I consider the combined role of these key elements by proposing a new theoretical understanding of how they interact to answer participants’ questions of Relevance, Relationality and Ultimate Reality, as outlined in Chapter Four. My proposed theory seeks to demonstrate the process through which propositional beliefs become inhabited, embodied beliefs.

CHAPTER EIGHT

DRAWING THE ELEMENTS TOGETHER

Introduction

Beginning at the beginning: religious beliefs and their relationship with faith

Understandings of the origins of religious beliefs within the scholarly discourse remain highly contested, appearing in the literature of many disciplines variously as individually constructed and immutable; collectively acquired, as a product of social interaction, discerned and enacted subjectively; and derived from other-worldly super-empirical sources, such as the supernatural or the transcendent (Day 2010). The reality is less definable, an interaction of the three processes, particularly in relation to beliefs which shape the faith life of religious believers. For evangelical Christians, for example, learned propositional beliefs might have origins in both private thought and socialisation, yet are not ends in themselves but serve as building blocks, forming the foundation of faith, through which we encounter the living triune God and enter into relationship with him.

Chinese students arriving on British campuses undergo a migration experience which is simultaneously exciting and daunting. The process of uprooting from familiar surrounds, family or work life, allows existential questions of the meaning of life and reality to surface, including the re-examination of uncertainties which were present prior to departure.

As scholars have asserted, the affective impact of moving and resettling renders the migration experience, such the education sojourn of Chinese students, rich in potential for new theologising (Yang 2012). Promising new sources of belief, such the Bible, hint at the possibility of a transformed way of life, which as my participants discovered, could only really be affected through a transformed worldview. New relationships, as the result of exiting the familial community and entering a new one, raise the possibilities of change and/or (re)construction of identity, values and behaviour. And finally, within a foreign

environment with different life patterns and social norms, the absence of pre-existing rituals and spiritual practices can enable the re-examination of assumptions about ultimate reality and the supernatural which might not have surfaced before, leading to the increased plausibility of the existence of a transcendent God.

For my participants, and other Chinese students like them, the process of theologising did not take place in a vacuum. The literature shows that students demonstrate a high level of agency in negotiating their education experience, adjusting to the pedagogical demands of British higher education and the social acclimatisation which accompanies this. Further, there is significant proof that students are pro-active in seeking opportunities which will enhance the intercultural knowledge and English fluency which are commonly articulated goals of their sojourn.

The degree of agency exercised by Chinese students in religious exploration and faith inquiry, however, has hitherto been underestimated. Far from being the passive recipients of absorbed Christian values or adopted Christian identity in the quest for belonging, my participants demonstrated a highly involved process of belief evaluation, with questions around the overarching themes of Relevance, Relationality and Reality at the forefront of their minds. Each of these themes formed a basis upon which participants determined their intent to go further. Questions about the Bible as a reliable source of spiritual truth, whether the biblical God does in fact exist, and if the Christian life as experienced and witnessed would have salience within a Chinese context, and many more – all required systematic investigation. While these questions might not all have received answers, there often appeared to be one significant ‘unlocking’ event which prompted a step of faith, a decision to persevere. Similarly, where questions did not receive satisfactory replies, or where biblical understanding was superficial, the Christian learning experience was then relegated to the category of ‘philosophy’ or ‘knowledge’ with no bearing on life in China.

The data revealed a complex process of evaluation and interrogation of the overarching themes, revolving around the three central elements of Community, Word and Wonder. These provided corroboration, confirmation and salience in a multidirectional flow between them. In the next section, I present and explain a schema which emerged from the concepts and connections identified in the data. The schema serves as a visual representation of my theorisation, developed from the empirical data, depicting an analysis of the way in which biblical beliefs come to be apprehended, shaped and expressed by participants as ‘nascent ordinary theology’.

Putting the elements together

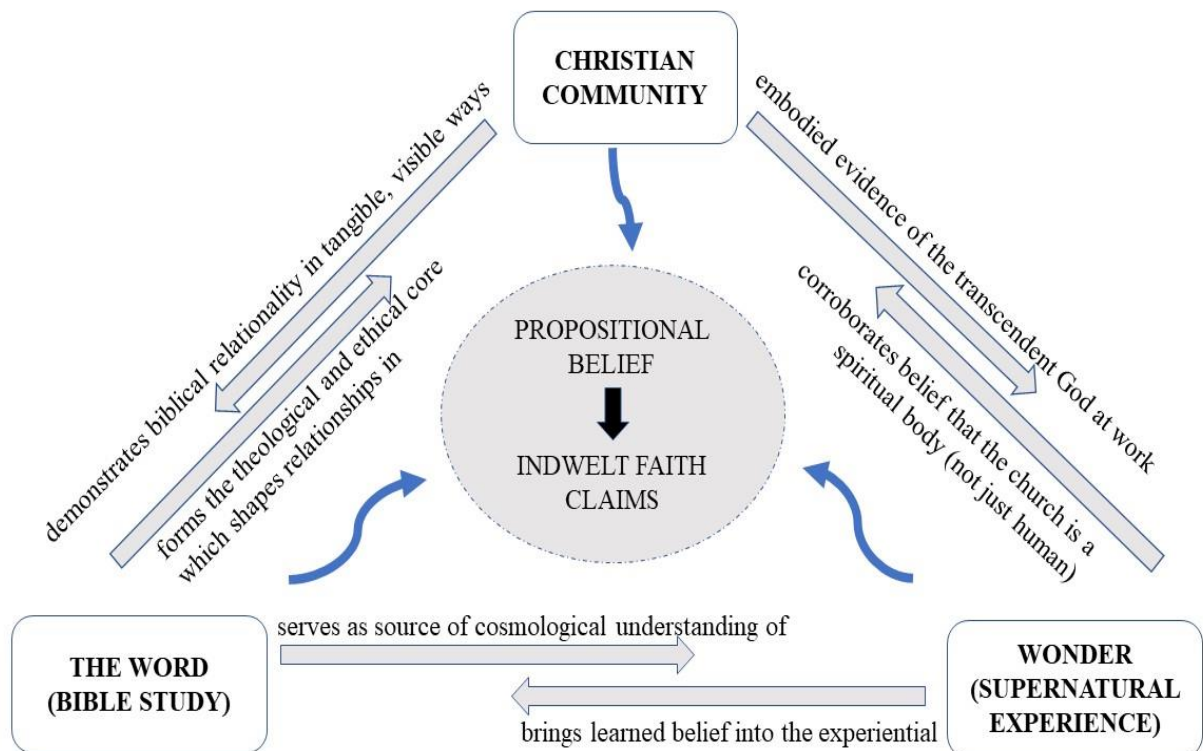


Figure 8.1 Interaction of the three elements in the process of faith inquiry

*with the grey circle representing the development of Christian habitus

Figure 8.1 shows the ways in which the three elements of Community, Word and Wonder were used by participants during the process of faith inquiry. The diagram suggests a more linear process than the data evidences, and this should be seen as a limitation of the presentation design. In reality, the interaction of elements is fluidic,

likely to have taken place in an organic way, akin to Meek's description (based on Polanyi) of subsidiary-focal integration (2011:72), such that each of the elements provided 'clues' which over time led the experience of integration, the so-called 'oh I see' moments (Meek 2011) when knowledge learned became embodied and inhabited. The grey circle central to the process thus represents the formation of Christian habitus, as introduced in Chapter Three.

Although much of this diagram is a summary of Chapters Five, Six and Seven, I will outline the main points while demonstrating the relationship of each to the overarching themes of Relevance, Relationality and Reality.

The question of Relevance

Participants came to Britain with specific questions and existential issues which reflected their emotional and psychological reality. Their attendance at Bible studies had mixed results: for many it took a high degree of fluency, perseverance and determination to gain enough knowledge of the context and the character of Jesus so that it was apparent why his life is central to the Christian faith. Accounts of miraculous healing were difficult to accept, but they were memorable. Participants recalled studies of the healing of Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:35-43), for example. For Charles (PhD, philosophy of religion), Jesus' teaching from the Sermon on the Mount demonstrated that the Bible contained different ethical standards. The realisation that Jesus might have answers to those questions helped him to view the Bible as relevant to their lived experience, both in the present as well as their expectation of life in China after graduation. Conversely, Jesus' perfection was also mentioned as 'too high a standard' (Gail, Master's, finance) which ordinary people could not be expected to achieve.

It appears from these reflections that participants did not always see the immediate relevance of biblical teaching to their lives. Most reported an emphasis on the Gospel accounts, usually Mark, Luke or John, but failed to understand the implicit Christological

content of the studies, aimed at communicating the life and salvific work of Jesus on the cross. The marked absence of the mention of 'sin' or corollary terms in some accounts also raises questions about depth of understanding of the gospel message. One possible analysis might be the view expressed by Chow (2013) that the concept of 'original sin' in Christian hamartiology challenges the inherent Chinese belief in self-cultivation, and that these participants were less inclined to mention it.

Interaction with the Christian community, however, in international cafés, Bible studies and churches provided one answer to the need for Relevance when the Bible studies did not seem to. Bible studies for international students generally use the inductive approach as a hermeneutic for understanding the scriptural text, but this was insufficient for many participants who for various reasons could not respond sufficiently to a text-based hermeneutic. Instead, their observations and interactions with the Christian community formed a 'living hermeneutic'. This took place amid the everyday witness and testimony of local Christians in friendship with participants. The relevance of biblical belief was made evident by relationships with people who professed to live in reliance on biblical truth, in obedience to God. Not only were these perceived to be distinctive, but participants also reported being able to understand how Christians might live effectively with different values and life goals.

Several participants reported previous encounters with the supernatural which became motivating factors in their faith inquiry. These did not need persuasion that biblical beliefs might be relevant to their lives. Supernatural encounters in the form of answered prayer and healing therefore served as pointers to an unseen reality, which could be given shape, form and identity through teaching from the Bible. Similarly, the participant who reported demonic interference had sought to resolve the problem by relying on learned Christological understandings. The importance of such encounters should therefore not be underestimated in the shaping of biblical belief.

Nevertheless, Ed (academic visitor, engineering) was very clear in concluding that the Bible held no relevance for him. He had been participating in Bible studies for some 6 months by then:

Actually, the Bible to me is a kind of knowledge. From my perspective it's a social science, a branch of social sciences or philosophy. I'm an engineer so the overlap is not big.

He admitted that as an engineer he perceived the Bible as more 'for humanities students', but also said that he had had no interest in Christianity prior to arrival and did not feel that he would continue reading the Bible when he returned home:

My life in China and my life here in the UK are totally different. Previously I had no contact with the Bible, and there was no context in which I would interact with it. Even if I bought a Bible and brought it home, there wouldn't be the environment or the people to continue...I don't have that background and the atmosphere is different. Consider if there was not a single person in your environment who reads the Bible. While I'm at work, I can't (read the Bible). When I get home, there's not one who wants to read it...so I feel it would be weird, it would be strange. So I feel I won't continue reading.

The question of Relationality

Since evangelical Christians have both an espoused and normative theological belief that Christianity is fundamentally a relationship with God, it is important to know if this was the understanding that participants arrived at through the Bible studies. Based on the data, it would appear that those who professed belief had a relational understanding of their Christian faith. Participants' use of relational terms such as 'being God's child', 'knowing Jesus personally' and 'feeling there is Someone always with me', as well as gerunds like 'comforting', 'loving', 'trusting' and 'speaking' would confirm this. Further, those who had seen answers to prayer or felt God spoke through the Bible seemed attuned

to the possibility of a direct relationship with God. They did not need the mediation of other Christians or ‘ritual service providers’, unlike other Chinese religions (Chau 2019:99) . Their experiences reinforced the teaching they received in Bible studies, that ‘Christianity is not a religion but a relationship’ (Helen, Master’s, TESOL).

In addition, the setting of many Bible studies in an international café context or led by a group of Christian volunteers lent a unique communal aspect to participants’ experience. This renders the corporate witness of the ministry volunteer team to be a powerful tool for communicating the relational nature of God. As Wan states in his argument for a relational theological and missiological approach, the source and basis of human being and understanding is ‘not simply a series of one-on-one relationships that foster transformation. Interaction with the larger group – the church, the Christian community – is also key to transformation’ (Wan & Hedinger 2018:7).

The data shows that the process of learning about God in a relational way was a process of discovery through multiple interactions, within shared lives and with the biblical text, not merely the explanation of Christian teaching. The interaction of all three clues enabled some participants to triangulate their growing knowledge about God, leading to convictional knowing, or transformation.

The question of Ultimate Reality

This question emerged very strongly in the data as some participants repeatedly asserted that their lack of belief in the existence of God was an obstacle to further learning, as well as the ramifications of this on all other aspects of interaction with Christianity. Based on my earlier discussion of Chinese religion in Chapter Two, it would not be accurate to assume that this professed unbelief is equivalent to the absence of belief in any god whatsoever – rather, participants were unable to believe in the existence of the transcendent and immanent triune God that Christians spoke about.

The question of ultimate reality was not always addressed within Bible studies, but was expressed as an obstruction to belief, most vocally by Emma (Master's, accounting & finance). Until she was persuaded of the existence of God (through a sequence of answered prayers, see Chapter Seven) the Bible contained too many details which she found 'ridiculous'. Having received tangible help in a crisis, however, her disbelief seemed to disappear, seemingly overnight. Her account demonstrates the strong link between pragmatism ('seeing that it works') and the acceptance of propositional belief, while also highlighting the urgent need for ministry practitioners to understand the basis upon which an individual might make a faith decision.

The recognition by participants that the Christians they knew lived differently was a source of curiosity for some and a challenge for others. As mentioned earlier, participants such as Charles, Belinda and Gail reflected that Jesus' moral and ethical standards were possibly high and impossible to fulfil, especially when the Bible was read in the Chinese style as a text for 'self-cultivation' (Chau 2019:27). This appeared to be overcome when participants understood that God is both transcendent, more powerful than any other god, and immanent, being fully involved in human life. The Christian community therefore both provided evidence that a living God was at work in individuals' lives. Experience of the community also demonstrated that belief in God at the Ultimate Real was an acceptable and plausible ontological position, particularly in their observations of those who were considered 'educated people' in British society.

Habitus: developing a Christian disposition

Bearing in mind the three themes represented above, it is important that resolution of the key questions did not come about through taught biblical understanding alone. This presents a clear challenge to the current understanding within international student ministry that Bible studies are the primary means by which Chinese students grow in understanding, leading to spiritual formation. The process and the ordinary theology

which emerges from the data paints quite a different story, that of individuals seeking evidence by intensive observation of the Christian community, imitation of the biblically focused values and behaviours of respected individuals and role models, and participation – albeit limited – in acts of worship and ritual in church. Within this theoretical analysis, the Bible remains the sole authority for Christian life, consonant with evangelical Christian theology. However, the data demonstrates that Chinese students come to understand the centrality of Scripture through a complex process involving evidence gleaned from communal relationships and numinous experience, interpreted through the lens of regular biblical teaching, before forming embodied and inhabited beliefs which enable them to respond to God’s revelation of himself.

This clearly challenges the espoused theology of ministry practitioners, whose focus might lie primarily in the teaching of Scripture as God’s revelatory word. It is clear, however, that it was often the affective and bodily response of participants to implicit scriptural truth which caused them to persevere in Bible study, rather than the other way round. Indwelt beliefs thus created the habitus for a relationship with God and a profession of faith in Jesus Christ, increasing participants’ recognition of the Bible as their authority for life.

Reaching integration

Based on participants’ accounts, the integration of learning from the three elements, leading to the construction of internalised theology which they could articulate, did not come about painlessly. Participants did not report a smooth linear process of understanding theoretical knowledge about Jesus Christ before professing to have faith in him. Instead, it was possible to detect a repeated process running through questioning, answer, doubt and reassurance, in which patterns – those moments of integration and insight - formed. These ‘moments of insight’ in faith inquiry formed progressive stages of recognition of the transcendence and immanence of God. As the integration of

dimensions took place, participants began to see a coherent pattern which made spiritual and theological sense of the Bible knowledge they acquired through Bible studies, their experiences and observations as part of the (transitional) Christian community they were in, and their encounters with the spiritual realm, which gave them insight into a new lived reality.

Although participants themselves might not necessarily have described the latter experiences as opportunities to learn¹⁵¹, their accounts contained a range of random, apparently meaningless, opaque and personally external particulars which were not explicitly related to Bible study or their experience of Christian community, yet came to have inherent spiritual meaning. It was only in attending to these subsidiary particulars, relying and acting upon them, that ‘patterns’ became focal as they focused on new ontological truths. Further it was as integration took place that Chinese students then came to indwell and interiorize their new understandings, developing ‘a lived bodiliness, a felt sense, with respect to all that we rely on in an epistemic act’ (Meek 2011:70).

As discussed in Chapter Three, ontology has to do with ‘what is real’, ‘what exists’, ‘what reality is made of’ and ‘what are the features of reality’. Within the Christian worldview, the triune God is the ultimate real. The significance of this acknowledgment is so immense that it is transformative of life itself.

The aim and purpose of Bible study with non-believers is, through teaching His inspired Word, to enable them to respond to God’s revelation of himself as ultimate reality, ‘the really real’ (Sire 2015:71). For the Chinese students I interviewed, this emerged as a crucial question. The biblical text introduces readers to God as Creator, wholly other from his creation. He is holy, transcendent, immutable, immanent. As humans, beings created in his image, we relate to God by his self-revelation in the person of Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit illuminating the Bible.

¹⁵¹ in the way that Bible study was described as ‘learning the Bible’

From this perspective there are evident reasons for the difficulty which participants expressed in understanding the Bible without even a notional understanding of the existence of God. Sire, addressing 'postmodern Western sceptics', asserts that the question of prime reality makes a profound difference to worldview: 'Epistemology is predicated on the nature of what is, not on an autonomous ability, human reason disengaged from God' (2015:74). In the Christian worldview ontology must precede epistemology. Such change is deemed necessary for those with a post-monotheistic worldview, but for those among my participants who had not even begun to question their ontological presuppositions, it proved to be a critical issue. They could not grasp the significance of the Gospel studies which sought to demonstrate the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as fully God and fully man.

Following Meek's description of the epistemic act as described in Chapter Three, we understand that other participants underwent a process of subsidiary-focal integration, drawing together the clues of Community and Wonder alongside the Word, which gradually brought into focus the potential of a different Reality. Participants described profound somatic experiences of peace and rest (Helen, Kelly) or alternatively, excitement and mystification (Emma, Charles) when sudden focal clarity occurred. That moment has been described by Meek, following Loder, as the 'a-ha' moment. While some might refer to this as a moment of conversion, it would be more accurate describe these as a series of 'moments of insight', when patterns of a different reality became distinct, leading my participants to a deeper understanding of the existence of God. This then made it possible for steps of trust to take place, thus leading to a new and different rational process encompassing and based upon God's revelation in his Word of Jesus the Son, by his Spirit.

With the possible exception of Ed, Belinda and Frank, almost all the participants described ongoing Bible learning, but intertwined in their descriptions of learning are rich

details of deep friendship, persistent questioning and receiving answers (with mixed degrees of helpfulness), witnessing and experiencing Christian welcome, kindness and friendships, experiments with answered prayer and encounters with God's power.

There was evidence that participants implicitly believed in embodied knowledge. Charles, Emma, Fern, Frank and Gail reported ways in which they sought advice from their Bible study leaders, who served as guides and interpreters of the Bible, providing answers which helped participants to apply biblical teaching in practical ways. Andrew, Cathy, Emma, Helen and Kelly also described the 'lived examples' of Christian life which they witnessed and then imitated, developing their own patterns of 'Christian response' to problems or challenges. This was usually described as an active change of behaviour and/or attitude, in a desire to 'obey Jesus'. Daily habits of Bible reading and personal devotions had also become intrinsic to their routines, as guided by other Christians.

Andrew, Charles, Cathy, Emma, Fern, Gail and Frank reported actively experimenting with prayer. As mentioned previously, the Christian understanding of prayer is different from the Chinese practice of making offerings, burning incense and asking for general protection. Where participants mentioned 'talking to God', 'telling him about my concerns' and even 'crying out to God', they were imitating behaviours observed in others. Thus, the tendency was to engage in conversational prayer, rather than formalised set prayer, as might have been observed in church services.

Through trusting commitment and the active inhabiting of insights which emerged, the various elements working as 'clues' were brought into focus over time, leading to integration, enabling progressive decisions to believe in God. Here participants reported a feeling of peace, or of stability, one might surmise that these were bodily experiences of moments of insight.

Tracing the rationale in participants' narratives

Summarising some of the participants' accounts, it is possible to discern their rationale for ontological change, starting almost uniformly from a position of having no theistic belief:

- Frank (exchange student, finance): believed that if God exists and humanity is evil and in need of rescue and salvation, and if Jesus can redeem people and conquer death, then the Bible narratives must be true. He then wanted to believe in Jesus, even if that meant believing the miracles which he could not explain. *He shows me that there is more meaning and purpose to life than money and material things.*
- Helen (Master's, TESOL): understood that if a Creator God exists, there is a different purpose to life than she realised before. Hearing people she trusted tell her that Jesus is God, based on his life and miracles in the Bible, she realised that he truly had the authority to raise Lazarus from the dead and understood her overwhelming fear of death. *Since he died on the cross and rose again, I no longer need to fear ghosts and spirits but can trust in His power over all things seen and unseen.* Seeing a crowd of Christians together gave her the realisation that God had done the same miracle in hundreds of lives so she could believe that what he says is true.
- Emma (Master's, accounting & finance): *God has showed me through helping me in a time of desperate need that he not only exists, but is personal and all powerful, giving me a sense of security even in great difficulty.* Once she came to believe in the existence of the biblical God, she could believe all that she had learnt about Jesus in the Bible, including the fact that Jesus is God, existing in Trinity with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Therefore, she said, if God said she was a sinner in need for forgiveness, she would choose to trust his word as true and accept Jesus' death on the cross for me.

- Charles (PhD, philosophy of religion): Although he didn't understand everything in the Bible, it was clear to him that Jesus was not an ordinary man. *His ethical teaching alone in the Sermon on the Mount had more authority - sets a higher standard - than any other teaching in the world.* Having seen God answer urgent prayers for his daughter and having come to a reasoned understanding of the gospel, he chose to believe even though it was costly and difficult, and lowered his social status in his hometown. He described his process of faith inquiry as *a long process filled with conflict and doubt, but I want to believe in Jesus and receive God's fatherly love.*
- Diane (Master's, education): *Just being in the presence of Christians gave me a feeling of peace.* She found that the more she studied the Bible, the more her burdens '*lifted even during difficulties and challenges*'. Diane's realisation that life is short and we all must make the right decisions, led to an understanding that the whole Bible forms a story that tells the story of humanity. *I believe that only God will be with me no matter what I face in future. Even when I sin and go wrong, he will direct me onto the right paths.*

Although the above section outlines a series of progressive developments of theological understanding, my purpose was not to give the impression that 'coming to know' happened in a deductive linear fashion. It would be more accurate to read the summaries above as a series of deliberations, though these happened over time and created feelings of conflict in my participants. A number of accounts include repeated forward and backward movement, moments of faith which were conditional, which led to more study, more observation and participation, before doubts were overcome.

We should not therefore assume that hesitation and doubt were signs of failed understanding, but that these were indicators that participants were deeply involved in their desire to know, and therefore cared about the answers to their longings. There was

therefore a significant experiential and affective dimension to their deliberations on the faith claims asserted by the Christians in their acquaintance. Considering the factors which emerged from the empirical data to be influential, it might appear that rationality in the form of pure understanding of the Bible and the search for ideological Truth features lower down on the list – not because these were insignificant, but because the other factors could be seen from participants’ own reports to be hugely persuasive.

Additionally, being of the Post 80s/ Post 90s generation, the majority of participants expressed an antipathy towards purely ideological truth, which in their experience with both Communist philosophy and traditional Chinese religious practices at home had proved to be insufficient or unsatisfactory in providing beliefs that could form the basis for life transformation and providing peace in everyday life. Many therefore expressed a need for evidence: anything received through direct teaching, such as in a sermon or Bible study, had to be proved true in terms of observed behaviour within relationships, solutions to problems which they could not resolve on their own, or experiences of ‘miraculous intervention’.

Conflict and contradiction (*maodun*¹⁵²)

As mentioned in Chapter Four, my participants’ repeated use of the term *maodun* is highly descriptive and rich in significance. It is a common turn of phrase which is literally translated as ‘sword shield’ and is used in affective terms to describe a sense of hesitation, between doing and not doing, due to the creation of inner conflict¹⁵³. The expression appears in the coding several times with regards to participants’ feelings towards trying to make rational sense of the biblical accounts, fighting feelings of hesitation, drawn by the evidence which they felt they saw in Christians’ lives as well as

¹⁵² 矛盾

¹⁵³ A philosophical definition is given as ‘the dialectical approach to objectively thinking about the opposing mutual dependence and mutual conflict between things or people’ Wang Huan (ed.). 1987. *The Times New Chinese-English Dictionary*. Singapore: Federal Publications. p596. 因有两个相反事物在心中斗争，感到为难

in their own experiences which were, for them, proof of God's existence. Charles, for example, describes his decision to believe in Jesus and be baptised: *I began to understand Christianity more deeply, then I started to change slowly. Becoming a Christian is a painful process...a very slow process. My thinking had to grow and change a lot.*

There appeared, for many, to be moments of insight upon which beliefs became inhabited through steps of trusting faith, followed by obedience, growth in faith, followed by deeper searching and obedience. However, this was not a linear progression but cyclical, with ups and downs as faith built based upon new perceptions and understandings, faltered, was contradicted, was rebuilt.

One clear example is Gail (Master's, finance) who, speaking to me 3 months after deciding to believe in Jesus, describes her decision to believe in Jesus using a phrase which can be literally translated as 'deciding to believe in the midst of contradiction'¹⁵⁴. Nonetheless, despite questioning if hers was only a 'book-based faith' and feeling disappointed by some perceived failures of God to answer her prayers, she continued to study the Bible. She was reassured that her Bible study leader, an 'elderly British aunty', was able to provide biblical responses despite Gail feeling that *she may not be able to entirely explain, or her explanation might not be what I am asking.*

Ultimately, participants who professed internalised beliefs and faith in God experienced an overall sense of progression, within which their identification with Christ was strengthened by their growing knowledge of the Bible, experience of Christian community and sense of God's involvement in their lives, leading some to reflect: '*God led me to the church*' (Andrew) or '*it was God who brought me to the first café evening*' (Cathy). In this they displayed some of the 'rhetoric of continuity' which McGuire (2002:76) cautions is subjective, non-generalisable data. While this might be a form of 'biographical reconstruction', I have included these comments in order to demonstrate

¹⁵⁴ '在矛盾中去相信了'

the degree to which participants who professed faith were beginning to apply their embodied biblical beliefs to their personal stories.

The contentious nature of becoming Christian

My data demonstrates that far from being decisions borne of ease and the desire to smoothen and strengthen affective bonds, as suggested by the literature, participants responded favourably to their engagement with the Christian faith and the communities which drew them in, but also perceived the sensations of going against the tide by continuing to attend Bible studies and church, with many anticipating that this would eventually create disharmony within their family-of-origin.

For Belinda, the genuine ongoing search for answers had created further internal confusion:

For me now...I believe in God, but I haven't decided about Jesus' identity. I haven't decided that Jesus is God. At the same time, I'm also learning Islam, studying the contents about Islam from a Muslim student. I am exploring...

The present situation is, I believe in God, I believe there is a God, but which god? I can't say for certain, but personally I guess I interact with Christians more, so I...when I discuss with my Muslim friend, I use a Christian perspective to discuss with him [laughs]...so maybe I explain it wrongly.

I'm still exploring. Maybe because I am in contact with more Christianity, I feel more attracted in that direction. Why do I say I am more in contact with Christianity? I understand more about it. But I also feel that that could influence my choice and decision, just like in a Buddhist family, I could be very involved and sincere, becoming a sincere Buddhist. That's why I have this kind of feeling...so I am (withholding judgement...

I want to keep exploring until I reach the point when I can say: this is it, I really am... (Belinda, Master's, business)

Charles had made a decision to become a Christian not long before the interview but stressed his perception that becoming a Christian was a matter of struggle:

I feel that this...this process of becoming a Christian is very painful...it's a long process. Because you have ideological struggles...there should be struggles, because you mentioned the question of identity, this identity question: Am I Chinese? Is it a Western religion? ...and so on. These questions will all be there. But...I feel that these are other people's defences. I feel that from my perspective, you need to ascertain if this is Truth. You need to look at it from a faith perspective.

(Charles, PhD, philosophy of religion)

Cathy said her conversion had adversely affected some friendships, and repeated her friends' concerns that she might proselytise them:

When my friend heard I had become a Christian, she was afraid and said, "You won't convert me will you?" This was the first reaction when many of my Chinese friends heard I had become a Christian: "Don't talk about this kind of thing to me!" (Cathy, Master's, law)

For Andrew, his decision to become a Christian was tinged with concern that the closest members of his family would neither understand nor accept his decision, particularly as he anticipated that his new religious identity would affect his future involvement in acts of ancestral worship:

My family will not be happy about my being a Christian, but I don't want to be a secret Christian, I just need to find the right time to tell them. (Andrew, Master's, environmental engineering)

Guest & Aune (2017) describe the British university context as a location for religious contestation and compartmentalisation for Christian students. Although most of my participants had not embarked on their studies at British universities as Christians,

many described a similar sense of conflict and contestation as they negotiated a growing sense of Christian spirituality and for a few, a new Christian identity.

Such impressions should perhaps be less surprising given the perceived fluidity of university life. As Gruber (2009:8) asserts,

The oscillation of meanings gives birth to a surplus of meaning: the interstice of the Third Space (Bhabha 1994, p.207) generates hybrid identities which do not just grow out of mere merging but arise out of violent contentions.

What about conversion?

This project has been described as a study of the process of faith inquiry as presented in the empirical data from Chinese students. It concludes with a schema depicting the important elements which contributed to theological construction and their interdependent bonds in shaping participants' emerging theological construction as evidence of the transformation of propositional beliefs to inhabited beliefs, leading to faith. As was stated in my introduction in Chapter One, my focus was not the decision to convert but the content of belief which developed through biblical learning, whether this led to eventual conversion or not.

The question might still arise as to whether this project has been, by any other means of description, a study of conversion. It is not, and this can be explained by highlighting a few key aspects:

The first is that of purpose. Despite having included accounts from several participants who described the process through which they came to make a profession of faith, the stated purpose of this project was never to study conversion as a phenomenon. It is arguable, of course, that in an analysis of how Chinese students come to 'know God' through Bible studies, Christian activities, and relationships while at university, conversion should be anticipated as one significant outcome. Although my analysis has uncovered dimensions and processes which have parallels with conversion studies, it would be true to say that my stated and continuing focus was solely on how students might encounter the living God through participation in Bible studies. However, in the

process, other elements or ‘clues’, per Meek (2011:69), also emerged as central to the epistemic act.

The second is that of methodology. My data was entirely qualitative, derived from in-depth interviews in which participants were invited to narrate their own stories of involvement in Christian activities and the resultant ways in which they learned biblical truth. Regular attendance in Bible studies was a prerequisite for selection since this was felt to be an indicator of interest and commitment, particularly from students professing little or no spiritual interest. The boundaries of my study were therefore clearly delineated, revolving around reflections on Bible study, as well as the events and social settings in which these studies were located. In contrast, it is likely that a study of conversion might entail a longitudinal study, including quantitative as well as qualitative aspects. Specific questions regarding the basis of decisions to follow Jesus and the consequent change of character and values might also be necessary, in order to arrive at an appropriate paradigm. Quite apart from the Bible study context, which was my focus, a study of conversion would require data encompassing multiple levels of reality (see for example, Jindra 2014). This was not the case with this project.

A final aspect would be that of the phenomena described. There are, of course, key areas where my study might converge with conversion studies, particularly since approaches to conversion have greatly diversified from Rambo’s well-known seven-stage model (1993) and Lofland and Stark cult-based motivational model (1965). Even so, few of the current approaches would adequately provide a framework for the data from this project (see, for example, Gooren 2007).

As has been mentioned, Western understandings of conversion often hinge on one key moment of turning, illustrated by biblical examples, chief amongst which is Paul’s encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). Rambo’s seminal work on conversion (1995), though almost three decades old, remains a key work which is widely

utilised in the literature. In the post-postmodern context, researchers conducting qualitative studies of religious conversion have questioned whether Rambo's model, even with recent modifications, should count as just one among several models, albeit with similar elements. Richard V. Peace, a professor of evangelism, for example, has analysed the conversion journey of Jesus' disciples in the Gospel of Mark and identifies the same three elements of conversion as seen in Paul's Damascus Road experience, albeit over a period of three years: *insight* into Jesus' identity, *turning* to follow Jesus and *transformation* of behaviour (1999:112). Other scholars have recognised conversion as a more community-oriented and gradual process, such as in Taylor's dissertation on conversion in unchurched Australians (2021).

The conversion career (Gooren 2007) offers a helpful longitudinal framework, in its synthesis of 'the best elements' (Gooren 2007:348) of existing approaches. This includes emphasis on religious experience, the holistic conceptualisation of the individual¹⁵⁵, the absence of a deterministic 'crisis' moment, and the recognition that conversion must recognise shifts in levels of individual religious participation as well as the changes in the human life cycle, encompassing Pre-affiliation, Affiliation, Conversion, Confession, Disaffiliation. These are seen as dynamic levels of individual religious activity, but significantly, 'do not necessarily follow any chronological order during a person's conversion career' (2007:350)¹⁵⁶.

The conversion career also acknowledges that there might be an absence of a conclusive 'conversion moment' as is sometimes described in the literature. Some participants explained that listening to other believers, they had come to be aware of the need for an '*ordo salutis*' in order to call themselves believers, but felt the need to explain that their growth in faith was more of a gradual progression, with others describing the

¹⁵⁶ A significant weakness of the model is that Gooren bases these assertions on church membership, citing the use of terms such as apostasy, backsliding, dropping out, church desertion as a basis for the Disaffiliation stage.

process as long, contested, difficult. Some expressed an expectation that a clear moment would come when they were baptised but were told that ‘baptism would not make them Christians’: *it’s enough to believe in Jesus* (Cathy, Master’s, law). Others came to the point where they wanted to identify themselves Christians in order to honestly reflect their newfound faith, although they still had doubts and fears about this identity based on the reality of family opposition or their own continued struggles (Andrew, Master’s, environmental engineering; Frank, exchange student, finance; Gail, Master’s, finance).

Were this a study of conversion, it is likely that my analysis would conform somewhat to the Affiliation, Conversion and Confession levels of Gooren’s model of the conversion career (2007). However, a larger problem lies more broadly in the fact that conversion theories as a whole have failed to consider the impact of ontological change and resultant changed theological understandings to any serious degree. Even models which seek to take a multifactorial, multidisciplinary approach limit the factors to the sociological, cultural and psychological. While these are significant factors which were considered in this thesis, it is clear that my overarching themes and concerns lie outside the general purview of conversion studies.

Concluding remarks

In this thesis, I have identified the ways in which Chinese students come to profess faith in Jesus Christ, relying on three major elements or perspectives from their involvement in Christian activities on British campuses and surrounding churches. These perspectives, which may interact in indirect or ‘subsidiary’ ways with each other, subsequently form a focus which enables participants to begin to apprehend the existence of a different ontology or Ultimate Reality, leading to ‘knowing God’. The process is long, often cyclical and complex, and involves considerable commitment and the development of personal trust in the Triune God as He reveals Himself to them. In this way, students

move from 'learning the Bible' to 'knowing God' even though many began from positions of purely social or cultural interest.

The new theory on faith development articulated above was developed through a grounded theory approach and is not based on predetermined hypothesis-testing. By allowing the theory to emerge from the data, it has been possible not only to understand how participants were drawn to the possibility of knowing God, but to identify the many influences that interact in different ways creating new insights and understandings of what it means to know God as the Ultimate Real. This changed ontology then reorders every aspect of life, including worldview, cultures, and relationships, creating a new Christian social imaginary. While practitioners have sensed for many years that students do not come to know God purely through intellectual understandings of Scripture, there has not been, until now, a holistic approach to elucidating the process. Hence, as the different elements of Community, Word and Wonder have been identified as interacting in a fluidic process to facilitate students' process of faith inquiry, it is clear that many of the current assumptions held by ministry practitioners regarding the centrality of Bible study are inaccurate.

It has also been important not only to listen to the voices of Chinese students but to foreground the rich philosophical and religious traditions which form their heritage. While coming to know Christ is transformative, postcolonial critique and the urgent need for a contextualised approach demand that we recognise the biases and presuppositions which have thus far been operative in ministry praxis, and instead apply theoretical understandings which resonate with Chinese thinking, even if not derived directly from their worldview. International student ministry under the auspices of Friends International and similar organisations currently emphasises the preparation of new believers to continue growing and developing in their faith and newly professed Christian identity upon return to their country of origin. It is clear that a deeper understanding of the basis

of their profession of faith - the primary factors and motivators for their decision to profess faith in Jesus Christ, and the way in which their beliefs change and develop to inform that change - is equally crucial. This has hitherto remained underexamined in the extant literature.

In my concluding chapter, I will consider the ways in which this emergent theory has the rich potential to better inform and shape current ministry among international students. I will also highlight the limitations of this research and identify potential areas for further research, building upon the new theoretical understandings developed in my thesis.

CHAPTER NINE CONCLUSION

Introduction

God meets us in the Word: Scripture is God's authoritatively guiding us to truth about himself, ourselves and this world. God meets us in the world: not only does the world offer glimpses of his glory and of his mind, but Jesus came into space and time, inaugurating restoration through his life, death and resurrection. And God meets us within ourselves, as God the Holy Spirit is the one who can and must open our eyes for us to be able to grasp truth (Wan 2003:195)

For many years, Chinese students have engaged with evangelical Christian groups and activities on British campuses. Although often initially motivated by desires to adapt to the British social context, gain cultural understanding, practise English and make local friends, inquirer Bible studies organised by evangelical Christians have become sites for the development of Christian beliefs. Given the opportunity to interact with Bible texts, ask questions and exchange ideas in a relaxed setting, Chinese students have been observed to undertake an arduous and focused search for truth, beginning by gleaning propositional beliefs from the Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus Christ. Yet the process by which such propositional beliefs are transformed into faith claims, has remained largely unexamined in the literature.

The current discourse therefore provides few answers to the question of how Chinese students come to profess faith in Jesus Christ through their involvement in Christian activities. Neither does the literature reveal specific reasons why some might spend a period of time actively interacting with biblical teaching, yet remain undecided or unconvinced.

The aim of this thesis has not been to describe in human terms what is both theologically and missiologically understood to be a work of the Holy Spirit. Extant theorisations around the means by which people develop faith are fraught with assumptions and biases. On the one hand, there are those who would take umbrage even at the suggestion that spiritual transformation can be attributed to human factors, which would be seen as detracting from the authority and power of a sovereign God. Then there

are the more sceptical, who assert that all faith and religious change is socially motivated and cultivated, that it is rare for new ‘meaning systems’ to be adopted in such a wholesale way as to lead to the ‘radical transformation of self’ (see, for example, McGuire 2002:74).

My assertion from the empirical data is that within Practical Theology it is not only possible but vital to research the human factors and processes involved in faith inquiry, as a means of tracking change and acknowledging transformation (or the lack of it). Such investigation follows Astley in asserting that ‘religious language is the primary medium for portraying the divine, and for religious communication, religious learning and religious thinking’ (Astley 2004: xi).

From Chapters Four to Seven, I presented the empirical data from my research into Chinese students’ development of beliefs from Bible studies and other activities, developing from this a new theory as to how pre-existing factors and elements of student activity contribute to self-reported belief change and transformation. Chapter Four provided an account of the diversity among my participants: this included consideration of how each participant’s background, motivation, family history, religious background and other factors might shape their faith inquiry journey. I concluded the chapter by introducing three overarching themes which emerged from the data as significant within participants’ consideration as they interacted with Christianity. These are Relevance, Relationality and Reality. Each of these questions could be identified in the narratives as driving their search, and in some cases, creating obstacles if there were no satisfactory answers to be found.

It was also possible to identify three distinct areas of interaction and influence which strongly emerged as forming the contours of participants’ faith inquiry. These served as contributors to belief acquisition/development and sites for theological construction. Describing them as ‘elements’ in the search, I thus explored the concepts of Christian Community (Chapter Five), which served as a source of relational learning and

theologizing; The Word of God (Chapter Six), discussed and learned through Bible studies, which became sites for the acquisition and adoption of propositional Christian beliefs; and Wonder (Chapter Seven), being experiences of the supernatural which aided the development of new beliefs (and deconstructed pre-existing beliefs) about ultimate reality.

Throughout the empirical chapters, I sought to explicate the interaction of these three elements, demonstrating their fluidic interdependence on each other in the process of developing Christian belief. In Chapter Eight, therefore, I used a schema to demonstrate visually how the three elements interact, leading to a rich process of nascent theological production. This was displayed diagrammatically in order to provide a clear account of how ordinary theology is constructed by Chinese students during their journey of faith inquiry.

In this concluding chapter, having hitherto placed an emphasis on my findings as a researcher, I return to my ongoing and dominant role as a ministry practitioner, using my professional experience and understanding of current praxis to reflect on the implications of my findings. By so doing, my project shifts from being a contribution to the existing academic discourse, albeit based on the synthesis of participants' narratives, to an active attempt to deepen missiological praxis and understandings within international student ministry. Finally, I comment on the contribution which my thesis makes to original knowledge, and making recommendations for future research.

This project therefore has sought to answer the following research questions, as listed in Chapter One:

How does faith inquiry in Chinese international students increasingly lead to a greater knowledge and experience of 'knowing God', from a Christian perspective, during their sojourn in the UK?

with the following sub-questions:

1. What frames of reference for spiritual and existential inquiry do Chinese students rely upon before and during their studies at university in Britain?

2. What factors shape the process of faith inquiry undertaken by Chinese students during their participation in British campus-based Bible studies and other activities, whether or not that leads to increased belief?

3. How do the different factors and experiences interact to inform the emerging faith or otherwise of Chinese students?

Gaps in the literature

Motivated by an inductive approach to my data, I found that gaps exist in the following areas. These therefore are my contributions to original knowledge:

- Although Bible study is a significant component of British church life, empirical studies in this area remain limited. Even within Practical Theology, topics are limited to Bible reading among ordinary believers in the west (for example, Perrin 2014; Bielo 2009). I was unable to locate any empirical studies on Bible studies for non-believers (so-called ‘enquirer’ or ‘seeker’ Bible studies)¹⁵⁷, apart from research focused on the efficacy of specific evangelistic resources. Practitioner literature and Bible study resources themselves provide a minimal basis for the theological understandings undergirding this common practice. My project therefore makes a contribution to original knowledge in adding to the body of empirical studies in Practical Theology on Bible studies for unchurched inquirers.
- It has also been difficult to locate academic understandings of the process and practices of learning from the Bible, especially for unchurched people or non-believers. Where the impact of Bible reading is noted among people coming to faith, it is only mentioned as one small part of the process of conversion within

¹⁵⁷ In my search of extant literature I utilised the following terms: ‘seeker’, ‘non-believer’, ‘unchurched’, ‘enquirer’, ‘other religious’ in combination with ‘Bible’, ‘Scripture’, ‘religious’ ‘sacred’, and ‘texts’, ‘studies’, ‘discussion’, ‘reading’, ‘learning’.

the church (see for example, Taylor 2017), or within missiological research as part of cross-cultural communication of the gospel (for example, among C5 Muslims, Colgate 2008) or as a factor in people coming to faith from other religions. My project therefore makes an additional contribution to knowledge by identifying an emergent theory of how nascent faith in people from non-religious backgrounds develops as a result of participating in Bible-focused and community activities.

- As has previously been mentioned, the growing body of literature on this present generation of Chinese students at UK universities has failed to take seriously their lived experience of spiritual growth and change of religious identity as a result of their British sojourn. This project is therefore also original in producing an account of the contextual and other factors which lead to an acknowledgement of faith in Christ, a profession of Christian identity and commitment to the Christian faith among Chinese international students in the UK.

Practical Theology is not merely about theological theories developed from empirical evidence. This sort of theologising leads to deep reflection on praxis, so as to identify the ways in which it corroborates the underlying theological position, or fails to do so. Swinton & Mowat assert that qualitative research with all its varieties and methodologies ‘become critical action-oriented tools as they are converted, sanctified and drafted into the service of God’ (2011:258). The telos of research for the practical theologian then, is no less than the development of new modes of praxis which ‘provide clarity within complex situations and [indicate] new possibilities for transformative action and faithful practice’ (2011:258). By so doing so, qualitative research such as this performs ‘a mediative task between Christian practice and the practices of the world’ (2011:259). Seen in this way, the work of international student ministry is ultimately not about Christians caring for international students, important though that may be, but Christians acting as mediators, serving the purposes of the triune God as He reveals

Himself in Jesus and initiates relationship with those who are not even aware of His existence.

My research has shown that although international student ministry within the auspices of Friends International and its ministry partners already involves several key elements which play a transformative role in the lives of Chinese students, there are limited theological and theoretical understandings of the significance of these elements. Ministry practitioners and volunteers place a heavy emphasis on Bible study as having a key role in communicating the message of Jesus Christ to international students, in a manner which is coherent with both their espoused and operant theology within the evangelical Christian tradition. My findings however clearly indicate that Chinese students value the affective and theological contribution of Christian community life as an apologetic for the Christian faith - this is, in general, almost entirely overlooked despite the significant emphasis on hospitality and the building of transitional communities at the international student cafés which are ubiquitous within international student ministry. In addition, although students' pre-existing beliefs and experience of the supernatural world have a significant affective impact on their faith inquiry journey, it would appear from my findings that this is an aspect which remains underestimated and to some extent, misunderstood by both practitioners and volunteers.

Emergent theoretical principles for praxis

The following recommendations for future praxis, therefore, highlight and build upon the theoretical principles which my research has identified.

Principle 1: The importance of ontological transformation

Anyone professing faith in Jesus Christ must acquire the ontological understanding that the triune God as the Ultimate Real. For my participants, this was of fundamental importance, since ontological transformation precedes the formation of a 'Christian social

imaginary'¹⁵⁸, as mentioned in Chapter Three. My theory, following Astley's adapted model, is based on relational knowing as the cornerstone of the epistemic act, akin to Meek's description (described in Chapter Three) of a covenanting response of progressive trust in the triune God as He reveals Himself as the Ultimate Real.

From a biblical perspective, a social imaginary based on God as the Ultimate Real and any consequent spiritual formation and personal transformation can only come about as the result of total ontological change. 'Ontology must precede epistemology in worldview formulation. Or, more specifically...it is not the study of ontology that precedes the study of epistemology but that being itself logically precedes the act of knowing' (Sire 2015: 95). This is more than semantics. The Chinese student who asserts that they have no belief in God must begin, through interaction with the Christian faith in Bible studies and interpersonal relationships, to grasp the greater reality that a Creator God exists, and this personal God is revealed in Jesus. Only then can the historical and cosmological importance of his sacrificial life, death and resurrection be understood. They also come to acknowledge, through that process, the truth of the human condition as described by God 'the knower of hearts', *kardiognostes Theos*, as the New Testament church described in Acts 15:8. Those who desire to enter into a relationship with God the Father as his children must surrender their lives to his lordship before they can be called his disciples. To expect values, behaviour, ethical or moral change without such total surrender is biblically impossible.

Much of Western apologetic thinking about Christian belief in the Western church over the last decade or so has addressed sceptics and materialistic atheists. These descriptors assume that the audience has rejected a culturally pre-existing deistic or theistic worldview. This is especially true of evangelism to postmodern Christians, but

¹⁵⁸ As explained in Chapter Three, the concept of social imaginary (Smith 2013) goes deeper than worldview, cognitive beliefs and ideals, and forms the unconscious 'Christian reflex and disposition' which Kreider (2016) describes as noteworthy in the early church's response to persecution and alienation.

can also be applied to those from Catholic, Orthodox or Muslim backgrounds. This project however has shown that this is a faulty assumption when applied to Chinese students.

Based on the data, some more accurate statements of the ontological understandings of contemporary Chinese young people might be:

- There is no Ultimate Real, I am entirely self-reliant and do not believe in or need an external transcendent power.

- There is a transcendent Ultimate Real but this revolves around the impersonal concept of *Tian* 天. Since *Tian* 天 lacks immanence, everyday life is governed by Fate¹⁵⁹ or Destiny¹⁶⁰, Luck¹⁶¹ or minor localised gods, spirits or ancestors¹⁶². These can be manipulated or coerced using appropriate ritual actions, including those performed vicariously.

- There is a transcendent Real but it has no relevance for me as I live my life entirely within the visible world. Perhaps If I am in crisis, or eventually when I am dying, I might try to find a way to benefit from the Ultimate Power to avoid suffering.

Such perspectives might be rightly described as ‘sceptical’ of the biblical worldview but the grounds for scepticism are different from, say, those who claim to subscribe to a Western atheistic worldview. An examination of the arguments of the New Atheists, for example, indicates a strong tendency to base their philosophical and metaphysical positions on ‘debunking biblical beliefs’, which might be more accurately described as anti-theist, non-theist or non-deist. My Chinese student participants did not approach the Christian faith with a similar scepticism. Scepticism, where expressed, appeared to be based on practical concerns about appearing irrational, anti-scientific, or

¹⁵⁹ *mingyun* 命运

¹⁶⁰ *yuanfen* 缘分

¹⁶¹ *yunqi* 运气

¹⁶² *shenmingzuzong* 神明祖宗

subject to extreme and dangerous cultic beliefs from indigenous movements such as the *Falungong*.

A further assumption of Western evangelism is the need to address the postmodern worldview of Christianity as an oppressive ‘totalizing metanarrative’. However, as I have indicated in previous chapters, there is an urgent need to address the spiritual needs of Chinese students utilising approaches which take into account the diversity of the Chinese worldview and traditions, rather than relying on a Eurocentric paradigm. In particular, whereas British campus approaches to evangelism might seek to frame biblical teaching in a manner which is compatible with the Western individualistic notion of the self, Chinese students of this generation face rather different challenges of limited individualisation while remaining strongly attached to their collective identities. Rather than casting off the metanarrative of oppressive Christianity, my participants were actively interrogating the Christian faith as a metanarrative which had the potential to make sense of their lived experience in both affective and pragmatic ways.

It follows then that a paradigm shift is necessary when considering evangelistic approaches and inquirer Bible studies for Chinese students, who approach the Christian faith from entirely different ‘pre-theoretical’ and ‘pre-suppositional’ views. This is where a new theoretical understanding is necessary.

As Sire so aptly puts it, ‘the focus is not on the role of human experience in apprehending God, not on our grasping after the knowledge of God, not on our search for God. God is already there. The focus is on our receiving from him the gift of knowledge of His constant, immanent presence.’(2015:109)

Thus for my participants, their acknowledgment of the existence of God as the Creator above all, the Ultimate Real:

- justified the necessity of total submission and surrender;

- removed the misunderstanding that belief in Jesus Christ was simply a movement from one hegemony to another;

- could then shape worldview change to a biblical worldview (not merely a ‘British Christian worldview’). More than that, the desire would be for Chinese students to have a Christian ‘social imaginary’, described as an implicit Christian understanding of the world in the light of the fullness of the gospel, shaped by a reciprocal desire and love for God (Smith 2013). Further analysis in this area was, however, beyond the remit of my research.

Even given that such a process of transformation took place among some participants, there were indications that few had developed a fully-orbed biblical theology of the character and nature of God. The narratives belied the risk that while those identifying as ‘Christian’ had come to acknowledge Jesus as Lord, they might nonetheless have an impoverished theology which focused excessively on the personal significance of the gospel, while lacking an awareness of the worldwide body of Christ. This was due in no small part to limited time and lack of participation in corporate worship, and revealed minimal awareness of the glory, majesty, sovereignty and power of God as King of Kings, Ancient of Days, Alpha and Omega – these are aspects of cosmology which might only be grasped through participation in acts of worship within a church setting. These are significant questions which could not be answered by my research but remain a pressing matter of theological concern.

Principle 2: Negotiating the epistemic act – incremental steps of embodied trust

The varying accounts given by my participants demonstrated that faith inquiry is an arduous non-linear process involving steps of trust taken through – and despite – cycles of confusion, conflict and comprehension. In spite of the disparate accounts that were given, there was some consistency in the search for clarity and understanding which typified the epistemic act that led to ‘belief in Jesus’.

As mentioned in Chapter Three, Christian philosophers such as Meek (2011) are uncompromising in their stance that transformation only comes through commitment and trust. As Meek asserts, knowing is interpersonal and demands the responsible stewardship of clues and insights. Some of the participants in this research surprised me by having made the decision to commit their lives to Jesus fairly rapidly. It was only upon listening to their narratives of events leading to the interview that I became aware of the conflicts and struggles which formed the background to their narratives. This does not mean that participants made faith commitments from a deficit state. Rather, life events had shaped their existential search in such a way that they were ready to accept feasible answers which would bring change.

In a similar vein, the degree of openness about doubt and uncertainty helped me to realise that decisions were not being made lightly. Participants who appeared to have a more robust reason for ‘why they believed’ had been through repeated processes of self-questioning, searches for answers, and moments of deep vulnerability. The presence of ‘authoritative guides’ (Meek 2011) – trusted friends and mentors who listen deeply, share vulnerably, and mediate and provide biblical guidance and support – was also instrumental to helping participants find stability in Christ.

This understanding of the Chinese student journey places the onus on ministry workers and volunteers to listen more deeply for clues about each student’s journey. In a way the epistemic act applies equally to leaders knowing their international students better. The focus of meeting students should therefore move from an emphasis on taught Bible truth, to an awareness of the clues of God’s work in their lives which can subsidiarily form a pattern, giving insight into the real questions of the heart.

Principle 3: The necessity of a (re)theologised concept of Community

My findings indicate that more than friendship-building and social activities, there is an urgent need for the British church, and those involved in intercultural ministry in

particular, to recognise that the Christian community serves as an embodied relational apologetic for the Triune God.

As I demonstrated in Chapter Five, deep friendships and the Christian life demonstrated by café teams and other groups played a significant part both in providing triangulation for new insights about biblical truth and about God, as well as providing a context in which participants could observe and practise living the Christian life. The latter is particularly valuable given the importance within Chinese philosophical thought of embodied moral learning.

Although community events are central to international student ministry, their intrinsic value as deep sources of lived theological truth has thus far been minimised or overlooked. My survey of practitioner resources revealed that a Western bias dominates, such that these ‘transitional communities’ are simply seen as places where people feel safe, included and can be known. While that much might be true, it is also true that a (re)theologising of the role of Christian communities would be a fruitful exercise. Gatherings which focus not primarily on activities and programmes, but on holistic care, presence, mutuality with humility, respect and reciprocity (Wan & Hedinger 2018:11), would emphasise biblical relationality modelled on the Godhead, which remains intrinsic to covenant knowing.

Principle 4: Experience of the Numinous as evidential

This thesis has demonstrated both from the literature as well as from the empirical data, that spiritual realities and an awareness of the Numinous are inherent in Chinese students’ cultural and religious landscape, whether these are found in benevolent experiences, such as miraculous intervention, answered prayer and healing, or malevolent, such as demonic oppression. The practical issues and challenges involved need to be addressed Christologically rather than merely in terms of orthopraxy.

In the Western church, the awareness of evil spirits and spiritual realities appears to be more prominent in Pentecostal and charismatic churches. Anecdotally, conservative evangelical churches might tend to expound the theological implications of passages such as Ephesians 6 in theoretical terms, without an understanding that encounters with Satan or evil spirits are realities acknowledged, and often feared, in the non-Western world. This difference is demonstrated, for example, in Kelly's comparison of her Chinese and British Bible study leaders' explanations of Jesus' encounter with the demon-possessed man in the Gerasenes (Mark 5:1-20), in Chapter Seven of this thesis¹⁶³.

Overall, the British church hosting Chinese students is generally unaware of these issues or ill-prepared to address them. Callow's dissertation on postcolonial pastoral care, mentioned in Chapter Four, cites an example of a discussion on Exodus 20:4-6 within a British church small group which included a non-British attendee whose family followed ancestral practices¹⁶⁴ (2019:145). Callow describes the firm but gentle rebuttal given by the sole Asian Christian in the group, and draws the conclusion that this incident provided the British church member with a learning opportunity. It is not difficult to anticipate that a similar 'declaration' by a leader in an international student Bible study group would effectively – and unhelpfully - silence all but the most confident enquirers on this topic.

Chan (2014:117) emphasises the Christological basis in ancestor veneration, and laments that even the Asian Protestant church, for whom ancestral practices are a common issue, generally addresses the practical issues of food offerings and idolatry with recourse to New Testament teachings such as Pauline teaching in 1 Corinthians 8, omitting the Christological foundation which would provide both a cosmological understanding and a

¹⁶³ Account given on p 219.

¹⁶⁴ As quoted in Callow's thesis: *A British Christian expressed the view that 'idol worship' did not really exist 'these days', unless idolatry occurred in issues of money, security or image. She felt that this topic of idol worship did not seem to have much relevance for her in a Western context and seemed fairly dismissive of the idea of people offering worship to objects of stone or wood. She represented her Western culture strongly and nearly closed down further discussion of the topic in how she approached it.*

theological basis for response. For Helen, an understanding of Jesus' power and authority, as evidenced by his raising of Lazarus in John 11, as well as his victory over death as demonstrated by his resurrection, formed the basis of her 'ordinary Christology' and increased her confidence that the teachings of the Gospels could be logically understood as proving Jesus' identity as God. They ceased to be 'nonsensical', from her perspective, and provided a deep source of comfort. Thus, although such realities might not trouble every Chinese student, workers and volunteers need to be aware and equipped to provide theological and practical responses which help the oppressed and fearful to find the freedom which they have through Christ.

Implications for praxis

From the theoretical understandings above, some of the implications for international student ministry may be outlined as follows:

- Demonstrate the relevance of the whole canon of Scripture, not merely the Gospels, to every part of life from the beginning of Bible studies: whereas cultural and linguistic interests might be students' initial interest, the relevance and importance of the Bible to human existence provides the impetus to continue studying. This might entail personal examples and testimony, going beyond the use of examples and illustrations from Western literature and media in the resources, for example, which perhaps increase the misunderstanding that the Bible is a literary work of semi-fiction or legend.
- Emphasise that Christians believe the Bible is a historical account of human, spiritual and cosmic relevance which continues to have power and importance today. Emma's question: 'Why do so many people believe in the Bible?' is often asked by international students and should have been an easy point from which to demonstrate the influence of the Bible.

- Address the question of the existence of God as Creator, giving reasons for the rational and relational validity of belief in God. Although students wanted rational answers, they did not consider the personal experience of Christians to be subjective or invalid in the way that a Western mindset might dictate. Instead, both personal testimonies as well as rational responses became subsidiaries which contributed to the insight which later emerged.
- Increase the availability of mature Christians to listen to and answer questions in both formal and informal settings, alongside the sharing of life. Place greater emphasis on the relational aspects of teaching and modelling biblical truth. Leaders might recognise the importance of answering questions but are often driven by the desire to finish a study, rather than offering the time for more time-consuming but far-reaching conversations.
- Create ‘third spaces’, whether over a weekend or longer, which form transformative habitus, safe spaces for enacted belief, while consolidating biblical teaching and giving a broader context to the Christian life. The data showed that student weekends away and Christian conferences like Word Alive provided not only vital blocks of teaching which provide additional context, but also give students the opportunity to develop their ‘Christian disposition’, with time and space to think and interact more deeply with their increasing convictions of biblical truth.
- Given the importance placed by participants on community and embodied faith, and the role of worship as having implicit pedagogical significance, regular participation in corporate worship and rituals such as Holy Communion should be highlighted as central to Christian formation and ‘a means of grace’, beyond the current ministry emphasis on Christian belonging.

Summarising the discussion

Overall, British international student ministry appears, through decades of adaptation, trial and error, to have determined a core set of activities which contribute to effective ministry, comprising Bible-centred teaching, community activities and an emphasis on a personal relationship with Jesus. However, it would appear within current international student ministry that heavy emphasis is placed on providing comprehensive Bible teaching, while greatly underestimating the intrinsic value of embodied learning, in the form of the theological and apologetic importance of Christian community life, acts of worship, and personal experience of the living God. Current academic writing as well as practitioner literature reveals a blindness to the importance of both these elements in helping students interpret biblical teaching in such a way that they can both personally relate to the triune God, as well as find meaning in the church community as the Body of Christ to which they belong. In similar vein, the general lack of emphasis on embodied learning through participation in corporate worship, and other experiences of shared Christian ritual such as Holy Communion, might go some way to explaining the failure of Chinese Christians to establish themselves within the local church upon their departure from British soil. Taking a broader view, the significant absence of ritual and liturgical understandings might also be seen to contribute to the low Christological understandings expressed by my participants, whose intimate descriptions of Jesus as real, loving and personal, far outweighed their understandings of his sovereignty, majesty and glory.

This project has demonstrated that while Bible teaching and discussion for Chinese students has been understood within ministry praxis as central to helping them understand the Christian faith, students themselves placed tremendous value on the lived and visual evidence of the relevance of biblical truth to everyday life. Strong Christian community life and witness serve as a vital apologetic, demonstrating the intimate relationality which originates in the triune God, is experienced and then modelled by His people within

community life. By recognising and addressing students' personal experiences of the supernatural, we enable them to reframe their experience in terms of biblical teaching about the authority and power of Jesus Christ within the biblical cosmology. This provides a coherent theological understanding of Reality in biblical terms, beginning with God the Creator and his relationship with his creation, redeeming it from its fallen state through the sacrificial death of his Son on the cross, and his resurrection. The victory of Jesus over death and his ongoing work in those who belong to him through the Holy Spirit provide answers for the Chinese worldview, whether addressing the spiritual void of the Communist and materialist worldview, or the polytheistic world of spirits, gods and ancestors.

It is only in these ways that true ontological transformation – opening the door to overall worldview change and the formation of a Christian social imaginary- can take place. An acknowledgement of the triune God as the Ultimate Real is the only way in which Chinese students can apprehend the sinful human nature, accept the divinity of Jesus Christ, put their trust in His sacrificial death and resurrection, and live in complete submission to His lordship.

Limitations of the research

1. Limitations of time and opportunity meant that I was unable to add a longitudinal element to my research. Further interviews at various time intervals after the narrative interviews would provide more details of the process of ongoing theologisation undertaken by participants, as well as giving evidence of the veracity of their professions of faith (especially among those who reported conversion weeks before their interview). My qualitative research should be taken as an in-depth 'snapshot' capturing an understanding of students' reflections on the process of knowing God. It does not, however, reflect their progress over a longer time frame or its durability.

2. The final two years of research and writing up took place in the middle of the Covid 19 pandemic. In critiquing current praxis, I was unable to interview Bible study leaders and volunteers in situ as originally planned, relying mainly on informal conversations and comments gleaned from participant-observation. My findings are therefore heavily reliant on participants' narratives and the resulting analysis bears an inherent bias towards their accounts. A more balanced perspective on current praxis might feature an equivalent number of structured or semi-structured interviews with Bible study leaders and volunteers. That, however, would shift the emphases of the research entirely.

3. Female Chinese students have tended to dominate international student activities and especially Bible study. This was reflected in my research by the ratio of female to male participants (2:1). Given the volume of data generated, I did not have time to consider the impact of factors such as gender, family background or even regional differences within China, on spiritual inquiry and other aspects of the research, but this would be a fruitful area for future inquiry.

Recommendations for future research

1. This project serves as only a first step to understanding how the faith life of Chinese students develops as a result of learning through Bible studies and Christian activities. It investigates the process of faith inquiry but is not based on action research. As a ministry practitioner who recognises the value of reflective practice, an important project for the future could involve the investigation of Bible study praxis using action research as a methodological approach, including an evaluation of the common resources used, with group leaders serving as informants. A cyclical process of praxis, review, evaluation, and adaptation of praxis could then form the basis of findings leading to more effective ministry.

2. While my research sought to devise a new approach to understanding how students learn from Bible studies, the emergent data revealed that faith inquiry and

development, particularly leading to a covenantal, relational knowledge of God, is based on the interaction of a number of factors or subsidiaries, which work integratively to produce new insights. A possible alternative approach to understanding the impact of Bible studies might be a study of pedagogical methods involving a specific Bible study resource or method of study. Instead of qualitative interviews, communal understandings could be gathered using focus group studies, with participants asked to reflect on their studies in selected passages of the Bible with and without prepared resources.

3. Since this was not a study of conversion, but a qualitative analysis of how Chinese students develop faith in God, my aims did not include assessing the long-term spiritual growth and discipleship of participants. A longitudinal study would enable not only an understanding of further stages of faith development, but might also demonstrate the degree to which the faith learning process is integral to creating a stable foundation for continued spiritual growth and discipleship.

4. As has already been mentioned, there is a marked absence of empirical studies on inductive and other forms of Bible study, despite their prominent use on university campuses and local church homegroups. There is therefore an urgent need for more empirical work in Practical Theology on Bible studies, the different approaches and their effectiveness, especially outside local church settings.

In conclusion

My concerns as I carried out this study were to avoid the enduring issues which have arisen in studies of Mainland Chinese students over the years, with accusations of monolithic understandings, stereotyping, depictions of them as lacking in agency, and the unfair use of a deficit model. Moreover, it has been important for me as a Singaporean Chinese not to adopt a colonialist stance which imposes my own hegemonic voice on the participants of my research, if only because the social and cultural capital I have, as a ministry professional, long-term resident of the UK and fluent speaker of English, might

set up an unhelpful power dynamic. The use of an inductive methodology thus prevented me from imposing my own preconceptions on participants through the design of a research instrument with fixed questions. Instead, the narrative life story-based interview style and grounded theory methodology enabled findings to emerge spontaneously from the data, thus minimising the influence of my own imposed ideas on the emergent theory. In the event, the data and emerging concepts completely transformed my research focus, leading to a reframing of the theoretical issues under investigation, a second phase of interviews and a reshaping of the final thesis.

Prior to this project, the existing literature had generally taken a reductionist approach to accounts of Chinese students investigating the Christian faith while overseas, attributing the reported accounts of belief change, conversion or religious transformation, to the socio-cultural factors, desires to assimilate into Western society, or responses borne of obligations to kindnesses shown by Christians in the local church. These conclusions are vastly different from those drawn from my empirical data.

My findings demonstrate that each Chinese student has a unique and different story which has been shaped in differing measures by their family-of-origin, their experience of China's modern political and economic history, the resulting effects of modernization, globalization, individualization and for most, their experience as products of China's one-child policy. The combined onslaught of all these rapid societal changes has resulted in both fluidity and fragmentation in my participants' spiritual and existential frames of reference and in turn, their values, perceptions and goals. This can be seen in the choices which they have made and the reasons they give, both in pursuing an education overseas and investigating the Christian faith in British churches. In particular, the findings suggest the two goals are often interlinked and are simultaneously the product and source of Chinese students' continued awareness of contestation and fluidity in their identity and self-awareness.

In terms of the faith inquiry process, the data provided strong evidence that Christian communities are deeply attractive to Chinese students, primarily for the practical, social and cultural benefits perceived in having access to a welcoming group of native English speakers. Given time however, even the more sceptical students are intrigued by the Christian faith which was communicated in action and through relationships. Running alongside, English Bible studies continue to attract significant numbers of Chinese students who long for language practice opportunities and value the patience and helpfulness of British Christians. However, it would appear that some of these studies fail to communicate the relevance and reality of biblical truth in ways which adequately capture students' interest. Anecdotal reports of students coming to faith even after a limited period of Bible study might give the impression of effective ministry, but the data reveals the following elements of tremendous influence which have previously remained unrecognised:

First, the significant role played by the Christian community in stimulating biblical imagination and triangulating students' nascent theological beliefs has been largely overlooked. Although the discourse includes the affective and material benefits experienced by students who interact with Christian groups (including bridging social capital), the visual and verbal evidence of people demonstrating their faith in God and living in obedience to the Bible serves as a powerful living hermeneutic. Although much of this remains unseen, Meek's description of the epistemic act is instructive, framing the process as subsidiary-focal integration, such that learned biblical beliefs and untrained theology undergo a transformation, leading to the development of embodied faith.

Second, the Chinese religious background, much of it implicit in the Chinese worldview, is expressed in many students' innate awareness of the transcendent, whether this is through historical experiences of answered prayer, healing, present experiences of God speaking directly through Bible texts, or conversely, the need to respond biblically

to occultic and ritual practices in their family background. Such an awareness can create the opportunity for a new apprehension of ultimate reality from the Bible, while also dealing with the affective and spiritual dimensions of occultic experience. However, negotiating these answers in the context of a secularised British campus is complex. In addition, given Taylor's assertion that the Western church inhabits an immanent frame, it can prove difficult for students with questions surrounding the supernatural to not only articulate their questions but to receive a response shaped by biblical truth which addresses their concerns holistically.

The narratives of my participants highlight a problematic combination of inherent biases within evangelical Christian missiology, as well as a limited understanding of the traditional Chinese ontological and epistemological presuppositions which continue to shape students' worldview and mindset. The result of these limitations is that churches serving international students might continue to use ministry approaches which fail to communicate as effectively as might be hoped. Worse, important areas of Christology and biblical cosmology are entirely omitted from teaching programmes as they are viewed within the immanent frame as irrelevant to Western society and thus also to Chinese students. This is an inaccurate understanding.

Considering the complex backgrounds of contemporary Chinese students, there is an urgent need for anyone involved in international student ministry to be able to listen deeply to them, so as to gain insight into their lived reality, rather than relying on outdated cultural stereotypes and dichotomies.

Ultimately, the concern is that current ministry among Chinese students might be missing opportunities to communicate the good news of Jesus in ways which are both biblically based as well as relevant to their context. At worst, the lack of recognition that belief in the biblical God requires ontological change and progressive understanding of the revelation of a personal God, means that both our praxis and theological approach are

based on established Western methods and thus provide very limited assistance to Chinese students engaged in genuine faith inquiry.

It has been heartening however to realise that the relational factors so valued and acted upon by Chinese students form a core part of international student ministry, albeit often with only a partial appreciation of the inherent theological and missiological value of Christian community life. The transitional communities formed by Christian volunteers serving across churches in each city, the degree of commitment and time spent with individuals, and the Christ-focused initiatives to provide pastoral care and support for international students are not only gratefully received but play an invaluable role in students' spiritual inquiry. In this respect, it is important to be aware that students exercise high levels of agency and commitment: many are quick to move on from groups which they perceive as irrelevant to their circumstances. Equally, there are those who move from being passive recipients initially, to observers and then to active participants, inhabiting their new understandings with commitment and trust. They respond first to the love shown by Christians and then, to the love of God as they come to recognise both his transcendent power, as well as his immanence as he draws them into relationship with himself.

Participants in this research came from non-theistic, often non-deistic backgrounds, with many professing little or no faith or religious belief prior to arrival in Britain. Their faith development journey ultimately entailed nothing less than ontological transformation. The apostle Paul, writing to early congregations of converts from simply pan-, poly- and non-theistic backgrounds, provides a thorough Christological - and ontological - foundation for the Christian faith:

“The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been

created through him and for him. He is before all things and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.” (Colossians 1:15-20)

These words summarise the doctrinal truths which Chinese students must apprehend and indwell if they are truly to make the decision to take on a Christian identity. It is only when they come to a personal knowledge of the transcendent immanent God that they can submit to the lordship of Christ. It is my hope and prayer that this research will, in some small way, contribute new understandings which will help build God’s Kingdom among the many international students who arrive at British universities in pursuit of their dreams and ambitions, so that they find fulfilment by responding to a far higher calling, being reconciled to the Living God who has ordained times and places so that each one might “perhaps reach out for him and find him” (Acts 17:27).

Lynette Shu Yin Teagle

Oxford, May 2023

APPENDIX 1: REVISED STATEMENT OF ETHICS FOR RESEARCH

Oxford Centre for Mission Studies

Lynette Teagle, MPhil stage, June 2018

In my original draft proposal submitted for MPhil registration (April 2013), the following statement on research ethics and risk assessment for my project was given, based on the criteria for assessment of minimal risk found in section 4.1 of the document on Research Ethics at OCMS:

My research will abide by the code of conduct stipulated in the OCMS statement of research ethics. Since data collection for this research will take place in Britain there are no issues of legality involved. Based on the definitions laid out by 'Research Ethics at OCMS' section 3.3.1, I would judge there to be minimal risk involved to my participants.

There is the small potential that for participants from certain countries, any account of religious evaluation or change carries a security risk. In-depth interviews regarding identity issues might also expose sensitive issues regarding participants' political or sexual behaviour, for example.

At the time of submission my proposed research plan was as follows:

- Self-completed questionnaire with at least 100 respondents, possibly based on the World Values Survey, in order to capture the way in which participants view their personal and social religious identity and beliefs.
- Participant-observation of international students in their social interaction with Christian student groups and Christian-based activities.
- Semi-structured interviews with 20-30, taking place in two stages, leading to further in-depth unstructured interviews.

I was asked to submit my questionnaire for assessment by the OCMS ethics committee prior to beginning my research. However, as my project developed, the following changes occurred:

1. **CHANGE OF RESEARCH INSTRUMENT.** The use of questionnaires has been omitted entirely. Instead, I have chosen to utilise participant-led semi-structured interviews. This minimises the potential risk to participants as they have complete freedom to withhold sensitive information from me should they choose to do so.
2. **CHANGE OF RESEARCH FOCUS.** The focus of my research was restricted to students from Mainland China only. It is felt that no significant risks would be created for them in revealing potential religious evaluation or change, or sexual behaviour. In addition, there would be no reason for them to reveal political behaviour given the stated focus of my research.
3. **INFORMED CONSENT OBTAINED.** Participants were fully informed of the research topic and the voluntary nature of their participation, as well as the use of audio recordings of the interviews, by utilising information forms and signed consent forms, both of which are attached.

I am therefore submitting this as a revised statement of ethics for my research proposal in view of changes to the methods used for fieldwork.

Lynette Teagle, Oxford

APPENDIX 2: RESEARCH INFORMATION SHEET

Research title: (Re)construction of identity in international students in the UK: a comparative study of Mainland and overseas Chinese students participating in Christian activities

WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

My name is Lynette Teagle and I am a staff worker with Friends International in Oxford. This study is for my PhD at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies.

WHAT IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research is to find out whether and how the experience of being an international student in the UK shapes a person's sense of identity (including core, social and collective identity), focusing on those who participate in international student activities organised by churches or Christian groups. The purpose of this research is to discover and understand how international students view and (re)evaluate their own identity while in the UK, as well as how this varies for Chinese students from different cultural and national backgrounds.

IF I SAY YES, WHAT WILL IT INVOLVE?

If you say yes to participating in the research I will ask you to participate in an in-depth interview in English or Mandarin (depending on your choice). This will be audio-recorded with your consent. I may ask further clarification questions via Skype, Messenger or email at a later date if necessary. Your interview recording will be stored in electronic version on a password-protected device. This can be deleted at your request at any time.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS/INCONVENIENCE?

There are very few if any risks because the research has been carefully designed to protect your confidentiality and anonymity. I will travel to meet you if necessary.

However, it is possible that you could find a couple of the questions uncomfortable or embarrassing.

WHY HAVE I BEEN ASKED?

You are able to give me the information I need for my research because you are or have been an international student in the UK, are of Chinese ethnicity from Mainland China or elsewhere, and have been participating in church-based international student activities or Bible studies for a period of at least six months.

DO I HAVE TO SAY YES? WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I SAY NO?

You do not have to say yes and there are no consequences if you say no. You will not be contacted again about this research.

IF I SAY YES, CAN I CHANGE MY MIND LATER?

You can change your mind at any time and you don't have to say why. I will thank you for your time so far and will not contact you again.

WHAT IF I HAVE CONCERNS?

If you have concerns about the research you can contact me on 07585225582 or lteagle.research@gmail.com. You can also contact my house tutor at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies, Dr Paul Woods, at pwoods@ocms.ac.uk.

March 2017

APPENDIX 3: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I _____ agree to participate in the research project: **(Re)construction of identity in international students in the UK: a comparative study of Mainland and overseas Chinese students participating in Christian activities**

being conducted by Lynette Teagle.

I understand that the purpose of this study is to find out whether and how the experience of being an international student in the UK shapes a person's sense of identity (including core, social and collective identity), focusing on Chinese students who participate in international student activities organised by churches or Christian groups.

I understand that I have been asked to participate in this research because I am or have been an international student in the UK, and I am ethnically Chinese, from Mainland China or elsewhere, and that my participation in this research will involve taking part in an in-depth interview which will be audio-recorded and/or email responses. I understand that I can withdraw from the research at any time and without giving a reason. All the information I give will remain totally anonymous and confidential. The data from the interview will be electronically stored and password-protected. In the reporting of the interview I will not be identified.

I am aware that I can contact Lynette Teagle if I have any concerns about the research. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions and am free to withdraw my participation from this research project at any time I wish, without consequences and without giving a reason.

I agree that Lynette Teagle has answered all my questions fully and clearly.

I agree that the research data gathered from this project may be published in a form that does not identify me in any way.

Signature (participant)

Date

Sydney Teagle

2/6/2017

Signature (researcher)

Date

APPENDIX 4: TOPICS INCLUDED IN NARRATIVE INTERVIEW

List of prompts used

1. 家庭背景。小时候家里有任何信仰，重要的习俗吗？会过节吗？

例如中秋节，端午节，或是清明节等节日对你的意义是什么？

Family background, childhood customs, beliefs, festivals. What did they mean to you?

2. 家人朋友对你到英国来念书，有什么想法/情绪？

Community reaction to plans to study overseas

3. 到英国之后在人与人的关系方面（包括自己与他人，或是他人之间），有什么印象深刻的事件发生？

Impressions of interactions with people in Britain

4. 你目前参加的团体聚会有哪些（包括校园外）？为何选择参加这些活动？

Activities you are currently participating in (on and off campus). How did you make your choice?

5. 来到英国参加了教会，查经活动，有什么印象？收获有哪些？有任何损失吗？学到了什么？

Participation in church activities, Bible studies: impressions – any gains or losses?

What have you learned?

【6. 亲戚朋友知道你信耶稣，成为了基督徒，反应如何？】

What was the reaction of your family and friends when you became a Christian?

或 OR

【6. 你认为来海外留学之后 思想方面最大的变化在哪儿？】

How has your way of thinking (attitudes, understanding of life, values) changed since coming overseas?

7. 到目前，谁是你在国外最知心的朋友？为什么？

Who is your closest friend at present? Why?

8. 在英国留学的这段期间，有影响到你的自我 / 宗族 / 民族观吗？请解释。

Have your studies in the UK affected your sense of personal//racial/national identity?

9. 最后，你毕业以后决定回家吗？对你来说，‘家’在哪儿？当你考虑这问题的时候，有哪些方面影响到你的决定：经济，家庭关系，进展机会，环境。。。

Plans after graduation. Where is ‘home’ now? What factors affect your decisions: finances, family, opportunities to progress, environment...

**APPENDIX 5: TABLE SHOWING PRE-ARRIVAL RELIGIOUS IDENTITY
AND CONVERSION AMONG PARTICIPANTS AT TIME OF INTERVIEW**

NON-BELIEVERS No professed faith	NEW BELIEVERS Arrived in the UK as non-believer. Self-identifying as Christian for 6 months or less*. Baptised? (B)	YOUNG BELIEVERS Arrived in the UK as non-believer. Self-identifying as Christian for up to 5 years*. Baptised? (B)	ARRIVED AS BELIEVERS Professed faith and baptised in China
Belinda	Andrew: 2 weeks	Emma: 16 months B	Amy
Dan	Cathy: 2 months	Fern: 5 years, B	Ben
Ed	Diane: 1-2 months, B	Helen: 2 years, B	Irene
	Charles: 6 months, B	Jen: 1.5 years	Greg
	Gail: 3 months		
	Frank: 3 months		
	Kelly: 1 month		

*at time of interview

APPENDIX 6: SELECTED TRANSLATED TEXT FROM TRANSCRIBED INTERVIEWS

我原来在国内的生活方式和在这里的生活方式是 totally different 的。以前从来没有接触过圣经也就是说当时没有这个环境去去接触，去学习。那么同样的，即使比如说你买了一本回去读，你也是没有我觉得它也是没有这个。。。这个环境，这个氛围的。是因为没有人没有这种气氛的，也没有那种背景没有这种气氛。就是说，你周围所有人没有一个人，在你任何时候都在比如说，读圣经。那么你因为在工作的时候你不可能去解读。那么回到家，因为家里人也都没有一个人也会读，那么我觉得就是很，很 weird 的。

My life in China and my life here in the UK are totally different. Previously I had no contact with the Bible, and there was no context in which I would interact with it. Even if I bought a Bible and brought it home, there wouldn't be the environment or the people to continue...I don't have that background and the atmosphere is different. Consider if there was not a single person in your environment who reads the Bible. While I'm at work, I can't (read the Bible). When I get home, there's not one who wants to read it...so I feel it would be weird.

其实圣经对我来讲它是一个，从我的角度来讲，是一个 knowledge 它是一个对我来讲是一个 social science 它属于社会科学的一个，一个 Branch 可能。对，我觉得属于 philosophy

Actually, the Bible to me is a kind of knowledge. From my perspective it's a social science, a branch of social sciences or philosophy.

因为我在这里正好有这个机会 有机会可以了解一下这个是可以这么
说。最后了解到多少。

因为我是一个工程师。我的专业是一个 engineer 就是一个工程师 这
philosophy 可能是完全不一样。就是说其实这个交叉不是很大的。所
以我在这里的态度就是学多少 就算多少 这个意思吧, 而且多少就是对
我来讲可能没有太大关系, 无所谓。

While I'm here, there is the opportunity to understand more, you could say that, to
just understand so much. Because I'm an engineer, my profession is an engineer,
the philosophy is completely different, the overlap isn't big. So my attitude here is
to learn however much, that's what I mean. As to how much I learn, in my opinion,
it really doesn't matter.

我觉得 Global Cafe 的人特别特别好。我尤其记忆犹新的, 有一次就
是我跟一个她叫 L ...然后我就在跟她聊天的时候, 我说我想表达
一个词汇, 但是我不知道那个词汇怎么讲。我就问, 就是我用这种
那种很很遥远这是一个另外一种方式绕了一圈去描述这个事情, 然
后我说, 你应该能理解吧? 然后她说我理解但是我想听你说。她
说, 这样可以帮助你提高英语. 我想告诉你一个更地道的表达方式。
然后她就找了张纸, 用笔写下来这个单词怎么说。我那一刻我就觉
得内心很温暖, 我觉得其实每个人并没有说什么有什么义务一定要
帮助你, 但是她就是特别的热心就是感觉很温暖。

I feel the people at the Global Café are very very kind. I particularly remember once
when I was chatting with one lady called L...I wanted to explain something but
couldn't remember the phrase. I tried using a long, roundabout explanation to

describe what I was saying. Finally I said, 'I guess you understand me now.' And she said, 'I understand, but I wanted to hear you say it. That will help you improve your English. I'll teach you a better way to say it...' She then wrote the phrase on a piece of paper and explained it. I was so touched. Actually no-one has a duty or obligation to help you, but she was especially warm and sincere. I felt very touch. (Kelly, Master's, data science)

就是他们祷告的时候就把这个把这个我‘信了’这个放在那个祷告里面让我很不舒服因为我不信呢！我觉得，为什么要这样祷告，但是我出于尊重那我就觉得算了。就这样吧。

They would always pray as if I already believed. I felt really uncomfortable, because I didn't believe! I would think, why do they need to pray like this? But out of respect I just thought, never mind. Just leave it.

然后他跟我讲他那个书的时候，也是基于我是相信这个观点，信上帝是存在的。然后又觉得这样讲很多事是基于我信了。他那么搞得我都非常不舒服。我觉得为什么要 push 我相信上帝存在？我不相信，而且我说我问一个问题他一直跟你解释。然后如果我反复的话，他就一直强迫你接受他们的观点。而我又不想跟他们 argue 其实我越来越不舒服。

After that, when they talked about their book, it was also as if I was a believer, that I believed that God is real. It was so uncomfortable. Why did they have to push me to believe in God? I didn't believe, and if I asked a question they would keep explaining. If I disagreed with them, they would put pressure on me to accept their perspective. I didn't want to argue with them, but I felt more and more uncomfortable. (Emma, Master's, accounting & finance)

然后我们就一起查了。我们查了,然后她教我祷告。她教我怎么祷告,然后她会跟我一起祷告。我就觉得因为我们祷告的时候是比较舒服。因为我们年纪比较近所以我们会聊一些自己的事然后她帮我祷告我自己的事。然后我就觉得就是很舒服。虽然我不相信有一个上帝出来但是我很感谢那个心。她祷告的那些话,她希望上帝帮我。我很感动,觉得她很关心我所以她才会给上帝讲。因为她是相信上帝存在的嘛。然后我就开始觉得祷告让我觉得很欣慰,因为是关于我自己的事跟上帝讲。然后我开始学会祷告。

We started to study (the Bible) together. After studying she taught how to pray... and she would pray with me. I felt that our prayer times were more comfortable, because we are closer in age, we could talk about our own concerns and she would pray about my concerns. So it felt very comfortable. Even though I didn't believe that God exists, I was thankful for that heart, those words that she would pray and ask God to help me. I was touched, I felt she really cared about me, so she told God these things, because she really believed in God. After that I began to feel that prayer was comforting. I could talk to God about my life, so I learnt to pray to Him.
(Emma, Master's, accounting & finance)

刚开始信就觉得相信基督教的人,比相信佛教的人更善良,因为我看到太多信佛教的人,嘴里念着经手里带着佛珠,但是在做着的却是很肮脏的事情。但是来到这里感受到的都是人那么美好,就是人心地的善良,他们真的是按照圣经说的去做。觉得那种那种善良的

美好。。。对，我当时，我刚接触基督教的时候，我在想为什么他们给我一份安定呢。

When I first began to believe, I thought Christians were much kinder people compared to Buddhists, because I'd seen too many recite the Buddhist sutras and then do very dirty things. When I came here I felt that people were good, their hearts were kind, they really live according to the Bible. That kind of kindness and goodness, to me at the time when I first accepted Christianity, I was wondering why they gave me a feeling of stability (peace?). (Cathy, Master's, law)

国内的话就是随着这种资本主义的渗透我觉得他们随着发展，每个人都想赚大钱。那是那一点我觉得很不一样。

因为我觉得，特别是我从他们基督徒身上我感受到了，就像我认识他们那个外国老爷爷吗。我觉得他的话就是他常的就是查经班嘛弄了十几年了。这样的事情我说过我们国内很少如果如果换个人来做的话，那么他是要投入很多时间，然后去做。当然他是退休了他有很多的时间，但是我觉得国内要退休肯定也不会说我来做这个事情啊。可能我打麻将，老爷爷的话。

In China it's based on capitalism. I feel that as they develop, everyone wants to make money. This is something I feel is very different (here). I feel, especially from Christians I feel that. Like the old grandfather I know, for example, he's been leading Bible studies for more than ten years. We'd have very little of that kind of thing in China, if it was someone else he would have to commit a lot of time to do this...of course he's retired, he has lots of time. But in China a retiree wouldn't do this...maybe an old grandfather would play mahjong. (Dan, Bachelor's accounting)

那时候回国我就把约翰福音带上了的那个就是那个时候就会去想那圣经里面它对死亡它都说了些什么。那个时候读约翰福音里面有一张对我特别帮助特别大，是第十一章，就是讲 Lazarus 的死亡。

那个第十一章是像神第一次跟我讲话一样的我就觉得很奇妙的一件事情。我很奇妙在于从那一开始我开始我自己内心里面开始觉得耶稣他是一个很富有同情心的人。是他向他在我内心那一刻他开始像是一个真的存在过的人，在历史上真的存在过人，真的他有朋友的人。他是一个会哭的人。那个对我帮助很大我就会觉得耶稣并不只是一个遥远的故事人物，他能感受到我们感受到的苦难，他能感受到我们感受到的痛苦，我们能感受到的他也能感受到。那个那个故事就像是当说尽了我当时的心情感觉。

(When my grandmother passed away) I went back to China and I took the Gospel of John with me. I wanted to know what the Bible says about death. At the time, reading a passage in the Gospel of John chapter 11 about the death of Lazarus really helped me. That chapter 11 was like the first time God spoke directly to me, it felt so amazing . At that moment deep in my heart I began to feel that Jesus was a very compassionate man. He began to be like a real person who existed, someone who really lived in history, who had real friends. He was able to cry. I felt that Jesus was not a distant person in a story. He could feel all the pain, the suffering we feel. All that we feel, He can feel. That story seemed to express everything I was feeling at the time.

(Helen, Master's, TESOL)

我当时就跟我大学的一个哲学系的博士聊过天。他在英国受洗他之前是信佛教的，后来他转到了基督教。。。他跟我解释了很多跟我说，我觉得又有一个很重要的一个问题是，佛教讲究的是自我救赎，但是基督教的是我们已经被救赎 我们已经被基督救赎了。我们只要相信。然后呢，做按照圣经说的去做然后就可以了。我觉得这是个很大的原因。

At that time, I spoke to a philosophy professor at my university, she was baptised in England but before she was a Buddhist and later converted to Christianity. She explained a lot to me. I felt an important question for me was the Buddhist question of self-redemption, but in Christianity we have already been redeemed by Christ, we only need to believe. After that, we do what the Bible says and that's okay. I feel this was a big reason for coming to faith.

(Cathy, Master's, law)

还有那个 worship 那边给我的感觉就那个 concert 给我的感觉就像是就像是那么多人，他们都是被神被神拯救了，他们都是一个一个新活的人，他们的生命都是真的 - 那么多人，就像那么多奇迹一样。他们就是行走奇迹啊！这不是我在书里面看的奇迹。他们都跟我同行的基督徒朋友，还那么多不认识的人。就觉得他们的生命都是被神拯救被神改变的... 如果他们都是真的，为什么福音书里面的奇迹都不会是真的呢？

(During the worship at Word Alive) During that concert the feeling I had was, there were so many people, they were all saved by God, they were all saved, every single person had new life. Their lives were all real, so many people, like so many miracles – they were all walking miracles! This wasn't the miracles I read in the books. They

were all Christians walking the same road as me even though we didn't know each other. I felt, their lives were all saved by God. Saved and transformed by God. If they were all real, why shouldn't the miracles in the Gospels be real too?

(Helen, Master's, TESOL)

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List of contributors

		Gen	Profession of faith? Baptised?	Course	Phase
Andrew	M	90s	Yes. Profession of faith 2 weeks before interview, not baptised	Master's, environmental engineering	1
Amy	F	80s	Yes. Became a believer during academic exchange in Singapore.	Postdoc, chemistry	1
Belinda	F	90s	No	Master's, business	1
Cathy	F	90s	Yes. Profession of faith a month before interview, not baptised	Master's, law	1
Diane	F	90s	Yes. Profession of faith and baptised a month before interview.	Master's, education	1
Ben	M	80s	Yes. Became a believer in China. Baptised in 2012.	Postdoc, engineering	1
Charles	M	70s	Yes. Profession of faith. Baptised 8 months before interview.	PhD, philosophy of religion	1
Dan	M	95s	No	Bachelor's, accounting & finance	1
Ed	M	80s	No	Academic visitor, engineering	1

Emma	F	90s	Yes. Profession of faith. Baptised 15 months before interview.	Master's, accounting & finance	1
Fern	F	90s	Yes. Became a Christians and was baptised in the UK 5 years before interview.	Master's, tourism studies	1
Gail	F	95s	Yes. Profession of faith 3 months before interview. Not baptised.	Master's, finance	2
Frank	M	95s	Yes. Profession of faith 3 months before interview. Not baptised.	Exchange student, Finance	2
Helen	F	95s	Yes. Profession of faith two years before interview, baptised a year later.	Master's, TESOL	2
Irene	F	90s	Yes. Became a believer in China at university and was baptised there.	Master's, social work	2
Jen	F	95s	Yes. Father a believer. Profession of faith one year before interview. Baptism not known.	PhD, electrical engineering	2
Kelly	F	95s	Yes. From a Christian family but a profession of faith a few months before interview. Not baptised.	Master's, data science	2

Greg	M	90s	Yes. Became a believer and was baptised in China.	Master's, town planning	2
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