

# More Than Evangelical and Ethnic: The Ecological Factor in Chinese Conversion to Christianity in the United States

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*This paper focuses on the conversion patterns of students and scholars from the People's Republic of China studying at United States universities. Based on in-depth interviews and observations conducted on university campuses in two midwestern cities, we examine the similarities and differences of conversion between the two Chinese student communities. While the social and cultural contexts in China are prevalent in their conversion narratives, the local context or the ecology of local churches is important to explain the variations of the churches that the Chinese converts have joined.*

Chinese students and scholars from the People's Republic of China (PRC) studying at U.S. universities have joined the surge of Chinese conversion to Christianity. A highly noticeable part of this growing phenomenon is that some well-known dissident intellectuals and student leaders who fled China after the 1989 Tiananmen Square Incident have converted to Christianity. The most prominent of these is Yuan Zhiming, who was one of the scriptwriters of the *River Elogy*, a television documentary critical of the Chinese cultural system that contributed to the rise of the student-led democracy movement in spring 1989. Mr. Yuan was baptized in 1991 at Princeton University and has since become an active and popular evangelist among the Chinese in North America and elsewhere. Xie Xuanjun, another scriptwriter of the *River Elogy* and a renowned mythologist, also became Christian. Among the 21 student activists on the most wanted list of the Chinese government, Zhang Boli and Xiong Yan have become

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Christian ministers. Many more lesser-known activists have become Christian as well.

Moreover, many PRC students and scholars who are not politically active have converted to Christianity. This phenomenon or movement has caught the attention of some ethnographers at various parts of the country (Yang 1998, 1999; Ng 2002; Abel, Zhang in this issue). They have observed that Chinese Bible study and Christian fellowship groups have been active on most university campuses, especially large state universities and the Ivy League and other prestigious private universities. These campus groups commonly hold weekly meetings for Bible studies, evangelistic lectures, and social activities. Campus ministry organizations and local churches regularly sponsor evangelistic camps that attract large numbers of PRC students, scholars, and their spouses. Since the 1950s there have been many Chinese churches established mostly by Chinese immigrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan in metropolitan areas and college towns, which tend to be independent in organization and evangelical in theology (Yang 1999). Through observations and interviews we have learned that PRC students and scholars currently comprise the majority of first time visitors to Sunday worship services at these churches and the majority of the newly baptized.

Why do PRC students and scholars in the United States convert to Christianity? Is it still because of the contextual factors affecting earlier Chinese immigrants (Yang 1998), or is it now mostly because of ethnic affinity? Put in another way, how much are the PRC converts attracted to the church by fellow compatriots who happen to be Christian? Besides ethnic Chinese churches that are evangelical or conservative in theology, do PRC converts join other Christian churches? To answer these questions, we chose to compare PRC students in two midwestern cities, one with a large and concentrated Chinese population and the other with a small and dispersed Chinese population. The larger city has ethnic Chinese churches while the smaller city does not have a Chinese church. We find that the broad contextual factors of social, political and cultural changes in the coerced process of modernization of China are still prominent issues in conversion narratives. The local context is important as well. Specifically, the religious organizational ecology (Eiesland 2000), or the composition of various congregations at a locality, is an important factor in explaining the variation of churches that Chinese converts have joined. Before describing the two research sites and analyzing their conversion and church experiences, we begin with a brief introduction to some distinct social characteristics of PRC students and scholars.

## **PRC STUDENTS AND SCHOLARS**

Since 1979, large numbers of students and scholars from the People's Republic of China (PRC) have come to the United States to study at universities and graduate schools (Orleans 1988; Zhang and Rentz 1996). Indeed, PRC

students and scholars have been one of the largest and fastest growing national groups of international students and scholars. In the 1980s and 1990s, the number of PRC students enrolled at U.S. universities ranked first or second among all foreign students. The enrollment of PRC students, excluding visiting scholars and postdoctoral researchers, was around 40,000 in the early 1990s, over 50,000 in the late 1990s, and reached 64,757 in 2002-2003 (Davis and Chin 2005).

PRC students and scholars differ from earlier Chinese immigrants in several important aspects. First, many of the earlier Chinese immigrants from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries were displaced by wars, Communist revolutions, and sociopolitical turmoil. They commonly shared a sense of “uprootedness” and alienation while settling down in the new land. This sense is exemplified in the words of a Fred Yu quoted in Yang (1998). Born in 1929 in Shandong, Fred was a college student when he fled to Taiwan along with the Kuomintang (Nationalists) in 1949. After finishing college in Taiwan, he came to the United States for graduate study and converted to Christianity in 1959 while studying at a university in Minnesota. He said in an interview in the mid-1990s:

Mainland China is our dear homeland, but going back to that home is impossible because of the horrible Communists. Taiwan is not really our home, because we are regarded as *waishengren* [a person from a “foreign province,” or mainland-born people]. The Kuomintang was terrible. They took flight from the mainland with little resistance to the Communists. In Taiwan they treated us who were not in the military or government as second-class citizens, whereas native Taiwanese were treated even worse. You see, we dare not go back to the mainland and we are unwilling to go back to Taiwan. We have to seek to plant our roots in the American soil [*luodi shenggen*]. However, here we have to fight hard battles for civil rights as a racial minority. It is not all that easy. (Yang 1998: 249)

Wei-ming Tu (1994:vii) succinctly recapitulated China’s turbulent modern history and the troubled Chinese identity in the process of coerced modernization, a process that was not self-initiated but forced upon it by advanced Western countries that were also colonial and imperial powers:

The untold suffering of the Chinese people—caused by Western imperialism, the Taiping Rebellion, the collapse of the Manchu dynasty, the internecine struggle of the warlords, Japanese aggression, the conflict between the Nationalists and the Communists, and the misguided policies of the Peoples Republic of China—contextualized the meaning of Chineseness in a new symbolic structure. Marginality, rootlessness, amnesia, anger, frustration, alienation, and helplessness have gained much salience in characterizing the collective psyche of the modern Chinese.

The dramatic social changes and the accompanying cultural destruction made these Chinese “both free and bound to seek alternate meaning systems,” and many Chinese immigrants in the United States found Christianity “sufficiently answers [their] spiritual quest” (Yang 1998:251).

In contrast to the earlier Chinese immigrants like Fred Yu, however, recent PRC students and scholars *can* return to China if they want, in fact, many of them *have to* return to China. According to U.S. immigration laws, foreign students and visiting scholars are not considered immigrants. They hold U.S. entry visas in non-immigrant categories—"students" or "visitors"—for a temporary stay. They are expected, or rather required, to return to their home country upon completion of their study or research. Of course, some of the international students and scholars have become employees of American companies, especially in those industries that have an evident labor shortage. U.S. immigration laws and special acts have made it possible for such individuals and their spouses and children to change their status to an immigrant category. Three or five years later they may further apply for the "permanent residence" status with a "green card." However, the process of changing status is long and full of uncertainty. It becomes more difficult when the American economy slows down. Meanwhile, to combat the "brain drain" of American-educated Chinese scientists and engineers, the Chinese government has adopted various measures to entice them back to China. The continuously growing economy of China also has made it more attractive for many PRC students and scholars to return. In short, returning to China has always been a viable option for most of the PRC students and scholars today. The prospect of returning to China, where atheist Marxism-Leninism-Maoism remains the dominant ideology, can be daunting for people who contemplate converting to Christianity.

Both the earlier Chinese immigrants who were college-educated and current PRC students and scholars share the spirit of modernism that favors science, or scientism, over religion. More specifically, the college-educated Chinese, both within and beyond the PRC, tend to retain the spirit of the May Fourth Movement in 1919, which is iconoclastic toward Chinese traditional belief systems (Tu 1987). In this regard, PRC students and scholars only tend to be more radical. They have undergone thoroughly atheistic and anti-religious education under Communist rule. In the People's Republic of China, people are indoctrinated with atheism from kindergarten through college. The authorities also use the whole propaganda system to discredit religious beliefs, religious leaders, and religious organizations. Between 1966 and 1979, religion was completely banned in the public (Yang 2004). Many of the recent PRC students and scholars grew up in those no-religion years. Since 1979, some churches, temples and mosques have been allowed to operate under strict restrictions. But religious believers are a small and vulnerable minority in the population. Atheist education continues to be enforced throughout the school system and mass media. As a result, most PRC students and scholars tend to despise religious believers and hold critical or indifferent sentiments toward religion.

In spite of these social and political characteristics that seem to be adverse for PRC students and scholars to become religious, many of them have found their way to Christian churches. However, unlike their predecessors who often started

their own groups and churches, PRC students and scholars, upon arrival, are often received by the existing Chinese churches. Given this context, it is logical to ask this question: Do the PRC converts join the church mostly because of ethnic affinity? In the absence of Chinese churches, do they still convert to Christianity? If they do, what kind of churches do they join? Our research in two midwestern cities provides interesting findings.

## THE TWO RESEARCH SITES

From 2002 to 2003, we conducted participant observations and in-depth interviews in two midwestern cities—Iowa City in Iowa and Macomb in Illinois. Iowa City is a midsized city with a population of 62,220 according to the U.S. Census 2000. Macomb, with a population of less than 20,000, prides itself on being a small-town community. Both of these cities have a state university. The University of Iowa is one of the “Big Ten” universities and a major national research university with more than 28,000 students. Among the over 3,000 international students at the University of Iowa, more than 600 were from the People’s Republic of China. There were also many visiting scholars, postdoctoral researchers, and the spouses of the students and scholars. In addition, many residents of Iowa City were ethnic Chinese. In contrast, Western Illinois University in Macomb is about half the size of University of Iowa and is a state-level university with a lower ranking. The student body of about 13,000 includes more than 300 foreign students. When we conducted this research in 2002-2003, the Chinese population in Macomb was no more than 50, which includes about 30 graduate students.

In Iowa City, there have been two Chinese churches. The Chinese Church of Iowa City (CC) was established in the early 1980s. Most of its members are from Taiwan and Hong Kong, some are from the PRC and Southeast Asia. The Chinese Evangelical Church in Iowa City (CEC) was formed in 2000, whose members are almost exclusively from the PRC. Both of the churches grew out of the Chinese Bible Study Group (CBSG) on campus, which was first formed in the 1970s by students from Taiwan, Hong Kong and Southeast Asia. After the Chinese Church of Iowa City was established, the Chinese Bible Study Group remained a separate group with weekly meetings on Friday evenings. In the 1990s, the CBSG attracted more and more PRC students and scholars, who eventually became predominant, while the number of students from Taiwan and Hong Kong declined. As the number of PRC converts continued to increase, CBSG leaders decided to hold Sunday worship services for those who had become Christian in addition to Friday evening Bible studies that were evangelistic in nature. Thus the Chinese Evangelical Church in Iowa City was born. CBSG remains a separate student organization, holding Bible study meetings and lectures on Friday evenings. CEC and CBSG share an overlapping leadership body of volunteers, almost all of them from the PRC. The more established CC

has a full-time pastor who is originally from Taiwan. The church council of CC is comprised of deacons, elders, and co-workers who are from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the PRC.

At the time of this study, in Iowa City there were around 130 PRC students who regularly participated in the Chinese Bible Study Group and the Chinese Evangelical Church. This accounts for about 25 percent of PRC students in Iowa City. We were able to talk with more than 100 of them, witnessed many getting baptized, and heard them sharing their testimonies. We also read many articles they wrote and printed in newsletters and on the church's website.

In Macomb, there was no Chinese church or Chinese Bible study group when we conducted this research in 2002-2003. However, a campus ministry organization, the University Bible Fellowship (UBF), attracted Chinese participants. UBF is an international Christian organization dedicated to campus evangelism. It has branches worldwide and works among all students. The UBF at Western Illinois University extends invitations to all international students and almost all of the PRC students at Western Illinois University once participated in UBF activities. At the time of our research, only five PRC students were regularly participating, and a few others attended occasionally. In addition to the UBF, a variety of churches in the city also played host to the international students. By August 2003, one third of the PRC students in Macomb were baptized Christians attending various local congregations. Four people did not convert but regularly participated in the UBF, and two went to church occasionally.

## CONTEXTUAL FACTORS IN CONVERSION NARRATIVES

In Iowa City we conducted in-depth interviews with 20 PRC students. Thirteen of them had been baptized, four had made the decision (*jue zhi*) to believe but had not yet been baptized, and three participants had not yet decided. Among the twenty, six were females and fourteen males with ages ranging from the mid-twenties to early-thirties. Some had been in the United States for five years, while some came just a few months ago. None of them had a religious faith back in mainland China, although one converted while studying in Hong Kong before coming to the United States. Three of them told us they used to be members of the Chinese Communist Party, while many more once were members of the Chinese Communist Youth League.

In Macomb we interviewed all of the converts, four males and six females. Among the 10 converts, one was Jehovah Witness, two were Catholics, and the rest belong to various denominations of Protestant Christianity. Like PRC students in Iowa City, all the converts in Macomb were in their twenties or early-thirties. One of them was a member of the Chinese Community Party and all were former members of the Chinese Communist Youth League. Unlike those in Iowa City, the converted PRC students in Macomb have spent at least more than one year in the United States. Except for one person who converted to

Catholicism in China prior to coming to the States, none of our other interviewees was affiliated with any religion before they came to the U.S.

In Iowa City, usually the conversion of PRC students is marked by two big moments: *jue zhi* (making the decision or commitment to believe) and *shou xi* (being baptized by immersion in water). Most PRC converts “made the decision” after attending a moving lecture or series of lectures, which were often delivered by professionals or professionals-turned-pastors and evangelists. Some did it after watching the “Jesus” film.<sup>1</sup> Usually, at the end of an evangelistic lecture, the speaker would ask the audience to get ready for a prayer by bowing their heads. The speaker would then ask: “If you would like to invite Jesus Christ into your heart today, if you would like to receive God’s blessings today, please raise your hand. I will pray for you.” As some people raise their hands, the speaker would say loudly: “I have seen it, please put it down. I have seen it, thank the Lord. I have seen it, please put it down.” After repeating the call a couple of times, the speaker would conclude the meeting with an elaborate prayer. Immediately following the lecture, the leaders would approach the people who raised their hands, congratulating them on their *jue zhi* as having become Christian, and asking them to attend a catechism course leading to baptism. It is common for people to take months, sometimes a couple of years, between “making the decision” and getting baptized. Three of our interviewees told us that they raised their hands as a “sudden emotional reaction,” yet were not really completely ready to join the religion. They still had doubts and questions about the faith. Nonetheless, they continued to participate in the activities of the Chinese Evangelical Church and/or the Chinese Bible Study Group.

A common theme running through almost all of the conversion stories was strong dissatisfaction with the materialism or money-seeking milieu prevailing in China today. Indeed, most people from the PRC share the perception that Chinese society is in deep trouble due to corruption and moral crisis. For those Chinese who seriously seek answers in Christianity, they think that becoming Christian will set them apart from those they refer to as “typical Chinese”—those who have no faith in anything but money.

Another common theme was criticism of the way schools in China teach about religion, such as saying religion is the opium of the people, religious beliefs are superstitions, and religious believers are cowards who dare not face the tough reality of the real world. They now see Chinese bashing of Christian missionaries as imperialist agents under religious cover as mere Communist propaganda. They are easily led to see, or believe, that Christian ministers and believers are normal people, that Christianity provides moral values in American society, and

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<sup>1</sup>The “Jesus” Film, produced by John Heyman in 1979, is a two-hour docudrama about the life of Christ based on the Gospel of Luke. The film project was initiated by Bill Bright, founder of the Campus Crusade for Christ. The film has been used as an effective tool to spread the gospel and has been translated into hundreds of languages.

that Christianity is a normal choice for college-educated people. In this regard, the lectures and testimonies by professionals who have a successful career in science and engineering are especially effective. All the PRC students who participated in the Bible study or church activities expressed appreciation for the freedom in the United States to learn about religion without political fears. Many of the interviewees said that in China, being or becoming a religious person would look "weird" to college-educated people, and belonging to a religious organization could also impede one's career development. Now in the United States, finally they could choose a religious faith without worrying too much about their life and career being harmed, at least not while staying in the United States.

Besides the moral crisis in China, another common concern among the PRC converts related to Chinese traditional culture. Although they tend to be critical of Chinese cultural traditions and blame the traditions for many of the current political and social problems in China, nevertheless they still appreciate some of the cultural values, such as hardwork, frugality, temperance, filial piety to parents, respect to elders, honesty and trustworthiness to friends, etc. They feel pity that such moral values seem to be becoming obsolete in the process of market transition in China. In relation to this concern, many conversion testimonies mention the book *Chinese Confession* by democracy-activist-turned-evangelist Yuan Zhiming. This book reinterprets the Chinese history from a Christian theological perspective. It makes powerful arguments with passionate words: God was not absent in Chinese history. Rather, God has been present in China, worshipped by the Chinese in the most ancient times as reflected in the most ancient texts of the five classics. But God had been concealed by idolatries and political authoritarianism in the post-classic eras. Once we know the messages revealed in the Bible, we can reconnect with our cultural roots, salvage the valuable elements in our culture, and shake off the curse of the evil. This book has helped many Chinese Christians to find the connection between Christianity and Chinese culture. After all, they see that to become Christian does not have to completely reject Chinese culture, and Christianity can actually help to preserve and reinforce the good moral values but to get rid of the bad ones in Chinese culture. Several of our interviewees said that they eventually embraced Christianity after reading this book.

In their conversion stories, PRC converts in Iowa City and Macomb cited the same weighty concerns regarding the moral crisis in China and Chinese traditional culture. This is in agreement with the findings and arguments of Fenggang Yang (1998): the social and cultural contexts are important factors for the Chinese conversion to Christianity. Although the specific events and issues the PRC converts refer to are somewhat different from those by the earlier Chinese immigrant converts, they nonetheless are the events and issues in the process of China's coerced modernization.

Moreover, even though the evangelizing agents are quite different in Iowa City and Macomb, we found that the proportion of Chinese converts to



Christianity among the local Chinese population was quite similar in both cities. About one-third PRC students and scholars in Macomb had become Christian by the end of our research in August 2003. Earlier we mentioned that about a quarter PRC students in Iowa City attended the Chinese Evangelical Church and/or the Chinese Bible Study Group. In addition to that, there was another church, the Chinese Church of Iowa City, and a significant proportion of its members and lay leaders were PRC converts as well. Together, the proportion of PRC Christians in Iowa City was similar to that in Macomb.

## CHINESE EVANGELICALS AND BEYOND

While the contextual factors and the proportion of converts among PRC converts in the Iowa City and Macomb were the same, there was one important difference: Most PRC converts in Iowa City joined Chinese churches, which were evangelical, whereas those in Macomb attended diverse churches, including mainline churches and churches that are not normally considered orthodox Christian.

In Iowa City, there have been two Chinese evangelical churches and a Bible study group. They have been actively evangelizing, particularly targeting PRC students and scholars. Upon their arrival, many PRC students and scholars were picked up from the airport by members of the Chinese Bible Study Group or the Chinese churches. The recently converted PRC students have been especially active, helping the newcomers settle into the same apartment or within the same neighborhood. Our interviewees all described those receiving fellow students from the Bible Study Group as “very nice.” Soon after the beginning of the fall semester, the CBSG, in cooperation with the Chinese churches, would organize a welcome party for the newcomers. Chinese food or barbecue would be served free to the newcomers. At the welcome party and on other occasions as well, the newcomers would be invited to visit the Bible Study Group meetings.

Almost all of the students who had been helped this way or came to the welcome party attended at least some of the Friday evening Bible Study meetings. They did that to show their gratitude toward the students from the Bible Study Group for helping them. Some were also curious about Christianity. Participation in the CBSG meetings and activities would lead to conversion of some people. Friendship bonds with Christians of the CBSG and/or the two Chinese churches naturally lead to conversion to their brand of Christianity—evangelical Protestantism.

When we asked for the reason they might convert to Evangelical Christianity instead of other branches of Christianity or other religions, quite a few interviewees said that they had never thought about other options because they were exposed to Evangelical Christianity in the first place. Liu, a 27-year-old mechanical engineering graduate student, admitted that at the very beginning he was attracted to the Bible Study Group by the good food served every

Friday evening before the meeting. We asked him if he would have converted to another religion if it provided good food before he was hooked to the CBSG. He paused and thought for a while, then said:

That's a good question. Honestly, it might happen. . . . But Christianity is the biggest religion in the world and most Americans are Christians. It is just normal for one to join a Christian church. Besides, since most [PRC] Chinese Christians in town go to this church, I feel more comfortable to come here.

"How much do you know about other religions?" "Very little," he answered. But that seemed not to bother him at all.

We found that most members of the Chinese Bible Study Group and the Chinese Evangelical Church knew very little about various Christian denominations. In the People's Republic of China, Protestant denominations were disbanded in the 1950s and the China Christian Council insists that Christianity in China has entered the post-denominational era. As a result, the names of various Protestant denominations are rarely seen in Chinese. Those in the United States who learned the names of some Protestant denominations expressed confusion. Chinese Christian evangelists and church leaders taught them the evangelical brand of Christianity and spoke critically of liberal theologies so they identified with Evangelical Christianity. Of course, probably this is also due to some semantic problem. In Chinese, there is no exact translation of the word Protestantism. Protestantism is *Jidu jiao* (Christianity or the Christ Religion), whereas Catholicism is *Tianzhu jiao*, which means, literally, the "Heavenly Lord Religion."

However, two of the interviewees in Iowa City admitted that if they had gone to some other religious organizations at the beginning, they might have converted to some other denomination, or religion, rather than evangelical Christianity. While this was only "might be" in Iowa City, it was a reality in Macomb.

In Macomb, there was no Chinese Christian group or church. Instead, usually it was the International Student Office of the university that arranged volunteers to pick up new international students from the train station in town or the airport in a nearby city. At some point in the new semester, the University Bible Fellowship would invite international students for Bible studies. Two of the interviewees told us that upon their arrival they asked around to find out whether there was a Chinese Bible study group. They did that not necessarily to seek to convert to Christianity, but they were indeed curious about Christianity and hoped to learn about it. PRC students tend to regard Christianity as part of American culture and as new students they hope to learn about this element of American culture.

In Macomb, almost all PRC students had participated in some of the meetings and activities of the University Bible Fellowship at Western Illinois University. Like many campus ministry organizations, UBF has no denominational affiliation. It organizes Bible study meetings and introduces Christianity to

nonbelievers. It does not baptize people but it would introduce converts to local churches. PRC converts in Macomb shared many commonalities with those in Iowa City. However, they did not all end up converting to evangelical Christianity. Following the known pattern of converting through personal bonds (Lofland and Stark 1965), these converts tend to join a church to which where their friends or professors belong.

Jing was 28 years old when she converted to Christianity. In her second year in Macomb, she was baptized into Covenant Presbyterian Church in town. She said that several of her professors were Presbyterians and she started going to this church at the very beginning because of her personal acquaintance with the professors. Based on what she described to us, this church seemed to be a conservative one. Recently (Spring 2005) Jing switched to the University Baptist Church for reasons of convenience. This church is affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. Other PRC converts have joined various denominational churches that are evangelical or conservative in theology, including First Baptist Church of Macomb, which is associated with the Salem Association of Baptists, and Immanuel Lutheran Church, which is associated with the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod.

Instead of converting to Protestantism, Ping became a Catholic. Prior to her arrival in Macomb in Fall 2002, Ping studied in Ohio and earned a Master's degree in economics. She was 24 when she came to Western Illinois University to pursue another Master's degree. She said that she had a lot of religious experience since she came to the United States, and converted to Catholicism in Ohio. She was aware that most other Chinese converts joined Protestant churches, but the Catholic Church was the right choice for her, although she did not explain how she first became interested in the Catholic Church. Ping told us that she had been successful in converting her family members back in China. Her father had already been baptized into the Catholic Church and her mother was getting close to that point. We found another Chinese Catholic in Macomb, but he had been a Catholic in China. He said that he was attracted to Catholicism by the mystical beauty of the religion.

In addition to Protestant and Catholic churches, we also interviewed Ying, who became a Jehovah Witness during the winter of 2001. She had spent five years in Japan before coming to the United States. She did not believe in God until she made some American friends who were Jehovah Witnesses. Ying became deeply committed to her new faith, although she could not give any concrete reasons for her conversion. She said she just believed it.

In Macomb there were also two Chinese Muslims, who were Uyghurs from Xinjiang in Northwestern China. They were not converts, for Uyghurs in China are one of the ten ethnic minority groups that subscribe to Islam as their traditional religion. Nonetheless, these Chinese Muslims contributed to the diversity of religions among the PRC students in Macomb.

## CONCLUSIONS

Many Chinese students and scholars from the People's Republic of China studying in the United States have converted to Christianity. Social and cultural changes in China and moral and cultural concerns are often cited by PRC converts in their testimonies. This shows that contextual factors remain pertinent to explaining the relatively high rate of conversion to Christianity among PRC students.

The vast majority of PRC converts have joined evangelical Protestant churches, a phenomenon that deserves more careful analysis. First, the presence of Chinese evangelical Christian churches and campus Bible study groups appears to be an important factor for PRC students' tendency toward evangelical Protestantism. However, ethnic affinity with other Chinese is evidently not a major reason for their conversion to Christianity. We say this because some PRC converts in Iowa City organized a separate Chinese Evangelical Church instead of participating in the existing Chinese Church that was attended mostly by Chinese from Taiwan and Hong Kong. We have learned that a number of this type of church have emerged in various parts of the United States. Secondly, PRC converts do seem to be more in tune with conservative Christianity. In Macomb, without the presence of Chinese evangelical churches, a majority of Chinese converts joined conservative churches. Of course, this could be due to the presence of conservative churches in this Bible belt region of the country. It will be interesting to find out the religious tendency and practice of PRC students in places where other types of Christianity or other religions predominate. Many PRC students are religious seekers who are open or self-motivated to search for a religious faith, but we do not have sufficient evidence to say that they crave only conservative Christianity.

We find that the local ecological environment of religious organizations makes some difference. While PRC converts in Iowa City have joined the non-denominational evangelical Chinese churches, PRC converts in Macomb have joined a variety of denominational churches. This indicates that Chinese converts do not necessarily reject denominationalism. Also, some have converted to Catholicism and Jehovah's Witnesses. The absence of a Chinese Christian community created opportunities for these PRC students, who were in need of religious belief, to get to know other religions and other Protestant denominations. Unlike the situation in Iowa City, where newcomers were usually taken to the Chinese evangelical organizations upon their arrival, these PRC students went through different channels to search for a new faith, and they ended up in different denominations and different religions. Of course, by no means can we conclude that none of the PRC converts in Iowa City had joined other religions or Christian churches. With limited time it was impossible to conduct a census of all Chinese converts in the city. However, the Chinese churches and the CBSG were simply overwhelming to PRC students, not just to the researcher. We asked

about possible converts to other churches or religions, but the people we talked with all pointed to the two Chinese churches and the CBSG. The situation in Macomb was in sharp contrast. It was impossible for any observer to ignore the denominational variations with which PRC students were associated. And they did that with ease.

In short, the ecological factor is important to understand the variety of churches the PRC converts have joined. While ethnic Chinese churches tend to be evangelical and nondenominational, Chinese converts have gone beyond the ethnic and evangelical Protestant churches. This indicates that had other religious groups, including mainline or liberal denominations, become more active in proselytizing among PRC students and scholars, they might have achieved similar success as well.

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