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Religious pursuits? Chinese international students encountering Christianity in Britain

Lin Ma

Abstract

The increased presence of Chinese international students has contributed to the diversity of culture and religion on British campuses. While overseas Chinese students who convert to evangelical Christianity have been well researched in the United States since the 1980s, the role of religion in secular British universities remains under-researched. This study aims to understand Chinese international students' religious seekership and their interactions with evangelical Christians in Britain. It makes an original contribution by including evidence from non-converts. Data from a mixed methodological approach illustrate the attitudes and perceptions of newly arrived Chinese international students and the subjective reasons underlying their initial seekership in multi-ethnic English-speaking religious environments. The findings challenge the assumed lack of interest of Chinese international students in local integration. Crucially, by examining the ongoing formation and cultivation of Chinese Christian identifications on British campuses, this research demonstrates the permeable boundaries between language, culture, and religion.

Key words

Chinese international students; conversion; Christianity; diversity

Introduction

This study examines Chinese international students' experiences of religion and diversity at British universities.¹ Research carried out in the United States shows that Chinese international students convert to Christianity at ethnic Chinese evangelical churches (Guest 2003; Wright and Zimmerman-Liu 2013; Yang and Tamney 2006; Wang and Yang 2006; Yang 1999). In Britain, they become involved in multi-ethnic English-speaking evangelical Christian environments but do not always convert (Li 2012; Dickson 2013; Huang 2015; Yu 2017; Yu and Moskal 2018). This raises the question: what attracts non-Christian Chinese international students in largely secular Britain to local Christian communities?

This article addresses the prevalent exclusion of non-converts in researching the phenomenon of conversion. I start with the rich literature on Chinese international students' Christian conversion in the US and question its systemic neglect of non-converts in evangelical settings. I then review UK-based literature of ethnic Chinese students' Christian encounters and religion on campus. After this, I explain my mixed-method research design that includes *converts* and *non-converts*, as defined for the purpose of this study. Data illustrate commonalities of Chinese students' seekership in local British evangelical settings, regardless of their varied conversion outcomes. Findings draw on both quantitative and qualitative data to discuss how the English language, Western culture, and Christianity combine in the seekership accounts of both converts and non-converts.

Overseas Chinese and Christianity in the United States

In the US, studies on religion and immigration have flourished since the 1980s. They form a field that acknowledges positive social functions of religion for the settlement of immigrants (Foley and Hoge 2007; Kivisto 2014a, 2014b; Warner 1993, 1998). Although Chinese emigrants were known in China for their 'diffused' beliefs (Yang 1961, 294–340) and syncretic folk religions (Barker 2011, 110), they interacted with and converted to Christianity in the US, a phenomenon that has caught scholarly attention. For example, Kenneth Guest (2003) studied the generation of undocumented Chinese migrants; their unspeakable hardship prompted them to get their souls saved by "God in Chinatown", which led to a transitional network of religious identity constructions between Fuzhou and New York. Meanwhile, Teresa Wright and Teresa Zimmerman-Liu (2013) examined the conversion of Chinese political

activists and refugees in the 1980s and their transformed leadership in establishing Chinese Christian fellowships in the US. 'Mass conversion' to conservative and evangelical Christianity at ethnic Chinese churches in wider American society followed, estimated to have converted between one fifth and one third of Chinese students (Yang and Tamney 2006; Wang and Yang 2006, 184; Kivisto 2014a, 26). Through church archives and interview data, Fenggang Yang (1999) located social disturbances in China in the 1980s as the primary cause of this 'mass conversion' and explained its subsequent social function of assisting converts to form a tripartite Christian, American, and Chinese identity. After all, "Western-oriented Chinese" do not see Christianity as "something traditional, conservative, or restrictive" (Yang 2005, 425).

The empirical studies cited above feature people who lost their sense of meaning of and certainty in life and regained it through religious conversion. The individual aspect of 'problem-solving' is reflected in religious conversion theories and models (Lofland and Stark 1965; Lofland and Skonovd 1981; Rambo 1993, 1999; Rambo and Bauman 2011). Typically, converts are recognized as individuals who reinterpret crises and problems as religious in nature and as only solvable through a religious way of life. However accurate they may be, such interpretations are limited by their exclusive focus on the experiences and narratives of eventual converts, reproducing a dichotomy where converts merge with the religious and those who do not claim religious identities are neglected. Even during 'mass conversion', there are more non-converts than converts and little is known about their encounters with Christianity. More recently, in a three-year longitudinal study, Harry Hui et al. (2017) followed 455 non-Christian Chinese in Hong Kong and Macau and found that 10% of them (46 participants) had eventually converted to Christianity. This percentage may be read as high or low, depending on one's position, but it is the non-converts—in this case making up 90%—that are rarely understood in their own right. Studies addressing this missing cohort are needed to rectify this knowledge gap.

Chinese international students and Christianity in the United Kingdom

In the US, the conversion of Chinese international students to Christianity continues to be reported (Zhang 2016; Kumar 2016; Muthyam 2013). By contrast, in Britain, religion on campus is little understood (Stevenson and Aune 2017; Aune and Guest 2017; Stevenson 2013) nor is its role for international students (Stevenson 2014, 51; 2016, 62).

Religious voices on campus are heard unevenly. Where evangelical Christian students are a “vocal minority” (Guest et al. 2013, 208), they overshadow mainstream British students who might not promote a conversionist narrative yet identify as culturally and nominally Christian (Day and Lynch 2013, 203; Sharma and Guest 2013, 67). International students are arguably less likely to be similarly vocal; Paul Weller, Tristram Hooley, and Nicki Moore (2011) suggest that they face stakes which are too high to report unsatisfactory support for their beliefs and religions. When some do become vocal, freedom of speech on the ostensibly secular campus can escalate conflicts reflective of international politics, for example, between Palestinian and Israeli students (Sheldon 2017; see also Reid 2017). In this context, rising Islamophobia, a form of cultural racism (Modood 2019), puts Muslim students at higher risk. However, some universities have strategies in place. As Adam Dinham and Stephen Jones (2012, 195) note, where universities rely financially on Middle Eastern international students, prayer spaces are provided; where Christian foundation has a perceived status, it becomes a ‘selling point’ overseas.

Diverse student populations make British universities sites for inter-faith encounters and interactions (Dinham, Francis, and Shaw 2017). For example, scholars have noted many non-Christian Chinese international students in British churches and faith-based organisations (FBOs). Daguo Li (2012, 249) found that two of eleven Chinese postgraduates at a British university had volunteer experience at, and had converted following contact with, a local Christian FBO. Deborah Dickson (2013) identified the attendance of Chinese students at local Christian churches across British university cities. To explain this, Yinxuan Huang (2015) used the concept of ‘religious capital’ to illustrate that British faith communities act as catalysts for social bonding between white and non-white believers. Yun Yu (2017) applied an intercultural lens (Gu 2005, 2009) to examine the interface between Chinese students and local Christians; she found that over a third of her non-Christian Chinese student respondents had had a church experience in their previous six months in Britain. The students came from programmes with predominantly ethnic Chinese students and went to local churches for cultural engagement (Yu and Moskal 2018). This insightful finding does, however, not explain the particular appeal of Christian culture to Chinese students.

Nevertheless, the studies described above provide insights into the

presence of Chinese international students in British Christian churches and FBOs and they recognize that this phenomenon remains under-researched. Three salient features emerge when compared with US-based studies. Firstly, 'mass conversion' seems absent. For example, although Yu (2017, 131) acknowledged the under-representation of 'faith explorers' (students attending church for the explicit purpose to explore the Christian faith), she considered most students to seek intercultural engagement. Other UK-based researchers who studied the phenomenon of conversion have often approached it through cultural and value adaptations. For example, Dickson (2013) contrasted the biblical values of British Protestantism with heterogeneous social values in contemporary China to understand converts. From these findings, a second feature emerges: whereas Chinese conversion to Christianity in the US happens mainly in ethnic Chinese churches, Chinese students in Britain favour multi-ethnic local Anglophone churches. In other words, their presence in the British settings simultaneously transcends multiple boundaries (ethnicity, nationality, language, and culture). Thirdly, intriguingly, as this study identifies, Chinese students who convert in Britain also proclaim that a) Jesus is God and their personal saviour and b) true Christians are biblical and derive the meaning for their lives from witnessing and evangelising. Therefore, like their counterparts in the US (Yang 1999, 66), they articulate a biblical evangelicalism (Strhan 2015, 8; Hutchinson and Wolffe 2012; Bielo 2009).

Nonetheless, Christian contexts in Britain and America differ significantly, not least due to the way in which secularisation has been experienced in the two countries (Berger, Davie, and Fokas 2008; Bruce 2011). Despite dissent regarding the meaning of religion and secularisation, Christianity in both countries is gradually losing ground. Notably, the UK Census in 2001 and 2011 documented the rise of a new cultural majority in Britain—the religious 'nones' (Woodhead 2016). Yet this does not signify an absence of belief. Religious sentiment persists through 'believing without belonging' and 'vicarious' beliefs (Davie 1990). Mainstream British Christians also become nominal and cultural (Day 2011) and religious affiliation is declining among people with immigrant parents. Alasdair Crockett and David Voas (2006) found a rate of decline in major British social surveys, which is as high for this group as for the white population. Against this secular backdrop, conservative evangelical Christians who actively evoke faith within Britain are often seen as marginalised but may not appear so to international students.

In the face of these complexities and contrasts, this article aims to identify the initial pursuits of Chinese students in British Christian settings. These are important because they constitute the underlying conditions for any discussion of the further development of faith among British-educated Chinese international students. As previously stated, however, such studies focus exclusively on converts and this research is designed to include non-converting Chinese 'faith explorers' alongside converts in British Christian environments.

Methodology and field sites

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected involving Chinese students at two British universities in the same city. One is an élite Russell Group university and the other a former polytechnic. Both use the same Christian-based organisation with extensive evangelical partnerships in the city to provide services for their international students. Most participants in this study were enrolled at the élite university. The details of all research subjects have been anonymised.

The quantitative data were collected in a survey of Chinese international students who had spent less than three months in Britain. The length of stay was controlled for to capture their attitudes and perceptions before their adjustment to lived everyday diversity in Britain. For this reason, an English-mediated questionnaire was distributed in the summer of 2017, at an institutionally affiliated pre-sessional programme in English for Academic Purposes (EAP). The overall response rate was 0.22 and 270 valid questionnaire copies were collected. Only 4 survey respondents self-identified as 'Christian' upon arrival, including both Protestants and Catholic.²

The qualitative data comprised 31 in-depth interviews with Chinese students towards the end of a multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork I conducted between February and August 2017, at 6 Christian churches and 2 on-campus Christian FBOs. With one exception, all the organisations were connected to the Christian Union (an evangelical student society). Interviewees, including 26 female and 5 male ethnic Chinese aged 21–30 (see Table 1),³ had all participated in a Christian setting that promoted evangelical programmes to international students.⁴

Fifteen interviewees self-identified as Christian following their involvement on British campuses; the remaining 16 had explored Christianity to various degrees as part of their student experience in Britain but did not proclaim a belief in Christ or call themselves Christians. Thus, based on self-

categorisation, a first step in constructing social identity (Tajfel and Turner 1974), the former were recognized in this study as *converts* and the latter as non-converting 'faith explorers' or *non-converts* for short. Qualitative data were thematically analysed to identify shared pursuits that unite the two groups in the religious setting. Together with the survey results, they shed light on crucial features of this phenomenon in British universities where non-Christian Chinese students actively participate in Christian environments.

Table 1. Interviewee Overview

INTVW	Gender	Christian Setting		
		Conversion Status	Ethnic Chinese	Local Multi-ethnic
1	f	No, nonconverts		x
2	f			x
3	f			x
4	f			x
5	f			x
6	m			x
7	f			x
8	f			x
9	f			x
10	f			x
11	m			x
12	f			x
13	f			x
14	f			x
15	f			x
16	f			x
1	f	Yes, converts		x
2	m			x
3	f			x
4	f			x
5	f		both	

6	f
7	f
8	f
9	f
10	f
11	m
12	f
13	f
14	f
15	m

both	
	x
	x
	x
	x
x	
	x
	x
	x
x	

Attitudes and perceptions

Two themes provide clues to the attraction of multi-ethnic English-speaking Christian environments. These are described in the following.

Attitudes to diversity and locality

To ascertain students' attitudes to diversity upon arrival, three questions were asked, each starting with "I want to befriend people who have different... ", followed by 'ethnicity', 'language', and 'belief', respectively.

Table 2 shows that Chinese international students had positive attitudes to the three kinds of difference represented in the questions. While 95% of respondents wanted to befriend people who spoke a different 'language', 81% wanted to befriend those with a different 'ethnicity', and 78% wanted to befriend people with different 'beliefs'. What is understood as 'language' here may be English. Previous studies argue that Chinese international students lack accurate awareness and expectations of linguistic, racial, and cultural differences in Englishness (Scandrett 2011; Marr 2005). In this light, the high percentage reflects Chinese international students' aspiration on arrival to make English-speaking friends, which corresponds to results in Table 3 and to qualitative data (see below).

Additionally, Table 2 contains results of two statements regarding attitudes to co-nationals: 60% agreed with "I prefer co-national friends" and 66% agreed with "I trust co-nationals more than foreigners".⁵ Besides these two percentages being relatively smaller, fewer respondents (138 and 148, respectively) had provided answers. Instead of choosing "Neither agree nor disagree", participants simply opted out of answering. This non-response requires additional data for interpretation. Speculatively, it could indicate: 1) a perceived irrelevance of the questions, 2) a rejection of the perceived logic of the questions, and/or 3) a self-evaluated unsureness about providing an answer. Nevertheless, the results suggest an ambivalence of Chinese international students towards their co-nationals, compared with on-arrival openness to difference.

Table 2. Attitude to diversity.

	I want to befriend people who have a different ethnicity	I want to befriend people who have a different language	I want to befriend people who have a different belief	I prefer co- national friends	I trust co- nationals more than foreigners
Agree (%)	81	95	78	60	66
Neither agree or disagree (%)	8	3	6	9	9
Disagree (%)	11	2	16	31	25
Valid n (=100%)	187	210	166	138	148

Table 3. Attitude to local integration.

	Expect to acquire British culture	Seek local knowledge	Like to have trustable local contacts	Seek to improve English language
Agree (%)	96	95	95	94
Neither agree nor disagree (%)	1	2	4	2
Disagree (%)	3	3	1	4
Valid n (=100%)	235	212	217	202

Table 3 contains results of four statements formulated on the basis of the ethnographic fieldwork with Chinese international students at local Christian sites: they expect “to acquire British culture”, “seek local knowledge”, “have trustable local contacts”, and “improve English language”. Results illustrate very high percentages of positive attitudes to local integration. Over 94% of survey respondents agreed with each statement. Speculatively, the consistent high response rates validate the perceived relevance and accuracy of these statements for respondents; positive attitudes to integrating locally are not unique to Chinese students found in evangelical Christian environments but are widely shared by newly arrived Chinese international students in Britain.

Jointly, Table 2 and Table 3 illustrate their positive attitudes to local integration and diversity, particularly with regard to British culture and the English language. This provokes the question—to be addressed by qualitative data—about the extent to which Chinese international students’ Christian seekership is transformed and further constructed from their pursuit of a diverse local experience.

Perceptions of Christianity in Britain

To understand Chinese international students at local English churches, we need to know about their perceptions of Christianity in Britain. Table 4 shows two survey questions addressing this point: 66% of respondents agreed that “Britain is a Christian country” and 60% agreed that “Most British people are Christians”. To some extent, they were correct. Conservative politicians like David Cameron and Theresa May have claimed Britain to be a Christian country. Doubtlessly, as John Wolffe

Table 4. Perception of Christianity in Britain.

	Britain is a Christian country	Most British people are Christians
Agree (%)	66	60
Neither agree nor disagree (%)	2	3
Disagree (%)	32	38
Valid n (=100%)	251	251

(2007, 328) argues, Britain is now a very different country from what it was in the 1950s. At that time, the obvious choice of religion was Christianity. Today, however, people subscribe to it not because of a lack of alternatives, but despite of them.

Pertinent here is not whether my respondents understood the changes and complexities, but what criteria have consistently enabled two thirds of them to consider Britain to be a 'Christian' country and 'most' British people to be 'Christians'. Whereas qualitative data will elucidate this, it is worth emphasising that these preconceptions are likely to have been nurtured at home and were open to be shaped by the British social reality they were about to enter.

Pursuing Christianity on British campuses

The interconnection between the English language, Western culture, and Christianity emerged for both converts and non-converts. These intertwined elements manifested themselves in three ways, which are set out below.

English language, Western culture, and Christianity

Firstly, students explicitly articulated their motives for seeking out multi-ethnic English-speaking Christian environments to begin with. These accounts were typically produced by those who had studied English-related disciplines in China. A PhD student visiting for one year remarked:

My background is English language. . . My teacher told me: "If you want to really understand Western culture, you must first look into its background of religion." So, as I have the chance to come here, I want even more to know it first-hand. . . My teacher also told me: "When you don't know what to discuss with [non-Chinese] foreigners, you can chat about Jesus and God, they are very into that." Back then, I was curious, like, why would chatting about such things work? Because, like in China, if they [the foreigners] come to discuss Buddhism with us, we wouldn't necessarily know. . . I got to know a [Chinese] friend, she invited me, and I went along. Like to learn some knowledge. (Andrew, male, non-convert, life-story interview, 4 June 2017)

This account illustrates what was explicitly taught in China: a connection between the English language, Western culture, and Christianity. Academically, teachers and students acknowledge Christianity as essential for knowledge of the English language and culture. Moreover, it is suggested as a conversation-opening technique and as a way to gain access to new cultural knowledge. Yet, as Andrew

reflected, he may not respond to attempts at conversation on Buddhism in China, but he would expect Christian religiosity from Britons. Subsequently, this was affirmed by his on-campus encounters with evangelical Christians, who both exhibited biblical religiosity and claimed ownership of the British culture. If his experience were to be generalised, two thirds of the newly arrived Chinese international students who perceived most Britons as Christians would likely see church Christians as the British norm.

Unprompted, all interviewees with a major or minor in English-related disciplines credited their academic backgrounds for their understanding of Christianity in the West and hence their intellectual need to gain access to it. The account below further elaborates the link between English literature, the Bible, the English language, and the respondent's choice of church attendance:

Because my first degree was in International Business, we were offered units from both the Business and English Literature departments. I did a lot on English and American literature. There was a unit on the Bible; I didn't choose that, as I didn't think I could read it through. Studying earlier literature, you must know the Bible to understand why that author had those thoughts at that time. . . . Because I want to read the English version, after I came here, I thought this was a Christian country, and English-speaking, so I should try to re-start it again. (Minjun, female, non-convert, life-story interview, 6 June 2017)

This account also implies the pursuit of authenticity, to read the *English* Bible with a local English Christian community. Minjun remained a non-convert despite her interest in Christian knowledge as a route to understanding literature and culture. As a "Western-oriented Chinese" (Yang 2005, 425), however, she did not feel the need to incorporate a Christian authenticity in her identity.

In both cases, Christianity is desirable by its intrinsic links to Western culture and its manifestations through the English language. Such interests prompt Chinese students to accept an evangelical Christian invitation. Their cultural immersion and accumulated Christian knowledge, however, did not make them 'Christians'. While this article does not explore what facilitates or inhibits the claim to be Christian, a convert's account illustrates the shared theme:

My major is comparative literature; I also compare cultures. . . . It's very serendipitous. [About a year ago] I walked past the Christian Union stall and that's how it started. . . . At church, you don't just learn religious culture. Because, as religious culture penetrates social culture, social culture also influences religious culture. Like in our church, they tell you a lot about British culture. (Jenni, female, convert, life-story interview, 5 June 2017)

Jenni's conversion took place in the form of a hesitant 'Yes' in reply to her evangelist's query during their one-to-one reading of the Book of John. Essentialised and taught in China, Christianity is a rich cultural repertoire for understanding the West. Educational migration then sparked Jenni's exploration and she welcomed the evangelical Christian cultural community as the spokesperson for British culture. Jenni's active socialisation followed her self-categorisation. However, as I discuss below, she should not be simply understood as a 'cultural Christian'.

Practising English and meeting the locals

Other interviewees, who were not English-related majors or minors, were less explicit about the way language, culture, and religion reinforce each other. They spoke about their interest in the English language and culture through meeting people. Here is an example:

A [Chinese] friend of mine was here last year. She's not a Christian and now back in China. She just told me that there was this place, many nice elderly grannies there, and you can go practising English. . . I don't like 'three-minute interest'. I think, for anything, you need to stick to it. Like, even if you went there just for language, you gave up since you couldn't see it coming immediately—that 'gain' they are after is so shallow. . . For me, I was curious of the culture. And I really like those elderly grannies. They see me as a 'baby Christian'—I don't know, but I feel my improvement and they are like my friends now. (Yue, female, non-convert, life-story interview, 10 June 2017)

Yue acknowledged her initial pursuit of language, her cultural curiosity, and her later friendship with the church 'grannies'. After her first participation in Holy Communion, followed by more than six months' regular church attendance, she was labelled a 'baby Christian' (Bielo 2009, 39). Yue did not agree to the term but considered her seekership as being linguistically and culturally oriented. She particularly disliked other Chinese students' utilitarian practice of English. For her, presence and time commitment are necessary qualities for valuing friendship. Thus, the dynamic progressed from an explicit initial interest in language to culture, friendship, and people.

Corresponding to the earlier survey results, where up to 94% of the Chinese international students sought to "improve their English language", my multi-sited ethnography witnessed a high turnover of Chinese students responding to evangelical invitations. As Yu and Marta Moskal (2018) suggest, local church programmes attract Chinese students from business schools, seeking linguistic and cultural involvement in Britain. Similarly, in my fieldwork I often encountered this cohort openly joking about how ironic it was that they had to come to church to see British people. Most of these students did not continue their attendance after the first few visits.

However, one who continued to attend provided this account:

I had a [Chinese] Christian friend, so very soon she suggested this place to me as I wanted to improve my English and befriend locals. I would think the majority of us all want to. . . Like I'd worry if, for a job interview later, they see I studied in Britain and ask me to showcase some English and I still talk in bad English. . . At first, I thought I wanted to get a distinction, but once I started, I realised—oh, I couldn't understand much, I'd just pass. I knew there would be many Chinese students in my school, but I didn't realise the extent until I came. . . Improving English is the most important thing in studying in an English-speaking country, more important than the subject knowledge. . . But I don't think everyone thinks so. (Megan, female, non-convert, life-story interview, 30 March 2017)

In common with many others, Megan started with an interest in the English language and English people, through which culture became embedded. As she elaborated, her intense interest in English was cultivated through 'realising' what was achievable and 'the most important thing'. Thus, between those who felt guilty for using local people to improve their English and those who quickly moved away from religious environments, Megan accepted the evangelical invitation and committed herself to the setting.

Among the 16 non-converts, 12 professed a keen interest in 'improving their English proficiency'. By comparison, for the 15 converts, the salience of the English language, Western culture, and Christianity in their conversion stories appeared to be subtler and more complex. For example, 6 did not mention language at all; 4 explicitly stated that they did not understand English well when they first started attending English sermons or Bible sessions. Another 4 had previously been involved with Christianity through English-teaching Christian missionaries or international churches in China, at around the same time when they prepared for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) to attend British universities. Two had attended Christian schools before beginning their British higher education and both claimed to have only become 'proper' believers following their involvement on a British campus. The English language and Western culture may not always be actively acknowledged as contributing to conversion. However, given the analyses above, this is likely to be indicative of a *post hoc* rationalisation, downplaying an initial attraction to the English language and Western culture in the aftermath of valorised religious commitment.

'All other things, just for a start'

If, for these Chinese students, the interlinkage between the English language, Western culture, and Christianity is explicit disciplinary cultivation, for evangelical Christians, this interlinkage is valorised for conversion. Although converts appear to downplay it in their conversion testimonials, they highlight it when inviting their Chinese peers to join in. One participant, Jenni, a

convert, is an example. As mentioned, Jenni was drawn to British and Christian culture and soon considered herself a 'true believer'. One of the local churches she attended was a fairly young Anglican church. Established in 2014, it was mainly attended by university students and students-turned-professionals. In the year when then Prime Minister David Cameron (2014) called for Anglicans to be 'evangelical', this church ran a weekly programme called "International Café". It was recommended to international students as "a place to speak English and learn the British culture", the exact words that Jenni used to promote the programme among her Chinese friends. When asked about her involvement in the church mission of 'evangelising', she explained:

I don't think they are wrong in saying that. I, too, always tell this thing to my friends and invite them to attend our events. We should, like, get more people to know what God is like, so everyone knows His existence. (Jenni, female, convert, life-story interview, 5 June 2017)

Consequently, the church serves two functions simultaneously: it is a place 'to speak English and to learn British culture' and a place 'to know what God is like'. The café format is borrowed from "Friends International UK", an evangelical mission agency that stresses friendship in the course of evangelising. Cafés often include appealing terms in their names, such as 'International', 'Global' or 'Conversational', offering access to the English language and culture, followed by invitations to Sunday services and evangelical programmes, such as the Alpha Course and "Christianity Explored", and one-to-one or small-group Bible readings. Characteristically, the silver-haired Christian women running such cafés only shared their conversion trajectories interpersonally. However, a young leadership group ran the programme that Jenni attended; each session contained a presentation of conversion testimonials.

The call to 'bring your friends' was frequently only secondary to prayers. Given the collective mission, those who actively brought in friends and helped church growth were institutionally valued; those who did not were 'selfish', as explained by a young British Christian leader whom I interviewed on 25 June 2017: "It's like they don't share resources." Thus, free opportunities to access language, culture, people, and Christianity become inseparable from the whole package on offer. Chinese converts internalise this emic perspective that also directs the relationship between these elements, as a young Chinese Christian student in leadership dealing with international students explained:

Many just came for free food and opportunities to socialise in English with the locals. That's absolutely fine for a start. . . Who hasn't a time of difficulty? We'd

pray with them and for them to know Jesus and to open their heart. (Ava, female, convert, life-story interview, 6 July 2017)

For evangelical Christians, any trigger to talk about Christianity is an opportunity, as it affirms their belief and allows a way to approaching God. Hence, 'a time of difficulty' becomes meaningful and valuable, because it can lead to faith and is a means to cultivate a religious armour against 'difficulties' and a path to religious truth. A male Chinese leader from the ethnic Chinese evangelical church explained: "Everyone will have difficulties. . . It's a matter of whether they could see it as a way to God, the truth." (Cheung, male, convert, life-story interview, 17 February 2017)

Although Ava and Cheung differed greatly in age, gender, and location, they both used the notion of 'serving' instead of 'leading', which is a linguistic distinction for on-campus evangelical Christians (Dutton 2008, 31–38). Crucially, they both differentiated between means and ends. Only God can 'call a person in' and, therefore, church growth was widely cited as proof of the existence of their God. Initial attraction to, and curiosity about, the English language and Western culture were purposefully directed to God and any difficulties were interpreted as 'a way to God'.

Despite this internal coherence of evangelism, non-converts responded differently. They recognized the religious motives of kind and hospitable evangelical Christians but also their own degree of social marginalisation that religious conversion could not solve. Many talked about the linguistic and cultural difficulties faced by Chinese international students on British campuses. For example, here is the account of a female non-convert:

If Chinese students could fit in easily, they wouldn't all try the church. If it's not that we don't speak good English and so we have to count on the patience and kindness of the Christians, we wouldn't narrow our socialising circles only to the Christians. (Maggie, female, non-convert, life-story interview 23 August 2017)

This resembles what one of the Chinese students in Li's (2012, 253) study contended:

If we had had other types of contact, it would have been even better . . . we could have a better understanding of what other British are like. But so far we only know what Christians are like.

These comments suggest that, outside the Christian environment, Chinese international students lack the local support to integrate. They recognize the permeable boundaries that they are subject to, between language, culture, and religion. Departing from an initial desire for British diversity, their religious seekership is cultivated in evangelical environments.

By contrast, although all my interviewees had visited the ethnic Chinese church, most preferred an alternative local setting and regarded Chinese preaching as "sounding wrong" and the ethnic

Chinese congregation as “bumpkinish”, “superstitious”, and “not right for me”. Some even went further and compared it to churches in China, featuring “tedious preaching”, “lacking humour”, and “not [being] properly done”. In fact, these comments were mostly made by female interviewees, as my ethnography encountered far fewer male Chinese students at the local Christian sites. Instead, there was an unusual male-to-female balance in the ethnic Chinese evangelical student group that was unseen in the rest of the fieldwork sites that were multi-ethnic and English-speaking. Consequently, this gender imbalance of interviewees may reflect the existing gender gap among British Christians (Voas and McAndrew 2012; Woodhead 2007). Nevertheless, research with equal gender representations is needed to illuminate how gender intersects with ethnicity in Chinese students’ preferences for religious sites.

Discussion and conclusion

Both Chinese students who convert and those who explore but do not convert to Christianity in Britain are motivated by preconceived connections between language, culture, and religion. Qualitative data illuminate their shared pursuit in improving their English language skills and acquiring British culture in the local evangelical Christian setting. Converts see this as a by-product of their religious commitment, whereas non-converts explicitly remark on their linguistic and cultural intentions, which are also recognized and used by evangelical Christians. Confined to the conservative evangelical setting, Chinese student Christian converts sign up to its missionary values and re-impose a religious meaning on difficulties experienced while studying abroad. The domestic tension between biblical evangelical Christians and cultural Christians (Day and Lynch 2013; Sharma and Guest 2013) is present but not crucial. For most ethnic Chinese students, the question is not which kind of Christian they would be but whether becoming a Christian is part of their educational journey in Britain at all. Those who cannot buy into evangelical Christian interpretations move on without becoming Christian.

Furthermore, the survey illustrates that the qualitative finding is not atypical. Most Chinese students express a desire that matches the starting point offered by local evangelical Christians. Upon arrival, they exhibit a very high interest in the British language, culture, and people and knowledge about Britain. Two thirds of them perceive Britain as a Christian country in which a majority of Britons are Christians. These perceptions contribute to the presence of Chinese students at Christian sites, as my interviewees detailed. Like “Western-oriented Chinese” who

do not see evangelical Christianity as “conservative” (Yang 2005, 425), Chinese international students see Christianity as part and parcel of the West, unaware that the evangelical version with which they are presented is not mainstream in Britain, unlike in the US. Instead, they favour diverse local Christian sites regardless of (non-)conversion at a later stage.

Regarding attitudes to diversity in terms of ethnicity, language, and belief, the survey identified Chinese students’ ambivalence towards co-nationals. Nevertheless, in my ethnographic fieldwork and the vignettes included above, most Chinese students are invited to British evangelical Christian environments by ‘a Chinese friend’. Further research is needed to understand how such national and ethnic networks function in diverse contexts.

Lastly, ethnic relations are known to affect religious behaviour in multi-racial societies (Cobb, Perry, and Dougherty 2015; Kim 2015, 8) and sites of conversion could heighten existing tensions (Moosavi 2015, 1921). For Chinese international students in Britain, cultural and linguistic immersion takes place at diverse evangelical Christian churches with white majorities. How they cultivate, develop, navigate or reject religious identities in such shared spaces requires a research design that goes beyond religious/non-religious duality.

Notes

1. Chinese international students include both ethnic Chinese students from outside mainland China and scholars visiting for one year, with or without a doctorate.
2. Respondents were primarily from the People’s Republic of China (PRC), where Christian self-identification is generally low, although more in the surveyed cohort exhibited belief in Jesus and/or God. See Ma (forthcoming) ‘Doing Diversity Inclusively’. In the PRC, Protestants and Catholics are separate categories; Protestants call themselves ‘Christian followers’, translated in Chinese as ‘Christian’. Two respondents self-identified as Jehovah’s Witnesses but ticked the ‘Other’ category.
3. The nature of the seven sites may have contributed to the gender imbalance, for which further research is needed.
4. Christian settings include both churches and Christian FBOs, although participants are not equally affiliated.

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