

# New Chinese Mobility and Religious Enchantment

## Case study in Chiang Mai Province

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### Abstract

This study examines the religious experiences of new Chinese immigrants in Thailand. In particular, the study explores changes in values and religions during their migration. The new Chinese mobility has been increasing dramatically in Thailand today. Approximately one hundred thousand Chinese migrants have flown to Bangkok and Thai large cities for mainly trans-national businesses, economic ventures and trading activities. Apart from these phenomena, it is interesting that in cultural and religious spheres, not only have Chinese churches been increasing, but also many new Chinese migrants have joined Chinese churches and Christian communities by converting to be Christian members. This article explores the situation of new Chinese migrants and their conversion to Christianity in Chiang Mai, as a case study. I apply the concept of religious enchantment to examine how religious lives and religious activities of new Chinese migrants in Chiang Mai have emerged and what the roles of Chinese Christian churches are in encouraging the religious enchantment. I use qualitative interviews, observation and participatory research, while I myself was a volunteer at the Chinese churches in order to collect information over several months.

The paper finds that the Chinese churches have served an important role in institutionally guiding and shaping new Chinese migrants' beliefs, values, attitudes, and religious practices. Also, that women take an important role in religious enchantment. Moreover, new Chinese immigrants themselves have engaged enthusiastically

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in Christian conversion in gaining a sense of morality from the non-religious concerns in relation to religious subjectivity in the modern world.

**Keywords:** New Chinese Mobility, Religious Enchantment, Chinese Christian Churches, Christianity

“道可道，非常道；名可名，非常名”

(The opening of Dao De Jing, means: “The Way that can be followed is not the constant Way. The Name that can be named is not the constant Name.”)

The new Chinese mobility has been increasing dramatically in Thailand today, and has been accompanied by the emergence of the Chinese Christian Churches. It is interesting to note the increase in Christian enchantment among the new Chinese immigrants in Thailand which is a Buddhist dominated Country. This phenomenon is complex, as it covers the trans-national religious and cultural questions as in the abstract Chinese saying “The way that can be followed is not the constant way. The name that can be named is not the constant name”. This research traces the move from the Chinese traditional religion and culture context to study the new Chinese immigrant’s religious conversion in Chiang Mai.

Introduction “Xinyimin” and Christian enchantment in Chiang Mai.

Since Chinese economic and political reforms, China has made great economic developments and increasingly engaged in the global economy. It also brought a new “emigration regime” (IOM, 1995), which initiated a substantial increase and diversification of immigration from mainland China. These millions of Chinese people venturing out of China since 1978 have been termed “xinyimin” (New Chinese Immigrant). PÁL NYÍRI refers to the new Chinese migrants (xinyimin) as the migrants from the PRC who have settled abroad since 1978. Philip Kuhn also noted the “Chinese new immigrants” as the Chinese people who left China since China applied its economic reform and opening policy in 1978. Zhuang (2008) divided the Chinese migration to Southeast Asia into four waves. The fourth wave of Chinese migration to Southeast Asia constitutes a significant group of new Chinese immigration beginning in the 1980s.

Many researchers found distinctively different features between the new and old Chinese immigrants. Philip Kuhn described the Chinese new immigrants as the production of “new China”: “most of them are better educated, more skilled and more urbanized”. However, the “old immigrants” were described as a group of people making traditional-

style business practice and were highly reliant on native-place, dialect and kinship associations (Kuhn, 2008:322; Zhuang 2010). The new immigrants usually pursued chances to develop better opportunities instead of mere survival as the old wave of immigrants had. Zhuang also found that the globalization process also gave the new Chinese immigrants a floating character rather than just settling down to seek better opportunities. In the original migrant regions, most of the old immigrations were the metonym of “coolie trade” which originally came from a “qiao xiang” (diaspora village) in the southern coastal provinces, such as Guangdong, Fujian and Zhejiang. The new migrations are from almost all parts of China, and in recent years more and more Chinese migrants from the west and central provinces like Hunan, Sichuan and Hubei are involved in the wave of migration to Southeast Asia. (Zhuang, 2010)

Moreover, with the process of economic globalization which made the world connected, more and more Chinese people migrated to Thailand, especially to Northern Thailand with a strategic area of social, cultural and historical interest. Aranya (2015) points out that the megaprojects resulting from economic cooperation have stimulated increasing numbers of “overland” Chinese migrants. The flow of these new Chinese migrants are closely related to the “going out” policy and the various ways the Beijing and provincial governments have subsidised and supported the movement of the new trans-national Chinese diaspora (Yos, 2015). Nguyen Van Chinh (2018) explores the complexity of the new Chinese diaspora to CLMV countries within the context of China’s rising political and economic power in the region.

In recent years, increasing numbers of Chinese people immigrate to Chiang Mai to achieve business expansion, with less competition and social pressure, better environment and a cheaper international education resource compared to China. Because of these reasons, the number of new Chinese immigrants in Chiang Mai increased quickly. Most of “xin yimin” are students and their unaccompanied mothers, as well as businessman, trans-national workers and retiring long-stay old people. The number of Chinese students is at an all-time high, and includes kindergarten, primary school, middle school, university

and language school students. Since many students are very young, their mothers move to Chiang Mai to take care them. Apart from the students and their unaccompanied mothers, there are some Chinese companies or businessman who move to Chiang Mai and seek trans-national development, such as in a factory, tour company, import-export business, guest house, Chinese restaurants etc.

An analysis of the new Chinese immigrants in Chiang Mai, shows most of them are middle class of younger ages. Some of them prefer to change their life style by changing from the high pace and nervous life in China to a simple and leisurely living style in Chiang Mai. Some of them adventure abroad to make a fortune or create a better life, especially for those who were investment immigrants. They undertake business between China and Thailand, which makes them float between the two countries. The numbers of female “Xinyimin” in Chiang Mai is more than that of males, because many unaccompanied mothers take their children to study in Chiang Mai.

With the increase of “Xinyimin” in Chiang Mai, several Christian organizations have been set up with the aim of undertaking missionary work among these “Xinyimin”, they are Home of Love, Chiang Mai Huaren Jidu Church and Jehovah’s Witness. These three new-immigrant Chinese Christian organizations witness the Christian enchantment among Chinese “Xinyimin”.

The Home of Love is the first new-immigrant Chinese Christian Church in Chiang Mai. With the trend of educational cooperation between China and Thailand, the Chinese exchange students in Chiang Mai are increasing gradually. Pastor Wang set up Home of Love to conduct missionary work among the Chinese students in 2008, focus on student work and play a leading role in campus missions. He treats these Chinese students as his own children. He teaches English, cooks Chinese food, arranges holiday ceremonies and birthday parties for these Chinese students. The students feel the church is their second home. Inspired by the warmth and assistance from Pastor Wang, many Chinese students receive baptism and convert to Christianity. But the membership of The Home of Love is flexible because every year the graduating students go back to China and new students replace them

in the Church. From 2008 to 2015, the membership of The Home of Love was about 40 students. Because most of them are still students, The Home of Love doesn't receive devotion income, but the students usually buy some food to cook and share together on Friday evenings.

The Chiang Mai Huaren Jidu Church is derived from the Home of Love. Since 2012, many unaccompanied mothers joined the Home of Love which dramatically increased the membership. According to the ideas of different groups, the Home of Love is divided into a young student group and an adult group. The adult group developed very quickly and set up a new church named Chiang Mai Huaren Jidu Church in September 2015. The Church now has more than a hundred members. Its congregation includes a variety of age groups: children and their parents, young students, young adults, and seniors. The number of permanent members is about 60 people, and about 50 members are flexible because of their flexible new-migrant identity. The Church has now achieved financial independence through donations. Chiang Mai Huaren Jidu Church has established a strong leadership structure. In the beginning, the Church had no pastor of its own, so, a visiting pastor was invited from other churches to help the Church for one to two months. Now it has cultivated its own pastor. The Church attaches importance to Bible study, arranges different Bible study groups according to age and occupation, organizes different Chinese traditional culture ceremonies and activities to help young parents with child education. Chiang Mai Huaren Jidu Church also arranges many religious rites and lessons to help its members develop their Christian beliefs.

The Jehovah's Witness Chiang Mai provided missionary support to the Thai people, especially an ethnic group in North Thailand before 2010. But with the new Chinese immigrants increasing dramatically in Chiang Mai in recent years, Jehovah's Witness began missionary work in support of Chinese people. Jehovah's Witness Chiang Mai's Chinese worship is conducted at 4pm every Saturday, and now, they have more than one hundred members attend the Chinese meeting, and Chinese "Xinyimin" comprises about 50% percent. The leaders of Jehovah's Witnesses are Western foreigners who can speak fluent Chinese and usually, have been missionaries in China for several years

and familiar with Chinese culture and customs. “The Watchtower” is Jehovah’s magazine to teach and publish stories relevant to the Bible. The Jehovah’s Witnesses use door to door witnessing, usually working in pairs. They select some place where Chinese people enjoy hearing from missionaries, such as Chiang Mai University on Monday, Maya Shopping Mall on Wednesday, and Yunnan Market on Friday morning. Jehovah’s Witnesses refuse to celebrate non-biblical holidays. The Jehovah’s Witnesses also refuse to participate in military service, voting, and even saluting the flag.

Different studies have asserted different reasons as the answer for the religious enchantment in different countries. In this case, the reasons for Christian enchantment among the Chinese “Xinyimin” in Chiang Mai, despite being situated in a Buddhist country, are very different from former studies. In order to interpret this phenomenon, this article will start with an analysis of Chinese religious context, based on interviews with pastors of each Chinese Christian organization and Chinese “Xinyimin”, to conceptualize Chinese “Xinyimin”的 religious enchantment in Chiang Mai.

### **Context: Religion in China and Chinese Christian**

China has three prevalent traditional religions, known respectively as Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism, as well as “folk religion”, which involves ancestor worship. Among these Chinese religions, Confucianism plays an orthodox and central position in Chinese culture, representing Chinese culture and civilization. All the other religions, such as Daoism and Buddhism, had to adapt to the Confucian ethic in order to be accepted by the Chinese State and Chinese people. Although these religions are independent of each other, they have formulated an integrated instead of exclusive system, which is famously referred to as “three teachings are one”. It’s reflected in the integration of the religious doctrine and pluralist beliefs under the Chinese traditional culture. In this context, Chinese people insist on pluralistic religious doctrine and religious practices. Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism and other different folk religions work together to provide service to Chinese people according to their various religious needs and different circumstances.

The Chinese Government discouraged Chinese people to believe in any religion, and even banned all religions during the ten years of Cultural Revolution. But after the 1980s, the Chinese State lifted restrictions on religious activities, especially the activities that provide no threat to the stability of the State (Hunter, Alan and Chan, Kim-Kwong 1993), from then on, all religions seemed to be enchantment. Although many Chinese people declare they have no religion, they also claim to be very “religious”. The temples, whether Buddhist, Confucian or Taoist, are full of worshipful people wishing for guidance and inspiration in raising children, obtaining a good job, education, marriage etc.,

Apart from the traditional religions in China, Christianity developed very quickly after the 1980's. Yang (2005) and Bays (2003) describe the resurgence of Christianity among young Chinese intellectuals. There are two different types of Protestant churches in China: a church registered with the Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and autonomous Christian communities (House Churches). TSPM are “above ground” (Government approved) churches and House Churches are “underground” (Government sanctioned) churches. House Churches developed very quickly in China, but the membership of House Churches is difficult to determine. Because House Churches refuse to register with the Government and refuse to join the TSPM, the Chinese Government regards it as an illegal organization.

Yang provides social contextual factors for religious enchantment, such as the globalizing market and social pressure which produces internal anxiety, which then leads people to seek religion. Christianity is a source of the enhancement of a Chinese civic culture which lags the rapidly developing global market economy (Yang, 2012). They consciously try to re-fashion Chinese Christianity into a more modern and sophisticated lifestyle that can satisfy the aspirations of people living in a market-oriented culture (Cao, 2016).

In poor rural regions of China, Christians take the role of spiritual props for the poor people, interpreting the suffering, and giving poor peasants aspirations. With economic improvement and political changes, Christianity and believer groups have been extended from

rural areas and the poor ordinary people to elite Christians, placing emphasis on raising the quality of believing (Cao, 2013). In coastal cities, believers include middle class businessman and entrepreneurs who are supposed to understand that Christianity could connect with modernity, promoting economic development and political democracy. Cao noted these believers as “Cultural Christians” or “Laoban Christians” (Boss Christians) who advocate the enchantment of Christianity as their religious pride (Cao, 2016).

On the other hand, with the religious revival in China, the Chinese Government places stress on religious control actions in many ways in recent years. ‘Till now, the crosses on churches in Zhejiang Province were much less visible, and many house churches in China have been forced to disperse. Xi’s government has endeavored to connect the religious and Chinese traditional culture to support the legitimacy of the CCP and link the religions and culture to concepts of the “China Dream”. On the other hand, the Chinese Government has broadened the ideology campaign to restrict the influences of Western values, especially Western religion but to reinforce the perception of Asian religions, such as Buddhism and Taoism, in a strategy of expansion in Asian religion which might help to contain the spread of Western faiths like Christianity. The strategy has two meanings, one is that the Chinese Government intends to control the religions. The second, is that the Chinese Government intends to use Asian religions to contain the Western religions.

Yang (2012) finds that people in Mainland China do not have sufficient religious freedom. Christianity is a sensitive topic. On one hand, competition is very high in China, leading to people having to work hard to get more wealth opportunities which means they have less time for developing their beliefs. On the other hand, the Government does not encourage Chinese people to believe in any religion but Communism. As a result, the people who work in the Government or Party agencies, would not join in the activities of other religions, and most of the university students who want to have a stable job in the government would join the CCP. Even if the people have converted to Christianity, they would not reveal their Christian identity.

As above, many Chinese people declare that they are not members of a religion, but that they are “religious”. Christianity is an enchantment in China, but House Churches are restricted by China. So, why do “Xinyimin”, who come from a country which restricts religion, convert to Christianity in a Buddhism prevalent Thailand? Why the Christian enchantment among Chinese “Xinyimin” in Chiang Mai? These questions have been a valuable social topic.

### **Church Role and Religious Enchantment**

Based on interviewing the pastors of three Chinese Christian organizations, this paper found that the Churches take an important role in new Chinese immigrants’ religious conversion.

Among the three Chinese Christianity Churches in Chiang Mai, the Chiang Mai Huaren Jidu Church developed the most quickly. Through comparing analyses, this research found the following factors contributed to Chiang Mai Huaren Jidu Church’s development:

Bible Study. Chiang Mai Huaren Jidu Church pays more attention to arranging Bible study than the other two churches. Apart from Sunday worship, Chiang Mai Huaren Jidu Church also arranges a Bible study group for children, Youth Bible study group and Adult Bible study group. In each Bible study group, the church arranged the pastors or invited outside pastors to give directions in Bible studying and the members also supervised each other during their study. This kind of Bible study model prove to be effective and several members received baptism after a few days’ study. At the same time, Chiang Mai Huaren Jidu Church used modern media such as “We chat” to discuss and share their study experience during their studies.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses also pay attention to Bible study, but its study model is old-fashioned which is less attractive to Chinese people. Its study is restricted to the “The Watchtower” in Saturday worship day. Besides that, the Jehovah’s Witnesses carry out the “door knock” as missionaries. Each time two members of the Jehovah’s Witnessess set out to the place where Chinese people assemble to meet the missionaries.

The Home of Love congregation of youth and young students pays little time to Bible study, which makes the Home of Love work as a Chinese youth community. The youth assemble to cook and share their experience after dinner. Less Bible studies mean the connection between the church and its member is loose, which makes the church development slow.

Using Confucianism and Science in Bible Teaching. Confucianism plays an orthodox and central position in Chinese traditional religion and culture. The other Chinese traditional religions, such as Daoism and Buddhism, had to adapt to the Confucian ethic to be accepted by Chinese State and the Chinese people.

All the leaders and pastors of Chinese Huaren Jidu Church are Chinese, familiar with Chinese religion and culture. They usually teach from the Bible combined with Confucian morals, such as family relationship, monogamy etc. There are many mothers and their children in the church, so the church arranges lots of training courses and activities to help the young mother in setting good relationships with their children and to teach “mothers” to take care of their children both in health and education. The church also provides courses for the youth to teach them courtesy and morality. Through these activities, the members get better knowledge of Christianity, and some of them convert to Christianity later.

On the other hand, the Chinese government follows the “Marxist” ideology which is based on orthodox atheism and regards world religions as a trend of secularization caused by mobilization and scientific viewpoints which may change China to be a secular society. Base on atheism, the Chinese Government has formulated the education system under scientific atheism. Every Chinese student has to study Darwin’s evolution theory in their middle school, it contradicts Christianity. So, it’s very hard for Chinese to believe the Bible account that God created the universe and humanity in seven days. In the Chiang Mai Huren Jidu Church, several pastors with outstanding physics backgrounds, use their experiences to combine the science to teach the Bible, to explain why God used seven days to create humans, and to explain how the order of creationism is in accordance with scienc-

tific explanations. This can make Chinese immigrants accept the Bible easier, and subsequently convert to become an actual Christian.

Chinese Traditional Culture. Chinese society is a society based on kin. International immigrants may disconnect from Chinese society and lose most of the reliable kin relationships indirectly. Both Home of Love and Chiang Mai Huaren Jidu Church attach importance to Chinese traditional culture. These two Churches will arrange an abundance of activities during Chinese traditional holidays, such as Spring holiday, Mid-Autumn festival, the dragon boat festival etc. These church activities enlarge the new immigrant's family relationship. In these two churches, members call themselves brothers and sisters, which can give them the lost psychological family-belonging sense. Apart from that, there are lots of Christian doctrine which teaches members to act in moral ways. Churches give their members lots of help in different areas and also encourage their members to help each other. These reliable relationships give new immigrants a sense of safety and support. For these reasons, Chinese immigrants enjoy participating in the activities of their adopted Church.

The Jehovah's Witnesses, on the other hand, hold that to be a Christian, one should strictly abide by the rule of the Bible and that Christians cannot celebrate holidays which are not in the Bible. These rules would be very strict for a Chinese immigrant. It is just like cutting the relationship between them and their Chinese culture. It would be hard for Chinese people to accept these strict rules. At the same time, Jehovah's Witnesses are a foreign missionary group, most of the missionaries being foreigners. Although some missionaries have spent several years in China and can speak Chinese fluently, they are foreigners which have different cultures, and this is a great barrier for the Chinese in accepting the words of their missionaries.

In comparison, both Home of Love and Chiang Mai Huaren Jidu Church pay attention to the use of Chinese traditional culture to attract new Chinese immigrants. So, these two Churches can attract more Chinese people easier than the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Church service. Chiang Mai Huaren Church gives the new Chinese immigrants lots of assistance even before they come to Thailand. For example, the church assists them in renting a house, applying for school for their children, visa issue, buying cars, information services and so on. After they reach Chiang Mai, the Church gives them a warm welcome and provides them with access to a Thai language training service. Also, there are lots of choice in different courses for young parents to cultivate their children, family activities, medical treatment, psychological courses, Chinese traditional holiday activities etc. These Church services are useful and helpful in enriching Chinese migrants' family lives and attracting them to join the Church.

Prayer and religious rites. In traditional Chinese religions, most Chinese people have a mix of religions, meaning that they would seek the intercession of a different god for different purposes. For Chinese people, religion may be related to "asking various god(s) for protection". For example, they would prepare different worship for each god, Guanyin for building a family, Guangong for wealth, Luxing for career, ancestors for health and everything in one's home and so on. These alternative prayers are made at a different church or place of worship. But when the new Chinese immigrant moves to Thailand, they will face a different god and lose the places of worship used previously. On one hand, migration cuts off the ways new Chinese immigrants worshipped before, whilst, on the other hand in the new culture, prayers can be made at any time or place. This flexibility contributes to religious conversion among the new Chinese immigrants.

In this regard, "Xinyimin" original religious beliefs and practices are broken by the immigrant being provided with an opportunity for religious reconstruction based on Christianity. The Chinese Churches pay attention to prayer. The pastors pray for members and teach them how to pray. The prayer rite can take place anywhere and for everything. If the prayer is answered, they will be more confident in Jesus and be encouraged to offer more prayers and convert to be a Christian in the end.

From the analysis above, the Chinese Christian churches work as Chinese Christian communities; they provide the new Chinese

immigrants with helpful assistance, such as sharing information, Thai language teaching and employment opportunities. Apart from the material assistance, the churches also support their members in spiritual aspects, give them warm caring and share prayers. These efforts help new Chinese immigrants adapt and acculturate to the new country, profoundly.

The research indicated that the Chinese Christian Churches take an important role in new Chinese immigrant religious enchantment. It helps the new Chinese immigrant enlarge their family relationship, provide them with a social platform in a new unfamiliar place. Moreover, the Chinese Christian Church is a spirit home for the new Chinese immigrant. The economic development in China in recent years has pushed China into a moral dilemma. The Chinese Christian Church, combines the Chinese traditional culture and ethics with the Bible doctrine, teaches members thanksgiving, business ethics, family values and so on, opens classes for members in various training courses to help members set up a healthy and happy family and to give them a spirit home. The Christian members believe the relationships within the church are simple and reliable. Through helping each other, the members also create a healthy cooperative relationship. Members can get some useful information and even business opportunities. All of these church activities attract the new Chinese immigrants. Those who have converted to Christianity will also practice evangelism with the new comer and enhance the religious enchantment.

### **New Chinese immigrant's Religious Conversion**

This research analyses the “Xinyimin”’s religious conversion process and determines the reasons for their religious conversion through interviews with the churchgoers among the three Chiang Mai-based Chinese Christian organizations.

### **Rethinking Religion**

In this study, there was evidence to support the fact that different churchgoers experienced different religious conversion processes. Some participants were prepared to engage in religious conversion without

much hesitation, whilst other churchgoers struggled to reach the point where they accepted the principles before deciding to adopt Christianity. Through interviews of the new Chinese immigrants in Chinese Christian Churches, this research found some common factors that impeded their conversion to Christianity.

The first factor is the Chinese atheist Education System. In the Chinese education system, most Chinese people grow up under the Marxist atheist ideology. From primary school to university, the student must study the prescribed politics and science. The teaching of Darwin's Theory of Evolution is something that especially undermines Christian beliefs. The atheist educational system violates Christianity and most Chinese people grow up to be non-religious. As an example, Ms. Wang, shared her experiences in how she conquered the challenges and converted to Christianity as follows:

*(Wang), 'According to my prior education in China, I think Christianity is unbelievable and is far from us. I even don't believe the pastor's kindness and helping is just for offerings, I think their giving on purpose to attract more members. But after I reached Chiang Mai, Uncle Gan give me so much help and they never gave me any stress to attend Church activities. They just helped me, I was moved. But my conversion to Christianity is not merely because of being moved, I just wanted to find the answer in the Bible, and then I changed my ideas gradually'.*

Several other churchgoers made similar remarks to those of Ms. Wang, specifically that their atheist education in mainland China was one of the initial barriers for them to convert to Christianity. They struggled to convert to Christianity for about a year and embraced it after a considerable time spent in Bible study. Several churchgoers were dubious and cautious in the first stage of conversion because of their education in China, but they were also curious. After a period of observation, they recognized that the church and the churchgoers were committed to show Jesus's love, which led them to believe that they had met "the true God" upon whom they can rely.

Christianity was taken as a Western wave of ideas in China before 1979. After 1979, with the economic reform and open-door policy, Christianity begun to grow in China (Hunter and Chan, 1993). Most Chinese people had grown up under the Marxist atheist ideology since the Communist Party had taken power (Yang, 1999). In this regard, many new Chinese immigrants have strong prejudice against Christianity when they first encounter Christianity in Chiang Mai. But after they have spent some time with Church members, they realize that the church members are nice people with sincere devotion, they began to embrace the Christianity ideology and then progress to complete the religious conversion later.

This research found that there are some challenges to prevent new Chinese immigrants from converting to Christianity. These challenges include the traditional Chinese culture, nationalism and scientism. But the Chinese Christian Churches in Chiang Mai can reconcile these challenges by combining traditional Chinese culture, putting some stress in engaging in Chinese activities and using science in Bible teaching. Churches provide an authority platform to help the new Chinese immigrant passing on certain of their cherished Confucianist values, such as family and ascetic value. As a result, new Chinese immigrants have opportunities to re-think religion in the new circumstances.

### **Religious conversion as a process of “Finding Truth”**

In the first stage, the new Chinese immigrants encountered Christianity in Chiang Mai and they grew to appreciate a range of assistance from the churches. Some new Chinese immigrants decided to convert to a Christian way of thinking knowing that they can give up believing in Jesus in the event that they discover it's not good to accept Christianity. In this thinking, many Chinese got involved with Christianity gradually, furthered by study in order to get a deeper understand of it.

Pastor Kong named this Christian study journey as “led by God”. Almost all of them say “thanks for god's leadership” or “god's arrangement” after they become a Christian. During the religious conversion process, the following question arose: why and how did they decide

to become a Christian after the first stage of struggle? This question becomes more personal and complex. These new Chinese immigrants lack direct connection with their home country, they are usually more open to new ideas, and maybe they need to get a “new identity” to get on well with their work or study in the new society. This research found that the new Chinese immigrants’ religious conversion display in a new aspect. Ms. Xiao, a nineteen-year old girl, is an exchange student of Chiang Mai University who grew up in Mainland China. She thought that religion didn’t contain any truth before she came to Chiang Mai. After she reached Chiang Mai and was exposed to the freedom of religious practice in the city, Ms. Xiao gradually came to the point of view that “Christianity is truth”. She converted to Christianity because she believes that Christianity is more than a placebo. She describes her religious conversion process as “a search for the truth”. She says, “the more I studied the Bible, the more questions others asked me, I found Christianity is the truth, and other religions are not. What’s more, I think, what I believe is more than a religion. It’s a belief in a living God”. Yang’s (1998) ethnographic research about Chinese Christians in the USA, indicates that “Chinese immigrants’ spiritual demands cannot be satisfied in China because of the restriction of religious practice and beliefs”. The state’s structural-level political circumstance in China impels Chinese immigrants to reinterpret their religious recognition so as to seek the truth.

All the narratives of the new Chinese immigrants who convert to Christianity, have radically criticized the Chinese traditional religions. They describe their religious conversion as a “truth seeking process”. But some of them declare that they can accept some traditional Chinese religious practice by interpreting the Chinese ethnic and religious identity, secularizing Chinese traditional religion as Chinese culture, and secularizing ancestor worship as a kind of Chinese traditional culture of respecting senior persons.

Chinese Christian churchgoers infuse Chinese ethnic symbols into the practice of Christianity, describing their religious conversion as a process of “finding truth”. They think the Chinese traditional religions are false and that the Chinese people who follow the traditional Chinese religions do not understand their religions. In their search

to “find the truth”, they secularize their ethnic practices but deny the religious practices which related to ghosts and deity. The new Chinese immigrant creates a kind of “Chinese Christian practice” in Chiang Mai. The descriptions also show us the secularization of ethnic culture at both the individual level and the church organization level. So, the Chinese churches not only protect religions, but also provide a social space for the new Chinese immigrant to negotiate their ethnic and Christian identity.

**New Chinese immigrant churchgoers and religious enchantment** It is worth saying that in the process of the new Chinese Christians “seeking the truth” in Christianity, the elder members of the Churches give them special encouragement, especially the pastors who instruct the new churchgoer to pursue “the truth” in Jesus until they mature with the Bible and are strong in their faith. Usually, after the new convert grows to be a true Christian, they become enthusiastic to proclaim their Christianity. Just as Yue said:

*Now I realize that to be a true Christian, you should not only believe in yourself, you should introduce Jesus to the people around you. I now can understand Uncle Gan and Aunt Gan well, I can understand why they devout themselves to Jesus, and why they always help others to know Jesus, it is only because they are true Christian.*

Ms. Yue grew to be a Christian. She defines her religious conversion as a “seeking truth” process, what’s more, she realizes that a real Christian is not only one who believes the ascription of the Bible, she regards that a Christian should also devoutly practice Christian evangelism. Also, many cases indicate that the members of the church usually take their family and introduce friends to the church. Now, there is a procedure of “new person introduction” in Sunday service. Every Sunday, there are new faces which are invited to church by the old church members. Through this, the new Chinese immigrants impel the religious enchantment.

### **Finding**

Although, the first attraction for new Chinese immigrants is probably the warm heart of Christians, what is the deeper reason to explain the religious conversion? Through analysis of these reasons drawn from the descriptions provided by the new immigrants, this paper found the following points.

#### **Re-Identity of Chinese Morals through Christianity**

There is a growing number of researchers who have demonstrated the moral and spiritual crisis in China today. The Chinese government has lost its authority gradually due to many cases of corruption and scandals which involved the party leaders. At the same time, the egoism, materialism and opportunism seem to fill in the moral vacuum in China. Although the opening and reformation of the market have made China a dynamic economy with rapid development, the corruption and the trust crisis among people have become a serious problem. In traditional Chinese culture, trust is a factor of importance in both social and economic systems. So, it is a big mission to attempt to restore peoples' trust in the society. To solve this problem, there are some suggestions, including from the top Chinese leader, President Xi. He advocates that religions can work as one possible source in the reconstruction of a new morality. This is one reason that the Chinese government has given more opportunity to religions in China and religious re-enchantment in contemporary China.

Chinese people both in China and overseas are feeling the sense of a lack of trust. The Chinese Christian Church in Chiang Mai can give them a sense of home and belonging; it is a feeling of security as in one's own home which has many warm-hearted sisters and brothers with morals. It is a fantastic feeling which attracts them to be a member of the congregation through a moral re-identity process. Through religious conversion, the new Chinese immigrant could establish a new Chinese Christian identity with an enhanced moral foundation. This is supported in different conversion stories from several interviewees. Such as:

Yue, who shared her reason for converting to Christianity as:

“before I decided to convert to Christianity, I tried to finish reading the Bible. During reading, I was thinking “what does the Bible teach us to do, good things or bad? After reading, although I could not understand all of the content, I now know that the Bible teaches us to understand our lives and how to live and teaches us to do good deeds and to be moral persons. So, I decided to convert to Christianity.”

Pastor Kong: “As a Christian, we should notice what we can do, what we cannot do. We cannot cheat and cannot engage in other immoral things”

From several new Chinese Christian immigrants’ conversion stories, this research found that the new Chinese immigrants use a serial process of changing their personality to describe their new moral Chinese Christian identity. This study found that Christianity can facilitate the association between the new Chinese immigrants and the reconstruction of trust between people. The brotherhood and sisterhood between churchgoers in the Chinese Christian Church, can balance the absence of relationship between people in modern society and meet the needs of people in their emotional, spiritual and psychological life. The religious conversion is a moral re-identity process for “Xinyimin”. The new Chinese immigrant’s identity and spiritual faith in Christianity grows more maturely by blending Chinese traditional views and Christian morals.

More importantly, many parents in Chinese Christian churches, use Christian morality in teaching their children to discipline themselves. For example, a pastor may teach children: “as a Christian child, you have to be honest, do your best and be a good example to other children who are not Christian”. Churches also use Christian morality in guiding the children to refuse sexual intercourse before marriage, and maintain one husband, one wife in married couples. By using the Christian moral teaching, church members set up a feeling of upgrading member’s moral standards. Through conversion to Christianity, new Chinese immigrants redefine morality and set up trust connections between members and churches.

### **Modernization, Immigrant with religious conversion**

Immigration cuts off Chinese immigrants' kinship network, but, at the same time Christianity gives them a new family relationship. In China, the traditional society is an extended kinship network with obvious family identity, hierarchical intergenerational relations, and moral obligations of filial piety (Cheng and Chan 2006; Cohen 1990; Watson 2004). One important cultural dynamic of Chinese familial characteristics is ancestor worship, which embraces activities which include a series of rituals, practices, and beliefs that focus on the perpetuation of the family line and reverence for the ancestors (Hu 2016; Yang and Hu 2014). Kinship membership, especially for the man, is regarded as the continuing family line which contains the crucial intergenerational ties between the living and the deceased (Feucht wang 2001; Weller 1987). Wang (2015) finds that huge labor immigration from China, along with lower commitment to ancestral worship, have created a cultural space for Christianity in China. This study also found that new Chinese immigrants, were separated from kinship practices especially ancestor worship, but the Chinese Christian Church in Chiang Mai, on the other hand gave them an alternative Christian family gathering. Ms. Gao's religious conversion story says:

I never thought I would take part in Christian practices when I was in China. My family is a big family, and the ancestor worship is the most important family ritual. On every big festival, our whole family usually joins at my elder brother's house, and my elder brother will lead the ancestor worship. For me, now, it is a modern society, most of my family members are atheists and the ancestor worship is just a family reunion practice and a way of paying respect to the deceased.

I never criticized the ancestor worship until after I took my daughter to study in Chiang Mai. When we began our lives here, I felt very lonely. I cannot speak English nor Thai language, the very easy things in China seemed very difficult for me in Chiang Mai. What's more is, we are far from our family, I missed my family in China especially during the festivals. Chiang Mai Huren Jidu Church made me feel warm as well as being a part of a big family. Many sisters

and brothers helped me and kept me away from my fears. Although I cannot stay with my own family, I find another big family. The mutual belief join us together. We have the same father, we begin to have our new family practices and refuse to attend the ancestor worship.

As Ms. Gao says, when they stay in China, they have to join the ancestor worship as a family practice. These rituals give Ms. Gao a sense of family which reduce their need for a wider Christian family. There are two important pieces of information in her story, one relates to modernization, and the other is the influence of immigration, together, these two factors open a new space for religious conversion. At first the modernization can weaken the importance of ancestor worship as a religion, and regard it as a family activity for respect of ancestors and construct a sense of family. In addition, the immigrants are less committed to ancestral worship, which creates the cultural space for Christianity, mainly because Christianity can open a new way for immigrants to set up the meaning of family.

According to the study, the new Chinese immigrants move to Chiang Mai which is far from their family in China. The Christian Churches, on the other hand, give them a new perspective of family relationship in Christianity. Moreover, all members who have converted to Christianity, say that they will not attend the ancestor worship again when they go back to China to visit their family. In this regard, this study suggests that modernization and international immigration contribute two important factors that give a new perspective of religious conversion.

Christianity can solve psychological problems caused by modernization. China has undergone various changes since the modernization movement began in 1978. These dramatic changes cover the social, cultural, and economic areas which impact the Chinese people's daily lives greatly. Although the modernization process propelled China's rapid development in economics, it was accompanied by more and more Chinese people suffering from psychological problems. According to related studies, much of the literature suggested that the modernization process in China could transform and destroy the social class structure, the traditional value system and give rise to

anomalies in social behavior. The anomaly social behavior reflects that the Chinese people are suffering a variety of psychological problems as well as the moral crises inherent in the Chinese modernization process. Nowadays, Chinese people suffer from psychological problems, such as depression, dissatisfaction towards unfair social issues, and the prevalence of anxiety which is inherent in the modernization process.

The economic and social changes inherent modernity create obvious social stress and rupture. On one hand, the competition is increasingly dramatically, on the other hand many people are alienated in the form of loneliness and helplessness. High lay-off rates and low income among people in rural areas lead to serious social discrimination and a lack of health care and guaranteed income of the disadvantaged social groups. Social problems like these give rise to a loss of social safety and security. All of these lead to a whole set of social anomalies, such as the prevalence of money worship, the breakup of family and loss of family values. As a result, there is an increasing prevalence of depression among a great number of Chinese people. These depression sensations linked to modernization affect individualism directly. Moreover, the individualization, puts pressure on people's emotions resulting in shifting values and social practices which may include both inappropriate concealment and display. Religion, on the other hand, can provide spiritual peace for people who are experiencing problems or who are disillusioned with the social variants.

The prevalence of nerves and depression in Chinese people can be found in many aspects. Many new Chinese immigrants have talked about the differences in road traffic within China and Thailand. Although the roads in China are more modern and broader, driving in China is a headache, because drivers in China are always in a hurry, but the drivers in Thailand are more polite and patient, and they often give way to you, so although Thai people drive quickly, there are less traffic accidents. This demonstrates the impact on individuals caused by high competition and stress.

Another problem of which the Chinese immigrant in Chiang Mai complains regularly is the education system in China. They claim that their children are unhappy in China and have heavy homework loads imposed. Apart from study in the school, the students also have

to attend to different classes of interest and cram classes. The young students face great competition to study in a better school and better class. As a result, most young students do not have much interest in study. But they feel very happy when they study in Thailand with more manageable homework loads. As an example, Ms. Li states:

Chinese society is full of competition. Young students must study hard to pass an examination to a better school to please their parents. At the same time, in China, the students can only study in the school located in the same region as their residence. As a result, the prices of houses around good schools are very expensive. So, parents are under pressure to buy a house near the school, so that their children can have opportunities to study in the school which they aim for.

For these reasons, Chinese parents usually feel stressed and unhappy as well. In order to give their children the opportunity to study in a good school, many people work hard to buy the house near the school. There are many Chinese parents, who, after examining the differences between life in Chiang Mai and life in China, feel too tired to face the high competition and stress in China and decide live an easy life in Chiang Mai which gives them opportunity to open their mind to Christianity. Furthermore, Christianity can help them re-recognize their psychological problems and meet their need for psychological and spiritual health, especially when confronting a variety of problems inherent in the modernization program in China, including increasing marketization, rapid social transition, and emerging social problems.

### **Re-define Gender under Christianity**

Gender paradox is obvious in Chiang Mai Chinese Christian Churches. It seems that women show more enthusiasm in church's activities in Chiang Mai as well as other Christian Churches in different places around the world. It is easy to find that females make up the majority of members in Chiang Mai Christian Churches. In the Home of Love, girls make up about 70 % of attendance. In Chiang Mai Huraren Jidu Church, there are 126 registered members in the "Wechat Group" and women make up 71% of the group. In the Jehovah's Witness, the women members are about 58% in proportion.

Although females comprise the majority of members in these Chinese Christian churches and show great enthusiasm in participation in evangelicalism, there are no female pastors or elders in these three Chinese immigrant Christian churches in Chiang Mai. Men dominate the eldership or leadership of churches; all the senior pastors and elder pastors are male. They make all the important decisions, such as church missionary work, development strategy, financial issues, recruitment, co-pastor, cooperation with other churches, supervision of prayer meetings and other church activities; preaching and other important church work is led by male pastors. Women usually work at “Home making” church duties, such as cooking, cleaning, poetry, choir, taking care of children, worship. Women in the churches work to create a homely feeling for the members. In a word, in the Chinese Christian Churches in Chiang Mai, men express a form of hierarchy, rationality, control and exclusivism, while women create a vulnerable religious body. In Chiang Mai’s case, women outnumber males by 2:1. Most of them are young, middle class, and well-educated; some of them run businesses successfully as well as taking care of their children, so what attracts them to become affiliated with a patriarchal church? As Fällman put it: “It is surprising that young well-educated women in contemporary China, brought up in a secular and comparatively equal context, can voluntarily choose to join a religious congregation where they are not equal to men”. Many previous studies have focused on “the gender paradox”: why so many women have been attracted to a patriarchal religion which espouses a doctrine of male dominance? (Bernice Martin 2003; Brusco 1995; Cucchiari 1990; Ozorak 1996; Walter & Davie 1998). This study interviews pastors and church members, to try to analyse this phenomenon.

Gender ideas in China. Nowadays in China, gender issues are mixed with Confucians, Social/ late social and femininity. Apart from the resurgent Confucian values in some different social segments, the socialist and late socialist gender ideologies have persisted in recent China. During the Maoist-socialist era (1949-1976), women were given equal rights to men in the spheres of politics, labor, and education through top-down legislation. They were encouraged by the Chinese State to conduct works previously reserved for men (Yang 1999), on the other hand, in the home, women continue to play the

inherited, traditional mother role (Yang 1999). During the marketization era (1978-now), the previously discarded ideas about gender made a comeback. Femininity was emphasized as a characteristic of women, and the thinking that “women belong at home” returned. Since the 1990s, the rate of women’s participation in the labor force declined (Rofel 1999), Yang (1999), put it that femininity in China emphasised consumerist culture. In a reconciliation, the Chinese State encourages women to compete in the market, and to cultivate their ‘quality’ (素质suzhi) by raising their self-respect (自尊zizun), self-confidence (自信zixin), self-reliance (自立zili) and self-strength (自强ziqiang) (Jacka 2006). In the family law aspect, the Chinese traditional kinship system is replaced by the relations classified by blood and marriage. The authority of the father was weakened, with the establishment of gender equality, man’s superiority is reduced and women get more respect. As a result, with the resurgence of Confucianism, the emphasis on women’s public image and feminism has created an ‘identity crisis’ for Chinese woman.

In China, Cao Nanlai (2006) characterizes the practical, spiritual and theological gender role of gender as: “the number of women is much more than men in church, but it is the men who take on a formal leadership role and are entitled to make the moral decisions. Women are to carry out ‘homemaking’ duty in church, to clean and cook to create a family church atmosphere. Man is favored in textually central church activities such as Bible study sessions and publishing work, while woman usually enjoy activities such as spiritual cultivation meetings and prayer sessions. In this regard, Cao ascribes woman role in the Wenzhou case with many parallels in the patriarchal Confucian tradition which places a similar emphasis on “submission, subordination, purity, piety and domesticity.

Most members in Chinese Christian Churches in Chiang Mai are mothers who bring their children to study in Chiang Mai. They are young educated and independent mothers. It is interesting to find that some men follow their wife to church and convert to Christianity in the end. By analyzing the interviews of women in Chinese Christianity Churches, this study found that under the Chinese Confucianism resurgence context, Chinese women do not feel the church

is patriarchal. It is also suggested that through religious conversion, Christianity has been central to the production, reproduction, transformation, and negotiation of gender identity between patriarchy and feminism. This study suggest that Chinese women are attracted to the patriarchal churches for the following reasons.

“Woman community”. The study reveals that, some women join church activities because they can get support for their roles in family, community life and rearing children in church. The atmosphere of the church is like a big family, the pastor and his wife are always ready to help the members. Church members also take the church as their home, they clean the church, prepare the Chinese food for all the members every Sunday, and celebrate the Chinese festivals together.

Churches improve member’s family relationship. This study finds that Christian morality teaching can improve family relationship, help couples to reconcile and decrease problems arising from social modernization. Studies suggest that many church women assert that Christianity can promote their marital commitment and satisfaction. For example, in Chiang Mai Huaren Jidu Jiaohui, the leading pastor couple and all the elder pastor couples are the best model for the young couples. The pastors’ wives act as the co-pastor in church. The pastors always give enough respect to their wives and the wives always support their husband whether in regular duties of a pastor or in daily life, and never argue. However, wives are further and specifically instructed to submit to their husbands and husbands are called to lead and love their wives as they love themselves.

Chiang Mai Huaren Jidu Jiaohui teach members to rely on God, study the Bible, and learn to pray to solve family problems. Churches use Christian marriage morals to help members to solve the marriage ethic problem, teach them to pray and invite the husbands to attend church, emphasizes on women’s submission to husband and husband’s love for his wife. Through these courses, many female members provide feedback that their family relationship have improved greatly, So, what factors lead to devout church attendance? Although Christian marriages are based on submission or traditional gender roles, this appears to have a positive impact on marriage instead of a nega-

tive effect. This research also suggests that the same religious belief is an ideal between marriage partners. For Chinese men, they enjoy to continue their traditional hierarchy status, accepting women's "submission, subordination" to their husbands to embrace their family happiness.

Through interview, this study concludes that these three churches use the Bible as a foundation to explain the patriarchal leadership. At the same time, as the members are new Chinese immigrants which retain some Confucianist traditional context, instead of feeling that female is inferior to male, many female members feel they get more respect in church, and church treats them with love. This also means, that the female members prefer more psychological comfort than leadership power. The study further suggests that Chinese Christian churches in Chiang Mai have patriarchal gender values prevalent where both pastors as well as members use the Bible to explain "Gender paradox", but they disregard female inferiority in church. They use love and the same title to balance hierarchy and women use love to remove inferior status.

Woman and Christianity enchantment. Stark and Wang (2015) find that Christianity grows among a network of women who have lost their ritual ties to the past and the patriarchal hierarchies. Although, women are sub-leaders in Church, they take an important role in religious enchantment. Many women take their children, husband and parents to church. They also invite their friends and newcomers to join the worship or church activities. Many women in the church said they want their children to marry a Christian when they grow up. It is interesting to find that women of churches are devoted to proclaiming Christianity to others. Just as Ms Yue describes:

After I converted to be a Christian, I gradually understand why church leader has passion towards preaching. I understand that, it is a duty of a true Christian to let the non-Christian know the true God.

Although women are sub-leaders in patriarchal hierarchy churches in Chiang Mai, they are more enthusiastic in joining church's activities and Christian enchantment. They regard that their sub-leader status

is a kind of different work contribution. Christian church also creates equal atmosphere for members. Christian love lets female members feel respected. Women also endeavor to take her husband and family to church which can also expand a religious community and improve their marriage satisfaction.

### **Conclusion and further research**

Modernization and immigration give “Xinyimin” more opportunity for religious conversion and religious enchantment. Chiang Mai is an open city which allows the Chinese immigrants to have more opportunity to know and contact with Christians than China. Many Chinese immigrants describe that they did not pay attention to Christianity when they were in China because of the Chinese government’s restrictions on religion. In Chiang Mai, new Chinese immigrants have more opportunity to expose to religion and they have more free time, so they have more opportunity to be involved in religion. While migration destroys Xinyimin’s original religious worship, it gives more space for Christianity development. “Xinyimin” does not use Christianity only in solving the problems associated with modernization and psychology, such as tension, but also in re-establishing moral profile in Christianity as well. Xinyimin’s religious conversion can be explained as a “finding truth” process. Chinese Christian churches take an important role in religious enchantment. The new Chinese immigrants are attracted to the church naturally and easily. Christian church works as a family community where members treat each other as brothers and sisters. The church provides them with the sense of “a new home”. They feel these “sisters” and “brothers” are kind and warm hearted which makes them feel willing to be involved in church activities. Their religious participation process is their religious conversion process with fully use of Chinese language in teaching allows them to have no barrier in understanding the Bible doctrine. Bible teaching which combines traditional Chinese morals with the science-based explanations of the Bible makes the new Chinese immigrants feel that Christianity is not against Chinese culture.

Women outnumber men in Chiang Mai Chinese Christian churches. In China, women are in the Confucian, socialism and sexism

environment, but after joining Christian churches, they find family connection and are able to improve their family relationship through Christian morals and can take great role in Christian enchantment.

The obvious characteristic of new Chinese immigrants is their flexible identity. For them, the most reliable economic resource is still in China which means that, although they stay in Chiang Mai, they still have regular contact with people in China. Because of the Chinese Christian enchantment in Chiang Mai, the interaction between Chinese Christians in Thailand and China will be an interesting topic for the following study. Besides, house church in China is considered illegal, but most Chinese Christian church is still house church, the Chinese government's attitude towards the Chinese Christian will be a subsequent study of this research.

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