

“Going Home is Not What I Thought It Would Be”: The Unique Challenges Faced by Returnees

Pete

George represents many Chinese students who become Christians while studying in a Western country. He believed in Jesus after spending time in a vibrant campus ministry and attending church and a Bible study in English. A few years later, George returned to China and found it was harder than he ever imagined to keep his faith. His job requires long hours and involves corrupt practices that seem impossible to avoid. His parents are pushing him into marriage with a non-Christian woman, and even if he had any time on Sunday he can't find a church where he feels comfortable. George is seriously thinking of giving up on the faith he found in the West.¹

Students who have become Christians while overseas face challenges when they return to China in the areas of family relationships, employment, and church. These challenges are so severe that it is estimated up to 80 percent of them will abandon their faith within a year of returning to China.²

Cultural values and cultural distance

Why is it so hard for returnees to continue in their faith after returning home to China? I suggest that the chief cause is a conflict of cultural values that has developed because they responded to the gospel and were disciplined in a Western cultural context and are unable to adapt their faith to the cultural context of China.

Culture has been described as the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes one group of people from another.³ Cultural distance is the difference in cultural values between two groups of people.⁴ Cultural values are acquired in childhood through a

process called *conditioning*, which relies on positive/negative reinforcement by family and society.⁵ Children are not conscious that they are being conditioned, and what they absorb in the process is taken to be the correct, moral, and appropriate way to think and act.

I believe that the key cultural value impacting discipleship of Chinese students is the difference between individual and group orientation, also called individualism and collectivism.⁶ Chinese students who have grown up in China have spent their formative years in a group-oriented culture.⁷

Group-oriented culture

A group-oriented culture shapes a person's identity so that it comes from their membership and role in a group (e.g., the family, a village, or a work team). Group-oriented people subconsciously believe their own survival and wellbeing depend on the success

of their group, so individual needs are sacrificed for the benefit of the group. Group members think in terms of we and us, not in terms of I or me. Interdependence and harmony between group members are highly valued and relationship is more important than truth.⁸ Most Chinese students have grown up in closely enmeshed relationships with their family members and have learnt to cooperate with their relatives (and later with their classmates) to ensure that the group does well—ensuring success for all.

Leaving these tightly interconnected relationships to study in a foreign country is difficult for group-oriented Chinese students. The vacuum of close relationships they experience when first moving overseas is probably one of the main reasons that many of them find Christian churches and fellowships so appealing. Their need to be part of a group and connect to others makes Christian community and the gospel very attractive.⁹ Many responses to the



gospel message are perhaps motivated by a need to belong and identify with a group where they can care and be cared for.

At the same time, many of their thought patterns and their understanding of the world are challenged by the experience of living in a foreign country and studying in a Western institution. In China, tradition is valued and harmony, within the community and amongst teachers and classmates, is important. Individual thinking and presenting a critical point of view are seen as dangerous challenges to the authority and the well-being of society.¹⁰

Individual-oriented culture

When they move overseas to the West, students discover they are in a place where individual thought is valued, where critical thinking and arguing your point are rewarded, and copying from others is frowned upon. Whereas in the past good grades depended on the ability to memorise information and reproduce it on a test, now they need to understand and apply the information. In China, quoting the official line and copying from the experts were rewarded; now they are in a place where it is punished as plagiarism.¹¹ This is often a great shock to the newly arrived student, although most adapt very well and are transformed by the experience. They discover that they are able to think critically, have their own ideas and opinions, and they are able to explore many things that were previously considered off-limits. It is often at this time of emotional, intellectual, and cultural upheaval that they come across the message of the gospel and a Christian community that encourages them to critically study the Bible, ask questions, and make decisions based on what they learn. In China, decisions of this magnitude are made in consultation with the group (family) and with approval of the group leader (parent),¹² but while overseas, family are far away, exert little influence, and cannot provide the kind of connectedness that the student needs and the Christian community displays.

Although a church or student fellowship in a Western country is very much a group that exhibits many characteristics of a collective, it is also often a group that has been established by individual-oriented people and exists in an

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individual-oriented culture. Discipleship is contextualized to the surrounding culture¹³ and it is most likely that the new Chinese believer will be disciplined in a Western individual-oriented context. An individually-oriented person identifies primarily with self, relating to *me* and *I*. They subconsciously believe that the needs of the individual take precedence over the needs of the group. Independence, self-reliance, and taking care of one's self are valued. Individuals may choose to join a group but it doesn't form part of their identity and they can easily leave the group again whenever it suits them.¹⁴

Discipleship in an individual-oriented society usually starts with the individual—*me*. *I* recognize my sin, *I* repent of my sin, *I* ask God to forgive my sin because Jesus died for *me* and *I* believe in Jesus. This is all theologically correct, but typically this is a journey the individually-oriented person makes on his or her own and then announces to family and friends. This is acceptable in an individual-oriented culture because faith/religion is considered a personal and private affair. Family and friends may mock, they may resist being proselytised themselves, but the new Christian is allowed to have his or her personal faith.¹⁵

After responding to the gospel message, new believers are disciplined in how to live as a Christian. They are encouraged to attend a church and fellowship, to be generous with their resources, and to look for ways to serve their church. This is the community aspect that is often so attractive to international students. However, within this community there will be an emphasis on developing faith as an individual. As the Bible is taught and explained, it is applied to the context of a student-focused ministry in an individual-oriented society in a modern Western city. There will be an emphasis on personal

holiness expressed by personal Bible reading, reflection, and prayer. They will be persuaded to stand up for the truth, even if it impacts relationships. They will be encouraged to build up their knowledge of the Bible and (Western) theology.

However, although they are encouraged to attend church and a study group, there is often limited teaching about the purpose and meaning of church. They will observe a lack of commitment by some, and the common practice of moving from church to church to find “the church that suits me.” They will experience church in a society where it is free and legal to meet. Probably very little will be said about suffering or persecution, or how to face conflicts with close family members in a way that upholds truth but honours the relationship. In a society with a Judeo-Christian heritage, “integrity in the workplace” will only receive a brief mention, not the careful nuanced discussion that is needed for the context in China where corruption is an everyday practice at all levels of employment.¹⁶ In the Western context where each person makes their own choice of a life partner or to remain single it is unlikely that there will be advice on how to face persistent pressure from relatives who are determined to see a suitable match that produces grandchildren.¹⁷ Sadly, for all the careful discipleship and mentoring, many Western ministries have prepared these international students for the wrong context.¹⁸ In some ways it is like teaching a man in the tropics how to build an igloo for shelter or make snow skis for transport.

Three key problem areas

Typically, Chinese returnees struggle in three spheres of life when they return to China. Firstly, with family relationships. Secondly, with work and

career issues. And thirdly, settling into a church or fellowship.¹⁹

Family relationships

It is my observation that the kind of family that sends a child overseas to study is not an average family. Considering what has been said above, it is even more remarkable that group-oriented Chinese parents would choose to send their only child away from the nurture and protection of the group to a foreign land. In general, Chinese are known to have high levels of achievement motivation and it is the highly motivated parent who is willing to make tough decisions to see their child, and by extension, the family get ahead.²⁰ Studying overseas is an expensive and difficult process that requires great tenacity and determination. The student may be unaware of the extent of the effort made on their behalf, and they are equally unaware that completing their studies overseas is not the end of their parents' plans. On returning to China, there are further tasks that will need to be fulfilled and the high performing parents then apply their considerable organizing skills to these tasks.

Work and career

The first task of the returnee is to find appropriate employment. Up to this point, it would be easy to believe that the goal has been to help the child receive an education that facilitates a prosperous career. However, on returning home, it becomes obvious that the higher goal is not so much the success of the individual student, but the benefit and reputation of the whole family. While overseas, the returnee learnt to think of employment as something that provides financial income as well as a sense of meaning when engaged in a purposeful career. As a Christian he or she may desire to work in a way that honours God. While expecting that work will take up the majority of their time, they also expect to have time to relax and attend church events. On returning to China, they face an undersupply of appropriate jobs and an oversupply of qualified returnees. Often the only way to get a job is through family connections, and this means their work performance must be excellent to show gratitude to the employer and give face to the

family. They discover that a work week can extend to fourteen hours a day, seven days a week with long commutes on crowded public transport through difficult weather and extreme pollution. They also discover that corrupt business practices are so ingrained that it is impossible to avoid taking part. To make matters worse, they receive little sympathy from those around them who accept this as a normal part of life in China. Unfortunately, the Bible teaching they received overseas often offers them little practical advice in responding to these problems.

Marriage

Once employment is established, the next challenge appears. In Confucian societies the greatest obligation of adult children is to produce the next generation—grandchildren.²¹ The obvious requirement for this is a spouse. The motivated parent is unlikely to allow matters to simply take their course and has already been planning for this critical point in life's journey. Potential candidates are introduced, and their suitability is defined in terms of their family background, connections, employment, and financial prospects.²² Great tensions can develop between the returnee and their parents if he or she fails to cooperate with this process. Requests for a Christian partner are usually pushed aside as being unimportant on one hand and impossible to fulfil on the other—the parents don't know any Christians! The family's (group's) future prestige and success depends on grandchildren and grandchildren come from marriage. The returnee is told that his or her desire to marry a Christian, or otherwise remain single, is selfish and endangers the welfare of the parents who have sacrificed so much for them already. The Bible teaching they received overseas (based on the assumption that choosing a life partner is a personal decision) is

not of much help here. The returnee discovers that being firm and saying “no” only causes their parents to work even harder at getting them married. They also discover that in China, because of the interdependent group-oriented culture that surrounds them, they cannot simply ignore their parents—this is unacceptable in society.

Settling in a church or fellowship

The third challenge is finding a church. While disciplined overseas, students were taught that it is important to meet with other believers and to be regular in church attendance. Whilst overseas they experienced church in a place where meeting is free, open, and legal. Churches were easy to find because of their obvious architecture, signage, and online presence. They were open to all and there was no need for an invitation or introduction. Churches with a student ministry excel at welcoming new people, and in the West, Chinese students are often a novelty, so they may have been cared for with overtly expressed love and practical help like lifts to church and free meals. Student ministries in Western countries are well known for high quality teaching that is interesting, intellectually stimulating, and succinct. Services usually include vibrant modern music and other interesting youth-orientated activities. All this takes place in either purpose-built church buildings or spacious air-conditioned university lecture rooms borrowed or rented for the purpose.

Simply finding a church presents a challenge to returnees. In China, official churches may be in recognizable buildings, but they are not that common in less urbanized areas and in a large city they can be hard to find.²³ Attending one of these churches may also be a challenge. The teaching is usually good, even if sometimes influenced by politics, but hundreds

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Leaders need to recognise that many issues that are rarely mentioned in a Western Bible study are issues that a believer in China must face each day. How can we facilitate making connections so that Chinese students can fellowship and get mentored by mature Chinese Christians? How can we ensure they are being disciplined as Chinese Christians who are ready to return to live in China?

if not a thousand people may attend each service. At the end of the service everyone leaves in a hurry to make room for the next service and the returnee finds it difficult to meet and talk with anyone. The returnee often finds it all but impossible to get the close fellowship they need and enjoy.

The other church option is a house-church. These groups have flourished in China even though they are technically illegal. Often, these meetings are very much out of sight and require a careful introduction by someone known and trusted by the leader before it is possible to attend. Some house-churches have leaders who were trained in local underground seminaries or overseas (the latter are returnees themselves). However, many house-churches are led by committed believers who lead, pastor, teach and minister, but have usually received very little training to do so. Returnees who are used to a vibrant overseas church, often find the sermons rambling, the theology strange, the music uninspiring, the room cramped and stuffy, and the children's ministry non-existent.²⁴

As an overseas student they were used to the idea of moving from church to church to find one that suited them; after returning, the few options available are much the same and moving around is viewed as unspiritual.²⁵ In such a situation, it's hard to connect and feel at home or build the supportive relationships that are needed to face the pressures in life. There are no more friendly lifts to church and the journey by public transport may take an hour or more. There may only be one day a week (if even that) to rest, and there is pressure from family members who expect the returnee to spend Sundays with them. Is it any wonder that many returnees struggle to establish themselves in a church and slowly stop making the effort? While overseas their church or fellowship was their main "group"

providing support, relationships, and meaning to life. Now, after returning to China, life slowly reverts to the traditional groupings of family and work. Without the support of other Christians, many returnees find it impossible to live for Christ, slowly compromise to fit in with those around them, and eventually leave their faith behind, becoming yet another statistic.

What can be done?

What can be done about this situation? It is interesting that when faced with this problem some Western ministry leaders have suggested that more Bible or even seminary training might help.²⁶ This is partially true. If we recognise that the key issue comes from a clash of cultural values rather than a lack of Bible knowledge then it becomes clear that Bible teaching for Chinese students needs to be contextualised to the Chinese context. What does contextualized discipleship look like, and in what ways does it help with the problems of family relationships, work, and church?

Using Chinese language to worship

We have already said that contextualized discipleship requires discipling the student as a Chinese Christian in order to live in China. The first simple step is to encourage them to use Chinese language in their worship and learning about God. It may seem obvious that reading the Chinese Bible, praying in Chinese, and talking about matters of faith in Chinese would be helpful. However, for various reasons there is a great deal of push-back on this. Many Chinese became Christians in an English language campus ministry, with improving their English as a bonus attraction. The most commonly used Union Version Chinese Bible uses archaic Chinese that is difficult to understand, unlike modern

English translations, which are in everyday English.²⁷ Western ministry leaders often accept that students will use the version they like and understand (i.e., an English version), rather than encourage them to also persevere with learning to understand the Chinese version. Prayer is modelled in "easy English" which is the language used in mixed-group international ministries. Several students, after making trips home to China, have shared with me their frustration of being unable to explain to their parents what has happened to them after becoming Christians. Since the whole experience was in English they did not have the Chinese words to explain it.

Applying Bible teaching to the Chinese context

At a deeper level, these students need to be encouraged to consider how to apply the Bible's teaching to life in China, such as: What does the Bible say about honouring your parents when they are non-Christians and expect you to do things that violate God's law? What does the Bible say about eating blood or food sacrificed to idols and how do you apply this in a situation where these things are common practice?²⁹ Leaders need to recognise that many issues that are rarely mentioned in a Western Bible study are issues that a believer in China must face each day. How can we facilitate making connections so that Chinese students can fellowship and get mentored by mature Chinese Christians? How can we ensure they are being disciplined as Chinese Christians who are ready to return to live in China?

Preparing them to return

Students need to learn about the issues they are going to face at home before they return so they have an opportunity to prepare themselves. These are complex issues with no easy answers, but prayerful thought and discussion beforehand can help set realistic expectations and strategies. Introductions to churches and returnee networks can assist returnees in connecting to a church or fellowship that is committed to seeing returnees settle well. These questions indicate the need for specialist knowledge and skills that are often

beyond the scope of traditional student ministry teams. OMF's Diaspora Returnee Ministry team make a unique contribution by partnering with other churches and ministries to facilitate discipleship for the Chinese context, to provide specialised pre-return training, and to help connect returnees with churches and fellowships through networks in China.

Chinese returnees like George who have become Christians while overseas typically face severe challenges when they return home. There are tensions with parents and employers, as well as difficulties in finding and settling into a church. However, understanding that these issues arise from a clash of cultural values suggests that discipling Chinese students with the Chinese context in mind, giving them some pre-return training, and connecting them with a returnee network that will help them find an appropriate church will make a crucial difference for returnees like George. **MRT**

¹ For the complete story see <http://thrivingturtles.org/2016/06/19/george/> (accessed 31 July 2017).

² Stuart Bullington, "Diaspora Ministries: A View from the Field: Adding to Church Growth in East Asia by Discipling the Diaspora" (OMF International, 2014), 8.

³ Geert Hofstede, Gert Jan Hofstede, and Michael Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 6.

⁴ Craig Storti, *Figuring Foreigners Out: A Practical Guide* (Boston: Intercultural Press, 1999), 5.

⁵ Craig Storti and Laurette Bennhold-Samaan, *Culture Matters: The Peace Corps Cross-Cultural Workbook* (Washington, DC: Peace Corps Information Collection and Exchange, 1997), 18.

⁶ Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations*, 91.

⁷ Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov, *Cultures and Organizations*, 97.

⁸ Storti and Bennhold-Samaan, *Culture Matters*, 31.

⁹ J. Ling, "The Hook and the Cook: A Portrait of a Mainland Chinese Student in the UK," *China Source Quarterly* 18:3 (Autumn 2016), <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/the-hook-and-the-cook> (accessed 26 July 2017).

¹⁰ Wenzhong Hu and Cornelius Grove, *Encountering the Chinese: A Guide for Americans*, 2nd ed. (Yarmouth: Intercultural Press, 1999), 77.

¹¹ Hu and Grove, *Encountering the Chinese*, 80.

¹² Jean Brick, *China: A Handbook in Intercultural Communication* (Sydney: National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research, Macquarie University, 1991), 47.

¹³ Joann Pittman, interview with Jackson Wu and Sam Chan, "Contextualization and Chinese Culture," *China Source Conversations*. Podcast audio, 1 November 2016, https://s3.amazonaws.com/gospel-io-chinasource-processed-files/6a/c685d09e0111e6a3f3e52e91d8278a/Contextualization_20podcast.mp3 (accessed 26 July 2017).

¹⁴ Storti and Bennhold-Samaan, *Culture Matters*, 31.

¹⁵ Ben Gosden, "Discipleship and the Problem of American Individualism," *Covered in the Master's Dust* (blog), 13 March 2012, <http://mastersdust.com/2012/03/13/discipleship-and-the-problem-of-american-individualism/> (accessed 26 July 2017).

¹⁶ Michael Harris Bond, *Beyond the Chinese Face: Insights from Psychology* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1991), 85.

¹⁷ Bond, *Beyond the Chinese Face*, 64.

¹⁸ Bullington, "Diaspora Ministries," 9.

¹⁹ Stuart, "The Need for Chinese Students to Prepare for Their Return," *China Source Quarterly* 18:3 (Autumn 2016), <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/the-need-for-chinese-students-to-prepare-for-their-return> (accessed 26 July 2016).

²⁰ Bond, *Beyond the Chinese Face*, 17.

²¹ Brick, *China*, 48.

²² Bond, *Beyond the Chinese Face*, 64.

²³ For example, while the population of Kunming is around five-million people, there are only four official churches.

²⁴ E. T. Henry, "Returnees Committing to Church in China," *China Source Quarterly* 18:3 (Autumn 2016), <http://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/returnees-committing-to-church-in-china> (accessed 26 July 2016).

²⁵ China Outreach Ministries, *Returning Home to China: An Equipping Guide for Chinese Christians Returning Home*, 8, <https://friendsinternational.uk/resources/downloadable-resources/returning-home/58-returning-home-to-china/file> (accessed 26 July 2016).

²⁶ Several International Student Ministry workers in Australia made this comment during a conversation with me in 2014.

²⁷ The Chinese Union Version of the Bible was published in 1919. Although it is an accurate translation of the text, it uses literary Chinese that was appropriate for nearly 100 years ago. It is somewhat similar to reading the King James Version of the English Bible today.

²⁸ This is a complex issue. The teaching in Exodus 20, Matthew 15, and Ephesians 6 corresponds with Chinese cultural ideas that honouring your father and mother is very important. However, Chinese culture would say this is the ultimate command and parents must be obeyed above any other claims, whereas the Bible puts this command below "honouring God" in the Ten Commandments (Exod 20) and Jesus makes it clear that following him must come before everything else (Luke 14).

²⁹ See 1 Corinthians 8 and Acts 15.



Theologising Migration: Otherness and Liminality in East Asia

Regnum Studies in Mission

By Paul Woods. Oxford: Regnum and Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2015.

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This book weaves a rich tapestry of historical, sociological, anthropological, biblical and philosophical portraits of migration focusing on East Asia, with a robust theological and missiological portrait and accompanied by an extensive literature review. Of excellent scholarship, the book is infused with a persuasive exhortation to God's community as a missional entity to fulfill its obligation to obey the "alien mandate" – to love the Lord our God and to love the migrant as ourselves. Dr Woods' book is particularly relevant in today's context of an unprecedented global migration phenomenon which provides many open doors for God's community to share the good news of Jesus. As this is faithfully done, migrants may come to believe and belong as they are delivered from spiritual and physical bondage. This is a book that will deeply challenge both our minds and our hearts and should spur us into action.

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