

# Chinese Immigrant Families and Christian Faith Community: A Qualitative Study

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*Like most other immigrants, Chinese immigrants in the U.S. have experienced challenges in acculturation to the American mainstream culture. Major challenges for Chinese immigrants include identity problems, language barriers, relationships problems, and lack of economic and social resources (Families and change: Coping with stressful events and transitions (pp. 307–332). New York: Sage). With respect to social resources, the Chinese Christian Church plays an important role in coping, acculturation, and assimilation processes for many Chinese immigrant families (Sociology of Religion, 67, 149–159). However, for some, conversion to the Chinese Christian Church becomes an existential as well as a social force—a source of meaning in their new life, and a source of transformation of their marriage and family life. This qualitative study examines the social, cultural, and spiritual roles of faith community in Chinese immigrants’ marriages and family lives. Also, the research-based connections between: (i) families and religion, and more specifically, (ii) Chinese Christian families and religion are examined.*

**Keywords:** *Chinese; immigrants; religion; spirituality*

The conceptual framework for this study is provided by Dollahite, Marks and Goodman’s (2004) model of the three dimensions of religion: (i) religious beliefs, (ii) religious practices, and (iii) religious community. We have previously examined the dimensions of religious beliefs (e.g., Lu, Marks & Baumgartner, 2011; Marks, 2005) and religious practices (e.g., Brown, Lu, Marks & Dollahite, 2011; Marks, 2004), but the focus here is on religious community, defined as “support, involvement, and relationships grounded in a congregation or a less formal religious group” (Dollahite et al., 2004, p. 413).

Recent work by Burr, Marks and Day (2012) outlines several negative expressions of religion in personal and family life, but several reviews indicate that religious beliefs, practices, and communities generally correlate with positive outcomes in marriage and family life (Dollahite et al., 2004; Mahoney, 2010; Marks, Dollahite & Freeman, 2011). In the landmark volume *Handbook of Religion and Health* that analyzes more than 1,200 empirical studies and 400 reviews, Koenig, McCullough and Larson (2001, p. 228) conclude that religious involvement is correlated with “well-being, happiness and life satisfaction, purpose and meaning in life, higher self-esteem, greater marital stability and

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Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal, Vol. 41, No. 2, December 2012 118–130  
DOI: 10.1111/fcsr.12002

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satisfaction.” Faith communities serve as an important resource in guiding and shaping church members’ beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors (Cochran, Chamlin, Beeghley & Fenwick, 2004). Additionally, faith communities often serve as primary social support networks for marriage and family life (Krause, Ellison, Shaw, Marcum & Boardman, 2001).

### **Faith Community and Chinese Immigrant Families**

Research on religion and immigrants indicates that religious faith communities play a salient role in shaping many immigrants’ new identities. Further, faith communities are important sources of social capital (e.g., information exchange, as well as material, social, and emotional support) for new immigrants (Foley & Hoge, 2007). Several recent studies indicate that ethnic immigrant churches may be especially vital assets to Asian immigrants—including Korean Americans, Vietnamese Americans, and Chinese Americans—in reconstruction of identity, adaptation, and assimilation, as well as in marriage and family life (Bankston & Zhou, 1995; Cao, 2005; Chen, 2002; Min, 1992; Yang, 1999; Zhang, 2006; Zhou & Bankston, 1998).

Research has found that the motivations and processes of conversion are different among immigrants. In a micro-level study of Chinese immigrants’ conversions, Zhang (2006) found that the Chinese Church’s children and youth programs usually attracted non-Christian parents who subsequently converted to Christianity. Fellowship groups and cell groups also attracted nonbelievers or “gospel friends.” Finally, evangelistic conferences and camps, as well as Christian books, periodicals, and audio and video materials have played a significant role for native Chinese and Chinese immigrants to find rational meanings in evangelism and to eventually convert to Christianity (Zhang, 2006). Faith communities play a significant role in immigrants’ conversion, identity reconstruction, coping with psychological distress and crisis, and in their search for meaning in life (Xie, Xia & Zhou, 2004).

In a similar vein, Fenggang Yang (1999) has observed that both traditional marriage and family life are highly valued in the Chinese culture, and that these values match well with conservative Christianity. These shared philosophical values, as well as the strong cultural pull and network of other immigrant Chinese families, tend to make a Chinese faith community more attractive to Chinese immigrants than other faith communities or secular groups. Chinese immigrant parents often rely on the Chinese Christian church for meaningful and attractive youth activities in an effort to keep immigrant youth away from the potential effects of American society that are viewed as damaging to traditional marital and family values (Cao, 2005; Chen, 2006). Church involvement has reportedly promoted positive changes in some Chinese immigrant families (Xie et al., 2004). However, church involvement sometimes evokes new problems and tensions in a family—including when there is a conflict between religious commitments and academic involvement (Chen, 2006). In summary, Chinese faith communities play a vital role in conversion and also provide new and adapted models of parenting and family life in a new context (Chen, 2006). However, little is known about the influence of faith in Chinese immigrant families and marriages after conversion. A salient question is what are the meanings and processes associated with ongoing faith community involvement in the lives of immigrant Chinese Christians converts in the U.S.?

## METHODS

Institutional Review Board approval for the project was originally obtained in 2001 at the University of Delaware and Brigham Young University (and it was later obtained at Louisiana State University). More than 200 marriage-based families with children have been interviewed in connection with the American Families of Faith Project—a national, qualitative study of diverse Christian, Jewish, and Muslim families from all eight geographic regions of the U.S. The project has intentionally oversampled immigrant and minority groups (50.5% of the overall sample are racial minorities) to provide insight into these frequently overlooked populations. This study is based on a subsample from the larger study—immigrant Chinese Christian families.

### Participants

For this study, a purposive sample of Chinese Christian couples in the U.S. was recruited. These couples, recommended by clergy of the Chinese Christian Church, were highly involved in their religious community, and they regarded religious faith as a central priority in their lives. Couples were asked prior to participation if they concurred with the clergy's identification of the couple as "highly religious." The sample consisted of 22 Chinese Christian couples ( $N = 44$ ) who had at least one child. The husbands' ages range from 28 to 66 (mean age = 48), and the wives' ages range from 28 to 65 (mean age = 45). Most of the participants were highly educated, middle-class professionals and had been residing in the U.S. for more than 10 years. About 78% of the participants were first exposed to, and then converted to, Christianity after they immigrated to the U.S. The couples reported that their conversion processes lasted from nearly 1 to 9 years, with significant variations in personal experience.

### Procedures

All of the 22 couples were interviewed by the first author between July 2006 and August 2010. The purpose of the study was described to the participants, and each couple signed informed consent forms. The participants completed a demographic summary, which included their age, educational level, age and gender of children, the percentage of their income that they contribute to their church (many left this blank, mean of respondents = 8.75%), and the hours per week they devote to faith-related activities (mean = 15).

The interviews were semi-structured and open ended. The husband and the wife were interviewed together. This approach, as discussed by Lambert and Dollahite (2006), allows couples to remind and correct each other in order to obtain richer and more valid data. Moreover, the bias of one family member may be balanced by the other. Questions were asked about how their faith and their marriage and family life were related. Because this study is part of a larger research project on faith and families, the interview questions had already been tested and verified through interviews with more than 200 families.

Interviews were conducted initially in Chinese and then translated into English by the first author. Interviews lasted an average of one and a half hours, and the interviews took place primarily in the participants' homes. All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and checked for

accuracy. Copies of the transcripts were given to the participants as a member check. All of the participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms to protect their identity.

### Analysis

A grounded theory approach was used in the analysis of data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). First, interview data were open coded, then the data was examined to compare similarities, differences, and recurring concepts and/or themes. A Numeric Content Analysis (NCA) of the open-coding concepts in each interview was performed (see Marks et al. 2008). The high frequency concepts and the salient concepts both within and across interviews were recorded. Three themes emerged from the qualitative interview data. The next section describes the three themes, which were related to religious community and family life.

## FINDINGS

From a religious view, Christian conversion has been defined as "turn(ing) from one way of life to another, from a life of sin to salvation in Jesus Christ" (Lee, 2008, p. 239). From a sociological perspective, conversion is viewed as "a journey or gradual process impacted by social and cultural influences" (Lee, 2008, p. 241). About 78% of the Chinese immigrant couples in this study converted after they came to the U.S. They reported that they had experienced significant changes in their marriage and family life as a result of the influences of the Chinese Christian Church. In connection with each theme that emerged from the data, we offer supporting and illustrative interview data.

### Theme 1: "Our Marriage Has Changed" (The Influence of the Church on Marriage)

Zhan (W; Wife) and Lu (H; Husband) are one of several participant couples who explicitly addressed how their faith community changed their perception of marriage. They met and fell in love in a Bible study group and both converted to Christianity—in large measure due to the influence of Christian friends' testimonies, but the influence of their faith community also spilled over into their eventual marriage. Zhan (W) explained:

I had no confidence about marriage because my father and mother had quarreled all the time, I didn't want to marry. When I saw how happy the...(other) families were and how lovely their children were, I thought we would be happy and have three children too. That was my dream then.

The following narrative illustrates how another husband, Ban, changed his perceptions:

We listened to God's teaching about the marital relationship. (P)astor taught that... like Christ died for church, (a) husband (should be willing) to die for his family.... This belief has a great influence on me for our marital relationship.

A married couple named Zhu and Qiu discussed their changed beliefs, and how they were reinforced in their faith community. In their responses that follow, they contrast "the world's customs" regarding marriage with those of the "brothers and sisters on Sunday."

Qiu (H): ...The world's customs may influence us, such as more and more extra-marital affairs and divorce at present. Because we believe in God, these ideas will not function on our body, heart, and spirit. We know that these are not God's pleasure.

Zhu (W) If God is in a marriage, when there are conflicts in a marriage, we have faith. We can go to church (and get support) and...stand firm by God's words... (and draw strength from) brothers and sisters on Sunday. We would not make small things severe. God's Words remind us of our incompleteness. There is especially testimony in a marriage that we are all weak; we are all sinners. I learned something from marriage (by watching other brothers and sisters), and I began to grow up...

Like Zhan, Ban, Zhu, and Qiu, some participants focused on changes in their personal perceptions or beliefs regarding marriage. Consistent with previous research, the participants' religious faith strengthened their marriage by facilitating marital commitment. The way they dealt with their marital conflicts was, based on their reports, different from that of nonbelievers and their own approach to conflict resolution before their conversions (Lambert & Dollahite, 2006). Others discussed changes in the marital relationship itself that seemed to be directly influenced by their faith community. For example, many participants stated that their faith community provided emotional and spiritual support that strengthened the participants' marriage and family life. Yang (W) explained that, in her view, their conversion stabilized and strengthened their marriage.

Yang (W): Believing in God (was) the most important transition of our marriage; it became the base of our marriage. We didn't understand the meaning of marriage before...(but) the more we know God, the more we understand the meaning of marriage. As I grow up in spirit, I submit myself before God. This is a very important part to make the marriage stable. Considering many broken marriages, they don't deal with their own problems, but leave the conflicts to the other side, (to the other person). Blaming the other is a sin. On the contrary, we should confess our own sins before God...(this) is very important for building a stable marriage. (When we are humble and acknowledge our own sins), then the marriage is on the proper way.

While Yang identified her faith as a stabilizing and strengthening factor in her marriage, other couples in the study went even further to claim that it was God who saved their marriage. Mei, a wife from Taiwan wanted to write a book about her 20 years of miserable marriage. After their conversion, she and her husband Qin reported that their relationship had transformed.

Mei (W): We have a big difference in our individual character. He is irritable, I am tender; he is organized, I am not. Qin is always very busy, so sometimes he didn't know...the situation of our family (or our) children's development; (or) his situation and mine. We had many conflicts before...I would (be) frightened by his loud voice. I always cried. He didn't listen to my explanations. Now (Qin) has changed his temper, and our conflicts are less and less. It was God who changed him. I couldn't change him for 20 years...

Qin (H): God will give you grace upon grace if you submit to Him. (I believe it is) very simple, obey, and submit to God, He will give you time to change you gradually.

Initially, faith community had a great influence in the conversion of both Mei and Qin, as it did in the conversions of most other participants. However, the

influence did not stop at conversion but reportedly carried on as a new views and models of faithful marriage motivated transformation in the participants' own marital relationships. For example, Mei reported that they had poor communication before their conversion. She said that after the conversion, her husband changed profoundly. Now they have better communication with each other, and their marriage and family life are more harmonious. Next, we examine in detail how the Church provided social and spiritual support to the participants' marriage and family life.

### **Theme 2: "Church Life Should be Like a Big Family" (Social and Spiritual Support)**

Chinese Christian church communities typically provide assistance to immigrants—including information exchange, English language improvement, employment opportunities, transportation, and other emotional, material, and spiritual supports such as caring, comforting, and praying for each other. Such efforts are a profound help to newcomers who are adapting and acculturating to the host country. Indeed, the faith community was regarded by most participants as "extended family." The participants emphasized the influence of their church congregations, and they regarded their church as a high priority. Sunday worship, scripture study, church-related activities, and relationships with church "brothers and sisters" were repeatedly reported as salient. Additionally, pastors' sermons, special lessons on marriage and family, and church-based Bible study were all reported as resources for participants' marriages and families. Wang and Liang, a couple from mainland China reflected:

Wang (W): There were many sermons about marriage and family given by some preachers in our church. The quality of (our) marriage and our marital relationship improved gradually. We improved (the strength of) our family...

Liang (H): These (faith based) practices and traditions stabilized our marriage and improved our understanding with each other. Through...sermons and summer family Bible study, we know how to solve the conflicts between us, and how to stabilize our marriage. We've learned how to improve intimacy (and our) relationship...

Other participants emphasized the importance of Sunday worship as a family:

Huang (H): (It) is a good tradition that we go to church every Sunday.... There are great influences on children. My elder daughter is 18 years old who has attended college, I talked to her seriously....(She) looks at what your attitude is, whether you go to church firmly or not.... (We try to live it.) She...observes you about your faith and what your attitude is to your faith.

This pattern of adolescents watching closely for belief-behavior congruence ("Are you practising what you preach?") has been observed in earlier qualitative work (Marks, 2004), and is important in this article on both marital and familial levels.

Family-level faith community involvement has been identified as an important resource not only for marriage but also for child development and parent-child relationships (Dollahite et al., 2004). Lei and Zhou similarly emphasized Sunday worship and shared how faith community involvement changed their marital and parent-child relationships:

Zhou (W): We bring our kids to church. We want them to know God. As parents, we bring our kids to God. Our examples as parents are important; they see us through our speaking and behavior. We say we should love others as we love ourselves. Then, we should do it. We want them to go to Sunday school and Bible study, it is very important.

Lei (H): Sunday worship is very important. We worship God, praise God, bring our requests to God, and (want) to be near God. Bible study is also important to our spiritual growth. We learn how to deal with (our) marital relationship (based on) God's words.

Zhou (W) ...The change (for us in our marriage) is not abrupt but a process.

Zhou and Lei, like many other participant couples, expressed the importance of setting faithful examples as parents. Through Sunday worship and study, they not only reportedly learned how to better deal with marital struggles, but also gained child-rearing guidance and support as they sought to raise their children in a faith—a faith that the married parents had not experienced themselves until adulthood. In the face of these novel challenges, faith community was reported as an important resource for participants in their spiritual, marital, and family lives.

Statements like “Church is a big family,” and “church is our extended family” were frequently mentioned by the participants. Such statements would be significant from any group but may hold special significance given that the typical participants in this study were, quite literally, an ocean apart from any biological family and simultaneously facing the challenges of immigration and acculturation. Yang (W) and Li (H)'s related comments were representative.

Yang (W): They (our church family) helped us very much. We have been to three churches in different States (and) no matter where we went, there were mature brothers and sisters (who) helped us. They gave good examples to us and encouraged us (from) the bottom of (their) hearts.

Li (H): ...We learned (so) much from (our church) brothers and sisters.... They helped us when we were weak, and when they were in difficult times, we comforted them with God's love. We are beloved and we love others in our church. (For) our (church) family...we are thankful to God, especially (while we are here) in North America (so far from our home).

Yang and Li also described “brothers and sisters...in one family,” and expressed the Golden Rule in connection with this relationship—“We are beloved and we love others.”

Another husband, Qin from Taiwan, shared how his church congregation helped his family with their conversion—and later on, with their marriage and family life.

This is the most important time, when we accepted the Lord and regarded the Lord as Savior of our family. This helped our family a lot. There are lots of (Church) sisters, brothers, and the pastor, that help(ed) us during this period of time. It was difficult to rely on ourselves. We relied on elder sisters and brothers who provided us (with wise) suggestions.... We began to change after the Lord went into our family.

While many participants emphasized the family-level benefits they appreciated from their faith community, some also commented on the importance of serving as a family as well. Zhu (W) commented that “the Bible's teaching is very obvious: the whole family serves God together.... We taught

our children in such way.” This focus offers additional fit between traditional Chinese collectivist culture and Chinese Christianity—a focus on familial service. Indeed, serving God and others together as a family has been shown to enhance marital and family relationships (Dollahite & Marks, 2009).

Several participants expressed that, along with family, church is the most important aspect of their life. Most participants were well educated and highly mobile and one husband mentioned that during job changes, they look for a strong church and “good fellowship” in addition to improved employment. Ban and Jia similarly commented:

Ban (H): Whenever we went to a new place, we looked for (a) church first. Brothers and sisters serve God together in Christ...

Jia (W): Whenever we (move) to another place, we...go in (the) church's life. The most important (thing) is to make friends with (congregational) brothers and sisters, a deep relationship (filled) with understanding (of) each other, deep understanding. No matter what frictions happen, (and they do happen whether) you like it or not, we are all in Christ. If we have not (a) real relationship...that is not real church life to me. Church life should be like a big family; brothers and sisters talk to each other about everything. We share each other's weakness. We share each other's burdens. (We) open our hearts so that you understand me, and I understand you. We together serve God according to our different gifts.

Ban and Jia's comments underscore the salience of church “brothers and sisters” in their lives. However, Jia's reference to frictions in their faith community (“(they do happen whether) you like it or not”) was an insight that moved past the idyllic picture of harmony. Some participants also talked about how their “home” in this world is temporary, but how their eternal heritage is in heaven. Jia (W) continued:

If God doesn't let me stay at one place, (if He) does not need me (here) anymore or I need to be nurtured at another place, this is the time I should consider to leave. (This is) how to evaluate church life. Do not just leave when you have conflicts, we are not afraid of conflicts. After conflicts, brothers and sisters will understand each other better, and their relationships will be much closer.

Jia's perspective is an interesting one in that she presents conflict, even among Church “brothers and sisters,” as an opportunity for increased understanding and closer, more authentic relationships. This idea resonates with some versions of conflict theory—and certainly promotes conflict resolution over conflict avoidance, again deepening our view of church as family.

The Chinese Church is largely lay operated, with congregants serving as “producers” (e.g., teachers, lay leaders), as opposed to the Western European model of religion where congregants are primarily “consumers” (Stark & Finke, 2000). This producer-based model of faith community requires high levels of both investment and interaction among members. However, the potential for conflict in lay-operated churches is higher—and the need for resolution is vital and perpetual if the cooperation-based system is to continue to function effectively. Jia's comments allow us to see how her faith community resembles a family: complete with collectivism, cooperation, conflict, and conflict resolution. The following two excerpts resonate with this image of family.

Lin (H): (With our) congregation, we should have quality relationships between brothers and sisters. Our church will (often) think over this (message): There should be quality help (from one another), not just more burden and pressure.

Pan (H): I think having a good church (family) is always a help. It is a good group of people. They help you with life in general, not just with marriage and family. Having a good group of friends, who share many things with you, (your) faith in God, and some of the core values, is very important.

Pan offered an insight that a good fellowship helps with not just marriage and family but with life in general, including personal spiritual growth. In all of the above examples, the social aspect of faith community is acknowledged, but participants reportedly wanted more than sociability—they wanted church family. While this ideal was desired—and was profoundly helpful when achieved—church family seemed to entail its own set of challenges and costs, which are discussed in the next section.

### **Theme 3: Church or Home? (The Challenges, Blessings, and Costs of Church Service)**

Although the faith community or church family was reportedly a vital resource and source of “blessings” for the participants’ marriage and family lives, there were also challenges reported. Two of the most pronounced challenges related to the resources of time and money.

One participant, Cao (H), explained that while attending prayer meeting was beneficial, it was also difficult and inconvenient. He explained:

There are several times I wanted to give up, but God provided a way out for me. God sacrificed for us, I do not dare to withdraw. I usually pray (to be) able to go to prayer meeting. (It) is 45 miles (one way) from my workplace to church. I was very tired, and I could only eat dinner after the prayer meeting. Sometimes there is traffic. I know this is an invisible fight: Satan prevents me from going to prayer meeting. (When) I do not go, ... (I) begin to look other people in a picky (critical) way. My temper (comes) back again.

While Cao reported a soothing and optimistic influence of prayer meeting, he also reported that a 45 mile one-way commute in metropolitan traffic was a significant barrier—making prayer meeting both a blessing and a cost-laden challenge for him.

Jia (W) mentioned time and energy challenges associated with her church responsibilities:

Challenge is common, (almost) like (a) job...teaching child(ren) as well as (maintaining) the relationship with church brothers and sisters. (The) service challenge is always there. However, when you look up to God, you are reminded that...God is faithful.... God has his own way to solve our problems, but sometimes we don't have enough patience, so we do according to our own will. We are learning...this is always a...challenge to us.

An additional time-related challenge, how to balance church service and family life, was mentioned by other participants, including Zhen who explained (and perhaps complained):

It's harmful when (you) only...serve God, and neglect your family. When you go to church daily regarding church as your home and don't treat your home as home.

Like Zhen, some of the participants seemed to indicate that when church family shifts from being a vital support of marriage, family, and home...to become a perceived competitor against family time, this is dangerous. Marital

researcher and therapist Bill Doherty (2000) agrees, calling such situations “time affairs” that can damage and even terminate marriages.

In addition to time, an additional challenge came with nonbeliever family members:

Li (H): Nonbelievers of our family don't know what we gain and what we lost because they don't know what we have believed. They don't understand why we devote ourselves (and) so much of our time and money to our belief. For example, my brother-in-law (says), “You can give your money to us.” They don't understand why we offer our money to our church. My father also doesn't understand me when I went back China for just 2 or 3 weeks, and most of the time, I didn't stay at home, but went for God's work. They just consider about relatives. They don't understand what we give up and what we gain.

Yang (W): Our family (are)...nonbelievers (and do) not understand why we do so much work for our church by sacrificing our time and energy.

Different value systems may produce conflicts among family members and across generations, where religious commitment of time, energy, and belief becomes a line of demarcation, causing a “di-vision”—literally two different visions of life (Marks, 2004).

Only 50% of the study's participants disclosed the percentage of their income they donated to their church. The average contribution reported was 8.75%. Several, however, discussed the challenge of making a 10% (tithing) donation. A couple from mainland China shared their experience from moving from “struggling” to “willing”:

Xi (W): It is (a challenge) at the beginning. This is a process. God's grace is sufficient. ...If I offer one-tenth, God still gives me nine-tenths...

Cao (H): It is (a challenge for me). It was (a) budget (issue). My salary was low at the beginning with four family members and (we) just bought (the) house. I tried to do it according to God's words. We have...no wealth, (but) I become more and more bold (in my faith). My faith has been becoming stronger and stronger.... (But it was a challenge at first because) I had to support the whole family.

Many participants regarded church offerings as both a challenge and as God's blessing:

Mei (W): I think religion is not just going to church on Sundays and service at church.

Qin (H): For example, ... (many) Americans are very generous (with their) church offering. I think God gives them much more. For offering money to God (and) not to someone (else), God's blessing (will be) huge in the future. (If) you(r) offering (is) lesser, God give you less.

Mei (W): I am not reluctant to (give a large) offering, it's (a) budget (issue).

Qin (H): If we go ahead following God, God's blessing will follow us, don't ask God to give you first. That's impossible, you give out and God will bless you.

Mei and Qin's excerpt is an appropriate finale due to the complexity it embodies. We see offerings portrayed as both “God's blessing” and a “budget issue.” We see the same faith that unites Mei and Qin serve as a point of tension. We see faith and we see reasonable doubt. We see a textured picture of how faith unites, divides, challenges, and the belief that through it all, as Qin concludes, “God will bless you.” These responses seem to resonate with Stark

and Finke's (2000)'s assertion that "When religious people give time and money, they must be fully aware of the costs because they value these things as much (as)...anyone else" (p. 51). These participants were aware of the costs when they serve their church community—but they also perceive something else—a combination of meaning and blessing that vindicates these costs due to a higher value.

## DISCUSSION

We return to the central question: What are the meanings and processes associated with ongoing faith community involvement in the lives of immigrant Chinese Christians converts in the U.S.? Faith community meant a home, friendship, a new belief, and a new world view in a new land. Faith community meant personal, marital, and family support in novel contexts where participants had few connections and relationships. However, two longer-term processes seemed to emerge. One was the challenge to increasingly "live out" the ideals of their new faith in the context of their marriage and family—to progressively achieve belief-behavior congruence. Indeed, as costs and challenges began to appear (e.g., financial, temporal, intergenerational, conflictual, and marital/familial), it seemed that additional depth of commitment was demanded of the participants.

The second process seemed to involve moving from the stage of being a fledgling, "consuming" convert to becoming a "producing/contributing" senior member of the church family. The latter process reportedly placed strain back on the individual, marriage, and family...as those who had once been new converted "children in the faith" were asked to assume more mature and responsible roles in the church family.

## IMPLICATIONS

At present, there are 38.5 million immigrants in the U.S., which represent 12.5% of the total U.S. population, and Asian Americans comprise 28%, a significant minority, of overall U.S. immigration (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Ethnic faith communities' role in the immigrants' adaptation to the host country is significant. Research that addresses and more richly captures the personal, familial, and religious lives of this growing immigrant population is needed in an increasingly "flat world" with blurred boundaries. The findings suggest that faith communities play a vital role for some Chinese immigrants' adaptation and acculturation to American mainstream culture. Educators, clinicians, and practitioners need to be sensitive to cultural differences and also the benefits and support, as well as costs and challenges that can accompany faith community involvement when working with immigrant families. For instance, unbalanced involvement with a faith community may produce conflict between couples. Therefore, balancing church involvement and family life is an important topic. From an opportunities-based perspective, faith communities may provide an optimal setting for family life education or other enrichment programs that assist Chinese immigrants.

## LIMITATIONS

Although the data offer richness and depth, the purposive sampling does not allow generalizing. Further, this sample was both highly educated and highly mobile, offering few insights regarding lower-Socioeconomic status families. Further, religion is comprised of beliefs, practices, and faith community, but this study focused only on the faith community.

## CONCLUSIONS

Reflecting this special issue's topic of Highlighting Culture Diversity from a Global Perspective, this article closely examined the processes and experiences reported by immigrant Chinese families regarding their conversion and involvement in Chinese Christian faith communities. In connection with the participants' experiences, there may be a final message that emerges from the data. Fincham, Stanley and Beach (2007) have called for increased attention to "transformational processes" in marriage, where partners transform and change a relationship from within (i.e., self-regulation) rather than through outside, clinical intervention. Fincham et al. further posit that processes including forgiveness, sacrifice, and sanctification (e.g., viewing marriage as sacred) involve and foster transformation in marital relations. Indeed, the reported experiences of the Chinese immigrants in this study reflect processes including forgiveness, sacrifice, and a new "sacred" view of marriage. Further, many of the participants discussed their conversions and ongoing (and demanding) faith involvement not merely as stabilizing forces in their marriages, but as transformative.

Immigration, assimilation, and acculturation are all processes of stress, challenge, change, and adaptation. The processes of conversion to and integration into a Christian "church family" seem to have several parallels with immigration. However, as the Chinese immigrants in the study reflected on their personal and familial experiences of religious conversion, it was not merely change that defined these processes—but transformation. Having explored several meanings and processes associated with ongoing faith community involvement, we return to the question: Is faith community, then, a rich resource, a perpetual challenge, a context of high costs and demands, or "a Godly blessing" for these families? It seems that the most valid response for the Chinese immigrant families, we interviewed is that faith community is all of these.

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