



A Chinese Scholar's Story: A Case Study in Conversion and Conversation

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Conversion? Conversation? Obviously, these are neither alternatives nor parallels. They are simply different. Conversation occurs between or among two or more persons. Conversion is something that happens in the life orientation of an individual. Conversation may occasion conversion. Conversion may inform conversation. It will be the intent of this essay to explore something of the dynamics of conversion. The place and role of conversation within that dynamic will make itself obvious.

Conversion? It is of course a problematic word, often used in ways loaded with fallacies. One quickly thinks of the coercion fallacy, the anthropological fallacy, the romantic fallacy. "We don't go out to convert...." Of course not. There is no such thing as a real conversion under duress. Real conversion can only transpire in freedom, and if we mean conversion to Christian faith, this can only be the work of the Spirit. Thus, coercion is excluded, and human agency is supplanted by divine agency. Or, again, change is a constant factor in both individual and cultural life. In neither arena is maintenance of a status quo possible or desirable. What really matters are factors that foster change amid continuity. Might it be well if the gospel is one of those factors? One might think so. In any case, the romanticism of the unchanging is long since gone, let us hope.

But if we are going to use the word conversion, and it is hardly a necessary word, it might be well to consider what might be meant by it. *Conversio* is Latin for

The wonderful in the ordinary: In her own words a Chinese biologist tells of her encounter with Jesus Christ while studying and working in the United States.

repentance, which in the New Testament is usually represented by the Greek *metanoia*, implying a radical change of mind. That's what John came preaching, and also Jesus. The New Testament is filled with instances of such transformation. The transformations being considered are not a part of some abstract *ordo salutis* (order of salvation), but come about through an encounter with Jesus, either in person (as described in the gospels) or through a word of witness or proclamation (Acts and elsewhere).

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Such *metanoia* (conversion) is always a strange and wonderful thing. At the same time it is always linked decisively to the world of the ordinary. It is this strange ordinariness that I would like to reflect upon in this essay.

The occasion for this essay is the continuing sequence of such transformations that I and others have witnessed in recent years. It has taken place through a local Christian outreach to Chinese scholars and their families who arrive in our midst from various parts of mainland China. Some ten or twelve years ago, several of us began a hospitality ministry to these guests in our midst. Over the years, the number of those who sought baptism surprised us and led us to explore establishing a Chinese-language word and sacrament ministry. Such was established. It is now in its fifth year, with numerous “conversions” having taken place over these short years, and they keep happening.

In China today, of course, there is for that nation an unprecedented entry of people into Christian faith and baptism. Most of these people are in poor rural areas, but by no means all. If one hears stories of conversions in these village communities, they often appear to be very simple and direct events, not infrequently tied to a healing or some other wonderful happening. But in our experience with the Chinese intellectuals in our midst, the changes of which we speak are typically complex and subtle. Somehow, and we know not how, those accustomed to an intellectual atheism are willy-nilly brought to faith in Jesus Christ. Charlotte Gronseth has collected a number of testimonies of persons who have come to faith in the context of the above-mentioned ministries. Let us explore just one of these to sense something of these dynamics.

This concerns a young woman of thirty-six,¹ who completed a doctorate in plant biology at the University of Minnesota and is currently doing a post-doc elsewhere in the field. (The testimony itself will be in italicized type, the commentary in regular type.)

In reflecting on my journey to faith I realize now that God has used many seemingly insignificant experiences to gradually open my mind and my heart to him.

This is the wonderful in the ordinary of which I spoke above.

¹She has reviewed this essay and affirmed its content.

I was born in Shanghai, China, during the tumultuous years of the Cultural Revolution. These years left a deep impact on me. I learned—as was true for all Chinese during this time—not to trust others. It was a matter of survival. Trust leaves one too vulnerable. As a very small child when my parents divorced I learned that within the family this was also true. Their broken marriage shaped my views of marriage and family for many years. I simply could not reconcile love and family. This profound lack of trust left me nowhere to go with the deeply troubling mystery troubling me: Why should the innocent suffer, whether in a family or a national tragedy? God, of course, never entered my thoughts. God simply did not exist.

Here we have the preamble that sets the stage for future transformation. The Cultural Revolution, engineered by Chairman Mao, was itself wonderful in its awfulness. It endured ten long years, from 1966 on. The impact not only for this young girl, but one might say for almost everybody in China, was the breakdown of trust, perhaps the most elemental emotion in human relations. This breakdown of trust occurred at the macro- (all human beings) and the micro- (family intimacy) level. Trust broke down because innocent people were wrongly treated. This, of course, is a theme that is recurrent throughout the Psalms—Why do the wicked prosper? Why do the innocent suffer? O Lord, save me from my enemies! What resources did this young girl have to ponder these fathomless perplexities?

My mother, who remarried when I was 10 years old, was a strongly positive influence on me. She wisely taught me that we must all recognize our own weaknesses, and through this knowledge to grow. I learned that one can always improve and so I developed the habit of “observing” myself in order to learn. Mother also taught me never to fight back. So even as a child it was clear to me that although others may be mean to me, I must never be mean in return. I admire my mother for this teaching and have always hung on to it. I also remember how she used to sing to me since infancy the Twenty-third Psalm, set to a Chinese folk tune. She had learned this as a child in a mission school. I had no understanding of its meaning, but the strange word “anoint” fascinated me. This memory, long dormant, flashed back vividly years later when the same song was sung during Christian worship in America.

One thinks of Jesus who also, at around this age, began to grow in wisdom and stature. Such was her experience. She attributes to her mother the wisdom that enabled this growth. Two bits of wisdom in particular are mentioned. First is that of self-observation. She was to recognize her own weaknesses and seek always to improve herself. Surely, her mother was inculcated in the wisdom of the Confucian tradition. There are many such sayings as “When you make a mistake, do not be afraid of mending your ways,” or “When you meet someone better than yourself, turn your thoughts to becoming that one’s equal. When you meet someone not as good as you are, look within and examine your own self.”² This became a main in-

²*The Analects of Confucius* I.8 (also IX.25); IV.17.

redient of the culture of China. Second is the counsel not to fight back. This too has roots in the Confucian tradition. But even more it is a deep part of the biblical, particularly New Testament, teaching. The Golden Rule, the counsel to love enemies, the counsel against repaying evil for evil are there in abundance. As becomes evident from what follows, doubtless both of these levels were at work in this homespun wisdom that her mother conveyed to her.

She makes special mention of her mother singing the Twenty-third Psalm set to a Chinese folk tune. It is something I too from childhood have learned to love to

“tucked into Psalm 23 was the beginning of an answer to her question—a power beyond herself that was present in the midst of suffering, giving rest and peace even there, promising victory over enemies”

sing. The music lends a quality of embeddedness in life and culture that always moves me. Apparently it did so to her. Later encounters gave her flashbacks to that childhood experience. Of particular interest is that she had no understanding of its meaning, yet tucked into the psalm was the beginning of an answer to her question—a power beyond herself that was present in the midst of suffering, giving rest and peace even there, promising victory over enemies.

By now, we are finding that the way towards transformation is built up through increasing layers of complexity. In historical order they are: the ancient Confucian tradition, the presence of missionaries in China and her mother’s experience in the schools they established, the trauma of the Cultural Revolution, the childhood experience of a broken marriage, the homespun teaching of a mother reflecting the two different cultural-religious traditions. The events of history begin their intertwine with the homely experiences of a young Chinese girl.

Life changed greatly following the Cultural Revolution and new types of experiences influenced me. I remember, for example, attending a showing of The Sound of Music in 1984. What impressed me most deeply was the music sung by the sisters in the convent. This church music had a mysterious attraction for me and I became very curious about it. So five years later a friend and I decided to visit a church one Sunday morning. It happened to be Catholic. (I had no concept then of “Protestant” or “Catholic.”) But I was very disappointed—the music was only from a tape recorder! Even worse, during the Eucharist I became quite frightened and left the service, never to enter a church in China again.

Attraction/repulsion. The mysterious attraction of the music in a secular movie led to her visiting a Catholic church five years later, only to become terrified by the strange symbolism of the mass. She flees the church.

I remember also reading Jane Eyre in one of my English classes. At one point Jane made a comment to the effect that “Even though I am not good looking and am

poor, when we die we will all stand equal before God.” This belief in human dignity had a profound impact on me, as did Jane’s conviction that God exists and that there is life after death.

Again a secular novel intrigues her: the possibility of God, equality as a human given (doubtless contrasting with the vicious class consciousness of the Cultural Revolution), and the possibility of a reality beyond death.

In 1991 I graduated from Beijing Agricultural University with a master’s degree. I returned home to Shanghai for three years, first as a junior researcher in the Chinese Academy of Science. But, since this would not provide the necessary financing for advanced study in the United States, which was my aim, I quit that position for a more lucrative job in the business world. There I witnessed how central wealth and comfort had become to so many around me. That was not what I wanted.

The moral commitments learned as a child shape her values as she begins to forge her future.

A year later I came to the U.S. for graduate studies. I worked hard, but I didn’t find my work rewarding and began to doubt my choice of the difficult life of a student. I began to wonder whether life was no bigger than the research I was doing. There was one experiment after another, each one either making or breaking the day. I found no joy in life and often complained. Deep down I knew I was missing many positive things in life, but I had no idea what they were. I began questioning myself: What kind of life do I want to lead? What is a “good” life? My mother had taught me to help others, but that didn’t seem to make sense. It simply was not realistic. Yet the thought nagged me. Perhaps being connected with others in this way could provide me with what I was missing in life, with some joy. However, in practice I couldn’t make it “fit.”

The question of what kind of life I wanted grew until I knew I had to address it. Earlier in China I had often heard the word “spirit” or “soul” (linghun), an expression frequently heard in proverbs and in ordinary discourse. It is a concept deeply buried in our culture but never formally addressed. The same is true of the supernatural. Likewise subconsciously I had been aware of “soul,” and somewhat also of the supernatural. But I had never made a connection between the two, and certainly not between my soul and God.

The question of the meaning of life, so urgent and typical for her generation after the debacle of the Cultural Revolution, begins to press upon her. Somehow, the altruistic spirit taught by her mother nags at her without making sense. At the same time, some popular concepts in traditional Chinese discourse linger in her mind and provide a connection with what she was beginning to experience in America.

Among my new friends in Minnesota were Chinese who had become Christians. They told me of the Hospitality Center for Chinese near the St. Paul campus of the University of Minnesota. On one occasion I attended a session of an English Bible class. During the discussion the American teacher wrote on the blackboard,

“All we like sheep have gone astray,” and explained how only God can save us. I was offended, insulted. I raised my hand immediately and made it clear that in my case this was definitely not true. Nevertheless, from then on I was unable to shake those words from my mind. I knew I was imperfect, but to have someone else tell me was unbearable.

New friends brought new connections. Earlier in China she had been terrified by the Catholic mass. Now she is equally offended by the Christian message of human fallenness. Indeed, such a concept is opposed to all the traditional moral teachings of the Chinese culture, whether Confucian or Maoist. Moral teaching always called one back to the human possibility. If there is salvation, it is always through moral education and self-reform. But to begin with the proposition of human fallibility? That is in fact to obliterate that which is most noble in our humanity!

I also became friends with a Christian from Taiwan. I became fascinated with her view that the Christian life is a lifelong process of growth. This fit so closely with what my mother had impressed on me about being aware of our weaknesses and striving to improve ourselves throughout life. This friend said that it was never too late to change when we are “in God.” So I began noting her life more closely. I saw that, as with other Christians I had met, her identity as a Christian set her apart. Her faith was genuine and her expression of it was natural. Often we talked about faith in God until late at night, and at times I was moved to the point of tears. Just before my friend returned to Taiwan, she gave me a bookmark with several Bible verses she had written painstakingly in beautiful calligraphy. But in her absence my life returned to normal. I could not accept the faith of my friend. But neither could I forget her and her many kindnesses to me.

The meeting up with the Christian witness and with people who embodied that witness begins to pile up in her life, layer upon layer.

In the spring of 1997, through my research in plant biology, I came to realize more deeply how awesome life is—a tiny seed will grow to a large plant intricately programmed, not only according to its species but also in responsiveness to its context. How much more awesome in the case of human beings! How wonderfully rich life is. How complex and well-ordered. How exquisitely beautiful even the tiniest flower seen under a microscope! All this cannot arise from chaos and purposelessness. There must be an invisible hand ordering it.

So I began to take the initiative in asking about God. I needed more than the God referred to in the popular American movies shown in China. Those references were too superficial to be meaningful.

The testimony of other Christians, the reverberations of the Christian testimony in literature and art, themes arising from her own cultural heritage and now supplemented by a new reflection upon the intricate beauty of nature (cf. Psalm 19) begin to build up a chorus of praise suggesting life is more than simply what meets the eye. A new horizon for thought emerged—God.

One day someone told me about Dorcas Wang. I was glad to learn that she would welcome a visit with me. We met for the first time in June of 1997 at Lori's Coffee House by the St. Paul campus of the university. I asked Dorcas what she did, thinking she was only volunteering at the church. When she replied, "I am a mission developer of the St. Paul Synod of the ELCA," I was quite impressed. This was a serious job! Not just a volunteer! Dorcas then said she would like to be a "sounding board." She listened then as I talked for 40 minutes straight. I talked about my deep need for meaning, for joy. How do people find this? Dorcas continued listening without trying to answer. When the café closed we went to my house nearby and continued talking at the kitchen table.

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Only then did Dorcas begin to speak. She told of salvation, of sin and its consequences, of God as Father. "Father!" I thought. "Parents are fallible!" All this talk angered me. When Dorcas told me of Jesus caring enough to die for us, I was not convinced. However, it did open up to me a surprisingly different realm of thought. I became aware of an entirely different way to look at life. Formerly, the whole picture was about me in the setting of my family and friends and work. I was the center. Dorcas showed a frame of vision much, much larger in which I was only a small part of the whole.

We might note two things here. She meets someone who can help give shape to her thoughts in her new openness. Quiet conversation is integral to the restructuring that is taking place in her own mind and heart, a restructuring that places her own identity within a larger framework than it has ever been placed in before. At the same time, however, we see the old and the new confront each other. All the childhood experiences of rejection and failure are resurrected with that word "father." The incipient change that lurks at hand cannot happen without bringing into play the whole of her life.

Sometime after this my car was stolen. When I mentioned it to Dorcas she offered to pray. Her prayer came over me like a cool breeze. She read the passage from Luke 11 which says: "Ask and it shall be given you, seek and you shall find; knock and it shall be opened to you." I could hardly believe it. It seemed that all along I had been banging my head against a stone wall, but this spoke of a door that could be opened!

An unhappy experience—a stolen car—leads to the prayer of her Christian friend and suggests to her an open rather than a closed universe.

Dorcas had often invited me to attend worship at Faith Chinese Fellowship, but always I politely declined. I had received invitations to another church earlier where I had felt "pushed," and when asked, "Are you a Christian?" I had an-

swered, “No, and I’m not interested.” By September of 1997, however, I felt I shouldn’t be so “mean” and that since these Christian friends were so kind to me I should do them a favor and attend.

So finally I accepted Dorcas’s invitation. There weren’t many present at that time, but when they began to sing, my goodness, there was something so different from anything I had experienced before. Was it the lyrics of the hymns? Or the voices singing? Something grabbed me. Ordinary people, untrained voices—but something reached deep down into me. Where did that come from?

Dorcas’s sermon that day was on “Fruits of the Spirit.” It was about the evidence of one’s faith in one’s life. This dovetailed with what my Taiwanese friend had said! At home that night I paged through the New Testament until I found the text in Colossians which she had used. “Here it is,” I said to myself. “Look! Here it talks about what I have been missing!” The author seemed to know me well. It spoke, too, of what I had observed in Christians. From then on, no one could have hindered me from going to church.

The decency she had been taught by her mother as a child now guides her. She responds to the invitation to come to church out of a sense of obligation, if not *noblesse oblige*. A previous unhappy encounter with overly eager, pushy Christians had dimmed any interest. And now an experience takes place that begins to put together the fragments of her life. It is music, not thought, that triggers the change. But the emotional transformation is supplemented by thought, the preaching of a new order of values. The fish is snagged by the net, to use Jesus’ homespun analogy, and she is caught—“Here it is!”

Not long after that during a trip to Chicago I heard a sermon on God’s love and how Christ had died to save us from sin. Though I had heard this before, now a sense of the depth of God’s love swept over me and I thought, “I must be very precious to God!” My pride had melted. I raised my hand when invited to accept Christ into my life and follow him. This was the beginning of a new life for me.

But the transformation was still in process. Yet another Christian testimony is needed before the process is completed. The discovery of love grounded in the cross of Jesus melts her ancient pride. God-valued, she no longer need defend her own craving to be self-valued. She makes a public commitment.

When I returned to China later I shared my faith with my parents. My stepfather was upset with my daily Bible reading, and at first both were upset by even the use of the word “Christianity.” While my parents are still not believers, a long conversation did lead to reconciliation between family members a few months later, including my younger brother, for we had been a fractured family. Now we were healed. It is four years that I have been praying for them.

My experience of coming to faith is similar to what I have experienced in the world of science. There are many concepts and theories to be learned through lectures and reading, but it is the personal experiences in the lab which illuminate

and reinforce the intellectual understandings. Similarly, learning of the concept of God was not enough. This alone was too abstract, too big to grasp, too distant. Rather it was learning to know people who belong to God, Christians who are warm and caring and whom God had shaped to be often very different from other people.

Now there are all the signs of a mature Christian growth. She herself becomes an agent of witness. How could it be otherwise? As she puts it, concepts are abstract; “it was learning to know people who belong to God.” Now she was one of these.

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Conversion? Conversation? Is there one without the other? Oh yes, conversation may not lead to a predictable conversion, but it always leads to some kind of change, if only a reassertion of one's already given convictions. She had such moments, as her testimony shows. Is it perhaps illuminating here how conversation could seemingly both close and open the mind and heart of an intelligent and sincere woman scholar?—the terror of Catholic mass, the anger at being called lost, the power of words to resurrect ancient emotions of resentment, words of a pushy Christian and a wise mother, a psalm sung, old movies and fictional discourse, congregational singing, the testimony of a Christian from Taiwan, the quiet sharing of Dorcas, the prayer, the proclamation of the word whether in St. Paul or Chicago. Perhaps in fact all of these things worked together in concert to bring about the ultimate reordering that took place.

“I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel...!”³ This word, heard at last, does its work. ⊕

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³Explanation to the Third Article of the Creed, Martin Luther's *Small Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959) 345.