



Patterns of Conversion within the Chinese Catholic Christian Community

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BACK IN 1979, WHEN CHINA WAS BEGINNING TO OPEN UP TO THE OUTSIDE WORLD and churches were reopening after the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), I wrote a paper on the Chinese view of evangelization.* I accepted Lee Chia-sung's six models of how Chinese people accept the gospel. In this essay I will present a number of stories to illustrate these six models of conversion, based on my experiences in mainland China.

I. MODELS OF CONVERSION

First, the six models, or six ways of interpreting the encounter with the gospel:

*John Tong, "'Evangelization' as Seen from the Chinese Viewpoint," in *Towards a New Age in Mission: International Congress on Mission, 2-7 December 1979*, ed. C. G. Arevalo, S.J. (Manila: Theological Conference Office, International Mission Congress, 1981) book 3, 1-13.

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Lee Chia-sung's six models of Christian conversion are illustrated by true stories from recent Chinese history. In many and various ways the gospel continues to give life to Chinese people.

1. "The seeker after righteousness is converted." Those looking for a paragon of virtue and moral teaching are moved by the sublime meaning of the gospel and finally enter the church.

2. "All religions, which have one source, reach the same goal by different paths." Some Chinese enter the church in the spirit of *Da Tong* (universal harmony). They hold that all religions aim at practicing good deeds and so the different faiths must have the same origin as the way of the sages in Chinese antiquity.

3. "The rejection of one's ancestors and turning against the clan." In this model, those who accept Christianity must resolutely reject their inherited customs, now seen as ancestral superstitions.

4. "Bringing along one's relatives, or group conversion." When an influential person accepts the gospel, relatives and in-laws also convert en masse.

5. "Foreign goods come with a prize attached." There was and still is to some extent a belief that many converts find church attractive because they hope to gain some material or financial benefit from conversion. In previous generations such converts were looked down upon by their neighbors as "rice Christians."

6. "A secret recipe handed down from antiquity." In this view, the missionaries came to announce a secret. But once a family is converted or a parish formed, Christians limit their evangelism efforts to passing on the faith to the next generation, with little or no zeal for transmitting the gospel to their neighbors.

II. STORIES OF CONVERSION

Now, let me tell some stories that illustrate the patterns:

1. "*The seeker after virtue is converted.*" Even people who are not actively seeking virtue may convert because they have been impressed by something outstanding or heroic. For instance, in one city in 1966 or 1967, early in the Cultural Revolution, a swarm of Red Guards accompanied by several times that number of onlookers forced their way into the Catholic cathedral. They dragged a statue of the Blessed Virgin from the side of the altar to the main door of the church and were about to smash it to pieces when one Red Guard handed a hammer to the bishop with the order, "You smash it!" The bishop politely returned the hammer and said in a firm, strong voice for all to hear: "You may use this hammer to break my bones and smash my skull, but I will not lift a finger against the Mother of God." The leader lowered the hammer, the Red Guards left, the crowd went home, and the bishop was left alone. That church was occupied by the government and put to secular use, as were all churches, temples, and mosques in China. Some fifteen years later the property was returned to the diocese and the bishop, and some old priests and sisters resumed their pastoral work. People flocked to the cathedral and to other reopened churches, not just old Catholics, but also some of the Red Guards and the bystanders who were impressed by the courage and loyalty of the bishop on that night years ago.

Then there was the young Catholic woman who fell in love with a classmate in medical school on the eve of liberation (1949). He was not a Catholic and did not

respond to her attempts to convert him, but after graduation she married him anyway and gave birth to a son. During one of the political movements, her husband, along with many other intellectuals, was sent to a labor camp. The separation was very difficult for the wife. She had to work long hours during the day and care for her son at night. In addition to her loneliness and her busy work schedule at the hospital, she was under pressure from the government to divorce her husband and to renounce her religion so she could gain political advantages. But she refused. Each night after she returned home, she and her son knelt down to pray and ask for strength from the word of God. One day at the end of the 1970s, she heard that her husband and other intellectuals would be allowed to return home. When that day came, she went to the railway station to welcome him. When the train arrived, she and her son were the only family members on the platform to welcome the men. None of the other women had been able to endure the long separation. They had all divorced and remarried. When her husband learned this he was so deeply moved that his eyes were opened to God. He took instruction and was baptized.

My third story is not one of loyalty but of patience, patience in a water prison. A water prison is a small, dark dungeon with a narrow concrete table or altar in the middle. The room is flooded so that only the table is above water. The guards take two stubborn prisoners who need to be taught a lesson and put them on the table every morning. The prisoners sit until bedtime on the concrete, back to back with no space to move. After forty days the men should either be crazy or ready to sign any confession, if they have not already fallen into the water. A Catholic priest was put into a water prison. His companion complained and cursed from the first day, but the priest decided to meditate and pray. Before long the non-Christian became curious as to how his partner could be so serene and began to ask him questions. The priest took the opportunity to explain Catholic doctrine. Eventually the catechumen asked: "There is water here, what is to prevent me from being baptized?" And so the priest baptized him, just as Philip had baptized the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8. The non-Christian had at first been as afraid of the water around his small table as the apostles were afraid of the heaving water around their small boat, but when Jesus comes then there is no longer any need to fear (John 6:16-21).

2. *"All religions, which have one source, reach the same goal by different paths."* Many westerners have heard this phrased as "many paths up the mountain." There is a famous hill outside Shanghai called Sheshan, which has a seminary and Marian shrine. Catholics go there on pilgrimage, while a number of non-Christians also climb to the top just to enjoy the scenery. No doubt some of them have also climbed one of several mountains sacred to Chinese Buddhists or Daoists. Just as monks have always placed water and tea along those routes, so seminarians now set up tables along the path and periodically refill the liquid refreshments. But they also place leaflets explaining the shrine and some basic Christian teachings, thus making an effort to quench both the physical and spiritual thirst of curious travelers. Some tourists afterwards come forward to approach the church and come to

believe that our Lord is indeed the way, the truth, and the life. In this instance water for physical life has been transformed into a drink for spiritual life.

3. *"The rejection of one's ancestors and turning against the clan."* One big difficulty for conversion in China today is the ancient tradition of the state as the regulator of religion. For over 2100 years, until early in this century, China was an empire, and the emperors looked closely at the varieties of religion within their domain. They divided them into three categories: orthodox and legal, such as Confucianism; unorthodox but still legal, such as Buddhism, Daoism, and Islam; and those which were both heretical and illegal, such as cults, secret societies, and Christianity. The government approved the first category, tolerated the second, and took steps to suppress the third.

The communists accepted this traditional form but changed the content. Marxism fell into the first category and became the orthodox and legal "religion" of the government; those religious groups that have received government recognition are tolerated; but those who fail to get government recognition fall into the final category and are dealt with harshly.

A religion can also move from one category to another. Thus in 845 A.D. the Tang court outlawed Buddhism, confiscated land from the temples, and forced monks and nuns to return to the lay state. But Buddhism was already too much a part of the Chinese scene to be suppressed totally, so after some years temples were allowed to reopen, now with the permission and regulation of the government. The monks had to register and get certificates from the government as legitimate monks, otherwise they could be fined or arrested. There is a parallel to the current government's policy of requiring the registration of clergy and places of worship. This tension between state and church (the Chinese press never writes "church and state") affects all religions in China today.

Now for a story: In 1986, Bishop (now Cardinal) John Baptist Wu of Hong Kong made a trip to China. A certain government official was at his elbow all the time. He strictly implemented the rules against prayer services or mass outside of a church building, discouraged crowds from gathering to see a hometown boy who went far in the world, gave lots of excuses why this or that activity was not feasible or not "convenient," and was a wet blanket during the whole trip. But people tell us that a few years later the same official had cancer and realized that he was going to die. So he left the Communist Party and was baptized. The party would lose face if this were widely known, so they only allowed a few of his relatives to pray by his coffin for half an hour immediately prior to the official memorial service honoring him as an outstanding communist. (There were cases in imperial China of Confucian officials belittling their wives for taking Buddhism seriously, but then, after retiring from government service and with death on the horizon, those same officials began chanting the sutras and praying a Buddhist rosary. The more things change, the more they stay the same.)

Then we know of Rose Yeung, who was a fervent Christian and quite active in the Legion of Mary, even after liberation (1949). She was given a long prison term. Some years later, China made an ill-considered attempt to industrialize and

to multiply food production overnight, but the Great Leap Forward was a disaster and by 1960 people were starving. Rose shared what little food she had with other prisoners. That, and her loving disposition, was enough to make some “model atheists” among the guards and prison administration give up their party membership and become Christians.

4. *“Bringing along one’s relatives, or group conversion.”* Faith healing attracted attention 2000 years ago and still does so today. Strange as it may sound, most conversions in rural China can be attributed to exorcisms. Doctors are unable to diagnose and treat the problems of people who are possessed. Such unfortunate persons are apt to behave in strange ways. In the past, people were accustomed to call upon their shamans and witches to cast out devils. Today such methods are no longer effective, and people are turning to the church for help. According to certain reports, some who have called on Christians for assistance and entered the church have been healed of their affliction. These neophytes have urged others to do likewise. For example, in Jilin Province in northeast China, in a village not far from Changchun, there was only one Catholic family in 1981. When a possessed person was healed after entering the church, 300 other people were moved to convert. Faith healing, miracles, and demonic possession may raise theological problems for some western readers, but no explanation of why the number of Christians in China continues to increase can be complete if it ignores this dynamic.

In one city, a young priest had a small parish of 200 Catholics before liberation. Sometime after 1949, he could no longer function as a priest but instead was assigned to carry charcoal, making home deliveries on foot up and down the alleys of that hilly city. That was a hardship for an educated man unaccustomed to heavy manual labor. He asked himself: “Why am I doing this? Is this the reward I get for remaining a priest, to carry a heavy load on my shoulders all day long?” But after a while he adjusted to his new job and decided to do it as a Christian. He could not preach to people when he delivered his charcoal, of course, but he could have a Christian attitude towards all those he met. In the 1980s, he was finally allowed to return to his church and to resume his pastoral ministry. But he could only preach on church property. Yet, on their own initiative, 800 people now crowd into that church every weekend, four times the number in the old days, to learn the catechism and the word of God. The people remembered him as the old charcoal carrier. Or rather, they remember hearing about this special charcoal carrier, since it was usually a grandparent, or sometimes a child or housewife, who opened the door to him and then told the rest of their family how he gave a convincing witness to Jesus by carrying countless baskets of charcoal. He was once as inconspicuous with his basket of charcoal in that city as the boy with his basket of two fish and five loaves was in the huge crowd by the Sea of Galilee, yet he now feeds a crowd of new Christians with the bread of life. This is another example of “bringing along one’s relatives.”

5. *“Foreign goods come with a prize attached.”* A pious, highly educated Catholic, fluent in English, was a volunteer catechist before 1949. During the Cultural Revolution, he was harangued and tortured by Red Guards. After China began to

reform and to open up to the outside world, he resumed his old job as a high school teacher. There was a craze among students for going overseas, and parents all wanted their son or daughter to get to an overseas university or graduate school, preferably in the United States. The U.S. consulate needed to hire local people to help administer the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) exam, and he was hired as one of the examiners. On the morning of the exam, anxious students and more anxious parents packed the waiting room. He walked through the waiting room and recognized some former Red Guards who lowered their heads in fear. But it was too late, they knew he had had enough time to get a good look at the faces of his former torturers, and knew that his subjective evaluation could make the difference between their child's success or failure. What an opportunity for revenge! At that moment the teacher recalled the command of Jesus: "Love your enemies!" and prayed that he would judge the students' performance fairly, with no consideration of their parents' identity. Luckily the students did not have any idea who their examiner was. To the amazement of all the former Red Guards, several of their children passed the TOEFL exam. The parents asked their former victim: "Why didn't you get your revenge?" He answered: "I was tempted, but Jesus said: 'Love your enemies!' so I graded each student as fairly as I could." Former enemies were reconciled, and the teacher even gave the students some coaching in preparation for going abroad. On many occasions, "foreign goods come with a prize attached" has meant that Chinese are willing to listen to a few Bible stories in order to get instructions in English, or that missionaries teach English in order to make converts, but this is a case of the gospel witness being given—and received with joy—before anyone mentioned language tutoring.

Xianxian, Hebei Province, not far from Beijing, is noted for the zeal of its Catholics. On October 1, 1984, the government authorized a priest and four lay people to open an eye clinic, which opened the following May 5. Most patients are treated on an outpatient basis, but there are nine beds for those who have to stay overnight. Similar eye clinics run by the church and staffed in part by young sisters who have been to medical or nursing school were later opened in other parts of China, especially in the north, to provide a valuable public health service for people in the countryside. While treatment is not free, fees for the poor or elderly are sometimes only token amounts. Some clinics have a retired doctor volunteering full- or part-time service. But what impresses the patients is the team spirit among the staff and their genuine concern for the sick. Some patients or their families go on to study the faith and are baptized. Some converts might have mixed motives, but overall that risk is much lower than in the days of the "rice Christians."

6. "A secret recipe handed down from antiquity" may apply more strongly in China than in other cultures, due to the Chinese stress on the family and to the notion that personal identity is rooted in a long history. Also, there have always been teachers in China with esoteric knowledge and a small circle of disciples. It is frustrating when Catholics operate out of this model of the faith. They will sit or kneel in church or even work hard in the church and lead their children to the faith,

but they feel no burning urge to spread the gospel. One young priest had a jarring encounter with this model on his first weekend in a small town in Taiwan. He was talking to some Catholic youths outside the church when he noticed some other teens a stone's throw away and asked: "Who are they?" They answered: "Oh, don't bother about them, Father, they are not Catholics." But the missionary took a minute to say hello to the "outsiders" anyway.

But this model has its positive side. One young priest knows exactly where and when he received his call. It was during the Cultural Revolution when his uncle, a priest, was put on public trial and sentenced to death. The nephew, then only a boy who knew almost nothing about the faith, was among the crowd of spectators. He heard the rifles fire and saw the bullet enter his uncle's heart, followed by a fountain of blood. At once he heard a voice inside himself saying: "I must become a priest to finish my uncle's work." His story proves what Jesus said. His uncle's life, like that of Lazarus, would not end in death but in God's glory (John 11:4).

A less dramatic story comes from northwest China. Again, it involves someone born into a Catholic family in the early 1960s, one who received no religious education. Yes, his mother taught him the sign of the cross and a few prayers, but then the Cultural Revolution came and it was risky to entrust any religious knowledge to children who could all too easily reveal family secrets. But when churches began reopening after 1979, a sick priest came to the house and the young man's mother took him in as a guest. She treated him with Chinese medicine, a mixture of roots and bark and other natural ingredients that has to be boiled for a long time. Every day as her son was boiling another pot of medicine, he had time for a conversation with the priest, who became like one of the family. Thus the young man received his religious vocation and later became a priest.

The first conclusion to the Gospel of John reads: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30-31). I have seen and heard many other stories about the church in China, but I will not record them here. I have recorded these stories so that you may understand that people in China approach Jesus from different ways and come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Their conversion experiences follow different models.

Jesus worked and is still working many other signs in China. They all mirror the signs recorded in the first part of St. John's Gospel and point to the greatest sign, the glorification of Jesus on the cross and in his resurrection. Despite all the setbacks to the preaching of the gospel in China and outright persecution over the decades, local Catholics have not stopped spreading God's word, sharing their faith in Christ by the witness of their lives more than by any wisdom in their preaching. I am confident that this will continue in the future. ☩