



*Beijing Airport by Meng Zhang*

*In this issue . . .*

**Editorial**

[When Sojourners Return](#)

[Page 2](#)

*Stuart, Guest Editor*

**Feature Articles**

[The Need for Chinese Students to Prepare for Their Return](#)

[Page 3](#)

*Stuart*

The conflicts and challenges facing returnees as they arrive back in their homeland can be enormous. Culture shock, family matters, work situations, and church issues all contrive to make it unlikely that Chinese Christians returning home will maintain a relationship with Christ if they try to go it alone. The importance of preparation for their return is evident.

[Functioning as the Body to Build the Body: Working Together for Chinese Returnees](#)

[Page 5](#)

*Debbie*

Many returnees have difficulty getting involved in a church once they return to China. The author looks at how agencies, churches, and individuals working together can help returnees become part of a church body. She also explores the benefits of working together internationally and concludes with the importance of partnerships and reasons they can be difficult.

[Returnees Committing to Church in China](#)

[Page 8](#)

*Henry E. T.*

Committing to a church in China can be difficult for returnees. In this article the author gives some reasons why and then goes on to provide suggestions as to how churches overseas as well as churches in China can help returnees overcome these difficulties. Finally, he identifies attitudes that, if embraced by returnees, will help them to commit to a church once they are back in their homeland.

**View from the Wall**

[Returnee Ministry at Home and Abroad](#)

[Page 10](#)

*Lydia Song*

Large numbers of Chinese students who have studied abroad are returning to their homeland. For those who have come to know Christ while overseas, many easily become lost to the church and Christ upon their return. While there are a variety of reasons for this, churches and organizations both overseas and in China need to cooperate to prevent this. The author gives some concrete suggestions of how this can be done.

**Peoples of China**

[The Hook and the Cook: A Portrait of a Mainland Chinese Student in the UK](#)

[Page 12](#)

*J. Ling*

After following the 18-month journey of Xiao Mei as she studied in the UK, the author examines the importance of providing familiar cultural settings for Chinese students. Reducing the “cultural distance” allows students to experience Christ and become his disciples in a way that is not usually possible in an all English language and cultural setting.

**Book Review**

[Understanding and Serving in the “New China”](#)

[Page 14](#)

*China’s Next Generation: New China, New Church, New World* by Luis Bush, Brent Fulton and Christian Worker in China.

*Reviewed by Peter*

China is changing dramatically and rapidly—economically, socially, and culturally. These changes have affected the church as well. This book looks at the “New China” and the factors that have brought about the changes; it also examines how the church has entered this new society. Especially for those working with young people, who need to understand their mindset, this book provides a concise overview of key issues and influences.

**Resource Corner**

[Resources for Returnees and Those Who Serve Them](#)

[Page 16](#)

Helpful books, websites, and downloads.

**Intercessory Notes**

[Page 16](#)

Items that require your intercession.

## Editorial

### When Sojourners Return

By Stuart, Guest Editor

Living in another country can be a life-changing experience. The longer the stay and the greater the immersion into that country's social life, the deeper and more lasting the effects. Adapting to the new culture, making foreign friends, learning a new set of behaviors, and speaking in a foreign language shape the identity and values of sojourners in ways that can never be undone.

The changes that overseas sojourners experience may go beyond the necessary adaptation to a new language and culture; for many, the experience creates an openness to new ideas, new values, and even a new way of understanding life.

When the time finally comes to return home, the newly-arriving returnees often discover that the behaviors, identity, tastes, and values they acquired overseas do not transfer easily into the home culture. Many of the changes they experienced, including some that are highly valued, must now be reversed for the sake of fitting in.

Now what if, among the many changes experienced in a foreign land, some of the sojourners have converted to the Christian faith? This is certainly the case for thousands of Chinese students and scholars who have studied abroad over the past three decades. For those yet to return, how will their faith, acquired while overseas, and often learned from Westerners in a foreign language, be brought home to become part of their daily life in China? Will these new believers, as returnees, view their new faith as one of the changes that "must now be reversed for the sake of fitting in"? Or will they discover how to be both Chinese and Christian, finding their places of service in the churches of China, perhaps via returnee fellowships made up of others who, like themselves, came to faith while studying abroad?

These are some of the questions raised in this issue. The articles are all written by Christian ministry practitioners who either share the good news with Chinese students in the West or work with returnees in China.

Beyond simply raising questions and providing information, however, these articles contain, implicitly or explicitly, a call to action. There is much that we can and should do in the West and elsewhere to prepare students and scholars to thrive as disciples of Jesus in China, and there is much that the churches of China can do to welcome them home, while recognizing that their needs and perspectives may be a bit different from those who never went abroad. We should not be resigned to seeing, as we do now, hundreds of professing Chinese student believers returning home each year only to drop out of the Christian life altogether.

The theme of this issue is collaboration. As the various authors point out, providing the support that Chinese students and returnees need calls for new levels of collaboration between churches in China and those who evangelize students in the West, as well as improved local collaboration among those involved in student ministry in host countries, especially between ethnic Chinese and non-Chinese. This approach expresses the unity of Christ's body, enables non-Chinese ministries to provide more culturally-appropriate discipleship, and has the potential to build a seamless network of support and encouragement to new believers returning to China.

*Stuart plays chess as a hobby and befriends Chinese students in the UK. After living in Asia for nearly 11 years serving in returnee ministry, he completed a doctoral research project on the struggles of Chinese Christian returnees in which he documented how much help they have received by participating in returnee fellowship groups.*

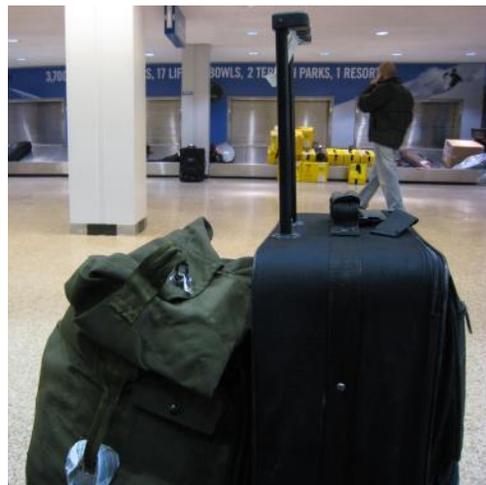


[Journal Entry \(Joel Montes de Oca\) by Chris Lott, on Flickr](#)

## The Need for Chinese Students to Prepare for Their Return

By Stuart

Sergei Karjakin, a young man of 26 from Russia, has been preparing since March of this year for a trip to New York City in November—but this is not to be a holiday. He is getting ready, instead, to face the supreme battle of his life. After his arrival in New York, he will take his seat across the table from another young man, Magnus Carlson (25), currently the World Champion, and the two will begin the grueling contest, held each year, to decide who will become the next champion. It will be a battle of the mind that will severely test the intellectual prowess and stamina of both players, for Karjakin plays chess, and plays it very well. Having won the Candidates Chess 2016 Tournament against the world’s best professionals in March, he emerged as the only one, among the earth’s 700 million chess players, who will have this chance to contend with the champion.



[SaltLakeCity2007 017 by Lawrence.](#)

You can be sure that Karjakin is not just relaxing and hoping for the best. In the months leading up to November, he has been meticulously analyzing every tournament game that Magnus Carlson has played over the past few years, looking for weaknesses, checking for patterns in his playing style, hoping, among the thousands of recorded moves of Carlson’s pawns, knights, bishops, and rooks, to find a fatal flaw, a tiny recurring oversight that he can exploit during the coming games to rout the champion and seize his title. Karjakin knows that he may only have this one chance in his lifetime; his destiny depends entirely on how well he prepares.

Let’s compare and contrast this with the typical Chinese student who has come to believe in Christ while studying in the West. We will call him Wei, and he will, for the purpose of our discussion, represent the hundreds of young Chinese who convert to the Christian faith each year while studying abroad.

### Wei’s Situation

When he returns home after graduation, Wei, like Karjakin, will face the supreme battle of his life. From the moment he steps off the plane in China, his new faith will be tested as it has never been tested before. Unlike Karjakin, however, Wei is doing nothing to prepare for it. In fact, Wei is completely unaware of the challenges that he will face and has no premonition of the impending destruction of his Christian life. Moreover, no one is warning Wei about what is to come or helping him to think realistically about how he will survive as a Christian.

Karjakin has a trainer, Vladimir Potkin (one of several), who selflessly devotes his time and energy to getting his contender ready for the coming battle. Vladimir spends hours on research, coming up with new and innovative moves that Sergei can draw on to present the champion with a few nasty surprises.

While overseas, Wei has Bob, his kindly mentor, who leads a small group Bible discussion in English for international students near the university, and who also meets with him once a week for additional one-on-one Bible study. Bob is actually quite good at explaining the Bible, and his illustrations and applications reveal that he has a clear understanding of the current issues that university students face.

But Bob is no Vladimir—he is not focused on Wei’s future, has little understanding of China or Chinese cultural issues, and does not know what challenges Wei will face when he returns home. Wei also does not know—he has never been a Christian in China before! Even if Bob should learn something about these challenges, he has no strategy, materials, or methods that he could use to help Wei to prepare for them. Wei also is quite reluctant to think about his future; he just wants to enjoy his student life abroad for as long as he can.

Meanwhile, the clock is ticking, and each passing day brings Wei a bit closer to his “time of testing” (Luke 8:13) when he will be “sifted like wheat” (Luke 22:31).

### Returnee Conflicts and Challenges

Ideally, what does Bob need to know about the conflicts and challenges that are waiting for Wei in China? Why will it be so hard for Wei to pack up his faith, acquired while overseas, take it home, and unpack it in his own culture?

The issues are many, and they begin with isolation, identity, and culture shock—these will eat away at Wei’s emotional well-being for months after his return. Then, while he is still navigating these rough waters, conflicts and challenges will

appear from all sides, forcing him to make the most painful choices while repeatedly testing his loyalty to his new faith. The challenges will hit him especially hard in the areas of life that matter most: family, work, and church.

Let us now quickly survey some of the challenges that Christian returnees face in China. Wei, thankfully, will not have to contend with all of these, but he will certainly have enough to keep him busy.

### **Isolation, Identity, and Culture Shock**

- *Going home alone.* From the moment a homeward-bound student boards the plane, all social support for his or her Christian faith is gone. Isolation immediately begins to take its toll. The free dinners, outings, picnics, fun activities, and cross-cultural friendships that the new converts once enjoyed in Christian groups overseas have all come to an end.
- *Separating Christianity from the West.* For some students, there is a strong association between experiences in the West and the Christian faith—and it can be hard to separate the two. This is especially true for those whose entire Christian experience has been in English. Having never discovered what it means to be a *Chinese* Christian, a student may unconsciously presume that leaving the West means leaving Christianity behind.
- *Adjusting once more to the traffic, noise, and crowded conditions of China.* Readjusting to life in China may take some time. Some returnees now have concerns about food safety and the health effects of China's air and water pollution, even if they never had these concerns before.
- *Experiencing reentry (or reverse) culture shock.* This is usually unexpected, begins to set in immediately, and can last from about six months to one year (or even longer!). Returnees may struggle with feelings of not belonging or not fitting in. They may experience deep feelings of loss and "homesickness" for the host country. Since these feelings are not understood or appreciated by friends and relatives who have never left home, the returnees tend to withdraw and dream about going back overseas. Many find that their feelings are only understood by other returnees.

### **Family**

- *Personal space:* For some, returning home means moving back in with parents and other family members. Every movement is under parental scrutiny. The freedom, privacy, independence, and personal space that students enjoyed overseas are gone.
- *Use of Sunday:* Families may be opposed to church attendance because of when it occurs. Sunday is a family day in many parts of Asia. Spending time at church, especially when it takes most of the day, may be viewed as not caring about family.
- *Ancestor worship:* Traditional Chinese families that practice ancestor worship or temple rituals will often expect or demand that their children participate. For new believers who are not prepared to negotiate their way through this conflict, the pressure can be intense, and the result is often capitulation.
- *Political concerns:* Parents and other family members may express concern about political problems due to children being open about their faith. Returnees themselves may have genuine fears about the possibility of trouble with the authorities or suffering career repercussions because of attending illegal Christian gatherings.
- *Marriage:* Female students, especially, may face pressure from their parents to marry non-Christians after they return. This can be very difficult to resist, especially when there are no eligible Christian men! Marrying a non-Christian, however, will make it difficult, if not impossible, to practice the Christian faith.

### **Work**

- *Finding a job:* This is usually not as easy as the returnees expected. They often find that there is intense competition for any job openings. This may predispose them to accept the first job that is offered.
- *Long work hours:* If they succeed in finding a job, they may immediately be faced with crushing and brutally long hours at work along with a long commute. Chronic exhaustion can become a way of life.
- *Moral and ethical compromise:* The Chinese workplace often leads Christians into a variety of moral and ethical compromises. Cheating, lying to customers, bribery, corruption, kickbacks, tax evasion, false accounting, and alcohol abuse are often the norm. Failure to go along with these practices can result in being fired.
- *Financial pressures:* Pressure to buy a house or repay relatives who financed their overseas education may drive returnees to seek the highest-paying positions, regardless of the personal consequences or cost to their spiritual lives.

### **Church**

- *Finding a church:* When returnees try to get involved in Chinese churches, they often discover that it is not easy.

[Continued at the bottom of page 7](#)

## Functioning as the Body to Build the Body: Working Together for Chinese Returnees

By Debbie

In many countries, churches in cities with universities have seen students from China profess faith in Christ. Sadly, although some returnees to China settle in churches there and contribute to God's kingdom, many do not. They encounter challenges including: family and work demands, materialism, lack of Christian contacts, and differences in church experience. Misunderstandings occur too, with their foreign friends, about what each believes. Happily, there are ways to avert misunderstandings and prepare people to overcome challenges. However, individual churches, even individual agencies, cannot usually do this alone. We need the wider body of Christ.



### Working Together Helps

Cultural misunderstandings occur both ways. Non-Chinese friends can misinterpret positive answers to questions and enthusiastic church attendance as faith, whereas the real motive may be politeness or enjoyment of the church atmosphere. Chinese students can perceive these meetings of kind people to constitute Christianity, and the attention showered on them as blessings from God without understanding what Christ achieved on the cross. As missiologist Brian Stanley said: "Not all conversions to Christianity represent conversions to Christ."<sup>1</sup> We need help from cultural insiders to identify and avert such misunderstandings.

Networks exist, abroad and in China, to help returnees connect with churches. Christians abroad who disciple new Chinese believers can search these out and seek contacts for returnees. Also, those with contacts in China can contribute to networks; we may know someone in a city where there is great need.

Few churches outside China understand the Chinese church, workplace, and family. Ideas about the church in China are often out of date. Those with China experience, including returnees, can cooperate to help prepare returnees for the reality of Christian life in China. Although it is initially daunting when we identify gaps in our preparation of returnees, it is thrilling to see fruit when gaps are filled because people, churches, and agencies work together.

#### *Example 1: Agencies working together*

The staff of Agency A had a vision for improving returnee preparation by running retreats for returnees prior to their leaving. They also wanted to establish mentoring relationships with the returnees between the retreats and their returns. This would make the returnees aware of the challenges, give them a vision for building God's kingdom in China, and start them praying about these things before returning.

Immediately, it was apparent that while the team from Agency A had many gifts, they lacked others. Several team members had lived in China and spoke Chinese; others had researched Chinese returnees; all had experience discipling Chinese students. However, they lacked mainland Chinese staff with personal insight into students' thinking. So, they asked two mainland Chinese workers from Chinese Agency B to lead sessions, and they also involved former returnees via Skype.

Even with these additions and good feedback from the first retreat, there were still issues to address. Participant numbers were low; the planning team lacked mainland Chinese as well as personnel under 40 who could really share perspective with the students. In addition, Chinese Agency B had grown and gone through significant changes recently. We needed to talk!

Representatives met and agreed to pilot a retreat together. However, some things needed clarifying first. Each agency needed to get up-to-date with the other's current vision and work. Agency B now had a greater focus on mainland students. In addition, the number of those attending their evangelistic and Bible-training camps and doing more in-depth service was greater than Agency A had realized. Likewise, Agency B leaders needed to hear what was on Agency A's heart and understand the discipleship gap they perceived.

The outcome was the best retreat so far. Participation of Agency B Chinese staff in planning, leadership, and support contributed greatly, as did their facility with its Chinese atmosphere, bookshop, and food!

Still, most new Chinese Christians are in cities where the team lacks contacts. Most of the previous participants had been from cities that team members had visited in the past, getting to know local workers and raising awareness of Chinese returnee issues. However, a Christian international student organization, Agency C, has staff countrywide. The team hope to deepen their relationship with Agency C's workers—gatekeepers to many more who would benefit from the retreats and preparation.

#### *Example 2: Churches working in partnership*

I know a British church with a Mandarin-speaking congregation that is blessed with gifted people who can provide China-focussed preparation *and* impart to students a vision of the global nature of God's mission. However, they are unusual, and even they do not go it alone. They build partnerships with returnees and churches in China; they visit China and receive visitors from China thus helping their ministry remain appropriate for returnees.

Few churches, though, have the resources they have. In 2005 my own church tried a different approach. Being in a city with many mainland Chinese students, we had many church members welcoming international students into their homes. Chinese made up the majority who joined international student social activities. They also filled most of the seats at a weekly evangelistic Bible overview. We had volunteers who could teach Chinese students the Bible in small groups or on a one-to-one basis. However, only two of our volunteers could teach the Bible *and* speak Mandarin, and they had day-time jobs that kept them busy as well.

In 2001 and 2004, I had visited China and had seen the challenges that returnees who are new believers face. Both British and American student ministry colleagues were observing the same thing: the large numbers of Chinese students found in churches abroad were not translating into large numbers of returnees in churches in China.

A dialogue occurred between my church and Chinese Agency B, which resulted in their sending us a trained mainland Chinese worker, Hope. This was an experiment: Hope was not coming to the local Chinese church; she was coming to work with local British churches which attracted many Chinese. Crucially, she has been given freedom by these churches. The Mandarin-speaking fellowship she leads is promoted and prayed for by these churches, while Agency B provides access to its specialized resources.

This relationship has greatly benefitted us as well as the Chinese who return; that became clear on subsequent visits to China. Now, while not all those returning to China commit to churches and persevere, many more do so than previously. Hope, with her language ability, cultural insights, and access to specialized colleagues and resources, can offer a depth of discipleship that we alone cannot. Likewise, she alone cannot build all the relationships that our church members can. Nor can she alone provide the international mission focus and sustained expository Bible teaching that a large university church can. We complement each other.

Students can meet her and other Chinese Christians and, in their own language, freely discuss what they heard in the British church; they have someone who understands them and can present the Bible in a way which connects more deeply with their lives. These meetings are also opportunities for people brought up in one-child families to practise serving “brothers and sisters.”

#### *Example 3: Individuals working together*

Recently, within a church context, Hope and I did training for people who meet non-Christian mainland Chinese. They wanted to understand Chinese people better and know how to avoid typical misunderstandings which arise when non-Chinese share Christ with Chinese.

Working together occurred in two ways. First, we two trainers were affiliated with different agencies and were of different nationalities. Second, we invited Chinese Christians to join the British Christians for whom the training was originally intended. We felt that the Chinese would benefit from our input and that their contribution to group discussions would help their British friends—and it did.

Hope and I knew everyone would benefit from her cultural insights and experience. But the cultural insights were not only from Chinese to British. During our planning meetings, Hope commented on the usefulness of insights that I brought as a cultural outsider. Having worked with Chinese, visited returnees, and researched Chinese culture, I had observed things which had passed her by; sometimes we do not question things about our own culture. I asked her questions like: “I observed people doing x; my reading about differences between British and Chinese cultures suggests that they may do x because of y. Do you think that is really the case?” We shared the teaching because we brought different insights.

#### *Example 4: Working together internationally*

Can agencies outside China cooperate better with each other and with those serving returnees inside China? Could others in China, with suitable church contacts there, liaise with Chinese in China who lead receiving networks? Together they may be able to support those key returnees who act as contacts for new returnees, by encouraging them and helping them find returnee-friendly churches.

Those of us in countries which have an agency specifically developing contacts with churches in China to connect with returnees could support those agencies better. Those visiting China regularly could help by liaising with such agencies beforehand, to ascertain which Chinese cities lack good contacts, then identifying and sharing our contacts with them.

Could we share other resources more? Recently, efforts to build a website for those working with Chinese returnees stalled because of a lack of expert technical help and shared resources.

### **Why People Do Not Work Together**

We can be blind to gaps in our ministry. Sometimes this is because we emphasize evangelistic activities but do not really make disciples, let alone consider what it means to follow Christ in a different socio-cultural and church context. Sometimes it is because we do not follow up on Chinese students after they go home. The Apostle Paul kept in touch by writing and visiting (for example, he revisited Lystra and Pisidian Antioch). Visiting returnees can be a real catalyst for change in the visitor’s ministry. Witnessing the challenges they face, or observing how misunderstandings about Christianity have led to disappointment, helps us identify what we need to do differently.

Others of us know we need help in working with returnees but are unaware help is available. Finding help could start with a simple email to an agency or international student worker, asking, “Who knows about helping Chinese returnees?”

We may hear of a course for returnees, but are nervous because we do not know the organizers and are unsure they hold the same beliefs as we do. We rightly feel responsibility towards Chinese who come to Christ in our church. We can identify our concerns and talk to the organizers; it may be that our concerns are unfounded, based on misunderstandings, false assumptions, or out-of-date information.

Occasionally churches have a policy of only using internal resources. Church leaders might review whether that policy is best for the Chinese students in their midst, or indeed for any cultural group in their church. Does long term fruit from their ministry confirm that they really have all necessary resources internally, or do they lack something? “For the body does not consist of one member but of many.... The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’” (1 Corinthians 12:14, 21)

Working with people from other organizations or churches, with ways (or cultures) different from ours, is not always easy, but that

in itself can contribute to the refining of the individuals involved and the services they offer: “Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens another.” (Proverbs 27:17) We “...are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.” (Ephesians 2:22)

### **A Concluding Story**

Some student workers in Britain sent new believer, Jing, to a retreat for returnees to China. They did not know much about it so they asked the organizers questions first. At the end of her university course, Jing’s UK church asked her to stay a few months to help with their student ministry. The church worked in partnership with an organization that gave Jing specialist supervision.

After returning to China briefly, Jing came back to another British city for PhD studies. She continued working one day a week for her previous church, training a team to help Chinese students prepare for return. She has a mentor, from a second organization, who specializes in returnees to China. Jing recently took team members to China to visit returnees and learn about China, liaising with a hosting church in China that provided learning opportunities.

God is working in Jing’s father, who recently visited her in Britain. Lacking suitable Mandarin-speaking Christian support, she prayed and sought help. A British friend led her father in an initial prayer of commitment but staff workers from Chinese Agency B are visiting to help him move forward. Everyone involved recognized their limitations and sought help.

Jing’s story illustrates well the value of working together. Her church looked to workers of an international student ministry for help with international student outreach, and later with supervising Jing. Those workers in turn looked to an agency specializing in return to China to help Jing prepare. Then Jing, the workers and her church together sought partnership with returnees and a church in China, to equip her UK church team. Jing herself has clearly learned the value of partnership: when an Iranian student turned to Christ recently she identified that her church and organization lacked the knowledge to prepare him to return to Iran. With their agreement, she found and contacted an Iranian organization to work alongside them. Working in partnership can be catching!

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<sup>1</sup> Conversion to Christianity: The Colonization of the Mind? *International Review of Mission*, XCII (366), 2003, 315-331, p 326.

*Debbie lives in the UK and did her doctoral research on Chinese students. She has been involved with students from China for 20 years and has visited many returnees. Affiliated with two organizations which support the British church in this work, she liaises with others, raises awareness of returnee issues, provides training for churches and develops resources for returnees.*

### **The Need for Chinese Students to Prepare for Their Return**

**Continued from page 4**

In the first place, it may be hard to even find a church since many meet secretly in undisclosed locations. In addition, after years of persecution, many churches are suspicious of newcomers and not very welcoming.

- *Having high expectations:* Returnees often search for a church just like the one they attended while overseas; but they soon discover that it is impossible to find—there is no church like that in China. At the nearby churches they visit, they often notice huge gaps in age, education, and social status between themselves and the church members. This can make it difficult for them to make friends or feel like they belong. So, after they visit two or three, they just give up.
- *Hidden returnee fellowships:* In cities where returnee fellowships exist, newly arriving returnees will often find a warm welcome. However, these groups can be hard to find—and many returnees do not even know they exist.

Given all of the challenges they face, there is little chance that new believers will make it if they go it alone. Their only chance of surviving as Christians is by joining a close-knit, faith community.

### **Wei’s Questions**

It has been two years now since Wei’s return. He visited the local Three-Self church a few times during his first month back in China, but that was before he found a job. The demands of his first job proved to be more than he could have ever imagined, even in his worst nightmares! He travels constantly now on company business, and routinely works through evenings, weekends, and holidays—it has literally taken over his life.

Could this have been avoided? Wei often wonders. Perhaps he would have turned down this job if only someone had warned him in advance. But he came back from overseas without a plan, without anticipating any of the shocks that came his way, and he has suffered one defeat after another.

### ***Could some training and preparation prior to his return have produced a better outcome?***

*Stuart plays chess as a hobby and befriends Chinese students in the UK. After living in Asia for nearly 11 years serving in returnee ministry, he completed a doctoral research project on the struggles of Chinese Christian returnees in which he documented how much help they have received by participating in returnee fellowship groups.*

## Returnees Committing to Church in China

By Henry E.T.

I wonder what excites us most about the prospect of brothers and sisters returning to China:

*How wonderful to have this godly man heading up a hospital, refusing underhanded deals with pharmaceutical companies.*

*How strategic to have this winsome sister working as a university lecturer; just think what kind of impact she could have on a whole generation of students.*

Yes, such inspiring thoughts spur us on in serving our Chinese friends from overseas, and yet how much is this rather individualistic? Perhaps we do stress the importance of church, but to what extent is this merely pragmatic? Without a supportive church community, how else will our friends stand firm in such a challenging context? *No, this is something far more significant, for church is right at the heart of God's eternal plan.* (Ephesians 3:10)

Many believers returning to China fail to appreciate the significance and dignity of gathering as God's people, as an outpost of his kingdom. Compared to the surrounding temples of consumerism, such meetings often appear distinctly unremarkable, and yet according to God's word they are "God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth." (1 Timothy 3:15) In a church that seemed to have marginalized the gospel, the Apostle Paul sought to remind Timothy of the church's mission: to declare and display the gospel to a watching world. Joining a local fellowship can never be an optional extra for a returnee believer—it is central to God's plan for each life.

There is no doubt that returnees have much to learn from the church in China. They also have much to give. How heart-warming it is to consider returnee friends who have committed to serving within local churches back in China. Some help coordinate the children's Sunday school; others lead small group Bible studies; some labor as elders while others are involved in planting new congregations. Yet for many, if not most, the reality is far more sobering.

### Why Committing is Such a Challenge

It clearly does not help that many returnees are made to feel unwelcome within local churches. It is not uncommon for church leaders to groan at the thought of a new attendee recently arrived back from overseas. Such leaders often *feel too busy* to spend the time getting to know returnees. Many churches have *little understanding of every-member ministry*, leading pastors to spend their days fighting fires with next to no capacity for proactive personal ministry. Some *feel threatened* by returnees that are often highly educated and, in some instances, have received better Bible training than they have. Many *feel bruised*, having had their fingers burnt in the past with previous returnees having promised much, but in the end, turning out to be half-hearted or even divisive.

"So in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others." (Romans 12:5) We must pray for churches in China to grow in concern for brothers and sisters returning from overseas. However, the onus surely must be on returnees themselves to be clear on their primary identity. The fact they spent time overseas is not so important; what matters is that they are "in Christ." It can never be right to look at a local church and think, "I don't need you," or "I don't belong with you." "In Christ," returnee believers form one body with local Christians of all kinds.

Church leaders from some of China's biggest cities have mentioned encountering the following kinds of returnees:

**Disdainful heroes**, who look down on how things are done and, perhaps unconsciously, consider themselves to be the answer to the church's future.

**Discontented consumers**, unhappy with the differences in style and format, and in many instances passively waiting to be looked after by others, having experienced well-intentioned but unhelpful spoon-feeding by churches overseas.

**Divisive cliques**, with returnees only making the effort to invest in relationships with others that have spent time overseas or, at the very least, relate with those who seem to understand where they are coming from.

No wonder there is talk of the need for 去海归化 a "de-returnee-izing process"! Perhaps more than anything, returnees often prove to be uncommitted and sporadic in attendance, choosing instead to prioritize family and friends, and in many instances, the need to find a job "suitable" for a returnee. Of course, the reality is that many returnees are only baby Christians, so we need to be realistic. However, surely there are things that can be done differently.

### Helping Returnees to Commit

Undoubtedly this is something we all need to be engaging with—churches overseas, churches in China, and returnees themselves.

#### *Churches Overseas*

Discipleship overseas is key to returnees integrating effectively into churches back in China. The way we serve Chinese brothers and sisters overseas should have an eye to their return from the very beginning (even if we don't make this explicit until they have spoken with us about returning). Of all the different aspects that should be considered with regard to returnee preparation, this question of committing to church is surely one of the highest priorities. The following three areas should be considered.

- **Explain the role of the church.** Many Western discipleship programs tend to be rather individualistic. If such materials are combined with campus-based, parachurch ministry, there is a real danger of sending returnees home thinking that church is just one of many aspects of the Christian life. The value of letting God set the agenda through sequential expository Bible



[Thomas H. Hahn Docu-Images.](#)

teaching gives returnees the chance to repeatedly see how central church is to life as a Christian. There is a danger for many Chinese overseas to view church pragmatically as a substitute community while away from family and friends back home. It is vital, therefore, to be explicit about why we meet as church, helping them grasp underlying convictions and equipping them to distinguish cultural and theological differences. It is also important that we encourage active participation rather than treating them as guests. Where appropriate, expose them to ministry initiative and involve them in discipling others, co-leading Bible studies, participating up front in church meetings, and so on.

- *Engage in prayer for returnees.* What a great model we have in Epaphras who carried on interceding for the Colossians (4:12) long after they were separated by geography. Recorded Skype interviews with returnees both inform the church/group how we can be praying intelligently as well as encourage future returnees to begin engaging with life back home. Explicit prayer for humble attitudes and love for the body of Christ both strengthen the returnees and provide a vision for those preparing to return.
- *Establish church partnerships.* Where you have personal contact with returnees committed to churches back in China, pray for their church as well as the individual. Look to learn from these churches, not least how we can be preparing returnees more effectively. If friends preparing to return to China are not tied to returning to their hometown, encourage them to move to a city on the basis of good partner churches rather than on the quality of the air or where they think it will best serve their career.

### *Churches in China*

There are reasons to be quietly confident that returnees will find it increasingly easy to integrate into local churches, especially in the burgeoning urban churches where growing numbers of people have spent time overseas—including many church leaders. All the same, we should pray for churches in China to consider the following.

- *Empathize with returnees.* While it is tempting for locals to look down on returnees and exhort them to “get a grip,” they need to seek to understand them and especially the underlying issues that make it challenging for returnees to commit to church. Establishing partnerships with overseas churches ministering among mainland Chinese could help with understanding the issues facing returnees
- *Expose the congregation to potential.* It is important the church grasps the value of having returnees in its fellowship with all the potential they bring for gospel partnerships, both locally as well as further afield. Having experienced life overseas, with all the challenges of cross-cultural relationships and working in a different language, returnees are often some of the best placed people to send as mission partners in the future.
- *Establish a returnee ministry.* Understandably, some churches have expressed concerns about returnee cliques emerging. Even with all of the above, there still surely is value in considering appointing someone in the church to coordinate, welcome, and follow-up new returnees; another possibility would be to develop a short-term transitional group.

### *Returnees*

The grass might genuinely be greener overseas (!) but the reality is no matter where we live, until Christ returns, life will be hard as we continue to live as sinful beings in a cursed world. Returnees are not back in China by accident. How important it is for them to go back excited about their...

- *New identity.* Being a returnee is not something to dwell on; far more significant is their being a member of God’s people, even more so than their family. (Mark 3:31-35) They might not feel like they fully belong back in China, but that should be true for all Christians!
- *New mindset.* Instead of thinking about how they might gain face for self or family, they should focus now on honoring Christ. (Philippians 1:21) They need to give attention to avoiding a consumerist mentality about church and perhaps set a time limit for choosing a church—otherwise they will get into bad habits!
- *New opportunities.* The Lord has prepared in advance good works for every returnee believer to be engaged in. (Ephesians 2:10) They do not need an official role at church to start serving; from day one they can make the most of building up individuals in the truth, giving, praying, and other ministries.

The previously mentioned church leaders also underlined how grateful they are to the Lord for individual returnees who have proved to be key partners in the gospel. Whoever we are, whether overseas or in China, let us be praying fervently for the Lord to be raising up countless “seaturtles” who will conduct themselves “*in a manner worthy of the gospel...standing firm in one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel.*” (Philippians 1:27)

There is no silver bullet for returnee ministry. What we need is the word of God’s grace (Acts 20:32), which is more than able to ensure that returnees not only survive, but thrive, as committed members of churches back in China. Think of the impact of countless returnees partnering in mission to the ends of the earth. Surely nothing could be more significant for a Christian returnee to China.

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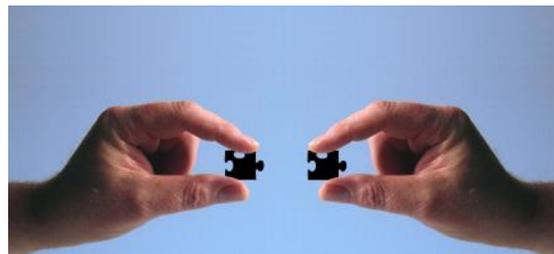
<sup>1</sup> “Seaturtles” or *haigui* refer, in current Chinese slang, to overseas returnees, especially to the thousands of Chinese students who have completed studies overseas, gained some practical work experience and are now returning home.

*Henry E. T. has been pastoring a Mandarin-speaking congregation in London since 2005; prior to that he served in China among returnees.*

## View from the Wall

### Returnee Ministry at Home and Abroad

By Lydia Song



On the heels of China's 1970s Reform and Open Policy, Chinese students have joined the ranks of those studying abroad in increasing numbers. The earliest group was primarily self-supporting. In the mid-90s, the China Scholarship Council (CSC) strengthened its financial support of students and scholars who study overseas which has led to their yearly surge. Among these have been government-funded students, visiting scholars, and exchange students. Now in the twenty-first century, more and more high school students are joining the ranks as young, overseas students. The study-abroad student population is now diverse and increasing dramatically. The annual number of overseas students quadrupled over ten years and reached 523,700 in 2015.<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, the number of Chinese students returning home has increased with the developing Chinese economy, China's progress in meeting international standards, Western countries' financial crises and immigration policy reforms, and other factors. The number of returnees was 364,800 in 2014, an increase of 40 times in fifteen years. The total number of study-abroad returnees has reached 1,800,960 which is 74.48% of the entire study-abroad student population since the Reform and Open Policy.<sup>2</sup>

#### Christian Returnees: A People Easily Lost

Thanks be to God that many overseas churches and organizations have recognized the tidal wave of returning Chinese students. They have responded to God's call and become greatly involved in the gospel work among these students. While overseas, a considerable number of Chinese students and scholars have been exposed to the gospel, believed in Jesus and followed him. Those of us who are working with returnees believe a significant percentage of the overseas students return as new Christians. So currently, while exact numbers are unavailable, it is reasonable to assume that thousands of these Christian students and scholars return to China annually—a number and group not to be ignored. Based on our past six years' experience of serving returnees within the country, however, we regret to find that at least 75% do not have a consistent spiritual life, and many have fallen away.

The reasons for losing Christian returnees are many. First, they face the challenges of reverse culture shock and the myriad of problems encountered in living in their homeland such as environmental pollution, food safety, housing shortages and exorbitant housing costs, traffic problems, difficulties in seeking medical help, problems in finding a mate and job, work pressures, children's state registry/education, and others. Furthermore, it is usually difficult for Christian returnees to find a church and become part of it. There is also political pressure: fear of making their Christian identity public, objections from unbelieving family members, "spiritual homesickness," and various spiritual "acclimatization" issues—all exacerbated by the Chinese political system.

However, the core reason for losing Christian returnees is their own weak spiritual faith. Most of these Christians are perhaps new believers or newly baptized and are merely believers—not disciples; their lives have not been transformed. They are still arrogant, judgmental, uncommitted, insensitive to sin, and lacking a sense of mission.

#### Returnee Ministry: Domestic Strategy

We believe that appropriate preparation, linkages, and reliable support in their transition will effectively help Christian returnees maintain a consistent spiritual walk and attain spiritual growth as well as bless the churches and society in China.

Whether Christian returnees thrive or languish depends on three relationships in their lives: their relationship with God, with the church, and with other Christians around them (networks). From their inner to outward being, these three relationships form a unified "spiritual community." The nucleus at which all decisions are made is the relationship with God. Next is the involvement with the church. If Christians have good relationships in these two areas, their spiritual ties are strong. The third relationship is an outward expression of the previous two that work together to give an abundant life. Many Christian returnees, following their return, have not established a strong relationship with God or with the church; thus they have to greatly rely on their overseas network or other local relationships which is a rather alarming situation.

Finding a church is the most important issue for Christian returnees. For many of them, the existing house church structure, especially those of the emerging urban church, is a good choice. At the same time, they need a multi-channel, diversified church base such as international churches, returnee (primary attendees) churches, or traditional house churches. Over the past six years, we have been committed to establishing and improving the internal church network. Our goal is to have a network for connecting returnee-friendly churches with returnees in first-, second-, third- and even fourth-tier cities.<sup>3</sup>

Seeing returnees integrated into a church is a challenge for returnee ministry in China and depends on both the returnees'

efforts and initiatives from local churches and their pastors. Helping local churches, especially the pastors, see the returnees' limitations and needs and accept the challenges of pluralism in the development of the church is key—along with having a kingdom strategy for returnee ministry. Relentless communication of vision and wonderful testimonies by returnees are a means to that end, but most crucial is God's guidance. Some local pastors feel that the church, as it tries to welcome returnees, should set up a contact person and establish special ministries within the church, introduce the new returnees to the pastors and elders who meet with and welcome them, encourage them to participate in "returnee activities," and actively support ministries undertaken by returnee ministry organizations."<sup>4</sup>

Returnees who are not yet rooted in church networks require a lot of companionship, encouragement, and guidance. Returnee ministry plays a key role at this stage. A multifaceted returnee ministry aims at meeting these needs and includes organizing a welcome party, providing a returnee salon, facilitating peer support, setting up professional small groups as well as building a returnee network in different cities. This type of work requires the participation and involvement of a great number of coworkers.

Returnee ministry also needs to strategically identify and cultivate future leaders from among the large Christian returnee population being served as well as instill in them a sense of mission. Not only are leaders the foundation for future returnee ministry, but they are blessings to the Chinese churches as well.

### **Returnee Ministry: Overseas Strategy**

In returnee ministry, involvement of overseas churches and organizations is essential. The diligent work of local churches and returnee ministry at the broken link or end of the "production chain" cannot fundamentally resolve the returnee's "quality" problem. Unfortunately, returnees' churches and institutions overseas have not been aware of this for years. To a certain extent, they have overly depended on the returnee ministries and local church in China. Some North American pastors feel that as the church in the United States has not solved the problem of losing believers, how can one hope that the church in China will solve it?<sup>5</sup>

The returnee problem should be addressed at its root when the gospel is shared with international students and in discipleship training. Prevention is far better than remediation. Overseas churches and organizations need to clearly and thoroughly communicate a holistic gospel to international students and scholars, help them establish a firm spiritual foundation after leading them to Christ, and systematically prepare them to face the challenge of contextualization upon return to their country. They should assist them in transitioning and making contacts with local churches, maintain contact with them for a while to care for and provide companionship after their return, and urge them to find and become involved in a local church. These are ways to address the returnee problem effectively and efficiently, but they require significant investment on the part of the overseas churches and organizations in collaboration with the mainland churches and especially with returnee ministry organizations.

A Standard of Procedure (SOP) of Christian recommendations, referrals, and follow-up, along with a feedback process is important in facing the surge in the population of returnees being served and in seeking sustainable ministries. It requires collaboration between domestic and, particularly, overseas churches and organizations.

### **Returnee Ministry: Kingdom Vision**

Returnee ministry is not just an extension of the gospel work overseas but more a kingdom vision. Due to their educational background, professional knowledge and skills, cross-cultural experiences, overseas contacts, language proficiency, and other advantages, Christian returnees can foster a multifaceted development in Chinese churches, extend the reach of the gospel into Chinese society and become a significant force in global evangelism.

Serving Christian returnees needs concerted cooperation among overseas and domestic churches and institutions. Returnee ministry in China is still in its exploratory and growing stage. Its continuing development requires still more involvement from members of the church body and support from internal churches as well as overseas churches and organizations.

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<sup>1</sup>Xinhua News Agency, "Ministry of Education: 2015 annual total number of students studying abroad reached 52.37 million," 2016-03-17 at [http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-03/17/content\\_5054762.htm](http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2016-03/17/content_5054762.htm)

<sup>2</sup>Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council, "Returnees," at <http://www.gqb.gov.cn/news/2015/0325/35373.shtml>

<sup>3</sup>Chinese cities are ranked in tiers based on size, economic factors, infrastructure, and historical and cultural significance. The rankings vary depending on who is doing the ranking. For an overview see "China City Tier System: How It Works and Why It's Useful," *Nexus Pacific*, July 09, 2013, <http://nexus-pacific.com/blog/2013/7/9/china-city-tier-system-how-it-works-and-why-its-useful> .

<sup>4</sup>2014 National Returnee's Ministry Consultation (RMC2014), Shanghai, China, 2014.

<sup>5</sup>"The Spiritual Growth of Believers from the Perspective View of Returnee Christians," [https://forumcfci.org/forum2014/sites/default/files/Proceeding/5\\_1.pdf](https://forumcfci.org/forum2014/sites/default/files/Proceeding/5_1.pdf), 2014.

*Lydia Song lived and studied in the US for six-and-a-half years. While there she became a believer in Jesus Christ. She returned to China in 2000. In 2010 she responded to God's call to serve in returnee ministry and now lives in Beijing with her husband and two children.*

## Peoples of China

### The Hook and the Cook:

#### A Portrait of a Mainland Chinese Student in the UK

By J. Ling



[England, Yorkshire, York - April 2015 by Peter Dunne via Flickr.](#)

When Xiao Mei came to study in the UK, it was the first time she left home to study abroad. Like many students from China, she had mixed feelings. On one hand, she was excited about the opportunity to gain knowledge of British culture and traditions; on the other, she was worried about the challenges of living independently in a foreign country and studying in an English-speaking school setting. She longed for friends who could help her succeed in this new environment.

Xiao Mei visited a local British church nearby where she joined a Global Café for the possibility of meeting new friends and learning to speak English. The relaxed atmosphere encouraged her to return, and the friendly church people invited her to learn more about the faith sustaining them. Over the next few months, Xiao Mei made many friends and really enjoyed the worship services. She became a Christian at a gospel event, but she admitted that she was mainly attracted by the genuine love and care of the Christians she met at church and only had a superficial understanding of their faith. Lack of ability and confidence to openly express her thoughts in English due to the language barrier made it difficult for her to engage in conversations about deeper spiritual issues.

After getting to know some Chinese Christians, Xiao Mei attended a special event for Chinese students. For the first time, in her familiar language of Mandarin Chinese, she heard people's testimonies of how Jesus had changed their lives and was touched by their real life stories. This connection led her to join a local Chinese student fellowship, and it was there that she began to truly understand the atonement of Jesus Christ on the cross for her sin. Through a series of Bible studies and discipleship courses, as well as regular discussions with other Chinese Christians in the fellowship group, Xiao Mei gradually came to grasp what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

Throughout her short 18-month stay in the UK, she continued to attend the local British church where her spiritual journey began and was baptized there before going back to China. Because she had been well connected with Chinese Christians in the Chinese student fellowship group and with others through its network, she was able to join a vibrant, local, Chinese church right after she returned to her hometown in Southeast China. She has been serving the Lord ever since.

#### Outreach Challenges in the UK

There are currently over 80,000 mainland Chinese students studying in the UK with approximately 50,000 new students arriving from China each year. However, their relatively short period of stay coupled with the intensity of study presents a special challenge for local churches and Christian organizations to share the gospel with them during this time. In addition, those who become Christians while studying here are faced with the reality of returning home to a new church environment that is starkly different from their experience in this country.

Most mainland Chinese students in the UK will come into contact with both British and Chinese Christians. There is a natural partnership that can be forged between different outreach ministries. This situation can be illustrated as having the British hook to get the students into the door of faith, but needing a Chinese cook to feed them homemade spiritual food to nurture and support their growth afterwards.

#### The British Hook

Like Xiao Mei, many mainland Chinese students consider the British church an ideal place to experience British culture, practice English, and make friends. This is partly due to the students' curiosity as well as their desire to explore and learn new things in a foreign country. Many British churches and organizations are intentionally reaching out to the international students—especially those from mainland China—through various friendship evangelism platforms such as Global Café and English Corner.

The friendship model is very effective in making initial contact with new students who are eager to befriend local British people. However, since friendship evangelism is usually low key and nonthreatening, the process tends to take a long time and is more fruitful when a student can remain in a place for an extended time. For those coming to study for a shorter period of one year to 18 months, it can be difficult to develop friendship and trust quickly. For mainland Chinese students in particular, English, as a second language, can be a barrier for more meaningful conversations in the process of gospel outreach and discipleship training.

#### The Chinese Cook

Many Chinese students converted in an English-speaking environment discovered that they were only able to deal with

deeper issues in their faith using their native language and in a culturally relevant setting. Most of them craved and appreciated the chance of talking freely with fellow Chinese about subjects of mutual interest. Chinese believers receiving discipleship training in their native language of Mandarin appear to have achieved more significant spiritual growth. Understanding the Christian faith in more depth and applying what they learn directly to their own life situations solidifies their biblical knowledge. Using the irreplaceable Chinese language to express their Christian faith in activities such as worship, prayer, Bible study, and personal evangelism is especially vital for students who will return to China after graduation and will need to readjust to the Chinese church setting.

Providing a similar cultural background and using their native language are two very important factors in the willingness of Chinese students to open up and join in at any new place. Being able to connect and interact with fellow mainland Chinese Christians from the same generation and background help the students develop a deeper sense of belonging in taking on their new Christian identity. Because they are from the same background and at the same stage in life, they are more willing to learn and practice their faith along with fellow mainland Chinese believers. Such bonding and friendship among students from the same region in China can extend to include their families after they go back home and are crucial in the continuation of their Christian walk in China.

One outreach strategy could be to take advantage of the natural curiosity of mainland Chinese students towards British culture and bring them into contact with Christianity through local British churches. Then, partner them with a Mandarin-speaking Chinese student ministry to provide discipleship training so they can become increasingly grounded in their faith through their own cultural lens.

### **Reducing the Cultural Distance**

In light of the students' relatively short stay in the UK, we recognize that the shorter the cultural distance student ministry workers have to travel to reach mainland Chinese students, and the closer the identification with them through tailor-made programs that cater to their taste, the more effective is the outreach and discipleship process.

An outreach model using the student's native language, coupled with a culturally appropriate program which the students can readily identify with, implemented through the familiarity of a Chinese environment by a local Chinese church or Chinese mission organization, can speed up the proclamation of the gospel and help mainland Chinese students make a faster initial decision to accept Christ. This advantage is strategically important when the student is only in the UK for a short period and does not have the luxury of long-term friendship building.

The native language advantage becomes even more visible to first generation Chinese believers when they witness to their close friends and family members who most likely are Chinese speaking with little or no knowledge of English. Being able to share their faith with confidence in their native language and within the context of Chinese culture encourages new believers to grow spiritually, as well as to become passionate in reaching out to their fellow Chinese whether they stay in the UK or return to China.

For students who will return to China after graduation, the best preparation will be to make sure they have a clear understanding of the Christian faith and the confidence to share their faith in their native language when they are back home. In addition to providing opportunities for such discipleship training and practices, it is essential to connect them with other Chinese Christians while they are in the UK and after their return to China so they will have a network of support to transition into local churches back in China.

### **Partnership in the Gospel**

Local British and Chinese churches, English-speaking and Mandarin-speaking student ministries, all play different roles to support mainland Chinese students at different stages of their spiritual journey. Partnership will help maximize the effectiveness of efforts from all ministries to reach out to mainland Chinese students in the UK.

A British Christian might introduce the gospel to a mainland Chinese student; then a Mandarin-speaking ministry worker can nurture his or her spiritual growth. In a small Chinese Mandarin student fellowship, students might build closer relationships with one another, receive discipleship training, and gain in-depth understanding of the Bible; in a local British church they can become involved in diverse ministries, relating to and serving people of different ages, languages, and cultural backgrounds. Chinese students with strong language abilities should be encouraged to move out of their comfort zones and catch the vision for global mission; they can learn a great deal from British Christians in terms of cross-cultural mission.

I believe that mainland Chinese students are brought to the UK not just to hear the gospel and receive eternal life for their own sake; there is a far grander purpose in God's plan for this new generation of Chinese Christians. Whether they go back to China, move on to other countries, or stay in the UK, I pray that God will use them to spread the good news of Jesus Christ wherever they are.

*J. Ling has been working with overseas Chinese students for more than 25 years. He currently leads a UK Christian organization focusing on Chinese student ministry.*

## Book Review

### Understanding and Serving in the “New China”

*China's Next Generation: New China, New Church, New World* by Luis Bush, Brent Fulton, and a Christian Worker in China. China Source, 2014. Available in Kindle format only; file size: 2674 KB; \$2.99 at [Amazon](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B00M000000).

Reviewed by Peter

I have spent most of the last 20 years living and ministering in China. On hearing this, the first comment that people usually make is, “You must have seen a lot of changes in that time!” This, of course, is true of any two-decade sojourn, but when I think back to the China I arrived in during the early 90s, then compare it to the present, I realize how unique this experience has been.

The year I arrived in China, Beijing was bidding for the 2000 Olympics. At that time, there were serious concerns about China’s ability to pull off a world-class event, and when China lost the bid, most Beijingers I knew sighed with relief. However, two Olympics later, Beijing hosted the 2008 Olympics in what has been described as China’s “coming out party.” The success of this event put China on the map, showing a country that had developed economically, socially, and culturally to the point where it can be taken seriously on the world stage. In less than three decades, China has changed from a needy, third-world country to a nation that is influencing the world economically, politically, and culturally.

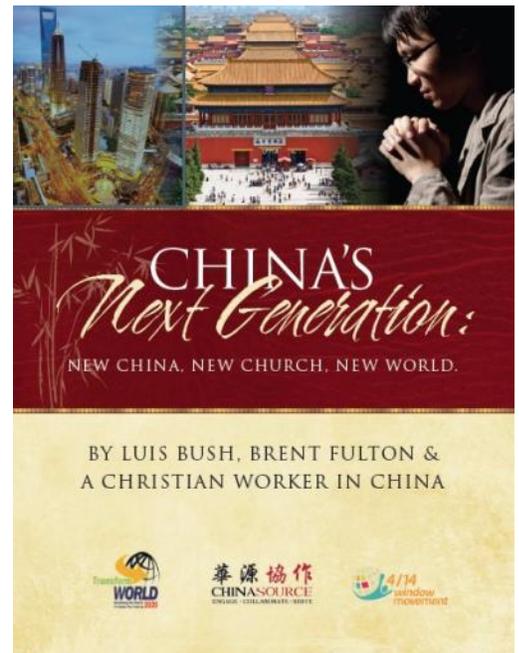
The church, too, has changed dramatically: from humble services in recently returned church buildings or clandestine meetings in homes during the 1980s to large established networks in rented or even purpose-built buildings today; from hand-copied Bibles and hymnals to LCD projectors, professionally printed books, and online materials; from mostly rural peasants to educated, urban intellectuals. The church has grown and changed. Twenty years ago I was asked to help with basic discipleship, Bible reading, and prayer. Now I am being asked to provide training in church structure and leadership development as well as cross-cultural mission. One of my friends, a church leader, summed this up when he said to me: “It was much simpler when our focus was on facing persecution, taking up our cross and dying for Jesus; now we need to learn how to live for Jesus and serve him in our complicated world.” The church today “seeks to move from the fringes to the center of society, becoming salt and light in every sphere and joining the worldwide Christian community in fulfilling the Great Commission.”<sup>1</sup>

Those of us who minister to mainland Chinese need to understand the mindset of younger Chinese as the next generation of those who need to be reached with the gospel. The young people today are the future of China, the Chinese church and the impact it could potentially have on the world. It is not easy to understand this new generation which enjoys so much prosperity and opportunity and yet is searching for meaning and fulfillment.

Why is this book important? This book outlines the “new China” and how it shapes the next generation. It outlines major changes in China in the last decade and shows the impact on Chinese society and the church. Both authors have extensive experience in China and draw on research as well as their own personal experiences. The book is short, easy to read and encourages the reader with the potential of Chinese church involvement in building the kingdom of God in our world.

The first part of the book unpacks the “new China” considering the impact of urbanization on China—from less than a quarter of the population living in cities in 1980 to more than half the population today. It is expected that eighty percent will move to the cities in the next 50 years. This massive migration brings instability as people leave their past and connections in their home town and seek to establish themselves in a city. From connectedness to home, ancestors, and land they become isolated, living in high-rise buildings with unknown neighbors, and working in jobs that constantly change.

Urbanization, prosperity, and the government’s one-child policy have forever changed the way Chinese think about family. Large families of many children and grandchildren led by a father or grandfather have not been seen for more than a generation. The norm now is two parents and two sets of grandparents investing all their energy, hopes, and expectations into one child who is spoiled in his or her early years and then expected to bear the burden of care for all the seniors later in life. Divorce rates have risen rapidly and young people today have very low expectations of marriage and family life. The authors point out that previous generations of Chinese youth experienced struggles to survive in war and revolution that gave them shared meaning and purpose with their peers. Today’s youth find themselves distant from parents and teachers, pushed to extremes in a highly competitive world, and burdened with unrealistic expectations to perform and provide. Sadly, China’s high suicide rate for youth demonstrates that all is not well for young people.



Media and technology have changed the way Chinese communicate. When I first arrived in China, home phones were very rare, and even a newspaper subscription required approval from your work unit. Now, China has the largest population of Internet users in the world, and even with government restrictions, Chinese users are able to access news, information, and entertainment instantly, comment on events around them and call each other from across the room or around the world. Churches and Christian organizations have been able to take advantage of this as they use the Internet to access resources and communicate with each other.

The second part of the book looks at the changes in the church and the way it relates to society. Urbanization has moved the church into the cities, and the urban church is made up of educated people, many of whom influence society and bring the church into public life. As communism is overtaken by materialism, Chinese are looking for meaning and comfort in traditional religions like Buddhism and Daoism as well as in Christianity and other religions and cults. Many of those seeking an answer to their questions find the gospel not only meaningful, but also powerful to change people's lives for the better.

One area where the church has entered society is the business world. Wenzhou is a coastal city that is famous for two things. First, it has a network of astute business people that stretches throughout China and the world and, second, it is known as the Jerusalem of China because of its high percentage of Christians. In a country well known for dishonest and corrupt business practices, Christian businessmen support and encourage each other as they seek to honor Jesus in their everyday business dealings.

The book includes a helpful discussion on the size of the church and an explanation of why authorities allow some Christian activities and clamp down on others. Leadership has been a key issue for the Chinese church since the early 80s. The rapid growth of the church, and insufficient training opportunities have created a great shortage of leadership. The authors discuss the changing face of Christian leadership and look at the implications for leading the church in a changing world.

In 2013, Xi Jinping became the Chinese president and began talking of the "China Dream." This concept embraces more than just prosperity for Chinese people; it includes China reclaiming a position of influence and power in the world. The final chapters consider Chinese involvement in Africa and the Middle East as well as the potential for China to be a major participant in the global church.

Published in 2014, the book is now two years old, which in China terms means it is somewhat dated. At the time of writing, Xi Jinping had just become president. The anti-corruption campaigns, the removal of crosses and demolition of churches, and the dispute over islands in the South China Sea occurred after publishing and therefore are not included. In my opinion, these events probably do not influence the final analysis greatly, and the conclusions are fundamentally appropriate and sound for today.

If you are ministering to young people from mainland China, then I can recommend this book to you as a concise overview of key issues and influences. It is well written and easy to read. I hope it will inform your thinking and be a blessing to your service among Chinese people, for the glory of God.

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<sup>1</sup>Bush, Fulton, & Worker (2014), chapter 2, paragraph 4.

*Peter and his family served in China for 20 years with particular attention on encouraging young leaders. In 2013, they returned to Australia and are currently serving among Chinese students with a focus on preparing Christian students to return to China.*

## Resource Corner

### Resources for Returnees and Those Who Serve Them

#### Books

Chinn, Lisa Espineli, *Think Home: A Reentry Guide for Christian International Students* IntersVarsity Press, ISBN 978-0-9835848-0-3.

Chinn, Lisa Espineli, *Back Home: Daily Reflections on Re-entry*, IntersVarsity Press, 32 pages, ISBN 978-0-9835848-1-0.

*Returnee Handbook*—*海归手册*, A handbook written for mainland Chinese returnees.

To purchase call or email Overseas Campus Ministries (OCM). Chinese edition: US\$7.50  
Telephone: +1-310-328-8200 ext. 105; Email: [order@oc.org](mailto:order@oc.org); or go to [www.oc.org](http://www.oc.org)

*New Horizons—Adjusting to Life Back Home* by International Students, Inc. This book provides a wealth of information, advice, and encouragement for international students returning to their home countries.



#### Websites and Downloads

*Friends International: Downloadable Resources*, by Friends International UK. Free downloads for churches and organizations desiring to serve effectively among international students. The section “[Students Returning Home](#)” may be particularly helpful.

*Sea Turtles* This website aims to provide resources for Chinese returnees—both those who are preparing to return home or those who have recently returned.

*Tool Kit for Working with Chinese—UPDATED*. Recommended books, websites, newsletters, videos, conferences, networks, etc. Updated Feb 2016.

*Home Again—Preparing International Students to Serve Christ in Their Home Countries* by Nate Mirza.

*ID Course (Student and Leaders’ Notes)* A 10-session series of discussions aimed at discipling international students in the Christian faith. Topics covered include decision making, relating to parents, relationships and religious customs. Available on the Friends International UK website or by writing to Communications Manager Jack Bentley at [jack.bentley@friendsinternational.uk](mailto:jack.bentley@friendsinternational.uk). Specific questions about the course can be addressed to Sue Burt, Head of Returnee Ministry at [sue.burt@friendsinternational.uk](mailto:sue.burt@friendsinternational.uk).

## Intercessory Notes

### *Please pray*

1. For the many Christian Chinese students returning to their homeland each year. Pray they will readjust well into society and find a church and Christian friends.
2. That the churches in China will become aware of the needs of returning students and work to incorporate them into their services and ministries.
3. That churches in countries receiving Chinese students will prepare those who have come to know Christ for their return home and the challenges they will face.
4. For organizations both inside and outside of China that work with returnees both to prepare them for their return and to support and aid them once they have returned.
5. For partnerships to develop among churches and organizations working with returnees, both inside and outside of China. Pray for cooperation so that returnees will be prepared for their return and find help and support once they are back home family.

