

# Faith, Conversion, and Challenge: A Qualitative Study of Chinese Immigrant Christian Marriage (in the USA)

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## INTRODUCTION

Research on religion and family life has increased markedly over the past twenty years. Furthermore, the impact of religion on family life is now beginning to be recognized as a significant issue which deserves greater study. As Houseknecht and Pankhurst (2000) posit:

In the process of economic and political change that many societies experience as disruption and disorganization, family and religion are important sources of stability and order, even as they adapt to the changing circumstances in which they find themselves. It is to family and religion that one should go to find the processes that are working out the morality for the new age and the lifestyles for the new era (p. 27).

The role of religion in family life is significant not only to native-born Americans but also to immigrants in the U.S. At present, there are 38.5 million immigrants in the U.S., which represent 12.5% of the total U.S. population. Specifically, Asians comprise 28% of overall U.S. immigration (U.S. Census, 2009). The existing literature indicates that religious beliefs and practices have a significant impact on marriage and family life (Christiano, 2000; Mahoney, 2010; Marks, 2004, 2006). Religion has also been shown to strongly influence the family life of Chinese immigrants (Lu, Marks, and Baumgartner, 2011; Yang, 1998).

Approximately 25% to 32% of the Chinese in the U.S. are Christians and when studying Chinese immigrants' marriages and families, it is important to consider these religious beliefs and practices (Chen, 2006). A preponderance of research regarding the impact of religion on marriage and family life focuses on the positive correlations between religiosity and beneficial outcomes in marriage and family life (Mahoney, 2010). This is also the case for research on Chinese immigrant Christians (Lu et al., 2011). However, in order to fully understand the impact of religion on marriage and family life, it is also important to study challenges that arise. To answer Burr, Marks, and Day's (2012) call regarding the need for research addressing the wide variety of religions and cultural conditions, the purpose of the present study is to examine: (a) challenges that sometimes accompany high levels of religious involvement, as well as (b) religion-based resources that Chinese Christian couples have during and after their conversions.

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## OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE

Although this paper addresses both challenges and resources that accompany religious involvement, one review indicates that religious involvement is generally correlated with “well-being, happiness and life satisfaction, purpose and meaning in life, higher self-esteem, [and] greater marital stability and satisfaction” (Koenig, McCullough, and Larson, 2001, p. 228). In connection with this latter reference to marriage, several empirical studies over the past quarter century have indicated that shared religious beliefs and practices generally have significant positive influences on marital stability and commitment (Abbott, Berry, and Meredith, 1990; Bahr and Chadwick, 1985; Call and Heaton, 1997; Lehrer and Chiswick, 1993).

Recently, Mahoney (2010) analyzed 184 studies from 1999-2009 on religion and family and found significant relationships between religion and several marriage and family outcomes. For instance, Mahoney found that religion typically correlates with marital satisfaction and healthy family relationships. Mahoney (2010) also recommended research directions for the next decade which included: a) more research on mixed roles of religion in families, especially in nontraditional or distressed families; b) more attention to the contexts of the family in order to better understand the role of religion in marriage and family life; and c) more qualitative research and high quality quantitative research such as longitudinal designs to study the interface between religion and family life. The present article is a response to the call for qualitative work. Next, we will discuss the interface of religion and marriage in connection with three different dimensions of religion: (a) religious beliefs, (b) religious practices, and (c) religious community (Dollahite and Marks, 2009).

### **Religious Beliefs and Marriage**

Religious beliefs are operationally defined by Dollahite and Marks (2009) as “personal, internal beliefs, framings, meanings, [or] perspectives” that are grounded in religion (p. 375). For many, “religion creates a sense of meaning in life that in turn fosters well-being” (Steger and Frazier, 2005, p. 580). Mahoney et al., (1999) found that greater perceptions of marriage as a sacred institution were associated with higher marital satisfaction and less marital conflict. This “sanctification” perspective seems to help married couples find significance and meaning in their shared life (Mahoney et al., 2005; Pargament and Mahoney, 2005). Qualitative literature also suggests that couples' perceptions of God being involved in their marriages are correlated with greater marital satisfaction (Goodman and Dollahite, 2006) and marital commitment (Lambert and Dollahite, 2008). Marks (2005) conducted a qualitative study on how religion influences marriage and reported that spiritual beliefs impacted marriage through anti-divorce beliefs, similar worldviews provided by shared religious beliefs, and a belief in God as a marital support. However, the same study reported that excessive or conflicting levels of religious involvement are also a challenge for marital and intergenerational relationships (Marks, 2005). Moreover, some interpretations and applications of a husband's “headship” and a wife's “submission,” according to New Testament teaching, may be misunderstood and evoke intra-marriage challenges (Barkowski, 1997).

Existing empirical research has found that religious homogamy is a significant factor in marital stability (Dudley and Kosinski, 1990; Lambert and Dollahite, 2006; Lehrer and Chiswick, 1993). Same-faith marriage has also been associated with better marital satisfaction and adjustment (Wilson and Musick, 1996). For instance, the congruence of denominational affiliation, church attendance, and belief in the Bible has been correlated

with marital satisfaction and stability (Heaton and Pratt, 1990). In addition, mixed-faith marriages report more conflicts and less stability than single-faith marriages (Curtis and Ellison, 2002; Lehrer and Chiswick, 1993). Research has repeatedly indicated that the divorce rate among inter-faith marriages is higher than among same-faith marriages—and among some denominations it is significantly higher (e.g., for Mormons, the divorce rate in one study for marriages outside the faith was *three times* higher than for same-faith marriages) (Lehrer and Chiswick, 1993). In addition to religious beliefs, religious practices also seem to influence marriage and family.

### **Religious Practices and Marriage**

Religious practices are “outward, observable expressions of faith such as prayer, scripture study, rituals, traditions, or less overtly sacred practice or abstinence that is religiously grounded” (Dollahite and Marks, 2009, p. 375). Couples' joint religious activities (e.g., praying for each other, attending church together, and praying together) are correlated with enhanced marital quality (Mahoney et al., 1999). Some religious practices may help couples prevent, resolve, and overcome marital conflict (Lambert and Dollahite, 2006).

Researchers have posited that religiosity may be related to marital satisfaction and stability through the religion-promoted practices of prayer and forgiveness (Dollahite, Marks, and Goodman, 2004; Jose and Alfons, 2007). Prayer has been positively related to forgiveness and relationship satisfaction (Fincham et al., 2008)—and forgiveness helps heal and improve broken relationships (Enright, 2001). A series of studies by Butler and colleagues indicates that prayer is an important resource and tool as religious couples resolve their conflicts (Butler, Gardner, and Bird, 1998; Butler and Harper, 1994; Butler, Stout, and Gardner, 2002). Marks (2005) similarly reported the importance of prayer in marriage and, in later work, suggested that prayer is important in coping and prevention, in addition to intervention (Marks, 2008).

However, other research shows that, although shared family religious practices can be beneficial and meaningful, “compulsory” family worship may have ill effects (Lee, Rice, and Gillespie, 1997). Moreover, imbalanced involvement in religious activities by one spouse may negatively influence a marital relationship (Lu et al., 2011). We turn next to the third dimension of religious community and marriage.

### **Faith Community and Marriage**

Religious community (or faith community) includes “support, involvement, and relationships [that are] grounded in a congregation or less formal religious group” (Dollahite and Marks, 2009, p. 375). Shared church attendance is a significant predictor of marital happiness and stability (Larson and Goltz, 1989; Myers, 2006).

Church as a social support and network is an important resource in marriage and family life (Krause, Ellison, Shaw, Marcum, and Boardman, 2001; Marks and Dollahite, 2001). Church members provide encouragement, advice, companionship, and emotional support (Taylor, Lincoln, and Chatters, 2005). Research has also indicated that church involvement positively relates to church goers' psychological, emotional, and spiritual state (Chaney, 2008). Indeed, in a landmark demographic study with a sample of 20,000+ Americans, adults who reportedly attended worship services more than once a week lived an average of 7.6 years longer than non-attenders (Hummer, Rogers, Nam, and Ellison, 1999).

In a qualitative study, Marks and Dollahite (2001) found that religious communities offered social, emotional, spiritual, financial, and temporal support in times of need. However, they also found that faith communities involved conflict and other challenges. Furthermore, the challenges related to religious community were reported more frequently than challenges with the other two dimensions of religion (beliefs and practices) combined (Marks and Dollahite, 2001). The same study noted that, because the faith community is often like family, that it was especially hurtful when the faith community failed the participants or let them down—significantly more so than when other (less personal) institutions failed them (Dollahite, Marks, and Olson, 1998, 2002). Having discussed the three different dimensions of religion in connection to marriage in general, we turn next to a discussion of the connections between religion and immigrant Chinese marriages in particular.

### **Chinese Christian Immigrant Families**

In Chinese culture, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism are traditionally regarded as the central religions. Christianity is considered foreign (Hunter and Chan, 1993). Since the enactment of the Economic Reform and the Open Door Policy in 1979, Christianity in China has been spreading quickly, along with other social and cultural changes, and modernization processes (Hunter and Chan, 1993; Yang, 1998).

Over the past two centuries, Chinese mission churches in the United States have experienced social, political, and economic hardships. In the book *Citizens of a Christian Nation*, Chang (2011) described the difficulties Chinese immigrants encountered in terms of race discrimination, and how they converted to Christianity, reconstructed identity, and engaged in evangelical projects (Chang, 2011). Chinese Christian churches have grown rapidly and Christianity has become the favored religion among Chinese immigrants (Yang, 1999). This choice, however, is not without its accompanying challenges.

Many first-generation Chinese immigrants in the United States face formidable stressors in assimilating into the United States' mainstream culture (Zhou, 2009). In addition to secular challenges and changes, many Chinese immigrants navigate religious changes as well. Two immigrant groups who face this change include: (a) non-religious Chinese who convert to Christianity, and (b) religious but non-Christian (e.g., Buddhist, Taoist) Chinese who convert to Christianity (Yang, 1998). For these groups who experience conversion after immigrating to the United States, a change of religion adds another dynamic to the challenges of assimilating into a new culture (Chen, 2006; Wong, 2007; Yang, 2005; Zhang, 2006).

For many Chinese immigrants, local religious communities play a very important role in the conversion processes (Zhang, 2006). Many Chinese immigrant parents rely on Chinese Christian churches for meaningful and attractive youth activities, in an effort to keep their youth away from potential effects of American society that are viewed as damaging to traditional marital and family values often held by Chinese (Chen, 2006, Yang, 1999). As Yang (1999) described it, these churches seek to “selectively preserve” Chinese cultural traditions and values, especially regarding marriage and family (p. 16). In a mixed-method quantitative and qualitative study on religiosity and marital satisfaction of Chinese-American couples, Ing (1998) found a strong relationship between religiosity and marital satisfaction. Religious beliefs, practices, and shared religious rituals and values seem to positively affect marital and family relationships in the Chinese immigrant community. Research on the interface of religion and Chinese immigrant marriage is scarce however, especially research on challenges.

In sum, the three dimensions of religious beliefs, religious practices, and faith community share several important (and generally salutary) relationships with individual, marital, and family life. These connections appear to apply to Chinese immigrant families as well, although some mixed results have been found (Lu et al., 2011). However, qualitative research on the meanings and processes behind these connections is rare (Marks and Dollahite, 2011). Employing a Chinese immigrant sample, the current study investigates the generally positive but often complex and challenging relationship between faith and marriage.

## METHODS

In the present study, qualitative methods were used to explore experiences, processes, and meanings associated with marriage (Daly, 1992a; Gilgun, 2005). Challenges that Chinese immigrant couples experienced during their journeys of faith were a special focus.

### Sample

A purposive sample ( $N = 44$ ; 22 mothers, 22 fathers) of highly religious Chinese Christian married couples with at least one child were interviewed. The husbands' ages ranged from 28 to 66 ( $M = 48$ ) and the wives' ages ranged from 28 to 65 ( $M = 45$ ). The educational level of the participants in this study was high. Most (34 of 44) of them held advanced graduate degrees (18 had Ph.D. degrees, 16 had M.S. degrees). Of the 22 couples, two couples came from Hong Kong, eight from Taiwan, and twelve from mainland China. The participants were all currently residing in the southern United States. All were affiliated with non-denominational Protestant Chinese Christian churches, except for one Episcopalian couple.

Boss (1980) has suggested that one of the best ways to learn about an issue is through a rich, prototypical sample that embodies the concept of interest. Consistent with this recommendation, given the researchers' interest in both religion and marriage, a "highly religious" sample of married couples was purposively selected. In terms of operational definition, both the wives and husbands in these "highly religious couples" reported: (a) that they were highly involved in their faith community (including contributions of time and money), and (b) that religion was "very important" to them. Purposive samples do not allow generalization but may offer insights that are relevant to similar populations (Johnson, 1999).

### Procedures

Interviews were conducted at the participants' homes or churches between July 2006 and August 2010 by the first author in Chinese. The participants completed a demographic summary which included their age, educational level, and age and gender of children. They also completed a demographic form which included the percentage of their income that they contribute to their churches ( $M = 8.75\%$ , although several left this blank), and the hours per week they devote to faith-related activities ( $M = 15$ ). Semi-structured and open-ended intensive qualitative interviews were conducted. The participants were asked twenty-two questions about faith, marriage, and family life, including questions regarding challenges of faith and family life. Interviews typically lasted one to two hours, with average interview length of one and a half hours. All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and double-checked. The interviews were then translated into English by the first author and were double-checked by a bi-lingual third party. Copies of the transcripts were also given to the participants as a member check. All participant names were replaced with pseudonyms to protect identity.

The husbands and the wives were interviewed together. This approach, as discussed by Lambert and Dollahite (2006), allows couples to remind and correct each other and helps provide richer data. Moreover, the bias of one family member may be balanced or counteracted by another family member (Daly, 1992b). In most of the cases, both the wife and the husband actively responded to each question. Patton (1996) suggests that researchers seek to achieve triangulation of data. We had three “triangulated” data sources: the perspectives of the wife, the perspectives of the husband, and the first author's first-hand observations and field notes as a researcher. Using three sources allows us to understand marriage and family life from multiple perspectives rather than relying on a single informant (Handel, 1996).

## **Analysis**

In the current study, a grounded theory approach was employed. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), open coding is the first analytic step where the data are closely examined. Concepts were identified from the words and phrases in the interview data. After open coding, axial coding was used to relate categories to their subcategories. During this process, Numeric Content Analysis (NCA) of the Open Coding concepts was conducted in each interview (Marks, Hopkins, Chaney, Monroe, Nesteruk, and Sasser, 2008). High frequency concepts and salient concepts were recorded and organized thematically. Several major themes were identified. Three of these themes (all related to religious beliefs) were addressed in a previous article (Lu et al., 2011). Religious beliefs reportedly influenced the participants' marriages in many ways, including changes in both perceptions and actions (Lu et al., 2011). However, participants also mentioned that they encountered several challenges during and after their conversion. These challenges are the focus of the present article, as outlined next.

## **FINDINGS**

In this section, four major themes will be presented: 1) The Challenge of Conversion to Christianity; 2) The Internal Challenge of Battling the “Old Self”; 3) The Intra-marriage Challenges of Being “Unequally Yoked”; and 4) The External Challenge of “The World's Lure.” Each theme will be illustrated and supported by primary data.

### **Theme 1: The Challenge of Conversion to Christianity**

All participants experienced different conversion processes in the current study. For example, some of the participants experienced struggles and challenges. A wife, Jia<sup>1</sup>, (W = Wife) shared how she accepted the challenge to convert to Christianity and how she changed:

I had prejudice [against] Christianity because we received our education in China. I thought this [Christianity] was too far away from us. The purpose that the pastor preaches was just for offerings. I could not believe. After one or two times, I didn't want to go to church anymore. Later, a friend of mine gave me audio cassettes of Pastor Stephen Tong's sermons. I thought it was reasonable after I had listened to them. I studied philosophy and philosophy tends to ask why. . . . I started to read the Bible from then on. I admired the Bible's teaching, but I could not believe the miracles. Jesus' teaching is simple and deep: it is [so] simple that everyone can understand; and it is deep

<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms, but out of cultural respect and because most of our participants are called by their Chinese names, we have chosen Chinese names as pseudonyms. To clarify whether a given Chinese name refers to a man or woman, we use the following designations: (W=Wife; H=Husband).

if you dig into it. . . . There was one time Pastor Tong preached at a Gospel Camp in Singapore. When Pastor called, Ban [my husband] went to front part because he wanted to believe [but] I could not believe. I stayed alone and I resisted it in my heart because I could not understand. . . . However, there was a voice in my heart speaking to me consistently, “You don't want to go? Do you want to be alone all the rest of your life?” I could not sit still and I went to the front. I started to believe from that moment. When I submitted myself [to God], I was full of joy that came from heaven into my heart. I had a feeling of returning home.

For some participants like Jia, the atheist education they received in mainland China was an initial barrier to their religious conversions. Christians comprise approximately 25% to 32% of the Chinese population in the U.S. (Chen, 2006) compared to about 10% in China. That means that nearly 70% of Chinese immigrants retain their original religious or atheist status. Jia struggled with conversion to Christianity for a long time but finally embraced a new faith, due in large measure to the influence of her husband. Some literature indicates that religiosity seems to promote marital commitment (Lambert and Dollahite, 2008). In Jia's case, the influence seems inverse; it seems that marital commitment motivated her conversion.

Zhou (W), from mainland China, explained her doubts about her new faith at the very beginning of the conversion process:

We were very cautious at the beginning. We knew nothing about faith, we were curious about church, about what they do. After a while, I noticed they had no other intention. They preached the gospel and hoped someone [would] accept [the] Christian faith because of love. They had no bad intention. I was cautious when pastor and his wife visited us, and we were cautious in talking because we did not know what they wanted us to do. Later, we went to church and Bible study group, and gradually understood that the church is to show God's love according to the Bible. . . . [Now] we have God to rely on in this world and we have hope of eternal life.

Zhou and her husband doubted, and were “cautious” at the beginning—in fact, she invokes the word “cautious” three separate times. However, they were also “curious” to find more about church and what people do in church. Finally, after they “understood that the church is to show God's love,” they reported that they found “the true God” and an accompanying hope.

For a long time Hu refused to convert because of her aunt's experience as a Christian.

*Hu (W):* In China, my aunt was a missionary. Before she graduated from [the] biology department of Fudan University in Shanghai, she was introduced to church. She thought the faith from the church was good and she changed her worldview and ideology. Then she went to Seminary after she graduated, and wanted to be a pastor or missionary. After the Communist takeover of China in 1949, she left Shanghai to evacuate, but she still kept her faith. She hoped to preach to us little kids when we were young. Due to the social environment, we didn't want to listen to her. Her family regarded her as abnormal, because she refused to find a job after she graduated.

*Ming (H):* Her aunt was very religious.

*Hu (W):* I thought she was abnormal and too “strong” when I was young. So I strongly disliked and rejected Christianity. When we came to the USA, someone invited us to go church, but we were not interested in. Pastor Tian came to our house . . .

*Ming* (H): Pastor Tian was her aunt's teacher. Her aunt was invited back to church after the Cultural Revolution.

*Hu* (W): Because Pastor Tian usually came to our house, I wanted to have a try to go to church after I rejected [it] for a long time. After a while, I noticed that people in the church were normal. Their thoughts, their attitudes to each other, and their spirit of devotion were much better than people in China, and they didn't ask for rewards. I felt good . . . that people in church took care of each other. Pastor Tian's devotion moved me deeply . . . I thought that faith was good. I changed my mind. I thought that people need faith wherever they go. Church has a great influence [on] children on how they grow in the right pathway from a young age. When they grow up and leave us, they have a standard . . .

In China, before 1979, Christianity was regarded as a Western power and influence, and most Chinese preferred a Marxist atheist ideology after the Communist Party had taken power (Yang, 1999). During the Cultural Revolution, religious institutions were closed and thousands of Christians were persecuted. After 1979, with the economic reform and open door policy, Christianity began to grow in China (Hunter and Chan, 1993). Even so, many Chinese immigrants who grew up under the communist regime, not only faced the new challenge of acculturation in the U.S., but also the new challenge of ideology. In *Hu's* case (above), she “strongly disliked and rejected Christianity” when she came to the U.S. because she associated the religion with her aunt's “abnormal and too 'strong'” ideology and behavior. However, after she had noticed that “people in the [U.S.] church were normal,” she embraced a Christian ideology. After conversion, many of our participants reportedly found a deeper purpose and meaning in life, and their marriage and family life also changed. How to “live out” their new faith, however, was a novel challenge for many of the participants—as discussed next.

## **Theme 2: The Internal Challenge of Battling the “Old Self”**

According to the participants [32 of 44 (73%) converted to Christianity as adults after they came to the U.S.], the greatest internal obstacle or challenge they face is battling their “old self.” Their old self includes an array of human weaknesses such as our “sin,” our “old flesh life,” “selfishness,” “pride and jealousy,” stubbornly relying solely on “my own ideas and opinions,” and a wavering condition where “[I] love neither God nor the other part.” Many of the participants viewed the “old self” not only as a personal battle and enemy, but also as a great obstacle in their marriage. *Shen* reported, “My old-self still frequently comes up, which hinders the progression of a marital relationship that pleases God.” *Zhang* similarly stated, “I think [the great obstacle] is [the] old self. This is a fight between spirit and my old self. [It] is not God's will . . . to think of ourselves first, and then the spouse.”

*Zhan* (H) said, “The greatest obstacle to me is [that] faith and life [are often] apart. Why cannot we [better] practice our faith in our daily life?” This question reflected a struggle that most of the participants reportedly experienced—the struggle to live up to and to integrate the lofty ideals of their new faith in their present “daily life.” A couple from mainland China similarly discussed their struggle to live what they referred to as “God's spiritual life”:

*Li* (H): [M]y spiritual life is not mature enough. My old life is the [greatest] obstacle of our marriage—it's not good. [The] old life, flesh, and sin are not pleased by God. To let [my] old self die and to live God's spiritual life is the biggest challenge to me.

*Yang* (W): I think [my biggest challenge is having] faith in God and in him (husband *Li*). To be the best marriage, we should have God's character. Sometimes I said negative



words to hurt [him], which shows lack of faith and love.

After conversion, many participants emphasized their spiritual growth in the Lord, and explained that they tried to do what they believed God wanted them to do. It seems, however, that “conversion” was not experienced as an event, but as a process. This process involved many struggles as individuals and couples worked to meet newly embraced ideals.

Qin (H)'s narrative resonates with Li, Yang, and other participants' voices as he discussed some of his personal and marital challenges:

[In our marriage], our family backgrounds are different. I change myself gradually [but it is a struggle] . . . [I want to] obey and submit to God. Now I spend plenty of time on driving, so I think over and over how to do something to improve my family and marriage. . . . It's difficult to change my temper right away. I also have my own ideas and opinions. I try to surpass my old self and improve myself to meet God's standard. Before, [I thought] I was higher than Him. Now I am trying to let Him be higher than me.

The endeavor “to surpass my old self and improve myself to meet God's standard” is Qin's response to the question regarding how he would like “to improve his family and marriage.” Qin sees his “old self” as an obstacle in his marital and family life but seems to find hope in this because it is an obstacle that he is striving to overcome. Although the progress is “gradual” and “difficult,” he is trying to “improve [him]self to meet God's standard.”

Participants often mentioned religious faith as a source of strength that helped with personal challenges. However, faith itself presented challenges. Heavy religious involvement was occasionally reported as a factor in marriage conflict, especially when religious responsibilities consistently separated or overloaded spouses. As Huang (H) put it:

Sometimes we have too much service. [It's] too hard and [we get] too tired. It becomes a big burden, which may be harmful to a family. To be a good person outside [the home at church], but to do nothing at home may be harmful to a marriage.

Another husband, Lin, explained that they have had much of this kind of conflict in their marriage and confessed: “Sometimes I overdo it in serving God.” Lin and his wife, Zhen, then shared their experience about their “big challenge”:

*Lin (H):* [There] is a big challenge between family and faith. Some teachings, such as loving God more than loving family members [present] a challenge.

*Zhen (W):* I had such [an] experience before. He [Lin] thought of God daily. [But] I could not feel [Lin]. He was somewhere [else]. When he invested on stocks before, he talked about stock to me every day. Now he believes in God, he talked all day about God and church. Sometimes I was tired, I said, “Don't talk about church things, and leave me alone.” It didn't sound good; it was harmful. My level [of religious belief and involvement] had not met his. Sometimes I thought he was far away from me. I had not connected with him. He notices this [better] now.

*Lin (H):* It should be the whole family [that] serves God together.

*Zhen (W):* It's harmful when only you yourself serve God, and [you] neglect your family. When you go to church daily [and start] regarding church as your home and don't treat your home as home.

*Lin (H):* [I needed to] be responsible as a husband and father. You Love God and put God first, but you should not neglect your family; I prayed to God, and asked Him to provide

me a way out.

*Zhen (W)*: . . . I could not feel him (Lin) at home. It was related to my spiritual status. My relationship with God had not met his level at that time. I emphasized family and children, [while he emphasized church]. If he lowered [his time at church] a little bit and I rose a little bit we would meet and have a balance. Now we balance well.

For Zhen and Lin, finding individual and marital balance in serving God, and loving family members was a significant challenge they faced. Zhen's different level of devotion and church involvement at the neglect the family fostered conflict and marital distance. However, when their spiritual status reached the same level, a condition Marks et al., (2008) refer to as "equally yoked," they reportedly "balance[d] well." As we begin to see with Lin and Zhen, personal religious differences can lead to marital strain. We examine this more closely in Theme 3, next.

### **Theme 3: The Intra-marriage Challenges of Being "Unequally Yoked"**

Several participant couples reported challenges when they did not share the same faith or even when they did not share the same level of spiritual faith. Two subthemes of "the importance of shared faith" and "challenges when 'unequally yoked'" will be respectively addressed as positive and negative aspects of the same connection—religiosity and marriage.

#### *The Importance of Shared Faith*

Many couples indicated that shared spiritual beliefs are a prominent factor in their stable marriage. For example, Mei, a mother of two put it, "This is very good that we have the same religious beliefs. We will become closer and closer, and meet on the spot where God is the common center of our life." Mei and her husband have the same faith and they reportedly pray together and give service together at church. In addition, their shared faith and shared practice of that faith seem to enhance their marital and family life. Another couple from mainland China also discussed the importance of shared religious beliefs, practices, and service:

*Yang (W)*: I think it's very important that the husband and the wife serve God together. I always support Li's service to God, unless he is off balance. For example, with Bible study, hosting a party, opening our house, caring for and visiting someone, we are in the same thought and support each other. This is not only helpful to our spiritual growth, but also to our marriage and family.

*Li (H)*: Our core values of our belief are very consistent. The aim of our marriage [and] the fundamentals of our marriage and core belief are the same. [Our shared faith] is the central part of our life . . . our service and our work.

Yang (W) was the children's Sunday school principal, and her husband was an elder of the church. Both invested significant time, energy, and money in their faith community. According to Yang's statement, this shared involvement was not only helpful to their spiritual growth, but also to their marriage and family life. By way of contrast, Yang and Li reported that they almost divorced before they "knew and believed in God." The following narrative from another couple illustrated a similar unifying effect of shared religious practice:

*Qiu (H)*: We have the same faith. When we prayed together, God's Words entered our

heart. Through the pastor's preaching and fellowship, the Holy Spirit let us know our insufficien[cies]. [We learned that we must be humble], we may not always [be] right. We saw our weakness.

*Zhu* (W): I did not want to pray together when I was unhappy. But we did pray together. When I began to pray, God let me see my weakness first. We might accuse each other if we would not pray together. It's strange that God would let you see your [own] weakness as soon as you pray.

Similarly, Cui, a husband and father of four, explained the personal meaning of his faith and why he believes that it is important for a couple to share the same faith:

Our belief that Jesus Christ is the son of God has very important meaning both to family and to marriage. . . . We have faith, and faith lets us have special meaning in our life. We know where we come from and where we are going—we know the purpose of life. We are created by God. We know the road we are traveling on and the road we will [continue to] go on. . . . The most important responsibility is leading my children to know God. I am so sad to see the children of my sister and brother are not believers. My sister is a believer, but her husband is not, their two children then are not, this is a great pity to me.

The situation of Cui's sister and brother-in-law relates closely with the next idea we address.

### *The Challenge of Being "Unequally Yoked"*

Although no direct question was asked, several couples spontaneously reported that they had experienced serious marital struggles before they shared the same spiritual beliefs. Mei reportedly experienced 20 years of difficult marriage before her husband came to believe in God. She explained:

When I first went to church and believed in God, I saw [church] brothers were [working in the church] kitchen. I thought, how wonderful [it would be] if my husband believe[d] in God! I sent letters to him [in Taiwan] which were all about the Bible verses or our church instead of talking about myself. When he came here he didn't believe at first, [but] he gradually believed with the help of [church] sisters and brothers.

Mei and Qin went on to explain:

*Mei* (W): Qin played the role of "I am a man, I should work hard and be responsible to this family." He is a very good teacher, just irritable. This may have influenced me negatively, because he didn't listen to me. Marriage is a partnership, and we need to communicate. He refused to communicate. But God changed him. I couldn't change him for our [first] 20 years of marriage.

*Qin* (H): I would not change until the end of my life. Even my mother couldn't change me.

*Mei* (W): He didn't want to change. [But when] I didn't try to change him, he changed by himself.

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

Mei and Qin's faith involvement is now shared sacred ground instead of an "unequal yoke." There were, however, other challenges reported in connection with faith and marriage.

The controversial issue of “headship” by the husband in a family was frequently referenced by participants, in spite of their shared faith marriages. One interview question asked, “Do you feel there are any religious beliefs or practices that if misunderstood or misapplied, can be harmful to marriage?” In response, many couples declared that it would be harmful if the teaching that “the husband is the head of the family” was misinterpreted. Xin, a wife from Taiwan, responded to this question as follows:

The Bible teaches us that the husband is your head, [that] God created us in such a way. As a wife, it's not easy to accept. I told my daughter, who has obtained her Ph.D. and is searching for a job, “Do not compete with your husband.” Our belief [with] marriage is that the husband is your head. Surely, the husband should love the wife, this will benefit marriage . . . [but] if both of them want to be the head of the family, there will be conflict.

Xin advised her daughter not to compete with her husband and warned that if both the wife and the husband “want to be the head of the family, there will be conflict.” Even so, Xin stated that “as a wife it's not easy to accept that” and identified the teaching as a potentially harmful one—as did several religious couples in a recent book-length study (Burr et al., 2012). A husband, Wu, from Hong Kong responded similarly to the same question about harmful beliefs:

[The Bible states], “The husband is the head of a family, a wife should submit to her husband.” It's harmful to marriage if this is misunderstood and we misapply this Bible teaching. Our pastor also taught us that it was male chauvinism if the husband requires the wife to obey him in everything no matter what it is; it is misunderstanding of the Bible verse. The rest of the passage states that “the husband should love his wife with the love of Christ” (Ephesians 5: 22-25, NIV).

Wu (H) emphasized that men should attend to the direction that “the husband loves his wife with the love of Christ” but later identified that this charge to demonstrate a “Christ-like” love for his wife was a challenge for him. Another husband explained, “It's easy to say, but difficult to do.” Zhu, a wife from Taiwan, also identified “headship” as dangerous:

[A danger is the belief that] “the head of the wife is the husband.” This is misapplied if a husband suppresses his wife with this, just for his own benefit and authority. . . . They have both responsibility and obligation. We should not choose a special sentence to defend ourselves.

Zhu (W) emphasized that a misapplied Bible verse can be harmful to marriage for both husband and wife. She later explained her struggle with this biblical passage:

The head of the woman is the man in the Bible. I struggled for a while, if he is right I will submit to him. [But] why should I submit him if he is wrong? I couldn't understand and disagreed. Then I asked a pastor, he did not answer me. Later, I found the pastor was wise because there are so many things that we could not realize by human reason. [T]here are things that you disagree [with] or are difficult for you to obey . . .

Even so, Zhu later expressed her opinion that “We have God's blessing if we do what God wants us to do.” Many wives and some of the husbands wrestled with if and how to implement the doctrine of male “headship.”

With the important challenge and recurring counter-example of “headship” noted, shared

denomination and shared similar spiritual level of religious beliefs generally seemed to benefit the participants' marriages because they shared the same values and worldviews in their lives. They also had shared, sacred practices that often tied them together. Consequently, their marriage and family lives were reportedly improved. For now, however, it is important to note that many participants struggled to understand and apply teachings of male headship. In addition, external challenges from “the world” also impacted their marriage and family life, as discussed next.

#### **Theme 4: The External Challenge of “The World's Lure”**

From the participants' perspectives, the primary external challenges to their marriages and personal spiritual development fell under the general conceptual designation of “the world's lure.” The world's lure (or “the world's attraction,” as some called it) was more specifically defined by participants as the American cultural emphasis on “materialism and individualism.” Indeed, many other immigrant groups of various national backgrounds report concerns with the ideals and practices of consumerism and individualism in the U.S. that conflict sharply with the values of their native culture (e.g., Nesteruk, Marks, and Garrison, 2009). For our participants, these challenges reportedly hampered their spiritual development, and sometimes harmed their marital relationships. While “the world's lure” was a challenge for many, some participants believed that this challenge and temptation did not pose a serious threat to their marriages and family lives if they had a good relationship with God. Phrased differently, by progressing and overcoming some of the internal challenges addressed previously, participants' felt their marriages and families less vulnerable to the “lures” offered by the external world.

Pan (H) shared his struggle: “[The greatest obstacle is] the pressure of trying to be like others, to buy a new house, buy a new car . . .” Pan's wife, Wan, addressed a related issue, which leading marriage and family therapist Bill Doherty (2001) has called “time affairs”—the habit of spending too much time on any non-marital activity (e.g., the Internet, shopping, TV, golf, etc.). A “time affair” disrupts or limits the couple's spousal time, which is a common struggle for many American marriages and families. On this note, Wan (W) said:

We have to be careful about technology, computer, and TV time. . . . There are times when we are just doing our own thing, especially now with all this technology. I think that can hinder our relationship. It takes time that we could spend together, [or spend] praying together.

The surrounding world, according to Wan and others, often interferes with their relationship with God and with their marital relationship. Another couple from mainland China discussed another external battle: money vs. family unity. They said:

*Sun (H):* [The greatest obstacle in our marriage] is the world's attraction and [worldly] desire. I wanted to change my job to a better [paying] one. I had spent a lot of time looking for it. This was not submitting to God because God gave my current job, I should do it well [and be grateful].

*Zheng (W):* If he had changed his job, we would have to separate [frequently because it was in another State]. So the potential obstacle is the world's attraction, [more money over family unity].

Cui, a husband and father, is separated from his family while he works in a distant city in the same state, and only comes back on the weekends to reunite with his family. He reflected:

To me [a big challenge] is time. I have not enough time. We hope we have a wonderful and happy marriage, but I have not enough time because I had to work hard for my family. So we have less time to communicate with each other. I am a man of the world. I think money is important. The Bible says, "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." But [other] things also need to be considered, such as our time and money.

Time and money management presented challenges to Cui but elsewhere in his interview, he explained that, after work and family, the rest of his time was for church. Thus, he had no time to do other things. Many of the families in this study seemed to be caught in what sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1997) has called "the time bind." Namely, due to work, they never seemed to have enough time to devote to family. In addition to work, their faith communities make significant time demands as well. Cui also mentioned how his church motivated monetary contributions, which is another central challenge to him. He explained:

We all know what we should do, everyone should tithe. But this proportion should be flexible rather than fixed because the conditions of families are different. Those families which are in difficulties should adjust. What we have is a condition [where] each of us gives according to our ability. When I was in Hong Kong, the church posted the results of devotion offerings every Sunday. It's not good to do so. But big churches in Hong Kong usually did that to show how much you offered. On the one hand, this was a kind of encouragement; on the other hand it was also a kind of pressure.

Traditional Chinese culture tends to be relatively reserved and private. In the current study, only 50% of the participants disclosed the percentage of their income they donated to their church (on the demographic form). Of those who responded, the average contribution was 8.75%. An Old Testament tithe of 10% is a profound challenge to many believers.

Another couple commented that making a church offering is a challenge, but also referred to the sacrifice as "God's blessing." They explained:

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

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

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

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

As with Mei and Qin, the issue of offering seemed to be a challenge for other participants, consistent with other larger scale qualitative research (Marks, Dollahite, and Dew, 2009).

In summary, participants addressed many challenges they may face in their marriage and family life. Conversion was a significant change and challenge for some participants. In the trajectory of participants' spiritual development, the "old self" was seen as a major obstacle to both personal spiritual development and a close marital relationship. Chinese immigrant families are also challenged by postmodern American cultural influences (e.g., individualism, materialism, etc.). At individual, marital, and external (cultural) levels the immigrant Chinese Christian converts we interviewed experience challenges related to their religious involvement. Even so, their religious faith is also a complex and multi-faceted

resource. Both realities seem to be components of the truth, as reported by these participant couples.

## DISCUSSION

Chinese Christian families in the United States have unique complexities inherent in the connection between spiritual development and marital relationships. Although the purposive sample in this study does not allow generalization to a larger population, this study contributes to the existing literature by investigating the challenge and rewards that faith involvement brought to these families. We will discuss these challenges using Lewis and Spanier's (1979) model of individual, interpersonal, and social-economic levels (cf. Marks et al., 2008).

### **Challenges at the Individual Level**

In terms of conversion, Chinese immigrants in the United States have experienced challenges in reconstructing new identities (Chang, 2011; Yang, 1999). These challenges stem from personal struggle, family relationships, and social and cultural environments. Christianity has ever been regarded as a "foreign religion" by Chinese people. Cultural differences may still be the largest barrier for Chinese immigrants surmount en route to Christian conversion.

After their conversion, the participants in this study changed their ideology and world view, as well as their perceptions of marriage. They strived to live out God's words. However, the "old self" was reported by several participants as an obstacle in their faith practice and in their marriage and family life. A congruence and harmony between professed beliefs and behavior is vitally important in personal, marriage, and family life (Burr et al., 2012).

### **Challenges at Interpersonal Level**

Previous research has indicated that shared religious faith correlates with marital stability (Lehrer and Chiswick, 1993). In addition, several qualitative studies of long-term marriages have found that shared religious belief was an important factor in many participants' marriages (Kaslow and Robinson, 1996; Robinson, 1994; Robinson and Blanton, 1993). However, when a couple differed in their religious beliefs, this caused additional problems. Marks and colleagues (2008) have discussed the challenge of being "unequally yoked," and how difficult this can be in a marital relationship.

Though the Chinese Christian couples in the present study shared the same faith when interviewed and did not presently deal with the problem of being unequally yoked, they did mention a different faith-related challenge to marriage. Many said it would be harmful if their Biblical faith were misunderstood or misapplied, especially in connection with the issue of male headship and saw potential for abuse and relational difficulties if this doctrine were misapplied.

Additionally, when only one partner was significantly involved in religious service, this seemed to be harmful to the couple's marriage and family life. Avoiding a "time affair" with church by maintaining appropriate balance between church service and family life was very important to the participants' marital relationship.

### Challenges at Social-Economic Level

According to Vygotsky's social-cultural context theory, personal development is influenced by a broader social context “in weaving together insights from history, sociology, economics, political science, linguistics, biology, art, and literature” (Miller, 1993, p. 411). As a result, the trajectory of Chinese Christian immigrants' spiritual development is different from that of most life-long Chinese Christian non-immigrants (i.e., born and raised in the U.S.) or American Christians.

Doherty (2001) has argued that “the natural drift of contemporary married life, in our busy, distracted, individualistic, consumer-driven, media-saturated, and work-oriented world, is toward less spark, less connection, less intimacy, and less focus on the couple relationship” (p. 12). The social context Doherty identifies here fits closely with the many of the central concerns of our Chinese immigrant participants, and with their ongoing struggles. The present study identifies several external challenges to Chinese Christian immigrant families. “The world's attraction,” American cultural influence, and “materialism and individualism” were all reported as significant challenges to the participants. Even so, when both of the partners moved toward a common objective, the marriage relationship remained strong.

## IMPLICATIONS

### For Research

The existing literature indicates that religiosity positively correlates with several aspects of marriage. However, mixed results have been found in some studies, and potentially negative influences of religiosity on marriage also need to be considered (Dollahite et al., 2004). In the recent book *Sacred Matters*, Burr, Marks, and Day (2012) discussed ten vital aspects of research on religion and family that should be improved in the future. One of these ten areas is research on harmful and challenging aspects of religion.

Chen (2006) reported that approximately 25% to 32% of the Chinese in the United States are Christians. Chinese immigrant families (Christian families, non-Christian families, and converted families) face many challenges in terms of acculturation in post-modern American society. It is important to understand how immigrant families, including Chinese immigrant families, undergo acculturation to their host culture. Moreover, it is important to understand how religious faith serves as a beneficial resource as well as a challenging factor in their marriage and family life. Burr, Marks, and Day (2012) emphasize that there is a need for additional research about a broader range of religions and cultural conditions. The majority of available research on religion and family life has been conducted with predominantly or solely white participants (Dollahite et al., 2004). This study is an attempt to include those of Chinese descent in the discussion and to highlight some of the unique challenges faced by this population. Further research is needed to see how common the challenges and benefits reported by these participants are to the larger Chinese immigrant population. If these same issues are found to be salient in the larger population, it would be helpful to explore how different couples deal with the same challenges. It would also be worthwhile to investigate if there are certain approaches to overcoming these challenges which offer better outcomes than others.

### For Practice

The findings of this study suggest that religious beliefs may serve as a challenging variable



that may influence marriage and family life negatively. Though most couples in this study reported positive outcomes as a result of their new faith, some of them identified different levels of challenges, including individual, interpersonal, and social-economic levels. Mental health workers and family professionals should be aware of the religious contexts of the individuals and families they serve, as well as the accompanying challenges and benefits. They should also be sensitive to how these families use religious faith as a coping resource to solve these problems. Most clinical professionals are not personally religious themselves, but it is important to be appropriately sensitive to the majority of couples and families who do hold their religious faith as important or very important (Koenig et al., 2001).

It is often difficult for Chinese immigrants to seek professional psychological services because they tend to be relatively reserved and reluctant to share their privacy with others. Mental health and family service professionals should be aware of the cultural values and beliefs that guide the behaviors of Chinese immigrants, including those who have converted to Christianity. Having an understanding of the stressors and challenges that this population faces due to their immigrant status as well as their newly acquired Christian faith would enhance the effectiveness of human service professionals.

Immigration is a challenging process and life event for an individual, couple, and family—and so is religious conversion. It is important for pastors and church leaders to obtain knowledge regarding psychological and family counseling. It is also important for them to attend not only to the spiritual needs, but also to the relational and psychological needs of church members. Clergy should also be willing to refer couples to secular professionals when needed, as is frequently the case (Marks, 2008). Church leaders might consider giving sermons, lessons, and workshops, which focus on special topics about marriage and family that are important for couples and families. Concerning immigrants' cultural backgrounds, church leaders need to pay more attention to individuals' cultural beliefs and values that are not relinquished upon immigration and that continue to influence the lives of immigrants as they acculturate to the host society. In the Chinese community, for instance, it is essential to know how to selectively integrate elements of Chinese culture into Christian culture (Yang, 1998).

## CONCLUSION

Qualitative methods allow researchers to better understand the meanings and the processes of the interface of religiosity and marriage. For Chinese immigrants, there is a unique process in the journey of faith within their multicultural contexts. Chinese conversion to Christianity is a sensitive and complex topic. Conversion to (and sustained high levels of involvement in) Christianity introduces and involves some significant challenges in Chinese immigrant marriages. However, in a type of lived paradox, many married couples seem to utilize and integrate faith-based resources as a primary coping resource to overcome these challenges. How religious beliefs and American culture influence Chinese immigrants' personal, marital, and family life continues to be an interesting and important topic in social science. More research is needed to bridge the gap in the area of religion and multicultural influences on marriage and family life.

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