

2009

# Religiosity and Chinese immigrants' marriage

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RELIGIOSITY AND CHINESE IMMIGRANTS' MARRIAGE

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
In partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree of  
Master of Science

in

The School of Human Ecology

By  
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December 2009

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**“I am the way and the truth and the life.”**

John 14:6 (NIV)

Christianity invoked special interest in me since I was young. However, Christianity is not mainstream ideology throughout Chinese history. Only after I came abroad had I the chance to read the Bible and go to church, and eventually became a Christian. I am impressed by those Christians who devote much of their time, money, and energy to their faith. Their transcendent spiritual beliefs have influenced not only their own but also some others' lives. I give my first thanks to the participants who have spent their precious time in sharing their personal experiences with me, and through which I have come to know how their religious beliefs changed their marriage and family life. Their beautiful stories came to this project and inspired me at the same time. I am grateful to my participants for their time, passion, and support.

My special thanks go to my major professor, Dr. Loren Marks. I am thankful for the opportunity to learn from him while gaining both professional knowledge and the knowledge to become a better person. I am grateful for the growing room and encouragement he gives me during my study. His profound, professional knowledge, deep insights, and wise advice benefit everyone as students and friends. I express my deep appreciation to him for his understanding, patience, encouragement and support. Dr. Marks has really been and will always be my mentor.

I extend my thanks to my committee members Dr. Baumgartner and Dr. Chaney for their constructive advice and support on this project. Thank you for your time, passion, and helpful advice. It is you who help me to grow in this professional field. Your contributions to this project are highly appreciated.

Thanks also go to my friends, Lingqi Meng and Shujie Liu, for their consistent support and encouragement throughout these couple of years. Their insightful advice is very helpful.

Thanks for their precious time and invaluable friendship.

I leave my last thanks to my beloved family. First, I will thank my parents for their love and care. I will never forget how hard they worked to raise their four children while encouraging them to pursue higher education. Second, I give my thanks to my two sisters and a young brother for their irreplaceable feelings as siblings. Finally, to my immediate family: my husband Baozhu, my two daughters Mary, Nancy and my son Matthew. Without their support, I would not be able to complete this project. They support me not only with their physical help but also most importantly with their feelings of love. Thank you, my family; you are my strength, my hope and my pride!

God is my rock, my fortress and my dependence. God is my guidance; He always reminds me and adjusts me when I deviate from the direction of His way. I know He is always with me whether I am in joy or sorrow. I am grateful for His love. His love is abundant.

**“Love is patient, love is kind....It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.”**

1 Corinthians 13:4-8 (NIV)

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## ABSTRACT

The existing literature on religion and family indicates that religious beliefs and practices are correlated with various aspects of marriage and family life. Chinese immigrants are an important part of the U.S. population. However, very little is known about the relationship between religion and marriage for Chinese immigrants. The purpose of the study is to examine the relationship between Christianity and marriage in Chinese immigrant families based on in-depth qualitative interviews. Sixteen highly religious Chinese Christian couples were interviewed to examine how religious faith influenced their perceptions of marriage and family life. Most of the participants in this study held advanced graduate degrees. Their ages ranged from 28-66, and the number of children ranged from one to four. Grounded theory methods (including open coding and axial coding) were applied to analyze the data. Based on my interview data, five central, emergent themes were identified: 1) Moving from atheism to theism: “God is love;” 2) Changing perceptions of marriage: “Marriage is established by God;” 3) The importance of shared faith: “Equally yoked;” 4) Challenges with religious faith; and 5) A new priority: “Put God first.” Supporting qualitative data was presented in connection with each of these five themes. Implications for research and practice related to Chinese immigrants’ marriage and family in the U.S. are discussed.

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Research indicates that about 90% of Americans report a belief in God and 60% consider that religion is “important” or “very important” to them (Dollahite, Marks, & Goodman, 2004). More specifically, according to the American Religious Identification Survey (2001), 80% of the U.S. population self-reports as Christian. Religion has played a vital role in the progress of human civilization vis-à-vis history, politics, literature, philosophy, science, and morality (Huston, 2003). On the other hand, Karl Marx, the founder of modern communism, who had tremendous influence on modern Chinese thought and her people, stated that religion was “a heartless world” and “the opium of the people” (Marx & Engels, 1964). At present, most Chinese still regard religion as “superstition” because they received an education grounded in Marxist atheism since they were born. Along with the enactment of Economic Reform and the Open Door Policy from 1979, Christianity has spread very quickly in China (Hunter & Chan, 1993).

The relationship between religion and family is considered a topic of interest throughout the world (Houseknecht & Pankhurst, 2000). The existing literature on religion and family indicates that religious beliefs and practices are correlated with various aspects of marriage and family life (Christiano, 2000; Marks, 2004, 2006; Pargament, 1998), including the families of Chinese immigrants (Yang, 1998). As we will see in the review of literature (Chapter 2), most research indicates that religious involvement has a positive and beneficial influence on personal, marital, and family life.

Chinese immigrants are an important part of the U.S. population and it is reported that Christians comprise approximately 25% to 32% of the Chinese population in the U.S. (Chen, 2006). Therefore, religious beliefs and practices are a significant consideration when studying

Chinese immigrants' families and marriages. However, very little is known about the relationship between religiosity and marriage for Chinese immigrants.

The purpose of the present study is to examine the relationship between Christianity and marriage in Chinese immigrant families. Using detailed qualitative interviews, the study will address: 1) How did faith influence these Chinese immigrants' change in worldview from atheism to theism (or conversion to Christianity)? 2) How has the Christian faith influenced their marital relationship? and 3) What strengths and challenges are apparent in these Chinese Christian families?

## CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Religiosity has been defined in several ways across the extant research on religion and family. For the purpose of the study, I adopt a three dimensional conceptualization of religion (Dollahite, Marks, & Goodman, 2004). These three dimensions include “(a) *religious beliefs* (personal, internal beliefs, meanings, perspectives), (b) *religious practices* (outward, observable expressions of faith such as prayer, scripture study, rituals, traditions, or a less overly sacred practices or abstinence that is religiously grounded), and (c) *religious communities* (support, involvement, and relationships grounded in a congregation or a less formal religious group)” (p. 413). Although religious beliefs, practices, and communities overlap, these three dimensions offer a framework to organize and synthesize previous research findings. In this section, I discuss the relationships between these three dimensions of religion and marriage. I will also address Chinese Christian immigrant families.

### Religious Beliefs and Marriage

Many quantitative studies have shown that religiosity is a significant predictor of marital satisfaction in the United States. It has been found that shared religious beliefs and practices have significant positive associations with marital stability (Abbott, Berry, & Meredith, 1990; Call & Heaton, 1997; Lehrer & Chiswick, 1993), and also promote marital adjustment (Wilson & Filsinger, 1986) and marital commitment (Bahr & Chadwick, 1985). Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, and Swank (2001), in their meta-analytic review of religion and marriage found that religiosity and religious homogamy between couples have consistently been associated with marital satisfaction and commitment. However, most of the previous studies only “focused on ‘distal’ religious variables,” or were “from a distance”—as a result, more “close” and “proximal” studies of religion and marriage are needed (Mahoney et al., 1999, p. 322). Mahoney and her

colleagues, as well as several qualitative researchers, have studied the meanings behind these religion and marriages correlations.

**Meanings of Marriage.** To examine the meaning of marriage more closely, Mahoney et al. (1999) used two scales of “perceived sacred qualities of marriage scale” and “manifestation of God scale” to assess “sanctification of marriage” (p. 322). They found joint religious activities between couples and greater perceptions of marriage as “sacred” were associated with greater marital satisfaction, more perceived personal benefits, and less marital conflict. Recent qualitative literature also suggests that perceived God involvement in their marriages relates to marital satisfaction (Goodman & Dollahite, 2006) and marital commitment (Lambert & Dollahite, 2008). Similarly, 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 (see also Marks, 2004; 2006). Shared religious beliefs in marriage is the next subtheme.

**The Importance of Shared Faith in Marriage.** Existing empirical research has found that religious homogamy is an important factor in marital relationship (Lehrer & Chiswick, 1993). Same-faith marriage has been associated with better marital satisfaction and adjustment (Wilson & Musick, 1996), and mixed-faith marriages report more conflicts and less stability than single-faith marriages (Curtis & Ellison, 2002; Lehrer & Chiswick, 1993). Heaton and Pratt (1990) studied the influence of three types of religious homogamy--namely, denominational affiliation, church attendance, and belief in the Bible. They concluded that religious homogamy was correlated with marital satisfaction and stability. Indeed, for most denominations that have been studied, the divorce rate among inter-faith marriages is higher than same-faith marriages—and among some it is significantly higher (e.g., for Mormons, the divorce rate in one study for

marriages outside the faith was *three times* as high as it was for same-faith marriages) (Lehrer & Chiswick, 1993). Other studies have similarly found that congruence in religiosity seems to be an important factor in marital satisfaction (cf. Dudley & Kosinski, 1990; Lambert & Dollahite, 2006).

Two additional qualitative studies of enduring and lasting marriages reported religious faith is an important resource in marriages (Mackey & O'Brien, 2005; Robinson & Blanton, 2001). However, there are variations in the findings. A longitudinal study (Booth, Johnson, Branaman, & Sica, 1995) from a large sample over 12 years found that the relationship between religiosity and marital quality is not strong. Moreover, Sullivan (2001) conducted studies with both cross-sectional and longitudinal designs and found that religiosity is related to couples' attitude toward marriage, and that religiosity has a positive relationship with marital satisfaction, but only for mentally healthy husbands.

In summary, strong religious beliefs (especially when shared) tend to be significant predictors of stability, satisfaction, and quality in marriage. Yet, more research on how and why religious beliefs influence marriage is needed (Marks, 2005). Internal beliefs are often expressed through external practices. Therefore, religious practices are important for marital relationship as well. We now turn from the first dimension of religious beliefs to the second dimension of religious practices.

### Religious Practices and Marriage

Religious practices have been correlated with the aspects of the marital relationship as well. Couples' joint religious activities (e.g., praying for each other, attending church together, reporting a spiritual connection with each other, and praying together) appeared to enhance marital quality (Mahoney et al., 1999). Some religious practices may help couples prevent,

resolve, and overcome marital conflict (Lambert & Dollahite, 2006). In terms of religious practices, prayer and church attendance are frequently measured in the empirical research, as addressed next.

**Prayer.** Religiosity may be related to marital satisfaction and stability through prayer and forgiveness (Dollahite, Marks, & Goodman, 2004; Jose & Alfons, 2007). Prayer may also be an important resource and tool as religious couples resolve their conflicts (Butler, Gardner, & Bird, 1998; Butler & Harper, 1994; Butler, Stout, & Gardner, 2002). Marks (2005) reported the importance of prayer as religious practice that influences marriage, and in later work he suggested that prayer is important in coping and prevention, in addition to intervention (Marks, 2008). A large-scale research quantitative project is underway to examine prayer as a marital intervention but findings will not be available until late 2009 (Beach et al., 2008).

**Church Attendance.** Shared church attendance is a significant predictor of marital happiness and stability (Larson & Goltz, 1989; Myers, 2006). Regular religious attendance is inversely associated with domestic violence (Ellison & Anderson, 2000) and positively associated with marital stability (Call & Heaton, 1997). However, couples in which one spouse attended church but the other one did not attend were more likely to divorce than those in which neither spouse attended church (cf. Marks et al., 2008). Future research should pay more attention to this domain.

After interviewing seventy-six highly religious married couples, Marks (2005) concluded that religious involvement is positively related to marital stability and satisfaction, but also found that heavy religious involvement may also be a significant challenge and a factor in marriage conflict, even in same-faith marriages, due to the conflict between mainstream culture and faith-based practices (Marks, 2004). Other research shows that although shared family religious

practices can be beneficial and meaningful, “compulsory” family worship may have ill effects (Lee, Rice, & Gillespie, 1997).

In addition to prayer and church attendance, religious teachings also have significant influences on marriages (Marks, 2005). Putting certain religious teachings into practice contributed to the prevention and resolution of couple conflict (Lambert & Dollahite, 2006). For several participants in these studies, scripture often reportedly provided guidance for the couples’ behavior. In summary, religious practices such as prayer and church attendance seem to have a generally positive relationship with healthy marriage. We now turn to the third dimension of religious community.

### Religious Community and Marriage

Church as a social support and network is an important resource in marriage and family life (Krause, Ellison, Shaw, Marcum, & Boardman, 2001; Marks & Dollahite, 2001). Church members provide encouragement, advice, companionship, and emotional support (Taylor, Lincoln & Chatters, 2005). Research has also found that church involvement positively relates to church goers’ psychological, emotional, and spiritual state (Chaney, 2008), and frequent churchgoers have a larger non-kin network, enjoy more personal connection with others, and benefit from social and emotional support and instrumental support such as money, goods, and services (Ellison & George, 1994). Through a study of the role of church and family support in the lives of older African Americans whose ages ranged from 65 to 104, Walls (1992) concluded that church support contributed to their feelings of well being, and that the religious community became an extended family network to the participants in their study. In their 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 often involve conflict and that the challenges related to religious community were reported more frequently than challenges with the other two dimensions combined (Marks & 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—profoundly more than when other (less personal) institutions failed them (cf. Dollahite, Marks, & Olson, 1998, 2002).

In summary, religious community often provides support to marriage and family life. The relationship is not perfect, however, with disappointment and conflict sometimes reported (Marks & Chaney, 2006). Having discussed three dimensions of religion in connection with U.S. family life, we now focus on Chinese Christian immigrant families in particular.

#### Chinese Christian Immigrant Families

In traditional Chinese culture, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism are regarded as the main religions. Christianity is considered foreign (Hunter & Cahn, 1993). Since the enactment of the Economic Reform and the Open Door Policy in 1979, Christianity in China has been spreading quickly with the social and cultural changes and modernization processes (Hunter & Chan, 1993; Yang, 1998). However, many first-generation Chinese immigrants in the United States may face special stresses in assimilating the United States' mainstream culture. To meet their spiritual and psychological needs, many non-religious Chinese became Christians and some Chinese Buddhists have been converted to Christianity after they had come to the United States (Chen, 2006; Zhang, 2006). Religious organizations play a vital role in converting Chinese to Christianity in general and to evangelical Protestantism in particular, after their immigration to the United States (Zhang, 2006).

Numrich (2007) studied immigrant American religions and the family, and mentioned Fenggang Yang's comments that traditional marriage and family life are highly valued in the Chinese culture and that Chinese immigrant parents rely on the Chinese Christian church for meaningful and attractive youth activities, in an effort to keep immigrant youth away from potential effects of American society that are viewed as damaging to traditional marital and family values (cf. Chen, 2006). In a mix-method of quantitative and qualitative study on religiosity and marital satisfaction of Chinese-American couples, Ing (1998) found that there is a strong relationship between religiosity and marital satisfaction. Religious beliefs, shared religious rituals and values seems positively affected marital and family relationships in Chinese immigrant community.

#### Summary of Review of Literature

In conclusion, previous research indicates that religious beliefs and practices have a positive relationship with marital satisfaction and stability. Interfaith marriages have more conflict and instability than same-faith marriages. High church involvement correlates with marital quality; and religious community is often a good resource for marriage and family life. Conversely, there are some costs and challenges regarding religious faith, including over involvement, disappointment, and conflict. The church plays an important role in Chinese conversion. However, we know little about the meanings and processes at work in the lives of Chinese Christians in the United States. Therefore, future research is needed on this topic.

## CHAPTER 3. METHODS

Slife and Williams (1995) state, “People already have an idea of what truth is (what the world is like). Method is then designed as the best way to get at that truth” (p. 181). The “truth” this project seeks to examine and understand is the relationship between family and religion, especially marriage and religion. In seeking to understand this relationship, issues regarding the purpose of life, or the meanings of births, deaths, and family experiences should not be ignored (Thomas & Cornwall, 1990). In the present study, qualitative methods were applied to focus on descriptions of lived experiences, the processes, and the understanding of the meanings of marriage and family relationships (Daly, 1992a; Gilgun, 2005). These experiences, processes, and meanings are exceptionally difficult to capture and convey with quantitative methods (Gilgun, Daly, & Handel, 1992).

### Sample

The sample consisted of 16 Chinese Christian couples who have at least one child. The husbands’ ages ranged from 28 to 66 (mean age = 46), and the wives’ ages ranged from 28 to 65 (mean age = 43). Most of the participants in this study held advanced graduate degrees (twelve had Ph.D. degrees, ten had M.S. degrees, six had Bachelor’s degrees, one was currently a graduate student, and two of them graduated from Technical School). Among the 16 couples, two couples came from Hong Kong, seven from Taiwan, and seven from mainland China. Many of them moved to Louisiana from other states of the USA. Additionally, four families moved to other continental States within one year after their interviews. In short, this was a highly mobile sample.

For the current study, a purposive sample, highly religious, married couples with one or more children, was recruited. “Highly religious” couples are operationally defined as couples

where: 1) the pastor of the couples' church referred them as ideal participants in a study on highly religious families, and 2) both the wife and the husband self-identified as "highly religious" (Marks, 2002). These couples are likely to perceive their faith as meaningful and to have a desire to share rich narratives and deep insights regarding faith and marriage and family life. Thus, we may better understand the meanings and motivations that underlie why Chinese immigrants tend to be drawn to and involved in Christian religion. The purposive sample does not allow generalization. However, the findings may offer relevant insights that relate to similar populations (Johnson, 1999).

### Procedures

Recruitment of participants was conducted from recommendations of a senior pastor of Chinese Christian church. Only one recommended couple did not participate (They reported they did not "feel comfortable"). Therefore, among seventeen potential participant couples, sixteen couples were interviewed (a 94% response rate). The purpose of the study was described to the participants, and an informed consent form was acquired (Appendix A). The participants completed a demographic summary (Appendix B) which included their age, educational level, age and gender of children, and demographic form (Appendix D) which included the percentage of their income that they contribute to their church (many left this blank), and the hours per week they devote to faith-related activities. Where possible, I conducted interviews in the participants' homes, but three interviews were conducted in participants' church and three other couples were interviewed in my home.

The husband and the wife were interviewed together. This approach, as discussed by Lambert and Dollahite (2006) allows couples to remind and correct each other in order to obtain richer data. Moreover, the bias of one family member may be balanced by another family

member (Daly, 1992b). Also, as in the study of Marks et al. (2008), the wives and husbands were encouraged to “each respond to every question and to comment on or add to the other’s response” (p. 175). 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. I had three “triangled” data sources: the perspectives of the wife, the perspectives of the husband, as well as my 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).

To understand the meanings and the processes of how religion influences marriage and family life, “intensive interviewing is frequently the method of choice” (Lofland & Lofland, 1995, p.19). Consistent with this view, I conducted intensive qualitative interviews that were semi-structured and open-ended. The participants were asked twenty-two questions (Appendix C) about how their faith shaped their marriage and family life. The first 10 questions addressed the relationship between faith and marriage, and the second part of the interview schedule addressed: (1) religious practice and community and family life, (2) religious beliefs and family life, (3) faith and parent-child relationships, (4) faith and surrounding culture, and (5) challenges of faith and family life. Because this study is part of a larger research project on the same topic, the interview questions were already tested and verified through interviews with more than 150 families. Interviews lasted one to two hours, with average time of one hour and a half. All interviews were digitally recorded. I transcribed all the interviews and double-checked them for accuracy. Copies of the transcripts were also given to the participants as a member check. All participant names were replaced with pseudonyms to protect identity.

## Analysis

Qualitative methods focus on theory building rather than on theory testing (Gilgun, 2005). A blend of analytic induction method (Gilgun, 1999) and grounded theory methods (including open coding and axial coding) were used in the analysis of data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Grounded theory means that theory emerges from data as data collection and data analysis are completed. Therefore coded data are “likely to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide” to developing new theory and ideas, as opposed to the traditional model of testing pre-existing theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.12).

According to Strauss and Corbin, open coding is the first analytic step where the data are closely examined. Interview data were compared for similarities and differences. Concepts were identified from the words and phrases in the interview data. After open coding, axial coding that related categories to their subcategories was followed. During the first step, I also made a Numeric Content Analysis of the Open Coding concepts in each interview (cf. Marks, Hopkins, Chaney, Monroe, Nesteruk, & Sasser, 2008). The high frequency concepts and the salient concepts were recorded. Thirty-five concepts from the interviews were narrowed down to twenty or so. Core themes were identified, less salient themes were eliminated, and in some cases, similar themes were combined. The final core themes were eventually subcategorized by the religious dimensions of religious belief, religious practice, and religious community (cf. Dollahite, Marks, & Goodman, 2004). Each interview was sent back to the participants for a check of accuracy and to offer an opportunity for any necessary supplementation. I examined the interview transcripts again and again to make sure that each theme was supported by sufficient data. Five themes relating to the dimension of religious beliefs and marriage will be addressed in

this study. Several additional themes relating to the other two dimensions of religion of religious practices and religious community will be presented in future work.

### Reflexivity

Subjectivity is always an issue in either quantitative or qualitative research because of the influence of researcher's biases (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Attention to subjectivity may be especially critical in a qualitative study where data is presented in words because the researcher's experiences influence his/her work of interpreting data and reporting results, especially when the researcher is an "insider" or a member of the group they study (Marks & Dollahite, 2001).

In presenting this study, it is important that the reader understand that I am an insider and a member of the group. I am an immigrant Chinese woman. Further, I am married and both my husband and I are highly involved Christians. We have three children, and we converted after we came to the U.S. Therefore, my personal values, beliefs, and experiences may influence my research. Also, because of my own positive experiences, I acknowledge a predisposition to view religion as valuable to Chinese immigrant families.

In order to counter and balance my (positive) insider's bias in interpreting the data and reporting results, questions regarding negative, stressful, and challenging aspects of both faith and family life were asked, and these data will be reported as well. This effort to present both positive and negative elements of the religion and family connection should add complexity, richness, and balance to the study.

## CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

Previous research has indicated that, for some, religious beliefs have profound influence on marriage and family life (e.g., Lambert & Dollahite, 2008; Marks, 2005). For many Chinese immigrant families, obtaining a belief in God is a very important transition in their marriage and family life. Most Chinese Christian couples in my study did not believe in God until after they came to the United States. During and after their religious conversion, many of their beliefs and values changed, including some of their beliefs about marriage and family.

Based on my interview data, 22 of 32 participants (70%) converted to Christianity after they came to the U.S. As they discussed their faith, personal life, and family life; five themes emerged from the interview data. Those five central, emergent themes are: 1) Moving from atheism to theism: “God is love;” 2) Changing perceptions of marriage: “Marriage is established by God;” 3) The importance of shared faith: “Equally yoked;” 4) Challenges with religious faith; 5) A new priority: “Put God first.” These major themes will be addressed in the following pages.

### Theme 1. Moving from Atheism to Theism: “God is Love.”

Almost all the couples mentioned that a fundamental element of their faith is the belief that “God is Love.” In several cases, participants reported that it was God who saved their marriage and made their marriage strong and happy. Lu and Zhan, now parents of two children, who became Christian while they were still in China, reported:

*Lu (H<sup>1</sup>):* We knew each other at the Bible study group and we joined the youth group together.

*Zhan (W<sup>2</sup>):* I had no confidence about marriage because my father and mother had quarreled all the time, I didn’t want to marry. When I saw how happy the Korean and American [Christian] families were and how lovely their children were, I thought we would be happy and [hoped that we] would have three children too.

---

<sup>1</sup> H = Husband.

<sup>2</sup> W = Wife

This passage is significant that they hope for three children while they were in China in light of China's "One family, One child" policy. At the end of the interview, the husband Lu proudly stated: "I think our family is [in the] top 3 of the happiest families. I am satisfied about our family and I am very happy. We are heading in the good direction." Reportedly, the good example of other Christian families profoundly impacted Lu and Zhan's life from the very beginning of their relationship, and gave them guidance for "heading in the good direction."

In contrast to Lu and Zhan's youthful introduction to Christianity, other Chinese participants struggled well into adulthood to become Christians. Zhang, a Sunday school teacher who accepted God several years after his wife's baptism, said:

I was a very stubborn person. I usually made the Bible study group a big mess when I was a seeker. In our seekers' class at Sunday school, when someone asked me very tough questions, I thought you were not as tough as me; the questions I asked were much tougher than yours.

For Zhang and others, Chinese traditional culture and the ideology of Marxist atheism seemed to be deeply rooted in their minds. Yet, over time the change in social and cultural context--namely, the influence of the Chinese immigrant Christian community-- broke down barriers and motivated them to change not only their beliefs but also their identities (cf. Yang, F. G., 1998).

Another couple, Lin (H) and Zhen (W), struggled for nine years and finally "accepted God" following a harrowing experience in their marital life. They explained:

We together first believed in God because of the adversity in May of 1995, we lost our first child. We were baptized together for the same reason.

Life course theory posits that transitions in life are windows of time when other changes are most probable (Hareven, 2000). Indeed, the death of a child has led more than one religious person away from faith. However, in Lin and Zhen's case the result was the reverse. As Lin reported, "The desperation of a man is the beginning of [knowing] God." Now Lin and Zhen

devote themselves very much to their church. They give 12% of their income to their congregation and the husband spends 25 hours each week in faith-related activities, the wife 15 hours. They both explained that they try to convey the love of God to others.

The reasons for the conversion differ. However, when they converted, they changed their views from one of “there is no God” to believing that God lives and “God is love.” This theme was repeated by many participants. When I asked: “Which of your religious beliefs have the most influence on your family life?” Cui, a father of four who emigrated from Hong Kong, replied:

I think, “love one another.” God’s commandment: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and love your neighbor as yourself.” It’s not easy to love one another. It’s easy to say but difficult to do. Our Christianity is the religion of love. Sometimes, we can’t show it, which is our big challenge. We don’t [always] like to care about others.

For Cui, “God is love.” In his faith, the very first step is to love God, God is the source where love is drawn, and then shared with their family members, and then ultimately with others. The extension of this belief is that if someone does not love others, there is no way for him or her to love God.

Yan (H) and Liu (W), parents of two from the mainland China, discussed their view of what a meaningful family life should be:

*Yan (H):* Christians should be good examples on earth for God. [Their] marriage and family should be testimonies for God.

*Liu (W):* God is love. My son Steven is in puberty, he is sort of strange, easily irritated, and I told Yan to spend more time to be with him and [show him that] we do care for him. God is love; we should care about our own family members.

*Yan:* We should give good testimonies on earth [through the way we live, so that we] do not make God ashamed. [We should] practice not to be angry. [We should] love others, husband and wife love each other, children grow up healthily, this will be a good testimony.

Another story shared by a pair of Taiwanese parents of a teenage boy and a pre-teen girl illustrated the conversion of their whole family, and how important their new faith is to their marriage and family life.

*Qin (H):* The most important time [in our lives was] when we accepted the Lord and regarded the Lord as Savior of our family. This helped our family a lot. There are lots of sisters and brothers and pastors that helped us during this period of time. It was difficult to rely on ourselves. We received help from elder sisters and brothers who provided us [with] suggestions. We are changing gradually. We began to change after the Lord went into our family. It is really God who saved our family, our faith is very important. There is a song “God is Love,” His love is first, we learn from Him gradually.

*Mei (W):* We are the first immigrant generation. We have many stresses. When I attended the seminar of Pastor Tang, I thought this is very good and I need it very much. My thought is simple; I accept [this] as long as I know this is good. I will act it out as I know this is good. Someone who doesn’t act it out although he (she) knows very much (about faith), then the faith is dead because they only care about themselves, without love in their heart.

The wife’s narrative resonated with many of the Chinese immigrants’ voices. As the first immigrant generation, they have many stresses including the language barrier, job stress, identity problems, generation conflict, and culture clash. However, faith provided them with spiritual support. Notably, for most post-immigration converts, the social church seemed to play a very important role in their conversion. However, biblical doctrines were often influential as well. Many learned a Christian-based conception of love from the Bible, and they believe the teachings from the Bible. As the husband (Qin) said:

In the Bible, the book of 1 Corinthians chapter 13, I usually think of the verses about the truth of love: “Love never fails” and “Love is patient.” This encouraged me a lot. And there are many teachings about marriage in the Bible, such as [in] the book of Malachi ... these are important beliefs. [Marriage] is God’s will.

The processes involved in the participants’ conversions were not very clear (no related questions were on the interview schedule). However, following these Chinese immigrants’ conversion from atheism to theism, many also reportedly experienced a change in worldview. Their

changing perceptions of marriage often brought fundamental changes into family life, as I will address next.

Theme 2. Changing Perceptions of Marriage: “Marriage is Established by God.”

As Christians, these couples’ perception of marriage is reportedly influenced by the Bible. This perception is ostensibly different from that of non-Christians and different from their own previous perceptions before their conversions to Christianity. Statements like “marriage is a commitment,” “do not divorce,” and “work out the differences” are common themes from the interview data. In addition, several couples mentioned how their faith influenced their choice of a mate.

**Choice of Marital Mate.** One couple from Hong Kong explained, “From the Bible’s teaching, we believe we should marry a Christian.” For another couple, they not only chose to marry a Christian, but also to seek a partner that matched their personal level of spiritual faith. A husband named Pan stated:

We met at a Christian college [here in the U.S.]. One value was simply [seeking] someone who can understand my faith, who understands the level of my faith, not just a regular Christian, but someone who can understand the depth, the level, of my faith [in God].

Pan’s wife Wan added:

Yes, since I was a teenager, talking about dating, I already had pretty much made up my mind that I had to marry someone...who is also a Christian. And I think I had really good teaching in my church too, so that I know, like Pan said, [to not marry] “just another Christian.” I’ve seen other Christian boys or [other] Christian guys, they’re not necessarily at my level spiritually. I think that [having a shared level of faith] is very important because I’m looking for someone that I can pray with, and really live a real Christian life [with]. Not just someone who just goes to church. So it was very important to have the same [level of] Christian faith.

Pan and Wan emphasized looking for the same level of spiritual faith in a mate, so they could understand each other, pray together, and “really live a real Christian life.”

One couple, who came from mainland China, became Christian after they married. Although faith did not influence their mate selection, they reported that they now viewed marriage in a different way from the secular view they held previously. The wife (Liu) explained:

God gives the best to me. He [my husband] has weaknesses, me too, but his weakness helps me to grow in God--spiritual growth. I am trying to say what God gives is the best. [My new view] is not from man's eyes. It is not how much money he earns, how he looks, what his occupation is, and whether or not he can flatter his wife. What God gives is the best.

Because of these and other similar beliefs, the standard of pursuing marriage was reportedly different from "the world." These standards seemed to positively influence the quality of the participants' marriages. In connection with her Christian perspective on marriage, the wife (Liu) quoted the Bible verse Romans 8:28: "God works for the good of those who love him." Even though the participants acknowledged that they had disagreements or arguments, they also tended to express a confidence that "with God" they could work through these conflicts, and that as a result, the stability of their marriages would not be shaken. For the participants, their perceptions of marriage appeared to be a significant predictor of marital satisfaction.

**Marriage Is a Spiritual Commitment.** Many couples underscored their conviction that marriage is a spiritual commitment. Mei, a wife and mother of two stated that the man and the woman get married and become oneness not only in flesh but also in spirit.

A husband named Shen, reflected on how God had influenced his 42 years of marriage to his wife Shi:

Marriage between a couple is a commitment both to God and to each other. It is a life-long commitment that cannot be changed. Love, mutual respect, patience and forgiveness are important ingredients of marriage. I cannot give you specific examples of how these virtues have influenced our marriage; however, I can say that all these together have [had] great influence on our 42 years of marriage.

In Shen's view, marriage is a commitment not only to each other but also to God. Previous research shows that those who believe God is in their marriage often regard marriage as sacred or as a "three fold cord," and that this belief can enhance and stabilize marital commitment (Lambert & Dollahite, 2008; Mahoney et al., 2001). Like Shen, other participants also mentioned the importance of spiritual commitment in marriage. Guo, a wife and mother of four from Hong Kong, who has been married over 20 years, said:

God created marriage, and let no man separate. Commitment to marriage is God's blessing, commitment is very important. We [do] not think about divorce, no matter how big the difficulties are. We must work out and resolve the difficulties in the Lord. We would not address divorce easily. This idea cannot emerge into my mind.

As Guo notes, commitment is very important to her marriage, especially in difficult times. However, her statement addresses not only the salience of commitment but also a refusal to even "think about divorce," much less discuss it as a couple. This latter idea of refusing to entertain divorce was a theme that was frequently addressed by the participant couples, as further discussed next.

**Do Not Divorce.** Almost all the couples shared the perception that marriage is established by God and that they subsequently do not mention divorce. Wang, a wife who came from mainland China cited:

In Chinese tradition before, if the husband and the wife couldn't get along very well, they would divorce; this is very common among non-believers. After we [came to] believe in God, we realized that we are not perfect, we have many shortcomings. We will make up with each other and help the other. [We try] not to look at the speck of sawdust in other's eyes and [while we] pay no attention to the plank in our own eyes. Marriage which is established by God is very holy. Our relationship is more stable than before. These spiritual beliefs made our marriage more stable.

Based on the participants' reports, one of the central differences between their own lives as believers and non-believers is that their perceptions of marriage are now different. For Shen,

Guo, and Wang, their spiritual beliefs reportedly influenced their view and definition of marriage, and these changes made their marriages more stable. Pan, a husband, offered this perspective:

I think marriage is designed by God and set up by God. From our faith, from the Bible, it tells us it was God who created man and woman, and put them together. Jesus emphasizes that when a man and woman are put together [by God], man should not put asunder.... Of course [also], marrying a woman and not marrying a man, things like that. These things are defined by God, and that's my spiritual belief on marriage. I think realizing that there will be difficulties in marriage [but that]...divorce is not an option, [means] we'll have to work out differences. We have to learn to accept who our spouse is, and work out differences.

Pan perceives God as the designer of marriage, and defines marriage as between a man and a woman according to the Bible. His spiritual beliefs rely and are restricted by God. In Pan's view, when there are differences between the husband and wife, they do not pursue divorce. Instead, they work out differences.

**Work Out Differences.** The wife and the husband are different individuals. They come from different family backgrounds, they have had different experiences, and some friction is inevitable. However, according to the participants, their religious beliefs help them to work out their differences.

Qiu, a husband and father of two sons from Taiwan, also believed marriage is established by God. He said, "It is God who joined us together, rather than we [that] joined together in our own way. The relationship between the husband and the wife is the relationship between us and God." In spite of being "joined by God," however, struggles still arise. Qiu's wife, Zhu explained:

[Even] If God is in a marriage, sometimes there are conflicts in a marriage. But we have faith, we go to church, and then we would stand firm by God's Words through Bible's teaching and sharing with brothers and sisters on Sunday. We would not make small things severe. God has grace; God's Words remind us of our incompleteness. There is

especially testimony in a marriage that we are all weak; we are all sinners. I learned something from marriage and I began to grow up. I have gained new experience about the Bible's teachings. When we understand God's will, God will solve problems.

This is a common perspective among the couples I interviewed. They see themselves as sinners and they are aware of their weaknesses. Even so, their faith dominates their life. God's words and their church congregation are reportedly key coping resources. God is cited as the strength of their marriage and family life, and the preserver of it. Three couples explicitly reported that God has saved their marriage from being broken. No couples, however, were more descriptive than a couple from mainland China who said:

*Li (H):* Our marriage was saved by God. We don't know where we would be now if we had not known God. We would have already divorced. This is the most important thing that we should thank God for. God saved our marriage.

*Yang (W):* I tried all kinds of my own ways, i.e., to complain and to blame--sometimes hid in my heart and sometimes it burst out...God lets me know of faults of mine and where the key problem was. We may have conflicts later, but how we deal with it will be different from before, because our character has been transformed.

Yang (W) continued, stating that believing in God was the most important transition of their marriage:

It became the foundation of our marriage. We didn't understand the meaning of marriage before, and after we have believed in God, we actually understand the meaning of marriage. The more we know God, the more we understand the meaning of marriage. As I grow up in spirit, I submit myself before God. This is a very important part to make the marriage stable. Considering many broken marriages, they don't deal with their own problems, but leave the conflicts to the other side. Blaming another is sin. On the contrary, we should confess our own sin before God, and carry our own cross, which is very important for building a stable marriage, and then the marriage is on the proper way.

Yang's husband Li added:

As far as our marriage, our beliefs are the same that come from God. We are living for glorifying God and benefiting the others. We live not for ourselves only and [do] not focus on our family only. Our marriage and family are tools established by God. May God bless others through us. We share our faith with others and help them to know God. Our consistent beliefs have helped our marriage the most by helping us pass the difficult time and [by] solving the conflicts between us.

The testimony of this couple reportedly encouraged other Chinese immigrants that surrounded them. Now, they practice to care and visit Chinese families on Sunday evenings. As the husband Li said, “May God blesses the others through us.” The purpose of their personal and shared married life is reportedly different. In his narrative, the husband emphasized the consistent beliefs are the fundamental element of their stable marriage. Shared beliefs will be the next theme.

### Theme 3. The Importance of Shared Faith: “Equally Yoked”

Many couples indicated that shared spiritual beliefs are a prominent factor of their stable marriage. Several referred implicitly or explicitly to the Bible’s teaching, “Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers” (2 Corinthians 8:12, KJV). 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; they can pray together and serve God together at church. This seems to promote their marriage and enhance their family life. Another couple from mainland China also discussed the importance of shared beliefs:

*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 is consistent. 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 and Li share their faith involvement. Because they have the same faith, they can support each other and serve God together. Yang is the children’s Sunday school principal, and her husband is an elder of the church. Both invest significant time, energy, and money in their faith community. According to Yang’s statement, this shared involvement is 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 similarly illustrated that the couples that pray together, stay together (Lambert & Dollahite, 2006).

*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, and 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.

Recent research reported that shared religious beliefs help to prevent and reduce marital conflict. In Lambert and Dollahite’s study (2006), a schoolteacher interview participant explained that the couple will often have the same answers when they pray to the same God and read the same Bible, and this is beneficial to marriage and family life.

Similarly, Cui, a father of four in my study, explained the meaning of Christian 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 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.

Shared faith seems to positively influence the couples’ marriages; this message closely resembles findings from similar qualitative research with African American couples in which discussed the challenge of being “unequally yoked” (Marks et al., 2008).

Several couples in this study emphasized the importance of their shared perceptions of religiosity. For example, a wife Yang reported:

I think it's very important that the husband and the wife serve God together. I always support Yunliang's service to God... about 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.

Also, in theme two, a couple shared they not only chose to marry a Christian, but also to seek a partner that *matched their similar level of spiritual faith*.

Shared denomination and also shared similar spiritual level of religious beliefs seem to benefit the participants' marriage, because they share the same values and worldview in their lives. They have the same practices that often tie them together and thus enhance their marriage and family life. However, there are also challenges in the shared journey of their faith.

#### Theme 4. Challenges with Religious Faith

Religious beliefs reportedly influenced the participants' marriages in many ways. They changed not only their perceptions but also their actions. However, they mentioned that they also encountered challenges that would hinder their marital relationship. One interview question asked: "What are the greatest obstacles to your marriage being all you and God want it to be?" The participant couples offered a variety of responses that were later divided into the sub-themes of internal challenges, intra-marriage challenges, and external challenges.

**Old Self: An Internal Obstacle.** According to the participants, "old self" is "our sin" and "old flesh life," such as "selfishness," "pride and jealousy," "love neither God nor the other part," and "my own ideas and opinions." Many couples regard their "old self" as a great obstacle in their marriage. Shen (H)'s response was: "My old-self still frequently comes up, which hinders the progression of a marital relationship that pleases God." Zhang (W) 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."

A couple from mainland China examined themselves, and discussed their struggle to live “God’s spiritual life”:

*Li (H)*: For myself, my 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 it’s faith in God and in him (her husband). To be the best marriage, we should have God’s character. Sometimes I said negative words to hurt others, which shows lack of faith and love.

After conversion, these participants emphasized their spiritual growth in the Lord, and reportedly tried to do what God wants them to do. For many, the important thing is to be near God day by day. In sum, it seems that “conversion” is experienced not as an event but as a process—a process that involves many personal struggles as individuals and couples strive to meet newly embraced ideals.

Qin (H)’s narrative reflects 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. It’s simple to me that I will do what God wants me to do. I will change if God wants me to change. [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. I left Taiwan and came to U.S.A. for my family. I try to lower the obstacles... [but] 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, and 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 answer regarding how “to improve my family and marriage.” In other words, Qin sees his “old self” as an obstacle in his marital and family life, but he seems to find hope in this because it is an obstacle that reportedly is being overcome. He is trying to “improve [him]self to meet God’s standard.”

Although participants often mentioned religious faith as a source of strength that helped with personal challenges, faith sometimes became an obstacle or challenge. Heavy religious involvement may be a factor in marriage conflict, especially when religious responsibilities consistently separate or overload 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 shared the following story 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 is a challenge.

*Zhen (W):* I had such experience before. He thought of God daily. [But] I could not feel him and he was somewhere [else]. When he invested on stocks before, he talked about stock to me everyday. 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 had not met his. Sometimes I thought he was far away from me. I had not connected with him. He notices this now.

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

*Zhen:* 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:* [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:* He said to hold a party. He said he brought up children, cooked, went to work and went to church, he did everything, but I could not feel him 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. If he lowered a little bit and I rose a little bit we would meet and have a balance. Now we balance well.

For this couple, how to balance serving God and loving family members was the biggest challenge they faced. They found that it is harmful to serve God only and neglect the family. However, when their spiritual status reached the same level that Marks et al. (2008) called

“equally yoked” in their study, they balanced well (see theme 3). In addition to personal, internal obstacles, the participants also experienced challenges within their marriages.

**Intra-Marriage Challenges.** Several couples experienced serious struggles when they did not share the same spiritual beliefs. Mei experienced hard times in her 20 years of marriage before her husband came to believe in God. She wanted her husband to come to God when she did. She explained:

When I first went to church and believed in God, I saw brothers who were cutting watermelon in the kitchen. I thought, how wonderful if my husband believes 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.

The following recollection described the challenge when Mei's husband didn't believe in God.

*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 20 years of marriage.

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

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

*Qin:* I told my children, since you believe in God, you should believe very sincerely, follow God's Words.

*Mei:* I was thinking to write a book about my marriage, how I fought for it, it was very painful to live in this marriage.

*Qin:* 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:* We have big obstacles, because we have different characters, after we believe in God, the obstacles became smaller. I am very satisfied with my marriage. Only God can change him, humans are limited, I did not tend to change him after I believed in God; he changed by himself after he believed in God. It's God who changed him.

Their shared faith involvement is now significant in their marriage and family life. However, it can be harmful to a marriage even in a shared faith marriage when they misunderstand their spiritual beliefs (Marks, 2005).

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. A husband Wu, from Hong Kong stated:

[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’s narrative showed that “the husband is the head of a family” and “a wife submit to her husband” with the condition that “the husband loves his wife with the love of Christ.” This is a big challenge not only to him but also to most of the believers. Like one participant explained, “It’s easy to say, but difficult to do.” Zhu, a wife from Taiwan shared her comments:

[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 emphasized that misapplied the Bible verse is 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 reasons. Although there are things that you disagree or are difficult for you to obey reasonably, we should do them according to God’s Words. We have God’s blessing if we do what God wants us to do. You establish your husband in such way, after being established, he may do better in leading the whole family in many aspects. He likes to be in charge of the

family in many aspects, the relationship of our family will be better, which is also God's blessing. The model of family is that the husband is the head of the wife. Man should be the head of the family, and then the wife and the children would be at their proper position just like a completed jigsaw puzzle. God's blessing will be upon you as soon as you submit: [the husband first to God, and the wife to the husband.]

I will return to the issue of "headship" in theme 5. For now, however, it is important to note that like some other participants, Zhu struggled to understand and apply various biblical teachings. In addition, the challenges that come from "the world" shared by the participants may impact their marriage and family life.

**The World: External Challenges.** From the participants' perspective, the primary external challenges to their marriages and personal spiritual development were "the world's attraction," "the world's lure," American culture's influence, "media," and "materialism and individualism." These challenges reportedly hampered their spiritual development, and sometimes harmed their marital relationships. While "the world" is a big challenge for many, some participants believed that these challenges did not pose a serious threat to their marriages and family lives if they had a good relationship with God. In other words, conquering some of the internal challenges addressed previously may make participants' marriages and families less vulnerable to external challenges.

Zhu, a wife and mother of two, stated that both internal and external obstacles can hinder family development, but she went on to explain:

The external obstacle is the world's lure. Our view or values of things that formed when we were young influence us to be a good Christian. For example, [I learned] aspects of teaching children [in God's way]... We should not compare our kids to other kids, [or it] may influence our teaching in improper way.

Pan (H) shared his struggle: "[The greatest obstacle is] the pressure of trying to be like others, who buy a new house, buy a new car. [Then] we wish we could, right here and right now." Pan's wife, Wan, addressed another issue which leading marriage and family therapist Bill Doherty

(2001) has called “a time affair,” referring to when a spouse spends too much time on any non-marital activity (e.g., the Internet, shopping, TV, golf, etc.). This “time affair” disrupts or limits the couple’s spousal time, which is a common struggle for many American marriages and families (Doherty, 2001). Wan said:

We have to be careful about technology, computer, and TV time. We have to be careful of that. 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, praying together.

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

*Sun (H)*: [The greatest obstacle in our marriage] is the world’s attraction and desire. I wanted to change my job to a better 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 for some time [because it was in another State]. So the potential obstacle is the world’s attraction, [more money over family unity].

Cui, another father of four, is separated from his family while he works in another city (the same state). He comes back once a week to reunite with his family but 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 was a big challenge to Cui. Elsewhere in his interview, he explained that after work and family, the rest of his time was for church, he had no time to do other things. Guo, Cui’s wife said:

We joined the choir recently. It's very good for us that our all family serves God together. We learned together. We have received many benefits that we could not have imagined. It's beautiful for our family to serve God together.

The families in my study, including Cui and Guo, seemed to be caught in what sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1997) has called "the time bind." Namely, they never seem to have enough time to devote as much time as they would like to family. In addition to work, the faith community makes time demands as well. Cui also mentioned how his church approached and motivated monetary contributions, which is another central challenge to him. He explained:

*Cui (H):* 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 my 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% (Malachi 3:8-11, NIV) is a profound challenge to many believers.

Another significant challenge faced by the Chinese Christian families was intergenerational conflict over religious faith and culture. For example, ancestor worship is part of Chinese traditional culture. This worship contradicts the participants' new Christian religious beliefs. Mei (W) explained:

My mother is very traditional; she never leaves her hometown, and values the feeling of parents and relatives. The Bible says to leave your parents [for God]. My mother didn't understand the meaning. I want to tell her with my action that I love her very much. She will understand gradually. It's very difficult to change her. [Instead], she goes to the temple to commemorate her ancestors by following the surrounding culture.

A husband named Yi similarly stated:

Now all of our five family members are Christians, my father immigrated to Houston, he is a Christian too, and he knows the meaning of worship ancestor. We do not do it anymore. We don't regard them (ancestors) as gods that can protect us.

Yi explained that his father came to believe in God, but when he first talked about the Christianity to his father, his father lost his temper and drove Yi out of his house. Many participants experienced intergenerational rifts at some levels surrounding or following their conversion to Christianity.

Li (H) illustrated how his non-Christian family members responded to his faith:

Non-believers of our family don't know what we gained and what we lost because they don't know what we have believed. They don't understand why we devote ourselves very much to our belief [even giving] time and money. For example, my brother-in-law [will] say, "You can give your money to us." They don't understand why we offer our money to our church. My father also didn't understand me when I went back China for just two or three weeks and most of the time I didn't stay at home but went for God's [mission] work. They just consider about relatives. They don't understand what we give up and what we gain.

From these participants we see that different belief and value systems may produce conflicts in family relationships. Consistent with the finding of Marks' (2004) study, when faith was not a "shared family vision," conflict within a family was common. Li's family could not understand Li's faith and what his faith means to him due to the "di-vision" of their beliefs (cf. Marks, 2001). However, Li feels it is his responsibility and burden to lead his extended family to believe in God. In Yi's case, the same effort got him ejected from his parents' home. Even when religious beliefs are shared across generations, intergenerational conflicts are typical (Hareven, 2000). However, when dramatic religious and cultural shifts are added, conflict is exacerbated. For the highly religious couples in this study, this kind of conflict did not constitute a severe threat but it was a significant challenge.

In summary, participants addressed many challenges. In the trajectory of participants' spiritual development, "old self" is a big obstacle that may hinder their marital relationship. They struggle to live out God's spiritual life and surpass their own desire. There are also some external challenges that come from "the world" which threaten their marriage and family life. However, to some extent, like a participant put it: "conflicts were good and constructive." Such as Yi's father finally converted to Christianity. Challenges reportedly served, in some cases, as beneficial factors that accelerated their spiritual growth if they could "put God first" which is the final theme I will discuss.

#### Theme 5. A New Priority: "Put God First."

The greatest commandment which the participants mentioned from the Bible's teaching is "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." (Matthew 23:37, NIV). Another significant reported belief or perspective was that many of the couples viewed Jesus Christ as the head of their family. Statements such as "Jesus Christ is the center of our family," "Jesus is the head of our family," and "faith is most important" were frequently made by the couples. Plaques engraved with "Christ is the Lord of this House" (or similar statements) were found seen in some families' homes. This perception of being "led by the Lord" seemed to help the couples to prevent and solve the problems they encountered in their marriage and family life. As Shen, a husband put it:

We are far from perfect and every family has its own problems. To prevent problems from occurring and to solve problems when they occur, we need to remember that Jesus is the Lord of our lives and of our family.

Qin and Mei, a couple who came from Taiwan, similarly explained,

*Qin (H):* We look up (to the Lord). Just like a triangle, both of us look up to the Lord; the distance between us is more and more narrow [as we grow closer to Him], otherwise we would be more far away. This gives me great encouragement.

*Mei (W)*: The husband and the wife are different individuals, but now we have God. We were usually unpleasant with each other for some little things such as shopping or education. But now God is above, Qin said look up to the Lord, let God be the Lord of our family, we [still] have distance [between us], but we are closer when we look upon the Lord.

*Qin (H)*: The most important [issue] is the two commandments our Lord Jesus gave us: love your Lord and love one another. The same in a family, the Lord is the head of our family. He loves us, and there will be love in the family. I was very busy before on Mathematics research, not much time to consider my family. Now I value the family time following God's commandments. Since the Lord is the head, we should really let Him be the head of our family. We try our best to do [this].

Some couples in the interviews view the relationship between husband, wife, and God as a triangle. According to balance theory (Heider, 1958), if the husband and wife have a good relationship with God respectively, they are more likely to have a good relationship with each other. As Mei said, "We are closer when we [both] look upon the Lord." For her husband, Qin, it takes him more than eight hours to travel one way from his workplace to his home; however, he chooses to come back home every weekend in order to lead his family to "walk in God's way." In addition, he also teaches in his church's Sunday school. He reportedly regards the Lord as the head of his family, and "looks up to the Lord," and tries to do his best in living God's will—"to love the Lord and love one another."

Zhen, a wife and mother of two who leads children's Sunday morning worship, said that she benefits from teaching children. She explained:

It is not good that you say to them to put God first, to trust God and God will take care of you, but you cannot do it yourself. In fact, teaching children is teaching myself.

She realized that it was important to be a good example for the children. Her husband, Lin similarly stated:

[A man] should be responsible as a husband and father. You Love God and put God first, but you should not neglect your family; I pray to God, and ask Him to provide me a way [to be a good Christian father].

In the “challenges” section, I discussed the profound challenge of being “unequally yoked” in a marriage. It can be harmful when only one spouse is highly involved and one is not. On the other hand, if spouses meet on a similar shared spiritual level, they have a greater probability of success (Leher & Chiswick, 1993). At the end of her interview, Zhen commented:

The journey of my faith is the process of my gradually growing up. We experienced pleasure, bitterness, and doubt, but we finally experienced that only after we had come to God [together], will we have peace and meaning in our life.

“The journey of my faith...” is a phrase that harmonizes with many of the participants’ voices. In the interviews, the participants shared their joys, their struggles, and their challenges. However, believing in God is reportedly central to the meaning they have found in their personal and marital lives. Lin and Zhen now not only both devote themselves very much to church, but also (like many others in the sample) expect their children to be involved in serving God at a young age. “It would be better that a family as a unit together is close to God, and everyone has a good relationship with God,” Lin concluded.

Li, a husband from mainland China, explained when he makes a decision he always asks for God’s will first:

I do not consider only myself; or do things [in the] worldly [manner]. I consider my family, my service at church, and so forth. I thank God for that. I am an instrument of God. Whenever I do something, I will seek God’s will, whether or not this is God’s pleasure, rather than whether I myself like it or not.

By his own report, Li was completely changed after he came to believe in God. Now, he continues to strive to change, to overcome internal challenges, to “seek God’s will” and “God’s pleasure” in all things. God is the standard for his decision-making. He shared his view on the purpose of his family life:

We will live a life not only for ourselves, but also for others to live and have a better life. Our lives touch many people, we work for God and help others to know God, and have a good relationship with God [as well].

To live for God, not for themselves, is the articulated purpose of many participants' lives. Yi, who is one of the original members of his church, has the same insight:

If we have disagreement, we all agree that God's Words are the supreme principle. We usually reach agreement after our communication. We should do everything according to God's teaching. God said Jesus is the head of the family. Then I let Jesus be the head of our family. For example, love wife as yourself, I try my best to do it, although I did not do 100%. God's Words will influence all my life. In fact, God's Words have great influence on us; it is the compass of our life.

Yi strives to be a good practitioner of God's teachings. He explained that when he lost his job several years ago, he said in his later interview, "I had peace in my heart because of God's Words." He still served at his church, and he reported, "the sisters and brothers in our church didn't know that (I lost my job) at all, because I had joy and peace in my heart." In *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl (1963, 1992) quotes a Nietzsche statement that "He who has a why to live for can bear with almost anyhow" (p. 84). Yi seems to illustrate this.

Common themes of the interview data are "Put God first," "To seek God's will," "do everything according to God's teaching." My participants viewed these charges as central in their efforts to have strong relationships in a marriage and family life, because "family is part of faith, it is showing God's love."

In summary, most of the Chinese immigrants in this study experienced a conversion from atheism to theism. For many participants, after their conversion to Christianity, their worldview and ideology also changed. They view marriage as established by God instead of as a social institution as typically viewed in the social sciences (e.g., Sprey, 2009). Their spiritual beliefs reportedly influence their marriage in many positive ways. They regard committed marriage as God's blessing; divorce is not an option for them. They have difficulties and conflicts, however, their faith reportedly helps them solve some of the problems and work out the differences between the couples.

However, there are challenges for them, especially in the acculturation of the new milieu when they came to the USA from China. Intergenerational conflicts are especially common, given the collision between two very different cultures. However, these challenges can also contribute to spiritual growth. As one participant stated, if God is “the guidance” and “the compass” of their life, they believe they will have a stable marriage and a happy family life. In this section, the participants conveyed the importance of their religious faith to their marriage and family life through their life experiences—some were positive, some were negative, and many were challenging. However, all experiences seemed to be an opportunity for personal, marital, and familial growth.

## CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSIONS

### Discussion

The existing literature indicates that there are strong correlations between religiosity and marital stability and satisfaction (Call & Heaton, 1997; Lambert & Dollahite, 2008; Lehrer & Chiswick, 1993; Marks, 2004, 2006). However, most of the previous research focused on American families through quantitative methods, while in-depth insights based on qualitative methods were rare. Qualitative research on immigrant families, including Chinese families, is especially rare. This study adds its voice to the literature by examining highly religious Chinese Christian marriages in the United States through qualitative, intensive interviews. Chinese Christian families in the United States have unique complexities inherent in the connection between spiritual development and marital relationships. Although the purposive sample does not allow the generalization to a larger population, this study opened a window for us to see the deep meaning of their faith, marriage, and family relationships through the experiences of these families. To discuss how faith influenced these Chinese immigrants' changes in worldview and how their conversion to Christianity influenced their marital relationship, I will use Lewis and Spaniers' (1979) model of individual, interpersonal, and social-economic levels (cf. Marks, et al., 2008).

**Chinese Christianity and Marriage at the Individual Level.** As the first immigrant generation, the participants have experienced some significant stressors. However, Christian faith reportedly is an important coping resource for them. In terms of conversion, the good examples of other Christian families, the Chinese Christian community, and God's Word were all reportedly prominent resources and influences. The motivations behind the participants' conversions were different. However, after their conversions, they all reportedly changed their

ideology and world view. From atheism to theism, most of the participants experienced a personal transition from knowing no God to believing “God is love.” Along with the changes of their spiritual beliefs, their individual perceptions of marriage also seemed to change. Mahoney and colleagues in their study (1999) stated that greater perceptions of marriage as sacred were associated with greater marital satisfaction--a finding confirmed by the qualitative work of Goodman and Dollahite (2008). The participants of this study perceived marriage as sacred and established by God, which is a different perspective than they had held as when they did not “know God.” They now believe marriage is a spiritual commitment not only to each other but also to God. These beliefs reportedly contribute to the participants’ stable marriages.

In the current study, the participants also reported that their spiritual beliefs influenced their marital mate choices--they not only chose to marry a Christian, but also seek a partner with the same spiritual level, which is similar to the statement by a father in Marks’ (2005) study that religious teachings influenced his attitude toward marriage and his decisions in mate selection.

Another way that faith strengthens marriage, according to my participants, is that their religious beliefs helped them to work out their differences instead of seeking to divorce. This is consistent with qualitative research findings that found: (a) including God in a marriage as a “third cord” enhances and stabilizes marital commitment (Lambert & Dollahite, 2008), (b) shared religiosity can help couples to solve their marital conflicts (Lambert & Dollahite, 2006), and (c) spiritual beliefs impact marriage through anti-divorce beliefs (Marks, 2005). It seems that the participants’ transcendent spiritual beliefs influence their perceptions of marriage, and then enhance and stabilize their marital commitment following a marital commitment. Because the purpose of the participants’ life is changed after their conversion, some participants strive to devote their time, energy, and money to their Chinese faith community-related activities. In

addition, the participants mentioned their internal challenges--the personal struggles between their “old self” and God’s higher standard.

**Chinese Christianity and Marriage at the Interpersonal Level.** According to the participants, faith profoundly influenced their marriages in a positive way. At least three couples reported that their marital conflicts were severe enough to threaten their marriage before they knew God. After conversion, their shared religious beliefs reportedly helped to unify them. Previous research has indicated that shared religious faith correlated with marital stability (Lehrer & Chiswick, 1993). In addition, several qualitative studies of long-term marriages have found that shared religious beliefs are important factors in many participants’ marriages (Kaslow & Robinson, 1996; Robinson, 1994; Robinson & Blanton, 1993). Conversely, Marks and his colleagues (2008) have discussed the challenge of being “unequally yoked,” and how challenging this can be to the marital relationship. However, one major finding of the present study is that shared spiritual beliefs and *similar level* of spiritual beliefs were both reportedly important to religious couples.

The Chinese Christian couples mentioned a faith-related challenge to marriage, however. Many said it would be harmful if the Bible was misunderstood or misapplied, especially in connection with the issue of male headship. The wives do not understand why the husband should be the head of the family and they should submit to their husbands. Little literature has addressed this topic, so additional research is required.

Another conflict or tension that exists between the Chinese traditional culture and Christianity in the milieu of modern American culture that can threaten intergenerational relationships occurs when grandparents, parents, and children do not share faith. For instance, the custom of ancestor worship in Chinese traditional culture contradicts the participants’ new

Christian religious beliefs, causing differences similar to the finding that “di-vision” of family beliefs (two different family visions) tends to produce conflicts within a family (Marks, 2004).

**Chinese Christianity and Marriage at the Social-Economic Level.** From 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). The trajectory of Chinese Christian immigrants’ spiritual development is different from those of American Christians. Their development also differs from Chinese Christians in China. Most participants experienced the process of moving from atheism to theism (70%). Before 1979, religious activities were restricted in China because of the atheist ideology and policy of the Chinese Communist Party. A Christian revival started in 1979 with the Economic Reform and Open Door Policy (Hunter & Chan, 1993). For some of the participants in my study, the Chinese traditional culture and Marxist atheism were initial barriers to their conversions when they came to America. However, American Christian culture provided soil for their spiritual faith to root. Consistent with Zhang’s (2006) finding, the Chinese Christian community in America played a vital role in the conversion of many of the participants.

The findings of the study are based on well-educated, middle-class Chinese immigrant Christian couples. We still know very little about the experiences about low-income, working-class Chinese Christian couples. The topic needs attention in future research.

The present study identifies several external challenges to Chinese Christian immigrants’ families. “The world’s attraction,” American culture’s influence, and “materialism and individualism” were all reported as significant challenges to the participants. These challenges also influence their marital and family life, including intergenerational relationships. As

discussed in theme 4, different belief and value systems often produced conflicts between the parent and grandparent generations.

In sum, the findings of this study show that when the married participants regard their faith as most important to them, they seem to have good marital relationships. The relationships among the husband, wife, and God were often compared to a triangle. If both of the couples are moving toward a common objective, the Lord, these shared aims and relationships also seem to serve as the base of harmonious marriage and family life (see also, Lambert & Dollahite, 2008). Also, the belief that individuals and couples should “put God first” reportedly influenced the participants’ decision-making, their life style, and their coping process. They report a deep sense of meaning in their lives, and some report joy and peace in their heart even when they are experiencing stresses.

#### Limitations

Despite the richness and depth of the data, there are some limitations in this study. Unlike the random and representative samples found in some quantitative research, the sample of the study is purposive and limited to highly religious Chinese Christian couples in a limited portion of the United States. Therefore, the results and findings may not be generalized to broader populations. The participants are well-educated, middle-class couples, and most of them have two or more children (an uncommon characteristic among native Chinese given the one-child policy), thus, future research should explore the influence of religiosity in various types of couples, such as low-income or working-class couples. It is also possible that participants emphasized the positive aspects of religion on marriage because of their strong beliefs. Both husband and wife were interviewed together, which would enhance validity and reliability of the study due to the triangulation of multi informants’ perspective. However, the husband or the wife

may avoid sensitive topics in the presence of their spouses. The present study only focuses on one dimension of religious beliefs; future research may consider the other two dimensions of religious practices and religious community in order to understand the whole picture of the interface of religiosity and marriage.

### Implications

The findings of the study suggest some implications for research and practice regarding Chinese immigrants in the United States. Some of these are discussed next.

**For Research.** Most of the extant studies on religion and marriage are based on quantitative research. Researchers have paid relatively little attention to how and why religious beliefs and practices influence a marriage (Dollahite, Marks, & Goodman, 2004). To answer such questions, qualitative research methods may be the ideal approach because qualitative research focuses on descriptions of lived experiences, the processes, and the understanding of the meanings of marriage and family relationships (Daly, 1992; Gilgun, 2005). These experiences, processes, and meanings are difficult to capture and convey with quantitative methods (Gilgun, Daly, & Handel, 1992).

Much 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, Marks, & Goodman, 2004).

The relationship between religion and family life in immigrant communities remains largely unexplored. Furthermore, almost no research has been conducted to examine how religiosity influences immigrants' marriages, especially among Asian-Americans. Future

research should pay more attention to the linkages between religiosity family, marriage, and immigrant community (Lee, 2007).

Chen (2006) reported that Christians account for approximately 25% to 32% of the Chinese population in the United States. For Chinese immigrants' families, they face the same challenge in terms of acculturation. Moreover, they also had to face some challenges of post-modern American society. For Christian and non-Christian families, they have different strategies to cope with stresses. Thus, comparing the two types of marriage may give us some new perceptions about religion and marriage.

**For Practice.** The findings of this study as well as the empirical studies suggest that religious beliefs are positively influence marriage and family life. Several couples in my study stated it was God who saved their marriages; they would have already divorced if they had not known God. Reportedly their religious beliefs made them know the meaning of marriage and made their marriage more stable. One participant stated the strength of prayer in this way: "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." The different practices such as prayer, attending church, and reading the Bible seemed to provide efficient and effective benefits for those who believe their faith is the center of their life.

Mental health workers and family professionals should be aware of the importance of religion to many individuals and families and should be sensitive to how these families integrate religious faith as a coping resource to solve marital conflicts and enhance marital and family relationships. However, most family and clinical professionals are not religious themselves (see

Marks, 2004). Therefore, to obtain at least minimal religious awareness is important for them in order to be appropriately sensitive to couples and families who pursue higher spiritual support.

It is difficult for Chinese immigrants to seek professional psychological services in a cross-cultural context. To understand Chinese cultural background knowledge may be helpful for family professionals to deal with Chinese immigrants' special issues. It is beneficial for mental health workers and family professionals to be aware of Chinese immigrants' typical and special stresses and challenges, including those related to faith and those that are not.

With knowledge of the role of religion in a marriage and family life, it is important for pastors and church leaders to also obtain knowledge regarding psychological counseling, and to attend not only to the spiritual needs but also to the relational and psychological needs of church members. They should also be willing to refer to secular professionals when needed, as is frequently the case (Marks, 2008). Church leaders might also consider giving sermons, lessons, and invited workshops which focus on special topics about marriage and family that are important for couples and families. Concerning immigrants' cultural backgrounds, church leaders may pay more attention to individuals' special psychological needs. In the Chinese community, for instance, it is essential to know how to selectively keep and integrate elements of Chinese culture into Christian culture (Yang, 1998). Overall, it is a challenging process for individuals to qualitatively change on a personal level as well as making an accompanying marital transformation.

### Conclusion

Participants reported that their high levels of religiosity were directly related to their marital stability and satisfaction. These findings among Chinese immigrants in the United States are similar to previous research on the same topic on Americans in general. Qualitative methods

allow researchers to better understand the meanings and the processes of the interface of religiosity and marriage behind the phenomena. For Chinese immigrants, there is an unique process in the journey of faith within the multicultural contexts. The current study has investigated how religious beliefs transformed the participants' individual's perceptions and their marital relationships. It also illustrates how and why faith serves as strength in marital and family life, but also how it creates and raises challenges the participants and their families may face on personal, marital, and even intergenerational levels. However, these couples also find great strength in their religious beliefs, referring to their faith as the "compass" of their lives. They illustrate the belief that "only with the aid of God, can we understand the incomprehensible, manage the unmanageable, and endure the unbearable" (Pargament, 1998, p. 112). Therefore, if we are to understand these immigrant Chinese Christian couples, we must be willing to try to understand the faith factor in their lives. If we will listen, we will be better scholars and practitioners.

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## APPENDIX A

### STATEMENT OF INFORMED CONSENT

#### Purpose of the Research

I am being asked to participate in a study that examines families and religion. My participation in the study will take 60-90 minutes. I understand that the interviewer will audio record my interview and that she or he will later analyze the interview data.

#### Rights of Participation

Everything I provide the researcher with will remain anonymous and confidential. If any information from my interview is used in any form, this information will not be accompanied by my name or any other identifying information. I have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) I am uncomfortable answering or request that the tape recorder be turned off for certain responses. I also may end my interview at any time by telling the researcher that I do not want to participate any longer.

#### Risks and Benefits

There are no known risks for participating in this study. However, this research will help family scholars and professionals better understand the relationships between families, stress, coping, and religion.

#### Contacts

I have had time to address any questions or concerns I have with the researcher. If I have additional or future questions or concerns, I may contact Dr. Loren Marks at [lorenm@lsu.edu](mailto:lorenm@lsu.edu) or (225) 578-2405.

#### Participation Assurance

I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary.

#### Consent Signature

Signature

Date

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Signature

Date

Please sign and date above if you agree to participate in the study.

APPENDIX B  
DEMOGRAPHIC SUMMARY

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Circle One: Male Female

Faith Affiliation: \_\_\_\_\_

Number and Gender of Children (i.e., 1 girl, 2 boys): \_\_\_\_\_

Child(ren's) Age(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Educational Level (High School, College, etc.): \_\_\_\_\_

- 1) *If you feel comfortable responding, approximately what percentage of your income do you spend or donate in direct and indirect ways that involve your faith community?*
  
- 2) *Approximately how many hours a week do you spend in faith-related activities?(including worship services, faith-related meetings, prayer and meditation, scripture study, family worship, youth or children's organizations, service to other congregational members, etc.)*

## APPENDIX C

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS ON FAITH AND FAMILY LIFE

#### Faith and Marriage (Married Couple)

*I'd like to ask some questions about links between your faith and your marriage or between your relationship with God and with one another. I am also interested in personal experiences that illustrate your ideas.*

1. Did your religious beliefs and values influence how you met and decided to marry?
2. What are some of your *deepest spiritual beliefs* relating to marriage? Can you give an example of how these beliefs have influenced your marriage?
3. Which faith *practices/traditions* hold special meaning for you *as a couple*?
4. How do these practices/traditions influence your marriage? (EXAMPLE?)
5. How has your *relationship with God* influenced your marriage?
6. Have you influenced each other's initial or ongoing involvement with your faith?
7. All couples have some conflict. Are there ways that your religious beliefs or practices *help avoid or reduce marital conflict*? (EXAMPLE?)
8. What do your non-religious friends or family members think you give up because of your faith?
9. Do you feel there are any religious beliefs or practices that, if *misunderstood or misapplied*, can be harmful to marriage? If so, what are they?
10. What are the *greatest obstacles* (external/internal) to your marriage being all you and God want it to be? (EXAMPLE?)

*The second part of the interview asks about connections between your faith and your family life; that is between your relationships with God and with family members. I would also enjoy any personal experiences that might illustrate the influence of your faith in your family life.*

#### I. Religious Practice and Community and Family Life

1. Which *faith practices/traditions* hold special meaning for you as a family?
2. Can you recall a particular time when these practices/traditions really helped your family?

3. Is your religious congregation important to your family? Your Marriage?

## II. Religious Beliefs and Family Life

4. Which of your religious beliefs have the most influence on your family life?
5. How *central* is your religion to how you parent your children?
6. Can you think of a time when you believe God *directly influenced* your family in some way?

## III. Faith and Parent-Child Relationships

TO PARENTS:

7. As parents, how do you *share your faith* with your children?
8. *How important* to you is it that your child(ren) *follow in your faith*?

## IV. Faith and Surrounding Culture

9. Do your religious beliefs influence what you *let in or keep out* of your family life?
10. What challenges arise from being a religious family in the surrounding culture? How do you *respond to these challenges*? (EXAMPLE?)

## V. Challenges of Faith and Family Life

11. Has your family experienced any *major stressors or challenges* that your faith has helped you deal with?
12. Is there anything else about your faith and your family life you consider important or interesting to mention?

APPENDIX D

DEMOGRAPHIC FORM

Name	Age	Number of Children	Ages of Children	Educational Level	Income Donated	Time spent hours	Time/Interview
Shen	66	1	37	PH.D.	12.50%	10	1/15/2008
Shi	65			PH.D.			
Cui	58	4	30,29,23,17	M.S.	N/A	15	12/9/2007
Guo	57			B.S.			
Yi	54	2	19, 17	M.S.	N/A	N/A	1/6/2008
Xie	52			M.S.			
Fan	61	2	30, 27	M.S.	N/A	N/A	3/22/2008
Xin	57			B.A.			
Lu	39	1	7	M.S.	0.50%	5	1/20/2008
Zhan	37			graduate student			
Pan	28	1	7 months	B.A.	10%	40	7/13/2006
Wan	28			B.A.			
Sun	34	1	9 months	PH.D.	N/A	N/A	9/16/2007
Zheng	33			M.S.			
Wu	33	2	3 yrs,7mon	PH.D.	10%	12	9/15/2007
Bai	33			M.S.		10	
Liang	40	1	15	M.S.	5%	9	9/23/2007
Wang	43			M.S.			
Yan	44	2	12, 3	PH.D.	N/A	N/A	9/30/2007
Liu	38			M.S.			
Li	42	2	9, 6	PH.D.	10%	20	10/14/2007
Yang	43			PH.D.		10	
Huang	44	2	18, 2	PH.D.	N/A	N/A	10/20/2007
Wei	44			Technical school			
Lin	45	2	9, 6	PH.D.	12%	25	11/5/2007
Zhen	42			M.S.		15	
Qiu	54	2	26, 24	PH.D.	10%	8	11/11/2007
Zhu	54			B.A.			
Zhang	46	2	11, 9	PH.D.	N/A	N/A	11/18/2007
Han	45			Technical school			
Qin	51	2	21, 13	PH.D.	N/A	30	12/2/2007
Mei	44			B.A.			

## VITA

Yaxin Lu was born and raised in Changchun, Jinlin Province, of P. R. of China. She married to Baozhu Liu, and they have three children, Mary, who was born in Qingdao, China; Nancy, who was born in Tsucuba, Japan; and a son Matthew, who was born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, U.S.A.

She received her bachelor degree in international law from Jilin University. After graduation, she went to Qingdao and worked for an import and export company for ten years. She went to Japan with her husband who was a visiting scholar, and stayed there for two years, then came to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, U.S.A. In 2007, she began her master's program in the field of family science with special focus on religion and family in the School of Human Ecology at Louisiana State University. During her master's studies, she worked as a graduate research assistant and was awarded the Alvin and Lillie Harper Graduate Fellowship.