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# Investigating religious conversion among Chinese college students: Testing the expansion of the Lofland and Stark model and the impact of media

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**Investigating religious conversion among Chinese college students: Testing the expansion of the Lofland and Stark model and the impact of media**

by

**Haifan Xiao**

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF SCIENCE**

Major: Journalism and Mass Communication

Program of Study Committee:

Andrew D. Prichard, Major Professor

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Gloria Jones-Johnson

The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2018

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**ABSTRACT**

With an increasing number of Chinese students pursuing academic careers in the United States, where the majority of people hold religious beliefs, Chinese students' conversion to religion when they move to the United States has become increasingly more common. In China, people are free to hold their own religious beliefs, according to the law. People who have a religious orientation, however, make up a small portion of the population because of the China's unique history and political context. The dissemination of religious information, especially from foreign countries, is limited and people have few channels to learn about religion. Therefore, when Chinese students without a religious orientation find themselves in a society with different cultural and religious histories, their adaptation and emergence into the new environment is of great significance. In addition, people today have more opportunities to gather religious information online, especially when students come to the United States. By using the expansion of Lofland and Stark's model (1965) and by focusing on the impact of media, my thesis investigates the process of religious conversion among Chinese college students in Ames, Iowa, a university town in the U.S. Midwest. Through 12 in-depth interviews, two important new themes emerged. The first new theme was families' attitudinal change from opposition to consent toward religious conversion. The second new theme involved feelings of doubt after conversion and the management of these doubts. Regarding the test with respect to the expansion of Lofland and Stark's (1965) model, the result confirmed the significance of three conditions: a turning point, affective bonds, and neutralized or supportive attitudes from extraneous social networks. This result refuted the necessity of the remaining conditions: acutely felt tension, the religious

perspective, defining oneself as a religious seeker, and intensive interaction. Participants reported significance of media on their conversion, although their church sanctioned only specific sites or online resources after conversion.



## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Although religious conversion has been frequently investigated in previous articles, religious conversion among the Chinese has not gotten much attention in the field. In fact, many anecdotes and suppositions concerning religious conversion within this subculture group remain unearthed (Busto, 1996, p.134). Motives for conversion involving two Chinese groups were investigated: Chinese individuals who experienced era-changing events such as the Second World War, and Chinese Americans who were brought up in the United States but were influenced by Chinese culture from their families. However, reasons for conversion among current Chinese college students studying and living in the United States, who simultaneously experience two distinct cultures, have been insufficiently investigated. To further investigate the reasons and the process of religious conversion among the current younger Chinese generation, the social environment and policies related to religion need to be discussed.

According to Yang (2006), for the Chinese Communist Party, atheism is an essential creed that is demonstrated in two forms. One is scientific atheism, originating from the European Enlightenment movement, which, regards religion as nonscientific, and regressive. Thus, under this line of thinking, improvements in science and technology should naturally drive religion to death. The second form, militant atheism, which was supported by Lenin and the Russian Bolsheviks, regards religion as a dangerous political ideology that threatens evolution. The Chinese Communist Party had embraced religious toleration since its early days, adopting scientific atheism. However, from the perspective of militant atheism, the power of the proletariats was aroused to eliminate anti-revolutionary ideas (Dai, 2001).

After the People's Republic of China was established, militant atheism urged communists to restrict religion. Foreign missionaries were considered as belonging to Western imperialism and were expelled. Other cults or heterodox sects were deemed as conservative and were banned. It was difficult to eradicate five prevalent religions in China, involving Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism. Therefore these five religions were made into national associations, also for their diplomatic value. In 1954, the China Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee was established as a result of efforts by the government and some religious leaders. Afterward, many religious groups established their associations from 1955 to 1957, including Buddhism, Islam, Daoism, and Catholicism. However immediately thereafter, religious systems were banned, and the five prevalent religions were all under a system characterized by uniformity. The Cultural Revolution, starting in China in 1966, led to the closure of all religious venues. Architecture and artifacts related to religion were destroyed. The remaining religious believers endured torture such as publicly confessing their "sins" in the ruler's eyes. Although it was dangerous to keep religious belongings, some people rescued artifacts such as scriptures, arguing that they were saving antiques (Lang, 1998). After the death of Zedong Mao in 1976, Xiaoping Deng took power and led the party to the road of economic reform. The government loosened its control over diverse aspects of the society, including religion. As a result, some churches, temples, and mosques reopened at the beginning of 1979.

In 1982, "Document No.19" formally admitted religious toleration and granted legal existence to the five prevalent religions with the guidance of government-sanctioned "patriotic" associations. Document No. 19 did not permit the legal existence of other religious groups and restricted proselytization within regulated areas. Furthermore, it endured

the ever-growing spread of atheism, except in religious areas. In the same year, the Constitution of the People's Republic of China reiterated the freedom of religious belief and the protection of "normal" religious activities. After 1982, the government introduced more methods to strengthen religious regulation, such as the release of Document No. 6 in 1991.

Therefore, religion in China is a politically sensitive topic to date. Believers, especially of Christianity, which is still deemed as part of Western imperialism, are not willing to (nor do they dare) publicly announce their religious identity or proselytize.

Some scholars (Snow, 1979; Snow & Philip, 1980; Turner & Killian, 1972, pp. 257-59) have pointed out that, if a religion is viewed publicly as "revolutionary," "peculiar," or "idiosyncratic," associations between significant others and potential converts should be neutralized or weak, so as to remove obstacles on the way to the conversion process. Accordingly, if a Chinese person were to convert to Christianity, which is regarded by the Chinese as a Western religion, there should be little tension between his or her religious activities and the individual's relationships with significant others, such as family members. One important contextual aspect for religious conversion among Chinese students living abroad involves the geographic distance between them and their significant others, who may impose control over them, such as their parents. The long distance between the students and their significant others leads to "minimal control" and less tension with extraneous attachments, which lead converts to solidify their faith (Lofland & Stark, 1965).

The number of PRC students in the United States, not considering visiting scholars and postdoctoral researchers, was approximately 40,000 in the early 1990s, over 50,000 in the late 1990s, and 64,757 in 2002-2003 (Davis & Chin, 2005). The growth of Chinese churches, Chinese Bible study, Christian fellowship groups, and other types of religious

activities has been observed at most universities in the United States, especially the Ivy League, large state universities, and famous private universities (Yang, 1998, 1999; Ng, 2002). Yang (2002b) reasoned that about one third of the Chinese in the United States regard themselves as Christians. Ch'ien (2000, p. 68) wrote that an “eye-opening number” of Chinese and other Asian American students were joining college Christian groups, and Busto (1996, p. 134) noted that these students are “central players in American evangelical Christianity.” There are many articles investigating the reasons and process of religious conversion. However, the reasons for religious conversion among Chinese students “remain for the most part anecdotal” (Busto, 1996, p. 134). This phenomenon has received little scholarly attention in Asian American studies and the sociology of religion (Warner, 1998; Yoo, 1996; Yang & Tamney, 2006).

Earlier Chinese immigrants converted to Christianity under an environment of time-changing events, such as the Chinese Civil War or the Cultural Revolution. Most of them could not go back to their home country because of conflicts. However, when living in the United States, they had to address various kinds of living challenges, such as being a minority ethnic group. A strong sense of rootlessness played a key role in their religious conversion (Yang, 1998). Today's Chinese college students studying in the United States, live in a relatively peaceful environment and are free to return to China, as long as they do not commit crimes. They are taught atheism throughout their education in China and are brought up in an environment of economic reform. They are more familiar with advanced technologies and have better abilities to search for information from the media, compared with the previous generations. Living in different eras might lead to various reasons for religious conversion. In addition, because of the Chinese online “Great Wall” and the

strengthening of China's religious administration, the religious information that Chinese students can obtain in China is limited. However, in the United States, it is easy to find out about a church's location and its upcoming events online, and to encounter proselytization on the street. Recently, religious media and media associated with religion, have adapted to increased interaction and have increasingly responded to the needs of practitioners of American religion (Fernback, 2002; Gilmore, 2011; Grimes, 2002; Hoover, 1998; Stout, 2013). Media usage in China and the United States might lead to different kinds of religious engagement, which is expected to be a distinct experience among current Chinese college students studying in the United States, who have the chance to experience the two different social contexts. Therefore, it is important to probe the reasons and the process of religious conversion among current Chinese students and the impact of media use during this process.

By applying an expansion of Lofland and Stark's model (1965) and the media's impact during the process, two important new themes emerged: attitudes of families changing from opposition to support of religious engagement, and feelings of suspicion after conversion and management of such feelings. Pertaining to the test of the expansion of Lofland and Stark's (1965) model, the significance of three conditions, involving a turning point, affective bonds, and neutralized or supportive attitudes from extraneous social networks, was supported. However, the necessity of four other conditions, which include acutely felt tension, the religious perspective, defining oneself as a religious seeker, and intensive interaction, was not supported. In addition, based on the interviews, media played an important role in their conversion, while limitations on information selection existed after conversion. Ultimately, this analysis attempts to offer more real historical stories, distinct

from those of other cultures and other eras, to the research of religion among the Chinese and the field of Chinese studies.

## CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Conversion

It is said that we are living in an “age of conversion” (Richardson & Stewart, 1978, p. 24; Snow & Phillips, 1980, p. 430). An increasing number of laymen and social researchers are paying more attention to the phenomenon of religious conversion (Colson, 1976; Patrick, 1976; Enroth, 1977; Conway & Siegelman, 1978; Richardson, 1978; Snow & Phillips, 1980). There is a great deal of enthusiasm for sociologists to study religious conversion to cults from the 1960s through the 1980s in North America and Europe. (Yang & Tamney, 2006). There are still many scholars investigating conversion to popular religions such as Christianity (e.g., Davidman, 1991; Suchman, 1992; Davidman & Greil, 1993). However, people who convert to mainstream religions, are often labeled by researchers as returning to their religious roots or switching across denominational boundaries within Christianity (Newport, 1979; Roof & Hadaway, 1979; Hoge, 1981; Sullins, 1993; Musick & Wilson, 1995). There has been much debate surrounding the reasons and sources of the expansion of conservative churches (Kelly, 1977; Hoge & Roozen, 1979; Finke & Stark, 2005; Roozen & Hadaway, 1993; Bibby & Brinkerhoff, 1973, 1983, 1994; Perrin & Mauss, 1991; Perrin, Kennedy, & Miller, 1997). However, these debates do not take into account the increasing number of evangelical Protestants among non-white people (Yang, 1998). Recently, scholars in different fields have noticed the rapid spread of Christianity in places beyond the West (Hefner, 1993; Martin, 1990). In North America, many Asians and Latinos have converted to evangelical Protestantism (Yang & Tamney, 2006, p. 125). R. Stephen Warner (2004) observed the phenomenon that there are many Christian congregations composed of Latinos and Asians in the United States.

Conversion among particular sociocultural groups might be considered as mass conversion, meaning that religious conversion has happened to several individuals in a society within a comparatively short time period (Yang & Tamney, 2006, p. 126). Yang and Tamney (2006, p. 126) stated that these individuals undergo religious conversion from his or her own free will instead of being required by someone in power such as a king, which occurred in medieval Europe and other societies without democracy. They reasoned, in modern society, mass conversion among certain sociocultural groups seems to increase. An article from Boston Globe (2003) reported that Asians have contributed a lot for growth of campus evangelical groups at schools such as Harvard and MIT. However, reasons for religious conversion among Chinese students remained unknown (Busto, 1996, p. 134) because this phenomenon received little attention in studies of Asian American and sociology of religion (Warner, 1998; Yoo, 1996; Yang & Tamney, 2006). Therefore, investigating religious conversion process among Chinese can fill the gap of religion.

### **Lofland and Stark (1965) Model**

Lofland and Stark investigated the conversion model by observing a small cult composed of Americans, following the self-established “Lord of the Second Advent” with Mr. Chang, who had converted over 5,000 people in Korea from 1954. Chang claimed that the “Divine Precepts” (which is written as D.P. in the following context) were the doctrine concerning “a complete ‘Restoration of the World’ to the conditions of the Garden of Eden by 1967” (Lofland & Stark, 1965, p. 862). Lofland and Stark collected their data via participant observation from 1962 to mid-1963, and less intensive observation through mid-1964, as well as interviews with converts and their acquaintances. The converts were composed primarily of “white, Protestant, and young (people); some had college training,



and most were Americans of lower middle-class and small town origins” (Lofland & Stark, 1965, p. 863).

They established a conversion model in a “funnel” sequence, which means that as the standard specifying qualifications increases, the number of people who are qualified for recruitment decreases. The more criteria there are for people to become qualified, there is greater potential for them to become converts. The authors contended that the temporal order may vary, and the ordering principle involves *activation*. They established seven conditions for conversion, as follows:

For conversion a person must:

1. Experience enduring, acutely felt tensions;
2. Within a religious problem-solving perspective;
3. Which leads him to define himself as a religious seeker;
4. Encountering the D.P. [the cult] at a turning point in his life;
5. Wherein an affective bond is formed (or pre-exists) with one or more converts;
6. Where extra-cult attachments are absent or neutralized;
7. And, where, if he is to become a deployable agent, he is exposed to intensive interaction. (Lofland & Stark, 1965, p. 874)

Lofland and Stark distinguished two categories of converts. The first category is *verbal converts*, people who possess religious beliefs and are admitted by the core members as sincere, but do not behave actively in the church. Individuals going through the first six conditions are termed *verbal converts*. The second type is *total converts*, who have intensive interaction with church people and who exhibit their commitment as much as what they say. Individuals who are qualified for all seven conditions are called *total converts*.

At first, concerning the first condition, Lofland and Stark (1965) argued that the tension in the situation of religious conversion is attributed as a felt discrepancy between an ideal image and the realities in which converts are trapped. They listed some concrete cases of tension, such as dreaming about unrealized wealth, knowledge, prestige, or suffering from physical conditions. They maintained that the model of human conduct always involves the conception of tension, frustration and other kinds of hedonic calculus (Lofland & Stark, 1965, p. 864).

Second, the condition of the problem-solving perspective refers to people's methods or means of coping with their problems (Lofland & Stark, 1965). Lofland and Stark (1965) stated that when people encounter problems, not all of them solve these problems from a religious perspective. Therefore, the number of people who experience trouble, who use a religious problem-solving perspective, and who finally convert to a religion is limited. Lofland and Stark (1965) put forward three particular problem-solving solutions: *the psychiatric, the political, and the religious*. In the first case, the source of problems is mainly attributed to the psyche, and dealing with the self is regarded as a solution. Concerning the political perspective, people in this approach, especially radicals, want to ask for systemic change. The religious solutions tend to see the origins and solutions of problems from a mainly unseen sphere. Several types of psychiatric and political solutions have been employed in contemporary society.

Third, regarding the condition of religious seekers, Lofland and Stark (1965) argued that after failing to deal with tensions in other ways, pre-converts' need for solutions still exist, so their problem-solving perspective becomes limited to a religious approach. At the same time, pre-converts find conventional religious institutions as insufficient in addressing

their problems. Consequently, the individual comes to define himself or herself as a religious seeker, who is in search of a satisfactory religious value system to deal with his or her problem, and acts to achieve this goal. In Lofland and Stark's (1965) article, people who define themselves as religious seekers positively "hopped from church to church" to find a value system with which they could live their lives. During this stage, Lofland and Stark (1965) also argued that openness to various religious views is an element for embracing a new religion.

Fourth, Lofland and Stark (1965) stated that turning points involve situations where old obligations and actions decrease, and new engagements become desirable. According to Lofland and Stark, all pre-converts undergo a "turning point," as perceived by themselves, a moment when old involvements are or are about to be finished, disrupted, or failed. Examples of turning points, listed by Lofland and Stark (1965), involve recent migration, unemployment, starting, finishing or dropping out of school, and recovering from an illness. Lofland and Stark (1965) deemed that the turning point occurs shortly before, and concurrently in regard to their encounter with church people.

Fifth, Lofland and Stark (1965) argued that affective bonds are "some positive, emotional, interpersonal" ties. They thought that the development of affective bonds between pre-converts and converts of the religion are required in order to shorten the distance between pre-converts' first exposure to the religious message and accepting the message when pre-converts may still view the religious message as puzzling. According to Lofland and Stark (1965), final conversion involves accepting friends' opinions. They stated that affective bonds between pre-converts and the converts of the religion can be demonstrated by pre-converts' positive evaluations of converts, such as personal traits.

Sixth, according to Lofland and Stark (1965), attachment between the convert-in-process and extraneous social network ties (which refers to the nonreligious associates of a convert-in-process) can be a considerable influence in the process of conversion. The conversion process will be more successful 1) if the convert-in-process gets support and little or no impedance from his or her extraneous social network ties; 2) if the control from social network ties is minimal because of geographical distance or intentional avoidance of communication about such a topic while in the process of conversion; and 3) if potential converts deem their relationships as irrelevant, such as recent migration, discontent with families far away, and few close friends. On the other hand, the conversion process may be hampered if the important extraneous social network ties show strong disagreement. In Lofland and Stark's (1965) article, neutralized extraneous social network ties means that the associates of the convert-in-process have little, or neither positive nor negative judgment towards the religious conversion.

Seventh, as Lofland and Stark put forward in the article, intensive interaction refers to "concrete, daily, and even hourly accessibility to D.P. members," indicating "physical proximity to total converts" (Lofland & Stark, 1965, p. 873). The cult in Lofland and Stark's (1965) study put most emphasis on persuading verbal converts to move to places close to other total converts. Through intensive interaction with total converts, people's commitment to the new religion will be fortified through reciprocal support from members of their religion. In Lofland and Stark's (1965) study, being a "deployable agent" means getting immersed in the religion and becoming a total convert.

The first three conditions are categorized as *predisposing conditions*, made up of a person's attributes prior to contact with the new religion. *Predisposing conditions* make

people more susceptible to conversion when they encounter a new religion. The last four conditions are classified as *situational contingencies*, leading to success in recruitment of people who qualified as having predisposing conditions (Lofland & Stark, 1965, p. 864; Lofland, 1966, p. 33; cf. Lofland, 1977,1978). Lofland and Stark (1965) asserted that these seven conditions are “necessary and constellationally-sufficient” (Lofland & Stark, 1965, p. 874).

### **Testing Lofland and Stark’s (1965) Model**

Lofland and Stark’s model has been tested and studied a great deal. Moreover, it is a prerequisite model when investigating the religious conversion process (Kox, Meeus & Hart, 1991; Snow & Phillips, 1980). It is recognized as “the most refined and most widely cited conversion model within the sociological literature” (Richardson, 1978; Richardson & Stewart, 1977; Robbins & Anthony, 1979; Snow & Phillips, 1980; Wilson, 1978). The model is also viewed as “the most influential guide to research on the sociology of conversion” (Bainbridge, 1992, p. 184). Some scholars have used this model uncritically for data categorization (e.g., Judah, 1974; McGee, 1974), whereas others have employed the model more critically. For example, certain scholars (Seggar & Kunz, 1972; Austin, 1977; Heirich, 1977; Baer, 1978) have questioned the necessity of predisposing conditions to conversion by finding that many people convert to a new religion in the absence of experiencing any of the predisposing conditions put forward by Lofland and Stark (1965). The following are some major findings that testify Lofland and Stark’s (1965) model.

William James (1958) emphasized the essence of tension, deprivation, and frustration for conversion (Condition 1). According to him, there are three factors in conversion: social networks, which include affective bonds with church members (Condition 5) and significant others, such as family and friends (Condition 6). Personality is the second factor, which

provides the foundation for tensions experienced by pre-converts (Condition 1), the religious problem-solving perspective (Condition 2), and religious seeking (Condition 3). The turning point (Condition 4) is the third factor for conversion.

Kox, Meeus and Hart (1991) investigated the process of conversion among 92 Dutch adolescents converting to a charismatic Christian denomination. They used a control group and tested Lofland and Stark's model (1965), along with the definition of conversion established by Travisano (1970). They reasoned that two dispositional conditions — enduring tension and seekership from the model — are of outstanding importance in their study. Affective bonds between potential converts and members of the religion were also confirmed in their study. Refuting this premise, Kox, Meeus and Hart (1991) found that there is no necessity for an individual to meet all of the conditions from Lofland and Stark's model to become a convert. They asserted that the conditions are independent of each other to a large extent, rather than a cumulative succession of a series of conditions of Lofland and Stark's model. According to them, Lofland and Stark did not establish a step-by-step conversion model, but rather proposed several conditions for conversion. They found that, concerning the religious problem-solving perspective, no difference was found between converts and non-converts. A religious problem-solving perspective does not lead to the prediction of conversion. Also, according to them, different from what Lofland and Stark reasoned in terms of the "job change" attributes being a turning point in one's life, converts tend to change jobs less frequently than non-converts.

Snow and Phillips (1980) suggested that affective and intensive interaction are not only of significance in their study of conversion to the *Nichiren Shoshu* Buddhist movement in America, but are also indispensable requirements for conversion, in general. Their results

(1980, p. 440) concerning affective bonds supported what Lofland and Stark (1965) put forward. On the contrary, Snow and Phillips (1980) stated that acutely-felt and prolonged tension, as well as a religious problem-solving perspective, are not necessary as predisposing conditions. As for extraneous social network ties, their findings provided little evidence regarding the necessity of the condition that neutralized extra-movement ties or social isolation contribute to conversion. Their data, moreover, suggest that extraneous social network ties can facilitate the conversion process. With regard to the condition of a turning point, they suggested that it “may be an important facilitative condition” that increases the possibility for people to undergo conversion, but not in the way that Lofland and Stark (1965) suggested. They found that the definition of a turning point is dependent on “the interpretive schema of the group in question”; thus, a turning point can be defined by an external status change or by particular things that have happened, which is in line with Lofland and Stark, or the turning point can be composed of some inner thoughts and beliefs. Snow and Philips believed that a turning point is subjectively determined instead of objectively attributed. Another difference from Lofland and Stark’s (1965) model is that the turning point tends to occur after having a connection with the new religion, instead of merely happening prior to or at the same time as individuals encounter church people. Thus, Snow and Philips suggested that the turning point could be viewed as a consequence that functions to symbolize the conversion, but not as a predisposing condition. They argued that the turning point can symbolize conversion because converts may realize that they are not the same as they were before, and their worldviews and living situations have changed for the better.

Balch and Taylor (1977) reported that their findings of participation in the Bo and Peep UFO cult questions the significance of group affective bonds for conversion. They noted that new recruits did not establish close affective bonds with cult members prior to their conversion, and that they received little social support from cult members after joining. They found, however, that the converts of the UFO cult did not convert in the true sense of the world. Also, if these members had undergone conversion, it was not to the UFO cult, but to a metaphysical worldview. Because conversion to the UFO cult indicates conversion to the metaphysical worldview rather than establishing affective bonds with the cult, Snow and Philips (1980) argued that it cannot be said that Balch and Taylor's (1977) findings contradict the Lofland-Stark model or their results.

Richardson and Stewart (1978) developed some modifications to refine the linkage between problem-solving perspectives and susceptibility to conversion. They argued that Lofland and Stark failed to see the significance of prior socialization in affecting people's problem-solving perspectives, and the possibility of subject to conversion. Combining the hypothesis that some religious traditions make people vulnerable to frustration (Fromm, 1950; Pattison, 1974; Toch, 1965), and based on observations of some converts with a fundamentalist background to the Unification Church and Jesus movement, Richardson and Stewart (1978) assumed that a prior background with fundamentalism increases the potential to engage in religious events and to possess a religious problem-solving perspective.

The general trend for current conversion research involves questioning the value of the predisposing conditions of Lofland and Stark's (1965) model, and instead emphasizes the social-network aspects. A social-network emphasizes the relationships between networked nodes (for example, a potential convert and existing religious members), rather than



investigating an individual's attributes, worldview, psychological trauma, or intelligence (Knoke & Yang, 2008). Lofland and Stark (1965) emphasized the prevalence of social networks by referring to the inadequacies of previous findings that combined the psychological aspects of a potential convert and the solutions provided by the new religion (Greil, 1977; Heirich, 1977; Lofland & Stark, 1965; Smilde, 2005; Stark & Bainbridge, 1980). Lofland and Stark (1965) stated that "in a manner of speaking, final conversion was coming to accept the opinions of one's friends" (p. 871). Smilde (2005) claimed that social networks are the crucial factor in religious conversion. This notion is consistent with a shift in conversion research overall, away from psychological models and toward sociological ones. Concerning the test of the three predisposing conditions, Gooren's (2007) "preaffiliation" is the most current attempt to extract the best parts of Stages 1-3 in Lofland and Stark's (1965) model. It refers to the worldview and social context of potential members of a religion during their first contact "to assess whether they would like to affiliate themselves on a more formal basis" (Gooren, 2007, p. 350). Christian churches describe people during this process as "visitors" or "investigators"; on the other hand, scholars studying religion usually use the term "seeker."

### **Chinese Conversion to Religion**

People (mostly Chinese immigrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan) have established several Chinese churches in cosmopolitan areas and college towns since the 1950s, tending to have an independent status in terms of the institution and tending to be evangelical in theology (Yang, 1999). Some scholars (Yang, 1998, 1999; Ng, 2002) have noticed that Chinese Bible study and Christian fellowship groups are active at most universities in the United States, particularly the Ivy League, large state universities and famous private universities. The number of Chinese students in the United States, not considering visiting

scholars and postdoctoral researchers, reached 64,757 in 2002-2003 (Chin, 2005). Some scholars have reasoned that nearly one-third of the Chinese in the United States regard themselves as Christians (Yang, 2002b). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that exploring the reasons behind or the process of religious conversion among the Chinese remains significant.

For earlier Chinese converts who underwent era-changing events in China, many scholars have noted the importance of the social and cultural context in the process of conversion (Tu, 1994; Yang, 1998). According to Wei-Ming Tu (1994), significant events that the Chinese suffered, which involved Western imperialism, the Taiping Civil War, the collapse of the Qing Empire, warfare among warlords, Japanese invasion, the Chinese Civil war, and miseries resulting from misguided policies after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, gave the meaning of "Chineseness" a new symbolic structure. Tu (1994) mentioned that some negative emotions such as frustration, rootlessness were very prominent in reshaping the Chinese mentality in the modern era. During these chaotic eras, Chinese people's previous beliefs were easily destroyed, resulting in the collapse of traditional Chinese values.

In Yang's (1998) "breakthrough work" studying Chinese conversion to evangelical Christianity, he supported the importance of social and cultural changes in the religious conversion of the Chinese who underwent these changes, by citing the example of Fred Yu. Yu was born in 1929 in Shandong; he fled to Taiwan with Kuomintang in 1949 and went to the United States for graduate study after finishing college (Yang, 1998, p. 249). According to Yu, he could not go back China, his dear homeland, nor could he stay in Taiwan because it was not really the homeland for him. He was regarded as one of the waishengren (people

who are from a “foreign province,” or Mainland China). The political situations in mainland China and Taiwan were both horrible for him at that time. Yu said:

We dare not go back to the mainland and we are unwilling to go back to Taiwan. We have to seek to plant our roots in the American soil (luodi shenggen). However, here we have to fight hard battles for civil rights as a racial minority. It is not all that easy. (Yang, 1998, p. 249)

Faced with social changes and life difficulties, the Chinese suffered as a result of collapsed traditional values, which generated deep feelings of uprootedness. Thus, new theologies and ideas had a chance to be applied and spread.

After a study of Chinese converts to evangelical Protestantism, Yang (1998) argued that the following three common-sense explanations were inadequate in explaining the increasing Chinese churches. First, he denied the “rice-bowl Christian” explanation, which states that some people become church members to obtain material benefits instead of true conversion. Yang (1998) argued that most Chinese churches in the United States serve only to evangelize, without other social service programs. Also, most members have decent jobs, such that they do not need to seek material benefits from the church. Second, he refuted that the main motivation for Chinese to convert to Christianity lies in their assimilation to the dominant culture of the host society (Kosmin & Lachman, 1993). Yang (1998) argued that being nonreligious, becoming members of non-ethnic churches, or joining the mainstream church would achieve better assimilation effects in contemporary society in the United States. Third, Yang (1998) argued against the conversion reason of “joining the church to meet ethnic needs,” which claims that becoming members of a church is a good way to establish ethnic group belonging. He said this applied to Korean immigrants because their

religious needs and social service needs closely interrelated with each other (Kim, 1988). He argued that becoming members of Christian churches for ethnic purposes is not the major concern for Chinese converts. Because there are numerous organizations for ethnic groups, he stated, immigrants do not need to seek satisfaction, such as belongingness, through joining religious groups.

Most converts in Yang's (1998) article were the generation going through time-changing events. People who suffered social turmoil and converted to another religion were of a different generation from today's Chinese college students in the United States, who are free to return to China, as long as they do not commit crimes. Foreign students and visiting scholars are considered as non-immigrants, based on U.S. immigration law; they are expected or required to leave the United States once they finish their study or research. However, it would be daunting for people who converted to Christianity in the United States to return to China, in which Marxism-Leninism-Maoism are prevalent and dominant (Wang & Yang, 2006). College-educated Chinese, both within and beyond China, are inclined to maintain the spirit of the May Fourth Movement in 1919, which was destructive toward Chinese traditional values (Tu, 1987). Chinese people receive atheistic and anti-religious education from kindergarten through college. Religion was totally forbidden in the public from 1966 to 1979 (Yang, 2004). Since 1979, some religious organizations such as churches and temples were allowed to operate, but were severely restricted (Wang & Yang, 2006). The spread of religion was still restricted throughout the mass media or physically. Consequently, most Chinese grow up without being exposed to much information related to religion, especially Christianity, which is viewed by Chinese as a Western religion. Many people are not believers; in fact, some people even despise religious believers (Wang & Yang, 2006).

Brian Hall (2006) investigated the process of religious conversion among modern Chinese American college students, who differ from the generation who underwent time-changing events in China. He applied the predisposing conditions and situational contingencies proposed by Lofland and Stark (1965) with regard to group conversion. Besides these two factors, Hall (2006) proposed openness factors involving three changes that have influenced Chinese attitudes toward Christianity that make Chinese immigrants curious to explore Christianity: “(1) the collapse of traditional Chinese culture both in China and abroad; (2) the nature and current status of Buddhism; and (3) the influence of Western modernization among the Chinese around the world” (Hall, 2006, p. 135). The traditional Chinese culture’s collapse removed some obstacles so that “foreign” religions could spread and people could learn more about them. Prevalent in China, Buddhism is the main factor leading to Chinese conversion. Concerning the influence of Buddhism, on the one hand, Buddhism celebrates “openness” so that it tolerates new religious ideas. On the other hand, Buddhism was regarded by modern Chinese American college students as the religion related to “old” things (Hall, 2006, p. 136), so the young generation tends to abandon this “old” religion in their minds. The influence of Western modernization demonstrates the popularity and hegemony of American culture and things related with it, including Christianity.

According to Hall (2006), openness factors led Chinese Americans to think about conversion to Christianity, as well as receptivity factors related to direct conversion to Christianity. The first receptivity factor is Christianity’s link with advanced modern society and Westernization. The second receptivity factor consists of two Confucian-like values: one is conservative social values, which are in accordance with conservative values in Christianity; the other is academic expectations, which lead to Chinese students attending

prestigious schools, where Western culture and religion are prevalent. The third receptivity factor involves settlement and adaptation to American society, during which decentralization generates ethnic detachment, prompting the need to join the Chinese church community and to undergo conversion. When students with feelings of ethnic detachment go to college or the university, where there are a large number of Chinese, it is easier for them to build their own organizations and religious groups in order to find a sense of belonging. He also concluded that converts going to Chinese groups can find out more about Chinese culture.

Yuting Wang and Fenggang Yang (2006) also discussed openness and receptivity factors. According to them, the Chinese seek new value systems for reasons of alienation caused by the “coerced modernization” in China. In addition, modern Chinese economic policies are viewed as materialistic and selfish in nature, thus awakening many Chinese.

Previous articles have investigated the reasons or the process of religious conversion among Chinese immigrants who lived through era-changing conflicts and Chinese American college students in recent years, who grew up in American society and adapted to local culture. Although there are articles studying religious conversion among Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans, such a topic is beyond the attention of most religious and Asian studies scholars. Furthermore, less attention is paid to current Chinese students who are living in the United States for academic reasons, and who are converting to Christianity. Explaining the reasons and process behind their conversion process remains a significant phenomenon.

### **Media’s Influence on Conversion**

With the development of technology, more than 95% of teenagers have had access to the Internet since 2006 (Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013), and there are basically 100% of emerging adults at higher education institutions with Internet access

(Smith, Rainie, & Zickuhr, 2011). It is highly probable that emerging adults in the age range of 18-24 (in contrast to other age groups) use new media devices (Smith, Rainie, & Zickuhr, 2011; Zickuhr, 2011). Smith (2011a) said that emerging adults in the age range of 18-24 communicate about an average of 50 text messages per day, and the number tends to drop after finishing their college program. Lenhart (2012a) argued that emerging adults enthusiastically enjoy most video communication, which involves videos uploaded and video communication interaction.

Spreading religion via media has been an important part of the religious culture in the United States, since the establishment of America's first printing press by Puritan colonists (Emery, Emery, & Roberts, 2000). From that time, television, radio, as well as newspapers have been produced with the content of religious fervor (Hatch, 1989; Hoover, 1988; Schultze, 2005). Therefore, it is reasonable that not only the traditional mass media, but also Internet websites and other media technologies function to promote and explore religion (e.g., Fernback, 2002; Gilmore, 2011; Grimes, 2002; Hoover, 2006; Stout, 2013; Underwood, 2002). Most people using the Internet have participated in some kinds of online activities related to religion (Hoover, Clark, & Rainie, 2004). Although there is a greater potential for Internet users within their home traditions to follow personal spirituality rather than participating in institutional practices (Hoover, Clark, & Rainie, 2004), this sort of individualism is totally in line with openness to enter the pre-affiliation stage and to look into other religious options (Pritchard, 2014).

Recently, religious media and media associated with religion are adapting to increased interaction and responses to the needs of American religion practitioners (Fernback, 2002; Gilmore, 2011; Grimes, 2002; Hoover, 1998; Stout, 2011). In the past,

religious media produced things that reflect the perspectives of institutional religions or well-funded evangelists (Pritchard, 2014); nowadays, however, media users who are searching for alternatives to religious beliefs can ask questions, express doubts, assemble information, communicate one's own religious or spiritual ideas, and join virtually in a religion to experience the convert's role (Snow & Machalek, 1983). One of the big advantages of media is the ability to stay anonymous while, as Snow and Machalek (1983) put it, "trying on" the new religion. After experiencing a particular religion or various religions online, a potential seeker today could "disaffiliate" from the religion that cannot provide them with answers or meaning (Gooren, 2010). Pritchard (2014) stated that it is totally reasonable for the first contact with a new religion (the beginning of the pre-affiliation state of conversion) to happen via media communication instead of the offline face-to-face communication that Lofland and Stark (1965) included in their model. Considering the importance of media in influencing people's ways of life and their behaviors related with religion, as well as the fact that few studies on religious conversion take into account the function of media, it is reasonable to assume that probing the effects of media in religious conversion is urgent.

Different from the freedom to spread religious information in the United States, religion is a politically sensitive topic in China, where only five religions — Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism — are legally admitted but, at the same time, are under strong control by the government. Document No. 19 in 1982 states that these five religions should be under the lead of government-sanctioned "patriotic" associations. According to the document, proselytization is prohibited outside of approved religious areas, and the non-stopping spread of atheism must be ensured, except in religious venues. After 1982, the government imposed more control on religions, which included the release of



Document No. 6 in 1991 (Yang, 2006). Today, religion is still a controversial and politically sensitive topic in China, involving various aspects of society, among which the content of media is to be censored.

The Great Firewall, equipped with the most advanced technologies of online censorship in the world (Romano, 2009), was started in 2001 to prevent Internet users from accessing specific types of information, by blocking certain connections and filtering content. The techniques of China's censorship can be categorized as blocking, reporting, filtering, and redirecting (Zittrain & Edelman, 2003). Besides the input of technologies, the government has also invested many other resources, such as human labor and a large amount of money into the Great Firewall (Hunt & Xu, 2013). In addition to government censorship, media organizations in China have taken the initiative to censor the content produced by themselves in order to prevent punishment and penalties from the government (Parker, 2013).

Under restrictions via documents and the system of media censorship in China, media organizations are very careful in dealing with religious content. Different social contexts might lead to different types of religious engagement. It is reasonable that current Chinese are not as free as Americans to access religious information from the media. It is reasonable to expect that religious engagement among current Chinese college students studying in the United States might be distinct in terms of their opportunity to experience two different types of social contexts. Therefore, it is significant to understand the impact of media on religious conversion among Chinese college students studying in the United States.

### **Conversion in This Article**

The Lofland-Stark model has been criticized for predisposing conditions with regard to conversion among individuals (Bainbridge, 1992, p. 2), particularly in terms of “what kind of individuals convert and the processes whereby individuals get recruited” (Yang, 1998, p.

241). Very few scholars have used this model to understand the conversion process among subcultural groups (Hall, 2006). The model is insufficient in understanding the phenomenon of convert groups that are “collectivities with similar characteristics, such as ethnicity or national origin, converting at a high rate in the same time period” (Yang, 1998, pp. 241-242). Although several indicators that explain the popularity of Christianity among the Chinese in America have already existed (Lee, 2000; Fong, 1999; Yang, 1999), the particular reasons for such a transformation are comparatively unknown (Hall, 2006). Many scholars have noticed that Chinese students join or convert to Christianity quickly in the United States (Ch’ien, 2000, p. 68; Busto, 1996, p. 134). Chinese American college students have demonstrated more interest in evangelical Christianity than recent Ukrainian immigrants or Muslims in the United States, and even more so than Caucasian college students (Hall, 2006). However, the research studying the conversion process among Chinese American students has received little attention from sociologists or Asian American scholars (Warner, 1998; Yoo, 1996); as a result, there is a dearth of articles addressing the conversion process among Chinese students living in the United States.

Therefore, it is significant to investigate religious conversion among subcultural groups, namely, Chinese college students living in the United States, so as to bridge the gap in religious research involving Chinese students. In addition, few articles have discussed religious conversion and have incorporated the impact of media during the process. Considering the importance of media in conversion among modern young people, as well as religious engagement influenced by different social contexts, it is important to explore the impact of media during the process of religious conversion.

Concerning Lofland and Stark's (1965) model, each conversion stage has both supporters and opponents. Two suggestions regarding the model are noteworthy because these two points are also put forward by Lofland in his following articles. First, in terms of testifying at each stage, the stage of the religious perspective was refuted by several articles. Lofland (1977) later on stated that the condition of the religious problem-solving perspective is not as important as the original model predicted, given the observation that many non-religious people join in movements related to religion. Second, Lofland (1977) also pointed out that the concept of the "turning point" in the original model can be troublesome for the reason that people can be viewed in more than one important way at a turning point at every life moment. Although Snow and Philips (1980) acknowledged the importance of the turning point stage, they suggested that the concept of the "turning point" can be expanded to external status change, which is consistent with what Lofland and Stark (1965) indicated, and internal status change, as put forward by Snow and Philips (1980). Snow and Philips (1980) argued that a turning point is subjectively determined instead of being objectively attributed. Bainbridge's (1978) seminal work demonstrated that the conversion experience itself encourages converts to find a "turning point" in their story, even though the actual conversion process may be slow and gradual.

Therefore, the study investigated religious conversion among Chinese students in the United States through the test of expanding Lofland and Stark's (1965) model, which includes the test of the original model (1965) and two major suggestions regarding revisions for the model. The two major revisions are as follows. First, the stage of the religious problem-solving perspective is not important in the process of religious conversion. Second, the concept of a "turning point" has been expanded to include both external and internal

status change. Also, a turning point is subjectively determined rather than objectively attributed. Moreover, it is based on the influence of media on religious engagement and the conversion process. This study asks the following questions:

1. What factors contribute to religious conversion among Chinese college students in the United States?
2. What is the function of mass media during the conversion process?

### CHAPTER 3. METHOD

To explore the conversion process and the media's impact during the process among Chinese college students, qualitative research is applied because it is suitable for understanding natural settings and meanings in society through analyses of verbal and visual data (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). Also according to Wimmer and Dominick (2011), qualitative methods for data collection, analysis, and interpretation, help the researcher to grasp the basic meaning of people's experiences. Thus, qualitative methods fit well for the researcher in this study to investigate the reasons for religious conversion through observation and interviews.

In-depth interviews are employed in this study. McCracken (1998) claimed that a long interview has the power to let researchers go into an individual's inner thoughts through which he or she experiences the world. Intensive interviews can offer detailed information with regard to interviewees' opinions, values, motivations, recollections, experiences, and feelings on sensitive topics (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). Interviewers can record not only sounds and text, but also physical responses such as body language and facial expressions (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). An in-depth interview builds a private atmosphere in which the identities of interviewees are protected, and communication between the interviewer and interviewees will not be heard by others. Therefore, participants can feel more comfortable and safer in expressing their thoughts. Compared with the more traditional survey methods, intensive interviews give opportunities for more accurate replies to sensitive issues, and the harmonious relationship between the interviewer and interviewees is a good way to talk about topics that may be taboo if they are approached in other ways (Wimmer & Dominick, 2013). For the main reason of political sensitivity, it is difficult for the Chinese, both living in

China and abroad, to talk publicly about their religious conversion to Christianity, which is deemed as a Western religion by the majority of the Chinese. In-depth interviews can approach a topic with an appropriate speed and manner, according to the interaction between the interviewer and interviewees. The rapport established during the interview can lead to more information. An advantage of this study is that the person who conducted the interviews is a Chinese student pursuing a master's degree at a large U.S. Midwestern university. Having the same ethnicity, language and culture, as well as similar background, can make it easier for interviewees to recount their stories more honestly. Therefore, in-depth interviews are the most useful method for understanding the process of conversion among Chinese students, as well as the impact of media during this process.

After approval from the Institutional Review Board (see Appendix B) at the above-mentioned large U.S. Midwestern university, a snowball sampling technique was applied in this study, during which the researcher contacted some qualified respondents in a town and asked them to recommend others they knew who would also qualify for the research (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). Snowball sampling takes advantage of dealing with problems in sampling hard-to-reach populations, including both deviant (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997) and urban elites (Saunders, 1973). The main value of snowball sampling, according to Atkinson and Flint (2001), is to recruit samples that are few in number, or where a certain degree of trust needs to be established for the initial contact. They argued that the chain referral helps the researcher gain credibility when contacting the interviewees. As a result, these interviewees could feel safe when answering the researcher's questions, whereas other approaches could have impeded the process of accessing interviewees. Some cultural groups are unwilling to disclose personal information so as not to risk social, political, or other

discriminatory repercussions (Tung, Nguyen, & Tran, 2008). Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that the snowball sampling is well suited for establishing trust between the researcher and potential interviewees, and for investigating controversial topics within certain groups. Because religious conversion is a sensitive and controversial topic among the Chinese living in China or abroad, Chinese converts are usually reluctant to reveal personal information, especially information associated with their religious conversion. The snowball sampling is a good way to build connections and trust between the researcher and potential interviewees, via being introduced by acquaintances who are friends with the interviewees. The researcher asked Chinese students who were known for their religious conversion whether they were willing to participate in the study. Then the researcher took advantage of snowball sampling to build initial trust within this group of people by letting qualified people recommend others they know who are also qualified for the study. After building personal relationships with the potential interviewees, the researcher asked about their willingness to participate in the study, one by one. If the potential interviewees agreed to join the research, they were asked the following screening questions: Are you Chinese? Are you over the age of 18? Do you have a religion orientation? Did you convert after arriving the United States? Interviewees in this study must be Chinese over the age of 18 who converted to religion after arriving in the United States.

I interviewed 12 students (see Table 1), among whom six were undergraduate students, and six were graduate students. Seven were at or over the age of 25, with the rest being under 25. All of them had converted to Christianity. Seven had been Christians for at least 3 years, while others had converted less than 3 years before. Therefore, the study focuses on converts in their 20s and 30s. People in this age range usually experience major

changes in their lives, such as entering college, applying for jobs, and getting married. It is of major importance to see how conversion, religious communication, and significant changes relate mutually in the interviewees' lives. What's more, their good education, having at least a bachelor's degrees, and relatively rich personal experiences mean that they are "data rich" interviewees who are able to provide thoughtful, in-depth, and self-reflective insights about their lives, fluently and explicitly. To protect the privacy and real identities of the interviewees, I referred to them by pseudonyms.

Table 1

*Summary of the interviewees' information*

| Number       | Alias                | Gender | Age     | Occupation       | Religion     | Year of conversion |
|--------------|----------------------|--------|---------|------------------|--------------|--------------------|
| 1            | Elizabeth            | Female | 22      | Undergraduate    | Christianity | 2                  |
| 2            | Kelly                | Female | 28      | Graduate student | Christianity | 1                  |
| 3            | Julie                | Female | 24      | Undergraduate    | Christianity | 5                  |
| 4            | Kevin                | Male   | 29      | Graduate student | Christianity | 5                  |
| 5            | Daniel               | Male   | 24      | Undergraduate    | Christianity | 0.5                |
| 6            | Amanda               | Female | 25      | Undergraduate    | Christianity | 4                  |
| 7            | Joshua               | Male   | 24      | Undergraduate    | Christianity | 1                  |
| 8            | Alexander            | Male   | Over 40 | Graduate         | Christianity | 0.5                |
| 9            | Grace                | Female | 24      | Undergraduate    | Christianity | 6                  |
| 10           | Carol                | Female | 27      | Graduate student | Christianity | 6                  |
| 11           | Mark                 | Male   | 29      | Graduate student | Christianity | 3                  |
| 12           | David                | Male   | 29      | Graduate student | Christianity | 5                  |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>12 informants</b> |        |         |                  |              |                    |



A semi-structured approach was used in the study, which is based on a set of pre-determined questions (see Appendix A) and some exploratory questions, according to each respondent's answers (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). Therefore, the semi-structured approach provides great flexibility (Brennen, 2013). In this study, based on a list of fixed questions, the researcher followed up with extra questions, according to the different contexts of the interviews. However, the interviews focused mainly on the process of conversion, the reasons behind the conversion, and the impact of media during this process. The basic questions include four parts. The first part involves the basic information of the interviewees, such as age and gender. The second part concerns their life experiences, including their happiness and difficulties while living in China and the United States. The third part involves religious experience, describing the conversion process and the interviewees' interaction with the new religion. The questions in this part are developed from the expansion of Lofland and Stark's (1965) model. The fourth part regards media's use related to conversion, which investigates the impact of media during the conversion process.

Ten interviews were recorded with a digital recording machine. Two interviews were recorded by computer, using a typed text version at the request of the interviewees to better protect their privacy. Eleven were interviewed in Chinese, and one was conducted in English. Each interview lasted an average of one-and-a-half hours and yielded 53 pages of Chinese transcription and eight pages of English transcription. After the researcher had safely and successfully uploaded the audio recordings to university-controlled computers and university-controlled networks, the audio recordings were deleted from the digital recorder. The researcher transcribed the audio recordings to text versions and stored the text version transcriptions in the university-controlled computers and university-controlled networks.

Because religious conversion to Christianity is a sensitive topic among the Chinese, either in China or abroad, to ensure confidentiality and avoid any potential risk of exposure, the researcher removed the identities of the interviewees and any references to third parties from the transcriptions. To better protect the interviewees' demographic information, data such as their hometown and year of arrival in the United States were deleted. Although the researcher's Chinese background was an advantage in achieving better communication and understanding with the interviewees, this identity can also be an element causing bias while interviewing and interpreting the transcripts. To achieve objective results, "member checks" were implemented, where an interviewee was provided with a copy of his or her interview transcription, in which the interviewee was allowed to rephrase, redact or remove information. A graduate student who is also a Chinese student at the same university helped check the translation from Chinese to English.

In the process of data analysis, instead of following the inductive grounded theory approach, during which major themes or theories emerge through a constant comparative analysis of raw data, the researcher applied a deductive model by employing an existed theory as the foundation for deriving testable hypotheses to explain the issues investigated (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). Recent opinion has thought that it is impossible for researchers to function as a blank slate when interpreting data by way of grounded theory; instead, theories can help researchers see the most important aspect in a particular social context (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). A theoretical perspective is helpful for the organization, categorization, and interpretation of emergent patterns and themes from the data collected (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). In terms of the theoretical perspective, all significant traits and elements related to a classification remain and are interpreted, and the irrelevant characteristics are disregarded

(Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). Bowen (2006) stated that theories help people with respect to *sensitizing concepts*, which aims to sense probable associated traits in society.

In this study, the researcher highlighted information that tests the expansion of Lofland and Stark's (1965) model, including the test of the original model (1965) and two revised suggestions, as well as the impact of media during the process of religious conversion. The first revised suggestion was that the stage of the religious problem-solving perspective is not very significant. The second revised suggestion was that the concept of the "turning point" is expanded to involve both external and internal status change. All of the interview transcripts were saved in an electronic version. Words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs referring to the category of the expansion of Lofland and Stark's (1965) model and the media's impact were highlighted and noted with commentaries "on some specific event or issue, or on the day's experiences and fieldnotes" (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011, p.81). Analyzing the interview transcripts with theoretical perspective could help sensitize researchers to content relevant to the occurrences recorded, and in turn, perplexing findings can drive people to revise or reject some concepts (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017). Besides the main purpose of testing the priori themes in an under-studied population, other important themes emerging during the data analysis were also identified. Keeping an open mind could help determine if other themes outside the theoretical frame are necessary so as to discover significant new themes. Therefore, data related with the expansion of Lofland and Stark's (1965) model was pointed out, and other themes that were not relevant to the model were compared with the model, and were considered in terms of whether to develop new themes. The data were analyzed to "theoretical saturation," which means that the researcher conducted interviews and coded them when stopping to hear new significant themes related

to the research questions. Ultimately, eight stages from the data were categorized in the study, among which some supported the expansion of Lofland and Stark's (1965) model, while others refuted the model. The result indicated that media have a great impact on religious conversion, but media use has limitations for this particular group. Two important new themes emerged, involving families' attitudinal changes toward conversion and doubt management after conversion.

## CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

After conducting 12 in-depth interviews, the findings supported the expansion of Lofland and Stark's (1965) model partially by refuting some conditions and confirming the others. In addition, the results also confirmed the importance of media and its limitations in religious conversion among Chinese college students in the United States. Two significant findings are put forward and identified as new themes in this study. The first significant finding involves the families' attitudinal change toward religious conversion. The second important finding regards the management of doubt after conversion.

### **Experience Enduring, Acutely Felt Tensions**

Many interviewees reported felt tensions for them when converting, while others reported that they did not experience any tensions associated with their conversion. According to those who experienced tension, they reported that they did not have opportunities to know about Christianity in Mainland China, or even in the United States for a while. Thus, their uncertainty about Christianity affected the way that they dealt with their tensions. Two types of tension emerged within this subcultural group. The first kind of tension was felt for a long time before having contact with religious people and knowing almost nothing about the religion to which they would convert in the future. The second kind of tension was felt during the time where interactions with religious people occurred. Two kinds of tension could happen to the same interviewee. Therefore, these tensions could occur and remained unsolved before the person's contact with the church. Also, different tensions could happen to the same person while interacting with church members.

### **Tensions before Contacting Church People**

Concerning the first kind of tension, four interviewees talked about their tensions before contacting church people. Daniel mentioned that his tension was academic pressure, while in the United States. Mark said that the death of his mother was the major tension for him when he was in China, and even after coming to the United States.

Grace mentioned that she had felt extremely lonely since she was very young. She did not think that she had undergone any big disasters, except for the great impact of her loneliness. Grace said, “I felt extremely lonely since I was very young. Sometimes I was too lonely and even wanted to kill myself when I was a child.”

Alexander told me that, after resignation from his job, he came to the United States to accompany his son, who went to school in the United States. He wanted to meet and absorb new things that his wife and son had already experienced. Things were fresh for him for the three months because he had the chance to contact people from different countries and to experience different cultures. However, after that, he felt lost. At that time, he did not have income, did not have plans for the future, did not speak English very well, and did not have many useful skills. Alexander told me, “When I watched rabbits in the garden, I felt so sensitive and fragile.”

### **Tensions While Interacting with Church People**

Pertaining to the second kind of tension, nine interviewees talked about their tensions while being in contact with church people. According to them, this kind of tension included relatives' sicknesses, academic pressure, spousal conflicts, boyfriend/girlfriend conflicts, accidents, and confusion for the future. For example, Julie mentioned that the tension she felt led her to begin praying for her grandfather, who was ill. She had interacted with church people, but had not converted to Christianity at that time. Her grandfather's illness had a

huge impact on her because Julie was brought up by her grandparents. She said that she was willing to pray to anything, as long as it was helpful for her grandfather.

David's stories illustrate the second kind of tension. David was a hard-working man, both in China and in the United States, pursuing good academic performance, fame, and satisfaction from parents. He had been working 60 hours a week for some time periods. He said, "If you are working all the time, if you don't communicate with other people, and then you get all of the emotion inside of you. It amplifies and you start to feel depressed and all of the negative emotions." It was at this same time that, David also had a difficult time with his professor. Consequently, he was very depressed and had a few emotional breakdowns. It was during this tough time that he was involved in an accident. He recounted the following:

It was Friday night before Spring Break. No one was in the building. I cut my finger (during work), and then I didn't know what to do. There were a couple of graduate students who took me to the hospital. I waited in the hospital and then (the doctors) performed a surgery on me. I stayed there overnight, or maybe I didn't. Then I went to my friend's house. They took care of me for about three days. Then I moved to my own apartment. At that time, my entire arm was in a cast. I couldn't really use my hand at all. If I wanted to type (on the computer), I could only use one hand, my right hand, because my left arm was in the cast.

One finger was cut, and there was a fracture in the bone. The saw took part of the bone away. I cut my tendon and two nerves. That incident caused me, or forced me to stop doing everything. That meant I had to stop my research and teaching. But I could still grade. What took me ten minutes previously took me two hours. I was like, I

always wanted to smash the screen and burn the computer. I was really mad. Then I told my instructor I couldn't do it. It was impossible. Basically I stopped doing everything. And I still went to church. Actually I started to go to church more often at that time. People were praying for me. I started to think about the purpose of my life. Why this happened to me and all of the stuff like that. About a few months later, I got my motion back in my finger, and everything started working, which is a miracle to me. (The accident) changed something about me. I thought about the way I work; the way I did things were not quite right. Because from the Bible, I don't think humans are designed that way as a machine to work all of the time. If you look at the Bible in *Genesis*. Even God rested on the seventh day. Humans were created in the image of God, and we should rest at least one day.

### **Problem-solving Perspective**

According to interviewees who experienced tensions while interacting with their Christian friends, who prayed for them and helped them go through tough times, it was natural for these interviewees to be influenced by their Christian friends, and to think about things from the perspective of religion. For interviewees who suffered tensions before establishing a relationship with Christianity, they could not think of applying the religious problem-solving perspective to deal with problems before contacting church people, so they sought satisfactory answers from the perspective of religion only after failing to implement other methods.

Mark's story gives us a great example of failing to deal with his tension from the traditional Chinese perspective:

When I was a graduate student in China, my mother passed away. It had an influence on my conversion. Because when your closest loved one dies, you will think about



what the purpose is for people to live their lives, and what is the meaning of death. When you sweep the tombstones of dead people, you cannot see them in reality. You just feel released at that moment, following the traditional rituals and what others say, to say something to dead people in front of the tomb. But I never felt released. I started to think of the meaning of life. I didn't contact Christian people at that time. I felt that none of my classmates were Christian. Or maybe I didn't know. None of my family members were Christian, either.

Alexander's story demonstrated that although he succeeded in dealing with his tension, which involved confusion about the future, by getting to know more people and making himself busier, he still converted to Christianity:

I went out to participate in activities held by non-profit organizations to know more people. My wife also recommended me to join events and know more people. These people were really nice and willing to help you, and listened to you patiently without any agitation. I couldn't understand too much English at the beginning, but I could attend the Chinese church. I went to all of the events at that time. I attended a free class so that I knew more people suddenly. My time was filled up. I thought at that time I needed to learn English well at first, not thinking of other things. To have more communication and to get rid of loneliness, you shouldn't lock yourself at home. This is also a good way to experience a new culture. I went to the Chinese church to listen to the preaching and American history. I didn't believe in God at that time. I just thought I was happy, and it was just a momentary problem. Having more friends means more roads.

### **Religious Seekers**

Most of the interviewees in my study did not take positive actions to hop from church by church to find the most satisfactory one. Even for some people going to different religious groups, they did not intend to find the best value system, but because of introductions by friends. Educated to live without religious thoughts, most interviewees did not think of being a religious seeker before encountering church people. Some interviewees, such as Kevin and Alexander, went to church or a family group for a while, thinking of Christianity as a good thing, so they accepted it. They did not seem to go through a period of seeking a religion. Some interviewees, such as Mark and David, suddenly converted to Christianity because their key problems were resolved satisfactorily, without any clear evidence of going through the stage of being a seeker. Only Joshua's religious conversion demonstrated clear evidence of this stage.

Joshua endured academic pressure while he was in China. He had already known something about Christianity from his e-friends online at that time. Among all of the things that he knew about Christianity, he has been fascinated with Ecclesiastes from his first reading. He said:

During that tough time, I wanted to grab something as long as it was useful and helpful. I didn't have self-confidence. I was willing to trust this God. (I said to God,) "If you are willing to point me in this direction (for the future), I am willing to accept it", ... I would like to restart, give me a chance, let me know myself again. That was kind of a wish.

### **Openness of Buddhism**

Seven of my interviewees said that they participated in activities related to Buddhism while they were in China. Four claimed that they liked Buddhism or some philosophies from

it. For example, Kevin said that Buddhism and Christianity both have reasonable ideas. He felt that Buddhism puts more emphasis on individual practice, whereas Christianity focuses more on faith in God. Although Kevin deemed the philosophies of Buddhism as reasonable, he did not believe in Buddhism.

One interviewee believed in both Buddhism and Christianity. He believed in Buddhism in China and then converted to Christianity after coming to the United States. He said, “Christians say there is only one God. I thought about it, but didn’t further investigate it, so I won’t suffer from such a question. I am open-minded. I won’t put myself into a dilemma if there are both good things.”

One interviewee clearly expressed his discontent for Buddhism. He said:

My grandmother often goes to temples, and I always play jokes on her ... I feel that they just get a membership card after donating money ... I don’t know if it is really an organization of Buddhism (the organization in which his grandmother joined). I feel it is neither sacred nor useful ... And by watching the news, I don’t think it is a religion with too much love.

Other interviewees said that they had no feelings for Buddhism, meaning that they neither hated nor liked it, even though some attended events held by Buddhists.

### **Encountering Religious People at a Turning Point in the Life**

Two turning points were clearly demonstrated among all of the interviewees. One of the turning points for all of the interviewees was a change in their living environment from China to the United States, which involved the external environment and a change in status. The other turning point involved encountering more religious-related idealism such as religious information and church members.

As for ways of encountering church people, four subthemes emerged: classmates or teachers, family members or close friends, random strangers, and help from church people.

### **Classmates or Teachers**

Some interviewees encountered Christians who were their classmates, and the interviewees were affected greatly by these classmates. Mark began to go to church because his classmate was in the church, and Mark was invited to the same church by his classmate. Elizabeth said that it was the first time for her to experience the American church through an American girl with whom she was acquainted in class. She said:

We talked about questions of the class often. She is so nice and cares about me. I asked her what she usually does during free time. She said she goes to mass, and later on I knew the meaning of mass. I began to attend church with her. The songs there are good and touching.

The case was similar for Kelly, who met Wei in class, and the two became very close friends. Wei asked her if she was willing to go to church. Kelly did not know much about the church at that time. Wei said that there was a woman teaching them English. Kelly finally went to church because of something unhappy, which she cannot remember now. She met Lily, an 87-year-old woman, who had a great job, and who behaved and dressed very well. Kelly said:

To be honest, we didn't learn too much English from the church. We went there to listen to stories, and we learned lessons from these stories. What matters is our relationship with Lily. She really cares about you. And she is 87 years old! You feel you really need to try hard when you see an 87-year-old woman is in such good shape!

The case of Joshua is different because the person introducing him to the Bible was his English teacher in an English teaching organization. The teacher told Joshua that the most meticulous parts of human civilization are philosophy and religion, and the teacher read some Bible passages to Joshua. Joshua did not have particular feelings about religion at that time, but he thought that the teacher was good at telling him about it.

### **Family Members or Close Friends**

Some interviewees began to know about Christianity because of their family members or close friends. The first Christian Julie encountered was her mother. Julie's approach to Christianity began since she was a child. Her mother has been a Christian since Julie was a kid, and she bought Julie stories about Christianity. Julie said that she treated these stories as common fables and did not think that there was difference between *Genesis* and *Nv Wa Zao Ren*, a story of the Chinese version of the origins of human beings. When Julie was in middle school, her mother was in the United States. Julie's mother sent her a very thick Bible at that time, but Julie did not really read it until she arrived in the United States. After Julie arrived, her mother took her to church and events organized by Christians. Similar with Julie, Amanda was also affected by one of her relatives. Amanda did not know much about Christianity until she came to the United States, although she had seen some religious information in China. When Amanda came to the United States, her cousin, a Christian, picked her up from the airport, and together they went to church on the same day. They helped elderly people read the Bible and serve them food. She started to know more about God since then.

Carol learned about Christianity from her then-boyfriend, now her current husband. When Carol was in China and her boyfriend attended college in the United States, he told her stories from the Bible and his relationship with God. "He told me that everyone has sin. I

didn't contradict him, but I didn't believe it too much at that time," Carol said. Because of her then-boyfriend, after she came to the United States, she got to know an American couple that influenced her conversion.

Daniel met a Christian for the first time in the United States, when he was introduced by his friend. Afterward, Daniel and his friend passed their English exams, so they called this Christian friend "nv shen," which means "goddess." The case for Joshua was a little bit different, in that the people influencing his religious conversion were his e-friends with whom Joshua had only contacted online. Joshua enjoyed surfing the Internet and absorbing interesting ideas online. He knew about Christianity and chapters from the Bible when he was in China from his e-friends, among whom some were seekers; some were Christians, and some even wanted to attend theological colleges. They cited many words and sentences from the Bible while communicating online. One of his e-friends recommended Ecclesiastes to Joshua, who was totally impressed by it.

### **A Random Stranger**

Some interviewees began to go to church or family groups because they encountered random strangers who happened to be Christians. Alexander encountered Christians because he wanted to know more people, and he made friends to get rid of tensions occurring in his life. Amanda said that she began to have contact with more Christians at the university and more contact with family groups after encountering a stranger. She said:

When I came to Ames, there were a lot of events at the beginning of the semester. I delivered a pen to an American girl while waiting in line during an event. She talked with me and invited me to a family group.

The first real exposure of Christianity for Grace was also the result of running into a random stranger. Grace came across a Chinese female in the store, who helped her.

Afterward, Grace asked the female if she wanted to have food with Grace. Grace said:

I didn't know why I said that weird thing then, and I immediately regretted it after saying that. It was because I didn't know her. She was kind of a total stranger to me. She watched me for a while, and agreed to eat with me. She said she was about to cook food for her children, and she invited me to her house ... We chatted together after eating. She stared at me and said, "Kid, do you know what my biggest harvest is since I came here ten years ago?" She started to talk about how she experienced God. Although I believe there is something mysterious in the spiritual world, what she told me was a huge shock. I thought she told me the truth if she was not mad. If it was the truth, I had to study it carefully by myself.

### **Help from Church People**

Some interviewees encountered Christians because these interviewees were helped by church people when they arrived or shortly after arriving in the United States, such as being picked up from the airport and getting a ride. Kevin encountered the first Christian he knew in the United States. He met this individual because a Chinese woman gave him a ride. It was through this woman that he learned about the local church. When Mark was about to come to the United States, he did not know anyone. He saw on a website that if he registered and provided arrival information, there would be someone there to pick him up from the airport. He did so and later on, he knew that these rides were provided by Christians. Mark then became friends with the male driver who picked him up, and he was invited by this male to have dinner together. It was also the first time that David got to know more about the church

from the Christians who had picked up him at the airport. David was then invited to participate in activities with Christians. He said:

And they invited us to go to church. I've been to church before; I just don't believe it. I knew this guy was a Christian, and I knew he was a really good person. And I knew that he was my best friend, but I just didn't want to be a Christian at that time. This friend picking up me from the airport invited me to a family group in the beginning. That's the first time I got to know church people ... For most people, from my experience, they go to church because they have never gone to church before, just out of curiosity. And when your friends keep inviting you, it's hard to say "no." When you develop a close and deep relationship, continuing to refuse someone means putting the friendship on the line.

According to the results, the interviewees experienced many different turning points prior to their conversion, involving both external and internal changes. Concerning the four ways of encountering church people, one interviewee could experience several ways of encountering them, as a result of different function. For example, in the case of Joshua, religious information heard from his teacher led him to his initial contact with Christianity. He obtained more knowledge from his e-friends, which inspired his interest and sense of exploration.

### **Affective Bonds**

The results of this study demonstrated that affective bonds had been established before the interviewees' conversion. All of the interviewees mentioned that they had had very good relationships with Christians before their conversion. They expressed admiration for the attractive personalities of their Christian friends, and they hoped to learn from them and become the kind of people that their Christian friends were. Kelly was so touched by the



emotional support she received from her Christian friends. Her recollections of her friendships with her Christian friends provide a graphic illustration. She said:

This old lady was 87 years old. She dressed up very well, and even her small accessories, like her earrings and socks, were the same color the rest of her clothing. All of her make-up was purple or blue. Oh my God, she is so beautiful! She never lowered the requirements for herself, even at that age. She is completely an excellent example for me. I really want to be like her. Besides this lady, other ladies also cared for us. They taught us how to cook traditional American food and told us that hamburger was not the only American food.

America emphasizes the importance of family. All of the family members attend events and show their support, even there is only one child participating in it. It was the first year I came here. I joined an activity, but there was no family member to support me here. The lady I mentioned previously attended the event. Another lady, both a Christian and an associate professor, came to support me, and even brought her mother to the event. They treated me very well without looking for anything in return.

Daniel initially thought that the free food provided by Christians was sponsored by some companies for the purpose of advertising. However, he found out later on that they provided food and other things without asking for anything from people, and that all they wanted to do was to spread Christianity. Daniel said that it was their love that led him to believe in God. He thought that this kind of love was so continuous and peaceful. He gave some examples about his friendships with his Christian friends. He said:

A car accident happened to my friends and me. People from different churches really took care of us after that accident without asking for anything in return. One Christian

friend cooked nutritious meals for us every day. Many Christian friends stayed with us, helped our parents find translators, and communicated with the university. It was because of their voluntary love, you could feel that they loved you wholeheartedly, and you really wanted to join this big “family.” God gives you grace, and you give grace to others. Even if you don’t deserve grace, God still gives it to you. Now I can take it easy for many things. I don’t think that I am a good person, but I am healthy without other bad things happening to me, and I got a good offer. I really appreciate it.

There is a man in the church who is super nice. And I think he is a perfect man. You can’t find his weaknesses. He endured lots of things himself and never gave grief to others. Once he organized an activity for us where some singers shared their stories about Christianity. He slept on the floor because there was no more available space. This time a lot of friends and I went outside, and the man shared a bed with me. I moved a lot in my sleep, but he didn’t move at all. He didn’t blame me for my moving around. He cares about you. He often asks you whether you need a ride, and he chats with you to help you deal with problems.

One noteworthy thing is that although the interviewees had great relationships with their local Christian friends, five of my interviewees made their decision to convert while they were attending events held by missionary groups from other places. Compared with local Christians with whom the interviewees had connections or deeply established relationships, some interviewees did not know much about people from missionary groups.

Grace’s story offers an illustration about conversion during a conference. She had already built a strong connection with church people before her conversion. Once she was

invited to a conference held by Christians. Prior to that, she felt that she was very close to God, but did not think that she would become a Christian for fear of political repercussions in China, although she realized that the Bible was good, and that Christians were good. Grace said that her closeness to god and many other things had made her ready for the conversion before her attendance at this conference. Grace recalled:

In the conference, a lady told us the parable of the Prodigal Son, which is a famous story in the Bible. It was the first time for me to listen to this story, and I understood it immediately. It seemed like God had opened my eyes. I suddenly understood that I am God's child. I asked myself why I continued being a vagabond. God was already in my heart at that moment. I returned to the hotel that night and thought, if God is real, and He takes 99 steps to reach out to me, what I need to do is to accept Him. Why not give Him a chance, which will also give myself a chance? Then the next day, I went to find the lady who told me the story. I told her I was willing to be a Christian, and I asked her to please guide me to do the Prayer of Confession. I said that I was willing to do it even if I die tomorrow.

Mark also told the researcher that he did the Prayer of Confession during an event held by a church in another city. At that event, he met a Chinese male who was the manager of the company. Mark talked about the influence of this male on his conversion. He said:

The man applied for the university and thought that he could be admitted. But he waited for the admission letter for a very long time. He was already a Christian back in China. He prayed that if the admission letter came tomorrow, there would be two birds flying to his window. It turned out that two birds flew to his window immediately after he prayed. He received the admission letter after one or two days.

This thing was very magical. At the end of the talk, I knew that he was diagnosed with cancer and was treated with chemotherapy. I didn't know about (his health condition) before he told me. I have seen many people with cancer. If you talk to this group of people, you have to say something positive to them, even though you are aware of the danger of the disease. However, this man helped answer others' questions. In order to participate in this event, he asked for a leave of absence from his job and paid (for the event) himself. It was totally voluntary for him. He talked about his disease and clearly knew that he wouldn't stay alive for a very long time. His belief, I felt, gave him hope instead of despair. This made me think about my mother's death, which occurred when I was in China. If you are a Christian, you know that after death, you are going to live very well in heaven. You will be sad when relatives pass away, but you know that you will meet them in heaven. You know that they have a good place to go, though we are not relatives there. Belief can help us if we encounter obstacles that you cannot get rid of. This perspective of viewing death really touched me. I did the Prayer of Confession at that time. It was not only because of this. I had several questions before this and got answers from others. However, in my point-of-view, what everyone does care about is just one question. If the major question can be solved, you will believe in God.

### **Questions before Conversion**

In the study, Amanda, Alexander, and Daniel did not mention their hesitation before their conversion. However, many interviewees experienced a period during which they had questions that could not be solved. Therefore, they hesitated to undergo conversion. Once their questions were solved, they converted to Christianity. There were questions that hampered their way to conversion. Julie asked why God did not cure her grandfather because

she prayed to God, but it was not helpful. Kelly did not understand why Christians could only believe in one God, and how to deal with gods in different countries. David and Joshua were both faced with conflicts between evolutionary theory taught throughout their education in China and the story that humans were created by God. Kevin hesitated to become a Christian because he did not think that he could follow all of the requirements in the Bible, nor did he think that he could behave perfectly, according to the Bible.

### **The Choice of Religion and Institution**

All of the interviewees in the study converted to Christianity. Three interviewees mentioned specifically why they chose their religions and their current religious institutions. Joshua said that the reason for his conversion to Christianity was that, from his viewpoint, the interpretation of the Bible via Christianity was the most correct way. Elizabeth mentioned the reason for her to believe in Protestantism. She said that although she was also invited to the Catholic Church, she saw the church members worshipping a sculpture and even kissing the toes of the sculpture, so she thought it was similar to idolism, and she decided to convert to Protestantism. Kelly revealed why she stopped going to a church she once attended. She said it was because of the person who lectured to them that “we are different from people without religious belief.” She did not like this way of distinguishing people and did not want to look down on others just because of their religion.

Many interviewees said that it was because of their introduction to their Christian friends or relatives that they began to go to a certain church. Once they established a connection with the church, they continued going there, and finally became a believer in that church. For instance, Mark went to a church to which he was introduced by his friend, and he gradually became familiar and got along with the church members. Finally, he converted with the help of the church. Mark said that he did not want to go to see what other churches

were like because he was taught by the preacher at his church that church members should stay in one church instead of hopping from one to another.

### **Extraneous Social Network Ties**

For the interviewees, all of them thought highly of their relationships with their family members, especially their parents. All of the interviewees' parents lived in China and did not know much about Christianity, except for Julie, whose mother was a Christian living in the United States, who brought Julie to church. Although all of the interviewees loved their parents very much and deemed their relationships with their parents as very important, they converted in the absence of too much influence because of the long distance between their parents and them, including converts whose parents were strongly against Christianity. For converts whose parents strongly opposed their conversion, they faced strained relations with their parents when they came home.

### **Attitude of Family Members**

The family members of six interviewees demonstrated neither support nor opposition when they knew about the religious conversion of their son or daughter. Carol said that her parents did not show any particular response to it. Elizabeth's mother told her, "You can believe whatever you want, but don't force me to believe it." The parents of Joshua and Kevin did not take their conversion too seriously. Kevin's parents also thought that he could have his belief if it did not influence his everyday life and if it did not bring about any negative things to him. Daniel explained, "My parents are open-minded, so I am open-minded. My mother is super open-minded, and she hasn't restricted me too much since I was very little. She wants me to be happy." Mark's father showed a little hesitation. His father did not thwart Mark's conversion, but he reminded Mark that there would be many restrictions if he returned to China as a Christian. His father wanted him to be careful. Alexander said that,

perhaps his father would have some disagreement; however, but his father did not tell him anything about it.

The family members of four interviewees showed their support during the interviewees' process of conversion. Julie's mother was a Christian before Julie's conversion, and it was her mother who brought Julie to the church. Julie said that her mother was so happy when she saw Julie's conversion. Her mother bought her a Bible written in both English and Chinese when Julie went to the platform to show her willingness to be a Christian. Amanda mentioned, "My parents think that (Christianity) is good, but they don't believe it yet ... They think everything is good as long as my life is good. They don't know much about Christianity. You cannot push them to believe in God because the belief is generated from one's own heart. People have different times to be chosen by God." Her story is similar to that of Kelly, who said, "My father came here to attend my baptism. He was so touched. On the one hand, my father really loves me. On the other hand, he saw the lady. Dear! She is really awesome! She can be this elegant and beautiful in her 80s." Because of his love for his daughter and seeing Christians' positive way of living, Kelly's father supported his daughter. Alexander's wife and son, whose opinions were a huge impact on him, showed their support for him.

### **Immersion and Intensive Interaction**

The church that the interviewees attended required them to get together frequently, but it did not require them to move into communal dwellings to have hourly accessibility. Frequent gatherings mentioned in this study included a Bible study group, fellowship, Sunday worship, family groups, prayer, and regularly talking with a particular person from the church. For David, who was an international leader in a Christian group, said, "They identify you as a leader so they encourage you to go to the family group, study more, and

read the Bible every day. They kind of have more resources for you, and they also have higher standards for you.” Julie said that she was the kind of person who needed to be pulled into the church constantly by others, and that she needed to be filled with religious information without interruption. Besides intensive interaction with other converts, the interviewees’ beliefs about following the Bible and God played a key role for them to get closer to God and to solidify their faith. Grace said that, because of God’s help, she thought of people in a more positive way, so that she dealt with her difficult times in better ways. Some of the interviewees did not interact with total converts intensively, but still kept their faith in God. For example, Kevin did not go to church too often, nor did he join any activities too frequently, and his intensive interaction with other converts was weak. However, for Kevin, he could not live without God; he said that he would suffer when he left God.

### **The Influence of Media**

The results showed that the role of media includes three aspects. First, it can function as a means of the first contact between the interviewees and the new religion. Some interviewees mentioned that they encountered religious flyers and CDs in the United States when they did not know much about religion. According to these interviewees, it was because of these religious flyers and CDs that they were able to know more about things related to religion, and they even went to the church because of these communications. According to Grace, who is very devout nowadays, one of the reasons she went to church was that she wondered how people sang in the choir because she had previously been in a chorus. She said that God has different ways of bringing people to Him, which included many occasions. Elizabeth encountered several Chinese Christians distributing church flyers in front of the library, while she was walking out of the library with her Chinese friend, who believed in Christianity in China, and who became excited to see this religious group.



Elizabeth received the flyer and went to church with this friend. She felt that the food there was delicious and the people were nice. This was the first time for Elizabeth to get close to the church. Amanda also encountered people distributing religious flyers before really getting to know about religion. Although almost nobody distributed religious flyers in Mainland China, according to Amanda, there were many women disseminating such flyers and CDs when she travelled to Hong Kong. When she was in China, she went to church occasionally, read flyers, and watched CDs. She said, “I didn’t really know about it; nobody introduced this to me at that time.”

Joshua was the only interviewee in this study who had knowledge about Christianity and who became a religious seeker from online information before arriving in the United States. He said that he could not get religious knowledge in the absence of online information, since there were no Christians nearby at that time. In spite of the restrictions about spreading religion, either online or physically in China, from the case of Joshua, he still learned about Christianity from his e-friends through the Internet.

Second, the media function as a way of learning about and getting close to religion. The interviewees said that they used various kinds of media to learn more about Christianity, including Bible apps, official church websites, YouTube, movies, radio, and WeChat. According to Grace, a Christian friend could read articles about Christianity from a WeChat public account, even though this friend went to a remote area, and it was difficult to have face-to-face communication with other Christians. Grace would also send her a sermon through WeChat, which was written by the preacher at Grace’s church. Alexander said that if he went back to China, he would probably study the Bible using mass media and online communication with his Christian friends. For those who did not usually go to church,

religious information comprised a large part of their religious knowledge. Many interviewees mentioned that they enjoyed gospel music because it made them feel peaceful and close to religion.

Third, the media function as a connection to a particular church group. Carol said that some Christian students have a WeChat group, in which people told others where they would have dinner, and they invited others to come to discuss religious topics. Even after two leaders of the group graduated, and even though they did not gather frequently, people still talked with and blessed one another. Similarly, Grace and Alexander said that their Christian friends could communicate with one another and pray together online.

### **Limitation Regarding the Use of Media**

The main limitation of the media's impact was as follows: at first, many interviewees did not mention using media to search for information about Christianity before knowing about it. Second, what they watched or listened to was usually in accordance with their church. Many recalled that videos they had watched were recommended by people from their church. Joshua told the researcher that he only dared to search for some particular information online because different sects had their own explanations. He would learn about books that were chosen by people and the preacher at his church.

According to David, what his church offered was a main source of knowledge for him. He said, "I don't watch preaching from some random person. I try to find things that are authentic, which match what my church teaches. I try to concentrate my knowledge, but not to diversify it."

For Julie's story, she did not say that what she searched from the Internet must match with what her church encouraged. She said that for her church, there were no restrictions or requirements for Christians to use mass media. However, she usually watched or listened to

online materials uploaded on the church's website, with which she was familiar. In addition, Julie was one of the people who did not go to church very often, and she usually relied on online sources to learn religious knowledge. Similarly, for interviewees who did not have intensive interaction with other church members, sources from the media were very important for them.

### **Two Significant Findings**

In addition to the test of the expansion of Lofland and Stark's (1965) model, two new themes emerged. One was the attitudinal change of family members, which refers to attitude changes from opposition to consent. The other involved doubts regarding the interviewees' beliefs after their religious conversion and the management of these doubts.

#### **Attitude Change of Family Members**

It is worth noting that for the interviewees whose family members did not initially support their conversion, instead of talking about how their families' discontent affected their conversion, they talked mainly about the attitudinal changes of family members toward their conversion. Two interviewees talked about the attitude changes of their parents from opposition to encouragement about going to church. Although Kelly's father supported her, Kelly's mother thought that Kelly was out of her mind. Her mother did not want Kelly to be involved in such a sensitive topic, and she did not attend Kelly's baptism in the United States. Kelly did not care about her mother's religious sensitivity. She said that her mother changed her attitude to some extent after seeing positive changes that happened to Kelly. During Kelly's sadness after breaking up with her ex-boyfriend, her parents encouraged her to go to church, to contact God more often, and to know more people.

Stories by Grace illustrated the attitudinal change of her parents.

Grace said that before her conversion, she was afraid of her parents' religious sensitivity, and she worried that her parents could not bear it if she were a Christian. She thought that she would be a Christian secretly. Later on, Grace was baptized because she thought that God told her it was the right time for her. She did not want her parents to know about it, but God persuaded her not to hide the truth from them. Grace wrote a long Christian testimony to her parents. Grace recalled:

My mom thought that I was crazy. She said she didn't want to talk with me. My father was very thoughtful. He read my Christian testimony 20 or 30 times. I didn't know which story or word touched my father. After that, he believed it was too hard for me to live abroad alone, and said that it was good for me to have a belief. So he didn't demonstrate against it too much. Because of the good relationship between my mom and me, I initially thought that she would accept my religious conversion. But my mom was strongly opposed ... I didn't know what my father experienced during these years; he began to hope to learn about my religion. This was a very long time. It has been five years. I wished my family members could believe in God, too, when I converted, so I kept praying. I received strong opposition for the first two years. I continued praying. The situation started to change in the recent two years.

When I came back to China and wanted to get together with church members there, my father was in a rage! I dared not sleep. I was kneeling in prayer, saying, "We have gatherings tomorrow, but my father won't let me go." I cried until 5:00 in the morning. When I got up, I found my father had already gotten out of bed. This was probably also a challenge for him. To my surprise, my father said, "You can if you want to go to gatherings. I can take you there." I didn't know what God had done to

convince my father. It was magical ... My mom was always strongly against God. She didn't like to hear anything related to God. She knew it was harmless or maybe a good thing, but she was not willing to hear about it ... A few days ago, daylight savings time began, and one hour was lost. My mom told me, "The time changed; it was one hour ahead of the standard time. Don't be late to go to church." Oh my god! She didn't want me to go to church when I stayed with her previously. She tried everything she could to stop me (from going to church). But now, she told me not to be late in going to church. I thought that if my mom had become someone else. She also said, "Girls need to dress up, so it would be better for me to get up earlier." I thought that my mom was weird. I contemplated my mother's changed attitude during that time. When our preacher was preaching, I was still reflecting on this. I was wondering why my mom changed, and I felt so strange. Suddenly, there was something in my mind reminding me, saying, "Do you think that all of your prayers are in vain?" I was about to cry at that moment.

### **Sometimes Doubts After Conversion and Management of Doubts**

Different from the distinction made between verbal converts and total converts by Lofland and Stark (1965), the interviewees in this study were not intentionally separated into two kinds of converts. Lofland and Stark (1965) simply mentioned doubts demonstrated prior to conversion, but they did not discuss the moment of suspicion after people's conversion. Some interviewees did not doubt their beliefs any more after their conversion. For example, Kelly said that converting to Christianity was a terrific idea. She said, "I never regret believing in God. And I even thought about why I hadn't become a Christian earlier." However, for six interviewees, even after their conversion, there were still sometimes when they asked themselves whether they really wanted to be a Christian and if God really existed.

Five interviewees reconciled their questions with the help of others or by themselves, so they kept believing in God. For instance, Elizabeth struggled with some things after her conversion. She said that she would feel guilty if God could not take care of her parents. An elder in the church replied to her that there would be no family relationship in heaven, and that everyone would be independent. There would be no hunger, no suffering, no anger, and no terror, which would be the happiest thing for her. She was satisfied with the answer, and her doubt about her belief was solved. Amanda also had a moment of doubt when she found out that she was in trouble, but God did not help her. She questioned whether God really existed, or whether her trouble was just a test from God. Amanda later on understood that God would help her, just not at the moment she had previously thought. Mark's story is similar. He had doubts when God didn't help him, and he even believed that God was giving him a hard time; however, he used *The book of Job in the Old Testament* to comfort himself. He believed that some things just could not be understood immediately, so there was no need to be deeply concerned about it.

Some interviewees could not get satisfactory answers, but sought comfort from other things or experiences. Therefore, their doubts were offset, and they still had faith in God. Regarding Carol's faith in God, she said that she went through various stages, from confidence to suspicion, and then to confidence again. She converted many years ago, but with more reading and observing, more questions arose without perfect answers. Therefore, she experienced a time of uncertainty and doubt. Although her suspicions were not satisfactorily answered, Carol started to trust God again because of comfort she derived from other things, which she thought were from God's help. For example, Carol got admitted into the program that she really wanted to enter. She regarded this as a miracle and thought that

God helped her. Thus, once again, Carol resumed her faith in God by offsetting her previously unsolved doubts with new comforts.

## CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The current study is important in the following aspects. First, although religious conversion has been investigated a great deal in previous articles, religious conversion among the Chinese has not gotten much attention in the field, and many anecdotes and suppositions concerning religious conversion in this subcultural group still remained unearthed (Busto, 1996, p. 134). Second, the reasons for Chinese converts who experienced time-changing events such as the Second World War and the Chinese Civil War, and the reasons for current Chinese Americans converts who were brought up in the United States, were explored. However, the reasons for conversion among the current younger Chinese generation studying in the United States, who were educated under atheism in China and who underwent religious conversion in the United States, are expected to differ from the reasons for conversion among the previous Chinese groups. Therefore, this study bridges the gap in the fields of religion and Asian studies.

Concerning the test of the expansion of Lofland and Stark's (1965) model, the necessity of three conditions was supported: a turning point, affective bonds, and neutralized or supportive attitudes from extraneous social network ties. The necessity of the remaining conditions was not supported: acutely felt tension, a religious perspective, defining oneself as a religious seeker, and intensive interaction. Media play an important role during the act of conversion. Additionally, content from the media was selected and filtered by the interviewees. First, to better understand the conversion process, tensions were separated into two types: tensions prior to encountering church people, and tensions after having connections with the religion. Many interviewees' experiencing various kinds of tension confirmed its importance. However, because some interviewees said that they did not



experience tension, it was evident that tension was not a necessary part of the conversion process. Second, the results showed that although most of the interviewees with tensions turned to religion for help after trying other methods, such as comforting oneself with traditional Chinese culture, some succeeded in coping with their tensions in other ways. Additionally, because the stage of tension is not essential for religious conversion, there is no need for potential converts to experience the stage of the religious problem-solving perspective. Therefore, the condition of the religious problem-solving perspective is also not a necessity. Third, only one interviewee in the study demonstrated the stage of being a religious seeker. Others did not take positive action to find a better value system. Furthermore, for the reason of denying the requisites of the previous two stages, the results refuted the importance of being a religious seeker. Fourth, the turning point was confirmed to be significant in the process of conversion. Regarding meeting church people, four subthemes emerged: classmates or teachers, family members or close friends, random strangers, and help from church people. Fifth, establishing affective bonds was extremely important. Most of the interviewees expressed their fondness of their Christian friends during the conversion process. Although solving problems played a key role in potential converts with questions and doubts before their conversion, their affective bonds with other converts provided chances for more religious people to answer their questions, and to quicken their conversion. Sixth, extraneous social networks had a great influence on people's conversion. For the interviewees studying in the United States, notwithstanding a very good and close attachment with their families, the long distance between them reduced the degree of control that their families could wield, which generated fewer obstacles for conversion. Seventh, intensive interaction was supported as an important factor by many interviewees, but was

denied by some as a necessity for conversion. Some said that they were devout believers, except for not going to church frequently. Eighth, the results indicated that media greatly influenced their conversion in terms of the following three functions: connection to a church group, a way to learn about religion; and a link to a church group. However, media also have a limitation in terms of people's selected content from media because most of them obtained online information from some official church websites with which they were familiar or information recommended or allowed by their church group. Two important new themes occurred after the test of the expansion of Lofland and Stark's (1954) model. The first new theme was that families who initially opposed the interviewees' conversion changed their attitudes to support religious activities. The second new theme was that many Chinese students had doubts, even after their conversion. They addressed these doubts and kept believing in God via two ways: solving the original questions, and seeking alternative comforts from God.

First of all, concerning the first condition of tension, two categorizations of tensions emerged, which were tensions prior to interacting with church people, and tensions while interacting with church people. Because few resources are available for Chinese students to learn about Christianity in China, they could not think about dealing with their tensions from a religious perspective while living in China, even after their arrival in the United States. To better understand the process of their religious conversion, tensions were separated into two parts, based on the time the interviewees encountered church members. The first kind of tension usually happened to them while living in China, which included the death of family members, academic pressure, extreme loneliness, and confusion about life. The second kind of tension, which usually occurred after arriving in the United States, involved close

relatives' illness, academic pressure, spousal conflicts, boyfriend/girlfriend conflicts, accidents, and confusion about the future. Although several converts reported their tensions prior to conversion, many others did not have a sense of experiencing tension during their pre-conversion period. Therefore, although the stage of tension is important during the process of religious conversion, it is not a prerequisite condition. The results confirmed the outstanding importance of tension for religious conversion (James, 1958; Kox, Meeus & Hart, 1991) but refuted the prerequisite stage of tension in the expansion of Lofland and Stark's (1965) model.

Second, concerning the second condition of the religious problem-solving perspective, for people who encountered problems while having a connection with a church, it was natural for them to be influenced by their Christian friends and to deal with problems from a religious perspective. For some people who experienced tensions before encountering the members of a church, after they failed to seek answers from other ways, they dealt with their problems by implementing religious methods and finally underwent religious conversion. However, Alexander's story refuted this idea because he succeeded in dealing with his confusion about the future by getting to know more people and by making himself busier, instead of from the perspective of religion. In addition, the first result showed us that not all converts underwent the condition of acutely felt tension; thus not all of them intended to use the religious problem-solving perspective to address a problem. Based on all of the examples, the results concurred with the expansion of Lofland and Stark's (1965) model, in that religious problem-solving perspective is not a prerequisite in the process of religious conversion.

Third, concerning the condition of religious seekers, Lofland and Stark (1965) stated that after failing to eliminate tensions via other methods, people turned to religion to solve their problems. At the same time, for people whose conventional religious institutions were unable to address their problems, they sought a new life instructed by a new religion. In this study, Joshua was the only person who defined himself as a seeker, who attempted to find a religious-perspective value system when he was in China, after receiving information about Christianity from his e-friends. However, most of the people in this study did not hop from church to church in order to find a value system. For people who went to different religious groups, they did so not because they were searching for a better value system, but because of invitations from friends. In addition, most of the interviewees, who were educated under atheism, did not think about being a religious seeker before encountering church people. Most of the people in this study did not demonstrate the experience of being a religious seeker. Given that the necessity of the previous two conditions was not supported, the necessity of being a religious seeker was also not supported. These results refuted the expansion of Lofland and Stark's (1965) model. The results were in line with the finding that many people converted to a new religion in the absence of experiencing any of these predisposing conditions (Seggar & Kunz, 1972; Austin, 1977; Heirich, 1977; Baer, 1978; Kox, Meeus, & Hart, 1991).

Fourth, with regard to the stage of encountering church members at a turning point, the results confirmed the significance and necessity of encountering religious people at a turning point in the interviewees' lives with respect to the process of conversion. The results demonstrated that individuals can go through several turning points, including both external and internal changes, which are consistent with the expansion of Lofland and Stark's (1965)

model in this study. Two turning points were evidently demonstrated among the interviewees. One turning point was leaving China to go to the United States. The other turning point was coming into contact with more religious aspects, including religious information and church members. As for encountering church people, four subthemes emerged among the Chinese college students: classmates or teachers, family members or close friends, random strangers, and help from church people.

Fifth, as for the condition of affective bonds, the results supported the expansion of Lofland and Stark's (1965) model, in that affective bonds are essential and required in the process of religious conversion. These bonds acknowledged the importance of emotional support from people's Christian friends in the process of their religious conversion (Abel, 2006; Chao, 2006). One remarkable phenomenon was that many Chinese students in the study decided to convert while attending a conference or events held by Christians from other places. Among those who converted during these events, many mentioned that their questions were answered satisfactorily, or they suddenly understood their relationship with God. Therefore, for Chinese students who had questions or doubts prior to conversion, addressing their suspicion was the key driver for their religious conversion. This finding refuted the statement by Lofland and Stark (1965) that people's final conversion involves coming to accept friends' ideas. However, establishing friendly and affective bonds with Christian friends was extremely crucial because these bonds offered chances for potential seekers to meet more people to help answer their questions. In addition, as for the choice of religion and institution, most interviewees converted to Christianity and went to a church because of initial introductions by their Christian friends from a particular church.

Sixth, regarding the condition of extraneous social networks, the process of conversion among most of the Chinese students in the study confirmed the expansion of Lofland and Stark's (1965) model, in that extraneous social networks have a great impact on people's religious conversion, and that families' neutralized or supportive attitude toward people's religious conversion is necessary in completing the conversion process. The results were consistent with the model that conversion is more successful when the control from extraneous social network ties is minimal, such as in the case of geographic distance. For Chinese students living abroad while their parents live in China, in spite of the close ties between them, geographic distance led to lesser control over the students' decision to experience religious conversion. When Chinese college students studying in the United States came back China to stay with their parents, their parents' control over their religious engagement became more intensified.

Seventh, considering the condition of intensive interaction, the results confirmed the importance of the stage involving intensive interaction (Daner, 1976; Judah, 1974; Gerlach & Hine, 1970; Heirich, 1977; Snow & Philips, 1980), but refuted its necessity. The study revealed that most Chinese college students mentioned their intensive interaction and how crucial it was for their religious conversion. Some said that it was more important to follow the Bible and God, in addition to intensive interaction with other Christians. Some did not even participate in church activities as regularly as other Christians. Among the people who did not attend church events very often, one said that he could not live without God, even though he did not go to church very often; another said that she usually obtained religious information from her church's official websites instead of attending church events physically.

Therefore, the condition of intensive interaction is significant, but does not apply to all of the interviewees in this study.

Eighth, pertaining to the media's impact, the research demonstrated that media exert great influence on religious conversion, but also showed the limitation of media usage for religious conversion among Chinese college students studying in the United States.

Regarding the impact of media, the role of media included the following three aspects: first, it can function as a means of the first contact between potential converts and the new religion; second, it functions as a way of learning about and getting close to religion; and third, it functions as a connection to a particular church group. As for the limitation of media usage, the employment of media for the purpose of religious exploration is limited before these Chinese students' religious conversion. Because of the particular situation in China, where media content is censored and religious engagement is restricted, Chinese students did not have very many opportunities, nor did they have much awareness about getting to know Christianity when they were in China, and even after they arrived in the United States. Only one student obtained some knowledge about Christianity from his e-friends, and he decided to become a seeker when he was in China. In addition, in line with the argument that media users today who search for religious information can selectively choose information according to their needs (Snow & Machalek, 1983; Gooren, 2010), when these Chinese students were exposed to an environment of rich information related to religion in the United States, they tended to accept media content that was recognized, recommended, and produced by members of their church, or their familiar religious groups.

Two significant new themes emerged from the study. First, what scholars studying religion do not mention is families' attitudinal changes, from opposition to consent toward

people's religious conversion. According to the results, there were three types of attitudes toward conversion: neutralized, supportive, and opposing attitudes. An interesting phenomenon was that all of the family members who were initially against the interviewees' religious conversion, changed their attitude and became supportive. A second new theme involved doubts after conversion and the management of these doubts. The results indicated that many Chinese students experienced hesitation and uncertainty after conversion. They continued believing in God because their questions were answered or the occurrence of other things that they interpreted as God's help offset their previous sense of doubt. With regard to hesitation after conversion, Carol's statement about the difference in faith between her husband and her may provide us with an illustration. According to Carol, although her husband could not answer all of her questions concerning Christianity, her husband did not have any doubt because he became a Christian very early on, and he thought that everything should (follow the Bible or God). The Chinese students in this study were taught atheism throughout all of their education in China, and most knew nothing about Christianity before arriving in the United States or before encountering Christians. For most of them, their worldviews had already been shaped, and their minds had already been fixed for a long time, so that they did not think of the world from other particular perspectives. Thus, it is reasonable for them to question many things during the process of conversion, or even after the conversion.

This study may be extended in the following aspects. First, one noticeable result was that people embracing the philosophies of Buddhism usually do not refuse to accept the philosophies of Christianity, which is consistent with what Lofland and Stark (1965) put forward; they argued that openness to various religious views is an important element in



embracing a new religion, which is also consistent with the argument by Hall (2006) that the popularity of Buddhism in China was a factor leading to conversion among the Chinese. Even one student in the study regarded himself as a believer of both Buddhism and Christianity. Buddhism is one of the five religions that have legal existence, and remain prevalent in China to date. Thus, it is logical to consider Buddhism as a conventional religion for the Chinese. Many students in this study participated in events related to Buddhism while living in China. This notion differs from Lofland and Stark's (1965) belief that dissatisfaction with conventional religion plays a role in seeking a better value system. For some students, instead of abandoning Buddhism, they embraced the philosophies of both Buddhism and Christianity. To further examine the relationship between the "openness" of Buddhism and conversion to Christianity within the scope of the world, future scholars can focus more on religious countries where Buddhism is the national religion, and can investigate religious conversion among Buddhists in these countries. Second, for most of the interviewees, the first three stages in Lofland and Stark's (1965) model, if they happened at all, occurred only after they formed "affective bonds" with the church people they met. This finding demonstrated the need to revise the order of the steps in Lofland and Stark's (1965) model while investigating the process of religious conversion in subgroups that experience two distinct cultures and religious atmospheres. The results suggested that usually during the initial stage of religious conversion, social bonds are the driving factor rather than the convert's psychology. At a later stage of conversion, for the interviewees who experienced tensions, what mattered most for their final decision was the resolution of their tensions. Scholars in the future may reconsider the order of Lofland and Stark's (1965) model when

applying it to Chinese students studying the United States, who can only access restricted religious information while in China.

The study has the following limitations. First, as the results indicated, the advancement of technology provides potential converts with channels to learn about religion and to deepen their religious knowledge. It also influences the ways that church members interact with one another. According to Lofland and Stark's (1965) study, the condition of intensive interaction emphasized geographic proximity between potential converts and converts. However, nowadays, all kinds of media on the Internet have become crucial tools for people to communicate with church groups and to obtain religious knowledge. In this study, Julie and Kevin were devout converts who did not go to the church frequently, but often learned about religious knowledge from the Internet, such as listening to sermons on some church's official website and watching videos of famous religious preachers from YouTube. Therefore, the concept of "intensive interaction" might be reassessed and revised in a future study, taking into consideration the factor of media. Second, concerning the relationship between extraneous social network ties and converts, Kanter (1972; 1973) stated that communal groups are more demanding than noncommunal groups; likewise, Snow and Philips (1980) contended that the two different groups might lead to different conversion processes. Therefore, researchers in the future should take the degree of isolation involving the religious group into consideration when discussing the impact of extraneous social network ties on the conversion process. Third, for most Chinese college students living in the United States, notwithstanding the fact that they can be independent in making their own decisions, their parents can always impose great influence on their lives, which concurs with Chinese traditional values, especially Confucianism. However, for people who are more

mature, or who can independently decide what they want in their lives (such as people who are middle aged), they may not be as easily influenced by others. Therefore, religious conversion among Chinese college students may not represent the conversion process among all Chinese people in various age groups. Future scholars can explore the distinct characteristics of conversion across the different age groups of the Chinese. Also, the study does not distinguish between male and female converts during the process. Future studies can focus more on the process of religious conversion between the different genders.

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## APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

### Basic Information

1. Age
2. gender
3. Current academic degree
4. Years living in the United States
5. Years living in Ames

### Life Experience

1. Please tell me some major things that made you happy and that made you upset in China and the United States.

### Religious Experience

1. Please describe the first time when you used a religious perspective to seriously think of an important thing or to solve a problem, either by yourself or by other's influence. When do you think was your true conversion moment?
2. When did you have interest or attraction to some church members?
3. Please describe how your friendship with other church members developed and how you interact and how often you interact with these friends.
4. How did your parents and close friends in China think your conversion? What did your close friends here think of your conversion? Did these people believe in God?
5. Please describe your regular religious activities after the conversion. Did you hesitate to believe in God during your conversion? How did you deal with it?

### **Media Usage Related with Conversion**

1. What types of media and which channels do you use to learn about and communicate with the new religion?

## APPENDIX B. INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD DOCUMENTATION

**IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY**  
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board  
Office for Responsible Research  
Vice President for Research  
2420 Lincoln Way, Suite 202  
Ames, Iowa 50014  
515 294-4566

**Date:** 3/20/2018

**To:** Haifan Xiao  
004 Hamilton Hall

**CC:** Dr. Andrew D. Pritchard  
213 Hamilton Hall

**From:** Office for Responsible Research

**Title:** Religious Conversion Among Chinese Students

**IRB ID:** 18-053

**Approval Date:** 3/9/2018

**Date for Continuing Review:** 2/19/2020

**Submission Type:** New

**Review Type:** Full Committee

The project referenced above has received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Iowa State University according to the dates shown above. Please refer to the IRB ID number shown above in all correspondence regarding this study.

To ensure compliance with federal regulations (45 CFR 46 & 21 CFR 56), please be sure to:

- **Use only the approved study materials** in your research, including the recruitment materials and informed consent documents that have the IRB approval stamp.
- **Retain signed informed consent documents for 3 years after the close of the study**, when documented consent is required.
- **Obtain IRB approval prior to implementing any changes** to the study by submitting a Modification Form for Non-Exempt Research or Amendment for Personnel Changes form, as necessary.
- **Immediately inform the IRB of (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences** involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) **any other unanticipated problems involving risks** to subjects or others.
- **Stop all research activity if IRB approval lapses**, unless continuation is necessary to prevent harm to research participants. Research activity can resume once IRB approval is reestablished.
- **Complete a new continuing review form** at least three to four weeks prior to the **date for continuing review** as noted above to provide sufficient time for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study. We will send a courtesy reminder as this date approaches.

Please be aware that IRB approval means that you have met the requirements of federal regulations and ISU policies governing human subjects research. **Approval from other entities may also be needed.** For example, access to data from private records (e.g. student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. **IRB approval in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.**

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office for Responsible Research, 202 Kingland, to officially close the project.

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have questions or concerns at 515-294-4566 or IRB@iastate.edu.