

Embedded rationality : conversion of middle-aged and elderly women to Christianity in contemporary rural China

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**NANYANG
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**EMBEDDED RATIONALITY:
CONVERSION OF MIDDLE-AGED AND ELDERLY
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CHINA**

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SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
2017**

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Acknowledgements

When people hear about my research topic, the first question they usually ask is “are you a Christian?” It’s often awkward for me to answer either “Yes” or “No.” The uneasiness of “Yes” comes from the fact that I do not feel comfortable about some ideas in the Bible. The uneasiness of “No” is out of the fear that people might misunderstand me as anti-Christian or even anti-religious. Having spent quite a bit of time in weighing various strands of thought, in the end, I have decided to be identified as a syncretistic who takes each school of thought, theism or atheism, as the expression of certain truths of human existence.

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Contents

Chapter One: Introduction	1
1.1 Background	1
1.2 Research Question and Its Significance	2
1.3 Christianity in China	7
1.4 An Embedded Approach to Religious Conversion	9
1.5 Data Collection.....	13
Chapter Two: Christianity as a Rational Choice	16
2.1 Religious Market in Xie Town.....	16
2.2 Benefits: God's Blessings	22
2.3 Investments: Following God's Disciplines	27
2.4 Conclusion: Christianity Vs. Popular Religion.....	29
Chapter Three: Rationality as Embedded	32
3.1 Christianity-Related Narratives.....	33
3.2 Social Networks	35
3.3 Life Circumstances.....	39
3.4 Conclusion.....	43
Chapter Four: Modernization and Christian Conversion.....	45
4.1 Chinese Modernization	45
4.2 Favourable Environment for Christianity-Related Narratives	47
4.3 Conducive Networks of Narrators	52
4.4 Contextualized Life Problems.....	54
4.5 Conclusion.....	58
Chapter Five: Conclusion	60
5.1 Embedded Rationality	60
5.2 Academic Significance.....	61
5.3 Limitations and Directions for Future Research	63
Appendix One: List of Interviewees	66
Appendix Two: Interview Outline	71
References.....	72

Embedded Rationality: Conversion of Middle-Aged and Elderly Women to Christianity in Contemporary Rural China

Abstract

Since the late 1970s, there has been a rapid increase in the number of Christians in China and of those who embrace Christianity, many are rural middle-aged and elderly women. Existing literature on Christianity in China has mainly focused on institutions and religious leaders, which, for the most part, deals with the supply side of the spread of the religion. Few studies have specifically examined the demand side. Using an embedded approach, this thesis studies the conversion of 24 middle-aged and elderly women (aged 50 and above) to Christianity in a rural town in northern Jiangsu, China. A total of 27 semi-structured interviews were conducted in June and July 2015. This thesis argues that the conversion of this group of women to Christianity is a rational choice but their rationality is embedded in Christianity-related narratives, social networks, life circumstances and the broader context of Chinese modernization. Christianity-related narratives prescribe the benefits and costs of being a Christian. Social networks serve to convey, endorse and recreate these narratives. Life circumstances, including problems and miracles, galvanize narrative changes. Paradoxically, the modernization efforts of the Chinese state, which are supposed to liberate people from religious beliefs in the official discourse, have created a favourable environment for the women's conversions. The state-sponsored modernization has delegitimized folk beliefs while retaining the notions of ghosts and evil spirits and increased people's social contacts while maintaining their family, kinship, and communal ties. The modernization efforts have also created social illnesses, such as environmental pollution, sequelae of birth control and a lack of social support, which gives rise to the pervasiveness of life problems.

Key Words: Embedded rationality, Conversion, Christianity, Contemporary China, Middle-aged and Elderly Women

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Background

When the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) started, my grandmother, then in her early 20s, was attending a local middle school. At that time, the teacher made a call for students to hand in all antiques, in response to the government's campaign of "Smashing the Four Olds" (*Chu Sijiu* 除四旧), i.e. smashing the old customs, old culture, old habits and old ideas. Excited to embrace a new era, my grandmother decided to forgo all the "olds." But she was poor, having nothing to hand in. In the end, she submitted her engagement gift, a pair of patrimonial bracelets she received lately from her future husband's family. To this day, her husband, my grandfather, still complains how stupid my grandmother was and how lightly she took his gift. At that time, all Gods and idols that belonged to the "olds" had to be smashed.

In the mid-1990s, when I was five or six years old, I often saw my grandmother kowtowed in front of a picture. On the picture, I learned, was *Taishang Laojun* (太上老君), the deified founder of Taoism. During festivals, she also took me to the tombs, where her mother and parents-in-law were buried, to burn gifts for those in tombs. She told me if we did not do those, our ancestors would suffer in the other world.

Several years ago, when I visited her, she told me that she became a Christian. The old *Taishang Laojun*'s image was torn off. She had stopped burning offerings to the ancestors because the act was considered as idol-worshipping and such acts were against God's wishes.

My grandmother's story is not unique. During the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976, the Chinese government wanted to obliterate all religions in the country. During that time, there was almost "no evidence of surviving religious practice" (MacInnis, 1974). Bush described the China in 1970 as a nation-state "with hardly a trace of religion as man has known it" (1970, p. 10). However, the country has seen a "religious renaissance" (Madsen, 2011) after the Reform and Opening-up in the late 1970s. The most conspicuous religion in the "renaissance" is Christianity (Bays, 1996; Fiedler, 2010; Xu, 2008). Fielder (2008, p. 47) observes that "China is now home to one of the fastest growing Churches in

the world.” Aikman (2003), former Beijing bureau chief for *Time* magazine, even predicts that “within the next thirty years, one-third of China’s population could be Christian, making China one of the largest Christian nations in the world”. Bays (2003, p. 488) estimates that “today, on any given Sunday there are almost certainly more Protestants in Church in China than in all of the Europe.” Yang Fenggang (2014) also predicts that “it is almost certain that China will become the largest Christian country in the world by 2030.” China Family Panel Studies (2012) (Lu, 2014) conducted by Peking University shows Christianity has taken the shape of “nationwide existence and local inhabitation” and it has become the second largest religion of the Han ethnic after Buddhism. Taking the aggressive Cultural Revolution and the huge population of China into consideration, Grace Davie comments Chinese religious revitalization as a “resacralization on an almost unimaginable scale” (2010, p. 166).

1.2 Research Question and Its Significance

This study investigates a group of middle-aged and elderly women’s conversion to Christianity in a rural town in northern Jiangsu province in contemporary China. It aims to understand the reasons behind their conversion.

By “Conversion,” I mean the process in which people start to identify themselves as Christians or go to churches and pray to the Christian God regularly. According to Yao and Badham (2007, p. 71), “whether or not one has a particular faith can be measured by one’s self-description (identity), or by practical performance (behaviour).”

Christianity refers to “the religion based on the person and teachings of Jesus Christ, or its beliefs and practices” (Oxford dictionary). Christianity is generally divided into the Eastern Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Protestantism. Under each branch, there are also different denominations. The interviewees of this study were converted to Protestantism. In China, Protestantism is translated as “*Jidujiao* 基督教” but “*Jidujiao* 基督教” is commonly used to refer to Christianity in general as well (K. Zhang, 2011). Besides, the denominations in China are not exactly the same as those in the West. To capture all the complexities, I use the term “Christianity” instead of any particular sect here.

“Middle-aged and elderly women” refer to women who are aged fifty and above. The sample comprises 24 baptised women from a rural town in northern Jiangsu, China. There are four reasons for me to study middle-aged and elderly women in a rural town:

First, I intend to study a cohort. In population studies, a cohort means “a group of people born during the same time period” and people belong to the same cohort are influenced by similar historical circumstances (Weeks, 2011, p. 309). My fieldwork was done in 2015. The eldest women I interviewed were 76 years old. That is to say, my informants were born between 1939 and 1965. Collectively, they shared a lot of common experiences, such as political upheavals and economic transitions. Their life experiences could reflect contemporary Chinese history. According to Weeks (2011, p. 311), the “continual feedback between the dynamics of successive cohorts and the dynamics of other changes in society produces a constant shifting in the status and meaning attached to each age stratum, proving an evolutionary link between the age structure and the social structure.” Therefore, studying this cohort would illuminate the changes in the social structure and the ways in which this structure influences the everyday life of individuals in the society.

Second, I want to limit the scope to one gender.¹ Gender is an important dimension of religious participation. Many studies have found that women are more religious than men (DeBono & Kuschpel, 2014; Francis, 1997; Miller & Hoffmann, 1995; Stark, 2002; Walter & Davie, 1998). Scholars have put forward numerous explanations, such as gender inequality (Manville, 1997), psychological variations (Francis, 1997), physiological differences (Stark, 2002), gendered socialization (Levitt, 1995) and different labour participation (Azzi & Ehrenberg, 1975). The gendered aspect of religious participation also holds true at my field site. The number of women account for more than two third of the attendees in all the churches I have visited. Gender roles are also salient in the villagers’ daily life. Many families live by the principle of *nanzhuwai, nvzhunei* (men are primarily outside the home, and woman are primarily inside the home 男主外, 女主内) (A. S. Leung, 2003). Women and men play different roles in their family, community and the labor market. This thesis will not discuss gendered religiosity in detail but it

¹ With the rise of LGBT studies, the word “gender” has become complicated. Here, I am using it in its traditional sense.

recognizes the importance of gender. That is why I have limited the scope to only one gender.

Third, middle-aged and elderly women are underrepresented in the literature on religion, especially those on “religion in contemporary China.” For quite a long time, even the “religiosity of ordinary women” in Western societies had not received sufficient attention of “either sociologists of religion or Christian feminists,” despite the fact that women are more religious than men on almost every measure of religiosity (Walter & Davie, 1998). The study of religion in contemporary China has focused largely on the relationships between the state and religious groups (Chan, 2013; Kindopp & Hamrin, 2004; B. Leung, 2005; Overmyer, 2003; Ying, Yuan, & Lau, 2014). The attention is usually paid to political and religious leaders. The less educated, poor, middle-aged and elderly women in rural China have not received much attention. Furthermore, sometimes, they are also ignored in their own religious organization. While studying Christianity in Wenzhou, Cao Nanlai observes:

Both repositioning of Christian faith and refashioning of elite male Christians are pursued, often deliberately at the expense of the poor, elderly, female believers who have traditionally made up the majority of the Chinese Christian population. The male entrepreneurial class of believers not only distinguishes themselves from these “low *suzhi*” believers in daily rhetoric but also deny their equal access to certain church-related activities by requiring an invitation and charging an admission or membership fee. (2011, p. 106)

In Chinese, *Suzhi* is usually glossed as “quality.” It embodies knowledge and refinement, which “the poor, elderly, female believers” are considered to be lacking.²

Fourth, as Cao Nanlai observes, “the poor, elderly, female believers” have traditionally constituted the majority of Chinese Christians. At present, due to the lack of a thorough national survey,³ it is hard to give a specific number or the percentage of rural middle-aged and elderly women in the Chinese Christian population. However, according to

² For a detailed analysis of the term “*Suzhi*,” please refer to (Kipnis, 2006).

³ Several surveys have been done on Christian population in China (Lu, 2014; Xu, 2008). Yet, it is still very hard to decide the specific number of Christians, let alone the number of people in a specific age and gender group. On the one hand, some surveys are not publicly available, whereas on the other hand, many Churches are underground, making it extremely difficult to get precise data.

available statistical reports and ethnographic observations, rural middle-aged and elderly women do take a large, if not the largest, percentage of Chinese Christian population. Yao and Badham (2007, p. 137) note that especially in the rural area, “religious beliefs and activities of various kinds revived like mushroom after rain”. Based on their national survey of 3,196 samples about “religious experience in contemporary China”, they affirm that “Chinese Christians are more concentrated in rural areas, and more rural residents have come to Christian faith than their counterparts in cities” (2007, p. 73). Their survey also showed that Christian congregation in China is characterized by “three mores”: more females, more elderly and more people of a lower educational level than the national average (2007, p. 74). Their findings are also confirmed by ethnographic observations. While conducting her field research in villages in Fujian and Henan, Fielder discovered that “a very high proportion of Chinese Christians are women” and at the same time elderly poor featured prominently in many rural Chinese congregations (Fielder, 2008). In Kipnis’s field research in Zhouping, a county in rural north China, he also found that “during the 1980s and 1990s the protestant church there both grew explosively and became overwhelmingly female” (2002, p. 81).

The site of this study is a rural town in the northern Jiangsu province. Since there are some unofficial congregations involved, for ethical concerns, I would use its pseudonym, Xie town thereafter. It covers around 20.5 km². In 2015, its population is about 17,600. 99.9 percent of them belong to Han ethnicity. Economically, most people are peasants, making a living through farming and/or fishing. Nowadays, a lot of villagers, mostly, young and middle-aged, work as migrant workers in big cities during farming intervals.

The literature on “Christianity in contemporary China” focuses largely on institutions and religious leaders. Although these are important, they could only explain the mechanisms of the supply side of the spread of Christianity in China. This study focuses on the demand side by taking a group of ordinary converts as its focal point, in addition to political and religious institutions.

By institutions, I refer to the state and churches. Scholars have mentioned that the relaxation of the state’s religious policies after the Cultural Revolution is a prerequisite for the religious renaissance in China (Hunter & Chan, 1993; L. Yao, 2004). For example,

Fenggang Yang's "a shortage economy explanation" (2010) argues that the religious need of Chinese people has been constantly suppressed and would be awakened whenever the suppression loosens.

Besides the state, the institution of Christianity is often emphasized as an important factor for its rapid rise. Fiedler (2010) argues that the communal nature of Christianity contributes to its popularity because it offers not only a new community but also a sense of communality. Geng Dinghua (2010) contends that the success of Christianity is owing to its marketing strategies which combine church organizations, missionary zeal, religious rites and local traditions.

Together with the role of institutions is the importance of religious leaders. In *A Star in the East*, Stark and Wang (2015) dedicate around half of their book to document the famous missionaries in China. Cao Nanlai's ethnography in Wenzhou (2011) gives a vivid report on how a number of business elites ("boss Christians") have successfully marshalled their financial and political capital to promote and "legitimize" their religious activities.

As far as the demand side is concerned, the explanation is usually the deprivation theory. Deprivation theory argues that "religious commitment is a result of the compensation that religion provides in situations where individuals meet obstacles in life and search for alternative goals" (Furseth & Repstad, 2013, p. 112). There are two kinds of deprivations, material and spiritual. Many scholars maintain that the reason why a lot of people are attracted to Christianity is that they are deprived of medical care, financial success and social security, especially in the rural areas (Du, 2011; Jin, 2005; S. Wang, 2015). Besides the "material deprivation," some scholars argue that people embrace Christianity because of "spiritual deprivation." Their argument is that the crumbling Communism and the Cultural Revolution have left a spiritual vacuum in China, which many people fill in by turning to Christianity (Stark & Wang, 2015; Zhou, 2010, p. 178). For example, Stark and Wang (2015) contend that educated Chinese are suffering from the spiritual deprivation led by the cultural incongruity between technical modernity and Chinese tradition, which motivates them to find solace in Christianity.

"Deprivation theory" links religious choices with people's daily experiences. Yet, in the face of "deprivation," why do some people choose to follow Christianity and some

others choose Marxism, Capitalism, Buddhism, Taoism, Shamanism or Islam? Since deprivation exists regardless of regions and eras, why do the popularity of different schools of thoughts vary significantly across geographic areas and historical periods? These unresolved issues call for a more sophisticated explanation.

1.3 Christianity in China

According to the record of Nestorian Stele, Christians first came to China in AD 635 during the Tang dynasty and set up the Church of the East, also known as *Jingjiao* in Chinese (Malek & Hofrichter, 2006). The Church of the East collapsed later together with the Tang Dynasty in the 10th century. In the 13th to 14th century, it was reintroduced to China and achieved substantial success under the Yuan government. In the mid-14th century, it declined rapidly and gradually died out probably due to the Ming revolution (Moule, 1930).

In the 16th century, Jesuits started to enter China, propagating Christianity together with Western mathematics and astronomy. Michele Ruggieri and Matteo Ricci were the first two missionaries who obtained the permission to enter China in 1582-1583. Ricci was known to most educated Chinese. He introduced the findings of European exploration to China and also translated Chinese classics into Latin. In the 1630s, Spanish Franciscans, Dominicans, and Augustinians joined the Jesuits in doing missionary work in China. Between 1665 and 1671, all missionaries at that time were exiled to Guangzhou or Macau, due to the xenophobic forces in the Qing government. Later when Kangxi emperor took power, he relaxed the sanctions on the missionary work and issued toleration decrees for all Christians in 1692.

After its entry into China, Christianity faced “the Rite Controversy”, which refers to the controversy on whether Chinese Christian converts should be allowed to practice rituals like ancestor worship. In 1704, the pope in Rome “ruled decisively against the rites” (Bays, 2012, p. 29), which caused tension with the Qing government. In 1724, Yongzheng emperor, the successor of Kangxi, banned Christianity and declared it as an “evil cult”. The illegal status of Christianity did not change until the 1840s. After Christianity was banned, although it did not totally die out, it was suppressed by the national and local

governments from time to time and the number of foreign missionaries was dwindling every year.

The first Protestant missionary, Robert Morrison (1782-1834), arrived in Guangzhou in 1807. He started to translate the Bible and compile a Chinese-English dictionary. The missionary work of Morrison and other missionaries had not broken away from tight constraints until the 1840s when the Qing government signed a series of unequal treaties⁴ with the British, the American and the French after its failure in the “Opium Wars.” Incorporated in those treaties was greater freedom for foreign missionaries to travel, reside and proselytize in China.

In 1912, the Republican government (1912-1949) replaced the Qing government (1644-1912). Under the Republican government, Christianity secured two seats, among the five recognized legal religions: Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, Buddhism, and Taoism.

When the Communist government (1949-) was established, the legal status of the five religions did not change. Yet, for Christianity, there were two significant adjustments. First, all foreign missionaries were expelled. Second, two national Christian associations were set up in 1957: The (protestant) Three-Self (self-governing, self-financing and self-expanding) Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA). They were under the supervision of the Religious Affairs Bureau and the United Front Department.

In the 1960s, the appeal of class struggle was increasingly fierce from the central government led by Mao Zedong, which finally led to the Cultural Revolution. One very important part of the Cultural Revolution was the campaign of “Smashing the Four Olds.” Christianity, together with other religions, fell into the “Four Olds”. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), almost all temples, monasteries, mosques, and churches were forcibly shut down. The United Front was stigmatized as a “revisionist organ” and all Religious Affairs departments were dismissed. Religious leaders were denounced as “ox demons and snake spirits” (Goossaert & Palmer, 2011, p. 165).

⁴ The reason why those treaties were unequal is that they were mostly imposed by the imperial powers who tried to get greater trading freedom in China.

After the Cultural Revolution, reflecting on its religious policies, the government issued “the basic viewpoint and policy on the religious question during our country's socialist period” in 1982, which is commonly known as the Document No.19 (Potter, 2003). It is the basic statement about Chinese religious policies until now. This document acknowledges that religion would exist for a long time and religious freedom should be guaranteed as long as the believers love the country, support the government and observe the socialist laws. Since then, the United Front Department, the Religious Affairs Bureau, and different religious patriotic associations have resumed functioning. Catholicism and Protestantism have resumed their position as legal religions together with Islam, Buddhism, and Taoism. The China Christian Council (CCC) was established in 1980, which aimed to supervise and organize protestant churches in China together with TSPM. For a Christian group to be recognized as legal, it must be a member of CCPA or TSPM & CCC. At the same time, it must be under the supervision of the Religious Affairs Bureau and the United Front Department. The regulations have given rise to two kinds of churches: official churches and unregistered churches. The former refers to those that belong to either CCPA or TSPM & CCC and are endorsed by the government. Those Christian congregations outside the official churches are unregistered churches. Because they often hold gatherings in private houses, they are commonly called “house churches” (*Jiating Jiaohui* 家庭教会).⁵ Yet, among unregistered churches, there are also varieties. Some of them are tolerated by the government and some are outlawed. Those who are outlawed are usually denounced as the “evil cults” (*Xiejiao* 邪教), which include but not limited to the Shouters, the Spirit-Spirit Sect, and the Eastern Lightning. The landscape of different churches varies among different regions and time periods.

1.4 An Embedded Approach to Religious Conversion

Why do people choose one religion over another? The explanations have been dominated by three theories: brainwashing, socialization and rational choice.

⁵ In fact, not all congregations at private houses would identify themselves as “house church”. While some of them do identify this way, others prefer to go by different names. For example, at my field site, one congregation calls itself the “House Church” whereas another calls itself “Local Church”, even though both congregate at private houses.

The brainwashing theory argues that “conversion is the product of devious but specifiable forces acting upon unsuspecting and therefore highly vulnerable individuals”(Snow & Machalek, 1984). This theory is inspired by the communist indoctrination experienced by Western prisoners of war (POW). During the Korean War, American POWs were said to have been subjected to extensive torture and education that aimed to persuade them into accepting communism (Bruce, 2006). The image of the convert is a passive and powerless individual who is nothing but a victim of “coercive persuasion” (Schein, Barker, & Schneier, 1961).

The second theory is “socialization.” The socialization approach argues that individuals would gradually grow into societal roles and internalize the expectations that are directed to these roles. Successful socialization would help individuals formulate an identity and be committed to specific worldviews, such as the world-view of a religion (Furseth & Repstad, 2013, pp. 114-117). The socialization approach is especially effective in addressing the impacts of religious upbringing (e.g. Gutierrez, Goodwin, Kirkinis, & Mattis, 2014; James, Lester, & Brooks, 2014) and religious education (e.g. Vermeer, 2010). In terms of religious conversion, socialization theory is often used to explain the impact of close family members and tight communities. Although the term “socialization” is different from “brainwashing” in its connotations, both depict a passive soul which is converted because of external forces.

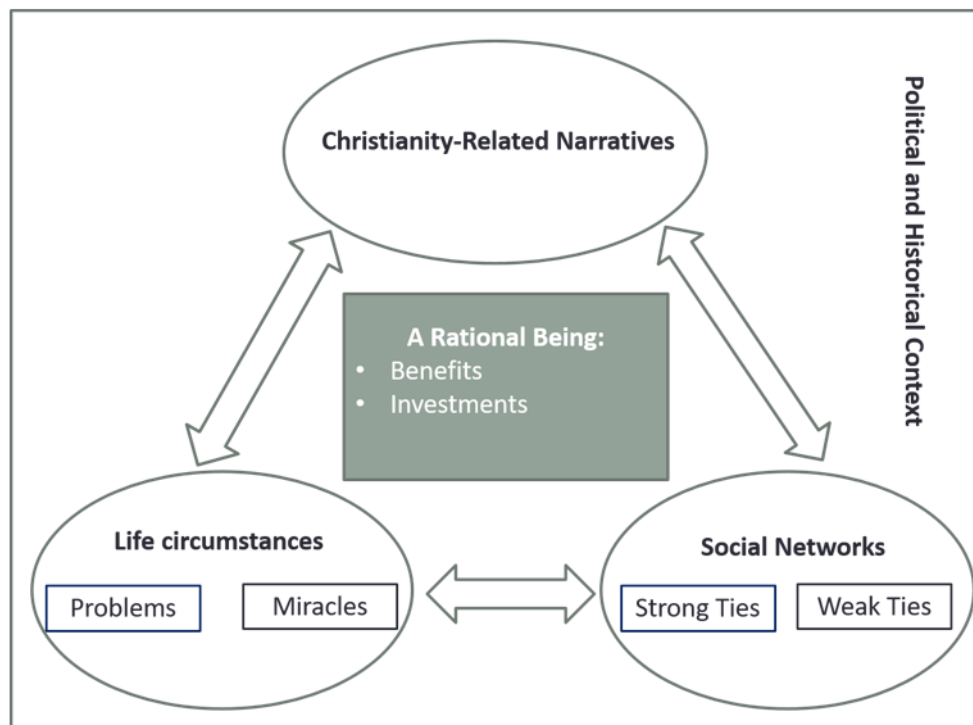
Contrast to the theories of brainwashing and socialization is the rational choice theory, which is championed by Stark, Bainbridge, Finke etc. Rational choice theory positions “religion to be the direct expression of universal human needs” (Stark & Bainbridge, 1985, p. 18). It prescribes that human beings would “seek what they perceive to be the rewards and avoid what they perceive to be the costs” (Stark & Bainbridge, 1980, p. 115) in terms of choosing religious affiliation just like doing other choices. Rational choice theory advocates the image of “religious seekers” who shop around in the religious markets, try out different religious products here and there and choose the one that has the best benefit-cost ratio (e.g. Einstein, 2008; Twitchell, 2007; Wiegele, 2005).

Granovetter (1985) has proposed an embeddedness approach that is different from either collectivist socialization theory or individualistic rational choice theory. He argues

that actors are neither slaves who would act subserviently in line with the scripts prescribed to their social roles, nor atoms who can act out of their social context. Instead, individuals' purposive action is always embedded in "concrete, on-going systems of social relations" (M. Granovetter, 1985). Coleman (1990, p. 18) also says that "much of what is ordinarily described as nonrational or irrational is merely so because observers have not discovered the point of view of the actor, from which the action is rational."

Following Granovetter and Coleman, this paper adopts an embedded approach to religious conversion. It takes individuals as rational beings while acknowledging the impacts of social forces on individuals' rationality. I argue that the conversion of the middle-aged and elderly women to Christianity is a rational choice but their rationality is embedded in Christianity-related narratives, life circumstances, social networks and the specific political and historical context. The relationship of different elements in my informants' conversion could be demonstrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: An Embedded Approach



The remaining chapters explain the conversion of my informants using the above framework. Chapter Two focuses on my informants' rationality of choosing Christianity over Chinese popular religion. It explicates the benefits and costs of being a Christian from their perspective. The benefits of being a Christian include exorcism, health, security, good luck and eternal life. The costs are attending church services, breaking away from "superstitions" and being a good person. I use the term "religious investments" to describe the requirements a convert need to fulfil to be qualified as a member of the new religion. My informants are attracted to Christianity because the benefits are enormous and the investments are in line with the requirement of local morality. The other available choice in the local religious market is Chinese popular religion. In contrast to Christianity, Gods and shamans in popular religion might be able to provide temporary relief from certain problems but none of them could promise an afterlife that is immediately free from sufferings. Further, popular religion is often denounced as superstitious and even demonic in Xie town. The costs and risks of practising popular religion are much greater compared to practising Christianity.

Chapter Three goes beyond the rationality of individuals to explore the framework of their rationality, which, I argue, is Christianity-related narratives. Christianity-related narratives serve to legitimize Christianity. These are stories of how the Christian God has helped and will help to resolve life problems. Two other important factors are also discussed in Chapter Three, which are social networks and life circumstances. Social networks function to convey, endorse and recreate Christianity-related narratives. They are people from my informants' social connections, such as their family members, friends and neighbours. Life circumstances galvanize narrative changes. Life circumstances include life problems and miracles. Life problems objectify the crises of previous narratives and initiate the search for new narratives. Miracles increase my informants' confidence in and commitment to the new narratives.

Chapter Four examines the political and historical context of my informants' conversion to Christianity. I situate my informants' conversion to Christianity in the broad context of Chinese modernization. I argue that China's multiple modernization efforts have contributed to my informants' conversion on three levels. First, the modernization

efforts have provided a favourable social environment for Christianity-related narratives by delegitimizing folk beliefs while retaining the notions of ghosts and evil spirits. Secondly, the modernization efforts have generated a conducive network of story-telling by enhancing people's social contacts while maintaining their family, kinship, and communal ties. Thirdly, the modernization efforts have caused serious social illnesses, such as environmental pollution, sequelae of birth control and a lack of social support, which gives rise to the pervasiveness of life problems.

Chapter Five re-illustrates the embedded approach and discusses its implications for the sociology of religion. It has the potential to contribute to the understanding of religious phenomena from the demand side. This chapter also acknowledges this research's limitations. Comparative studies of different groups at different locations should be done in future to dissect the varieties of religious choices.

1.5 Data Collection

This thesis studies the conversion experiences of a group of middle-aged and elderly women in a rural town in China. I take what my informants say about their conversion as my primary data and supplement them with the field notes I collected through participant observation.

While recounting their experience, my informants may lie, exaggerate and forget. Yet, this research is not to examine the objective value of my informants' responses but what matters to them. As expressed by The Personal Narrative Group (1989, p. 261),

When talking about their lives, people lie sometimes, forget a lot, exaggerate, become confused, and get things wrong. Yet they are revealing truths. These truths don't reveal the past "as it actually was," aspiring to a standard of objectivity. They give us instead the truths of our experiences.

Therefore, studying my informants' conversion through their oral accounts is not so much about what *actually* happened but what happened *to them*. Their oral accounts of conversion could inform not only why they chose Christianity in the past but more importantly why they stick to it at present.

My fieldwork was divided into two sessions and lasted for three months altogether. The first session was in December 2014. During this session, I mainly attended Christianity-related activities, such as weekly gatherings and Christmas celebration, and had random chats with people about their beliefs. In this period, I learned about the general picture of Christianity in Xie Town and built up a strong rapport with some people. The second session was between June and July of 2015. Detailed interviews were conducted during this session.

The interviewees were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. I started with people I know, and then asked them to introduce me to their friends and/or relatives who could tell me more about their experiences with Christianity. During this process, I did not specify that I wanted to interview only middle-aged and elderly women, because I also wanted to learn the situation of Christianity in Xie town, such as its scale, organizations, and activities, which church leaders usually knew better than the common members. Church leaders could also introduce me more “information-rich cases” (Patton, 1990). While deciding my sample size, I was following David A. Snow’s notion of theoretical saturation, “which suggests that when the ethnographer is struck by a sense of familiarity with new data that are being gathered, a point of saturation has been reached” (Bryman, 2001, p. xxiv). In the end, I had semi-structured interviews with 24 baptized women who were aged 50 and above. Most interviewees were interviewed once unless I needed clarification on multiple points. Appendix One shows the list of interviewees and their relevant features.

The interviews were conducted in the local dialect. They were face-to-face and semi-structured. I had my question outline with me (See Appendix Two). At the same time, I remained flexible, adjusting constantly to the interviewees’ responses. Sometimes, when I just started to ask why they believed what they believed, they began to tell me lengthy stories about themselves or others. Audio-recorders were used with their consent. The interviews were not conducted strictly on a one-to-one basis because I want the settings to be as natural as possible (Plummer, 2000). In some cases, the person who introduced me to an interviewee was also present when the latter was interviewed. Sometimes, the interviews were conducted in homes in the presence of family, including the interviewee’s

husband. The open setting helped me strengthen rapport, prompt dialogues and enrich information. Besides, it allowed me to observe how they talked about their beliefs in their everyday life.

Chapter Two: Christianity as a Rational Choice

This chapter discusses the rationality of my interviewees' religious choice. It begins with the religious market in Xie town to contextualise their choices. It then demonstrates, from the respondent's point of view, the benefits and costs of converting to Christianity.

2.1 Religious Market in Xie Town

The concept of the "religious market" is from the market theory of religion (Stark & Finke, 2000; F. Yang, 2006). It argues that people would evaluate the costs and benefits while making religious choices just as what they do when they make any other choices. It takes religions as firms that would compete in a religious market. It is debatable as to what should or should not be included while discussing a religious market. For example, should atheism be considered as a product in the "religious markets"? Here, I limit my discussion of religions to the beliefs in the supernatural. As argued by Stark and Fink (2000, p. 89), "religion is concerned with the supernatural; everything else is secondary." Besides, the only belief system that my informants consider to be in a competitive relationship with Christianity in Xie town is Chinese popular religion, which also involves the supernatural.

Popular religion is a term used to categorize the various practices that involve the supernatural in China. It comprises of geomancy, divination, shamanism, spirit possession, temple festivals, ancestor worship, the worship of numerous deities and so on (Fan, 2003). Popular religion might be influenced by Buddhism, Taoism or Confucianism. But it is not exactly Buddhist, Taoist or Confucian but a compound of different practices related to the supernatural. In the supernatural world, there are Gods (*Shen* 神), ghosts (*Gui* 鬼) and animal spirits (*Jing* 精) (Wolf, 1974). Some of them are good and some are evil. The good beings can be angered and impose misfortunes. The evil beings can also turn good (Harrell, 1974). Gods include the Jade Emperor (*Yuhuang Dadi*, 玉皇大帝), Avalokitesvara (*Guanyin* 观音), Stove God (*Zaoshen* 灶神), Door Gods (*Menshen*, 门神), Prosperity God (*Caishen* 财神), and so on. Some of them are from Buddhist or Taoist

tradition and some are historical figures who were deified after their death. Ghosts are the spirits of the dead. The ghosts of deceased ancestors could protect their descendants. They could also torture the living when not buried or worshipped properly (Feuchtwang, 2010). Animal spirits are animals with magic power. They could possess human beings and inflict sufferings.⁶ Fox spirits and weasel spirits are commonly mentioned animal spirits in Xie town.

Xie town has no temples but some families have altars at home. Placed on the altars are tablets with their ancestors' names and/or deities' pictures, such as that of Avalokitesvara or *Taishang Laojun*. In front of the tablets and/or pictures are bowls used to burn the incense in. People need to burn incense and prepare food for the ancestors and/or deities, on the first and the fifteenth day of each lunar month and on other important days, such as the deities' birthdays. Occasionally, they need to visit the ancestors' tombs and burn joss paper for them as well. Popular religion in Xie town also involves practices such as keeping longevity locks (*Changming Suo* 长命锁)⁷ and smashing *laopeng* (牢盆).⁸ Shamanism is an important dimension of popular religion. According to M. Yang (2015), shamanism in China can be traced back to Shang Dynasty (1700–1027 BCE) or even the Neolithic Age. Shamans are those who are said to be able to communicate with the supernatural. In Xie town, shamans are called Taoist grandma (*Dao Nainai* 道奶奶).⁹ They could cure diseases and exorcise evil spirits through the ritual called “Dancing to the Great Deity” (*Tiaodashen* 跳大神) (M. Yang, 2015). The ritual involves dancing and

⁶ Penny's article (2008) on animal spirits and Falun Gong could provide some information on animal spirits in China.

⁷ “Longevity lock” is a pendent in the shape of a lock, which is given to a baby to express good wishes for his or her longevity. Sometimes, the lock is replaced by colourful threads. When the baby enters adulthood, the lock or the threads should be taken off through a specific ritual, called “unlocking” (*kaisuo*, 开锁). For details on “longevity lock”, see (Wan, 2006).

⁸ *Laopeng* is the container of joss paper in funerals which is placed beside the dead body for mourners to burn joss paper for the dead. When the body is ready to be buried, a family member, usually the eldest son of the dead, is responsible to smash it into halves. If the container is successfully smashed, the living and the dead would expect good fortunes in this and the other world respectively.

⁹ The term “*Dao Nainai*” seems to suggest that most of the local shamans are elderly females. Yet, I also ran into the case of male shamans when one of my interviewees was talking about her husband as once being a shaman. “Is he also called a *Dao Nainai*,” I asked my interviewee. “Yes, that is his title,” she replied. “Shouldn't he be called *Dao Diedie* (Taoist grandpa) instead,” I questioned. She laughed out aloud with agreement. For a more detailed illustration on the gender aspect of shamanism in contemporary China, refer to (M. Yang, 2015)

humming in order to invite Gods, expel evil spirits or call back lost spirits.¹⁰ People would consult a shaman when they want to communicate with the supernatural. When shamans' magic works, the clients would present some gifts, such as a piece of cloth or some money in return to show their gratitude. Some villagers told me previously there used to be six shamans in Xie town and some had died. In 2015, there were only three. Shamanism is illegal in Xie town and is commonly denounced as "superstition" (*Mixin* 迷信). Therefore, shamans are quite secretive. Popular religion in Xie town does not have any Bible-like literature, specific institutions or clear membership. It is what C.K Yang called "diffused religion," which is defined as a religion that has "its theology, cultus, and personnel so intimately diffused into one or more secular social institutions that they become a part of the concept, rituals, and structure of the latter, thus having no significant independent existence" (C. K. Yang, 1961, p. 295).

There are different kinds of Christianity in Xie town, which are represented by different churches, although all of them belong to Protestantism. Three churches are the most well-known: The Three-Self Church (*Sanzi Jiaohui* 三自教会), the House Church (*Jiating Jiaohui* 家庭教会), and the Local Church (*Difang Zhaohui* 地方召会). Some informants also mentioned other churches occasionally, such as the Spirit-Spirit Church (*lingling jiao* 灵灵教)¹¹ and the Eastern Lightning (*Dongfang Shandian* 东方闪电)¹² but they were not as popular as the other three types of churches and I did not run into any member from them during my fieldwork.

The Three-Self Church is a protestant church under the administration of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM). It is the largest church in Xie town, known as the "Big Church" (*Dajiao* 大教), in contrast to other Christian churches which are usually called the "Small Churches" (*Xiaojiao* 小教). The Three-Self Church was formed by the local

¹⁰ Spirit-loss (*Diaohun* 掉魂) refers to the phenomena where people suddenly lose their spirits. It is said to happen often to new-born babies. When a new-born baby suddenly loses his or her vitality or cries abnormally, people would suspect that the baby might have lost the spirit.

¹¹ The Spirit-Spirit Sect was founded in 1983 by an elementary school teacher called Hua Xuehe in northern Jiangsu. Denounced as an evil cult by the government in 1995, Spirit-Spirit's activities are characterized by dancing, faith healing and eschatological warnings (Lian, 2010, p. 215).

¹² The Eastern Lightning was founded in the early 1990s in Henan Province. It was defined as an evil cult by the government in 1995 (Dunn, 2009).

Christian leaders and the county-level TSPM committee in the early 1980s by merging existing sporadic Christian groups. Later, it was divided into three small congregations to facilitate the expansion of gospels under the instruction of the TSPM committee. In 2007, the three congregations merged into a one again. The size of this church expanded from four or five members at the beginning to around 700 regular attendees in 2015. There would be slightly more people in winter when migrant workers in cities return home. At Christmas, the number of attendees could reach between 1000 and 1500. By 2015, about 600 people were baptized. It has sermons every Sunday and smaller gatherings every Wednesday and Friday. It is managed by a committee of nine people, the head of which is a female in her 40s. Among the nine people, three are females including the head. Five of them are responsible for the Bible-teaching while two manage the music ministry. One serves as the accountant. While the head of the committee is paid a few hundred RMB every month, the remaining members volunteer in the committee. The building of the Three-Self Church is a well-designed two-story house, a landmark in Xie town. Besides the church building, the Three-Self Church also has six meeting points (*Juhuidian* 聚会点), usually in members' homes. They are set up mainly to serve those who live far away from the Church building. The followers of the Three-Self Church are encouraged to find their nearest meeting point for the services on Wednesdays and Fridays and go to the Church building for Sunday services. In addition to providing weekly services, the Three-Self Church would visit the sick and the elderly from time to time. The local nursing home is a place that they frequent. Sometimes, they would also donate money to build roads for remote communities.

Ever since the establishment of official churches, there have been “house churches” which commonly refer to those who refuse to join the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA) or TSPM. In Xie town, except for the above Three-Self church, the others could all be called “house churches.” Yet, among these unregistered churches, one specifically identifies itself as a “House Church” and the rest have other names. The House Church in Xie town was initiated by a rural doctor. I would call him Doctor H from now on. He attended the Three-Self Church at first. By coincidence, he met a person from another town who introduced him the concept of “House Church.” The doctor, who was

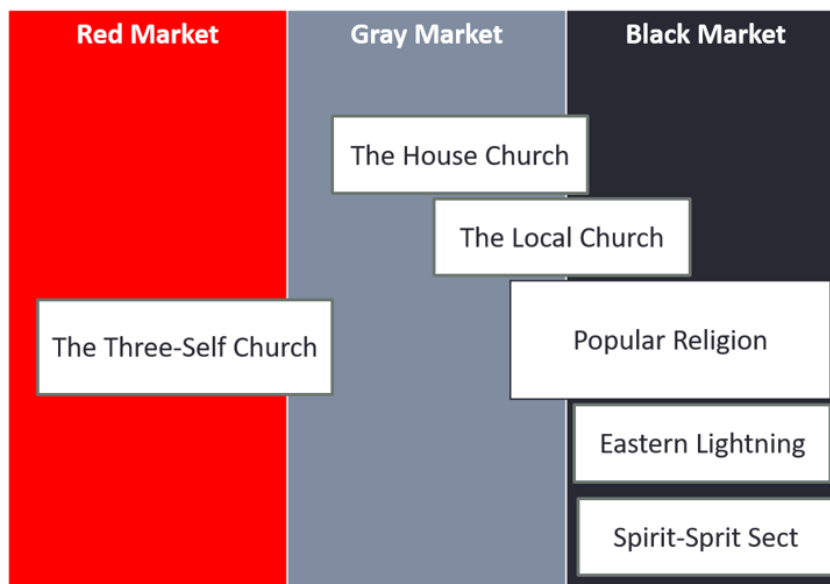
retired, said that the Three-Self Church had become a government institution, wherein the state is the supreme authority and not God. Together with four others, he set up a House Church in 1995. By intentionally choosing not to register with the government, the House Church aims to revere God as their supreme leader. Its membership fluctuates periodically and at its peak it boasted a membership of 40. Like the Three-Self Church, it provides Wednesday, Friday and Sunday Services. In 2015, there were around twenty attendees at its Sunday services. The House Church does not have its own building and the services are conducted in a small brick house provided by one member for free. Doctor H, now in his 70s, would still lead sermons from time to time. A couple in their 30s also help to manage the church.

The Local Church is also called the Little Flock (*Xiaoqun* 小群) or the Lord's Recovery (*Zhude Huifu* 主的恢复). It is a Protestant group outside Chinese official church system. Watchman Nee (*Ni Tuosheng* 倪柝声) initiated the Local Church movement in the 1920s, which upheld Christian unity, dispensationalism, and eschatology (Lian, 2010, pp. 155-178). He was imprisoned in 1952 and died in the prison in 1972. Witness Lee (*Li Changshou* 李常受) was the primary leader of the Local Church movement after Nee's imprisonment. When Lee took the leadership, he started to advocate "shouting" as a way of worship, after which his followers came to be known as the "Shouters" (*Huhanpai* 呼喊派). Provoked by some clashes between the "Shouters" and official churches, the Chinese government denounced the "Shouters" as an evil cult (*Xiejiao* 邪教) in 1983 and started to crack down on them (Lian, 2010, pp. 215-220). Notwithstanding these difficulties, the Local Church movement expands secretly in China. In Xie town, the Local Church appeared in the early 1990s. The Local Church does not have any church building but only meeting points at members' homes. There were at least two meeting points in Xie town when I was doing the fieldwork. They had gatherings every Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Sunday. At each meeting point, there were around fifteen attendees.

F. Yang (2006) developed a triple-market model which categorizes Chinese religions into the red, black and gray markets. The red refers to the religious activities that are endorsed by the government; the black to those that are forbidden by the government; and

the gray to those with ambiguous legal/illegal status. Chinese government acknowledges the legal status of five religions. They are Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism as long as they are willing to join the patriotic associations, which are the China Buddhist Association, Chinese Taoist Association, the China Islamic Association, the Three-Self Patriotic Association (for Protestantism) and the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association. Religious activities of legal religions are also subjected to regulations. As article 36 of the Constitution of the PRC (in effect since 1982) writes, “No one may make use of religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens, or interfere with the educational system of the state.” Religious education for children under age 18 and religious activities outside designated premises are largely prohibited (F. Yang, 2006).

Figure 2: Religious Triple-Market in Xie Town



When this triple-market model is applied to Xie town, the Three-Self Church is the only one that is on the red market despite the fact that some of its activities, such as setting up meeting points outside the church premise, might belong to the

gray market. The House Church is mostly on the gray market. According to Doctor H, the church was harassed once by the local police but it was soon let go because he successfully persuaded the police that the church was not doing any harm. The Local Church is bordering between the gray market and the black market. Their weekday gatherings are usually in the evening and although sometimes they gather in the daytime, they would still have the door closed. But attendees of the Local Church have not complained that they are suppressed by the government. They dismiss the label

“Shouters”, given to them by outsiders. Instead, they want to be identified as the Local Church or the Lord’s Recovery. Popular religion is largely condemned as “superstition” (*Mixin* 迷信), which is different from religion (*Zongjiao* 宗教). Religion refers to Christianity-like systems, supported by church-like institutions and Bible-like holy books, while superstition is commonly associated with folk beliefs. Unlike religions which are legitimized for the most part of Chinese modern history (1840- present),¹³ “superstition” has always been denounced as a cause of Chinese “backwardness”, targeted by social reforms and revolutions. Nowadays, some elements in the popular religion are tolerated by the state, in the name of “tradition” (Feuchtwang, 2010). Some elements, such as shamanism, are still largely on the black market. Figure 2 shows the rough positions of each religious groups in the triple-market model.

In the following sections, I shall demonstrate different facets of my interviewees’ “subjective rationality” (Stark, 1999; Stark & Finke, 2000) in their decision to choose Christianity over popular religion.¹⁴ All of them were baptized. Of the 24 interviewees, 14 were from the Three-Self Church, five from the Local Church, and five from the House Church. 13 interviewees reported having had an altar at home before being converted to Christianity. Seven said they had consulted shamans before.

2.2 Benefits: God’s Blessings

In my interviewees’ accounts, the Christian God is powerful and helpful, which would expel demons (*Mogui* 魔鬼), ghosts (*Gui* 鬼), and other evil spirits (*Xieling* 邪灵)¹⁵ and bring health, daily protection, good luck and eternal life. According to Wei, one of my interviewees,¹⁶ “the more powerful you believe God is, and the more powerful he would be. If you think he is powerless, he would not exert any power on you.”¹⁷

¹³ Religions were not banned except during Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). In contrast, superstition has been condemned throughout China’s modern history.

¹⁴ This thesis will not go into details as to why people would choose to join different groups within Christianity. Nevertheless, it is an important topic that should be addressed in future research.

¹⁵ Those are general terms for evil supernatural forces, which are often used interchangeably.

¹⁶ All the interviewees’ names are pseudonyms.

¹⁷ This is a variant of the daily saying “If you believe it, it is there and otherwise it is not” (*Xin zeyou, Buxin zewu*, 信则有，不信则无). It is also a common saying in other parts of China too (Chau, 2008, p. 68).

For my interviewees, believing in God is to escape the control of demons. In contrast to God, demons are considered to be the roots of bad luck and ill health. In Suen's words, "they are like ferocious lions, searching around for vulnerable spirits." They may be the spirits of animals or the deceased human beings. Twenty years ago, Zhe often cried, screamed and mumbled. She went to the hospital. But no disease was diagnosed. "(If it is not because of physical disease), it must be because of evil spirits," said Zhe. Then she started to go to Church. Gradually Zhe recovered. According to her, although evil spirits might still come back from time to time when she was angry, her situation was much better than before. When I was interviewing Youh, she told me the story of her mother-in-law. Similar to Zhe, Youh's mother-in-law had periodic bouts of mumbling and crying before converting to Christianity. What was different in the case of Youh's mother-in-law was that she knew the haunting spirit. It was the mother-in-law of Youh's mother-in-law (grandmother-in-law). The grandmother-in-law, who was in her 30s, was shot dead by Japanese's soldiers during the Second World War. In the turmoil of the war, she was buried hastily and, therefore, her spirit came back often, crying for houses and clothes by haunting Youh's mother-in-law.¹⁸ To free herself from this spirit, Youh's mother-in-law turned to Christianity. Wang said believing in God served mainly for the "spiritual needs" (*Jingshen Zuoyong* 精神作用).¹⁹ By "spiritual needs", she meant the need to fight against supernatural evils. "Demons go around, haunting this person or that person," said she, "as Christians, we must be able to defeat them." She then cited the example of one neighbour, who fell ill recently, which she thought, was, at least, partly, due to demons' torture. To demonstrate the power of God in exorcising demons, Qian cited the case of Legion from the Bible.²⁰ She said God sent demons onto pigs and drowned them.

Related to exorcism, many turned to Christian God in the hope of being cured of illnesses. Illnesses play an important role in almost every account my interviewees gave me. In most cases, an illness' cause has two layers, one medical and one supernatural. That is to say, there are two explanations and correspondingly two systems of treatments working together. The first one is medical, where people attribute their diseases to

¹⁸ For a discussion of ghosts in Chinese culture, refer to (Feuchtwang, 2010).

¹⁹ Different from many scholars who conceptualize the "spiritual" as the opposite of the "material," here, Wang uses the word "spiritual" to refer to supernatural power.

²⁰ Refer to Mark 5: 1-13, New International Version.

physical disorders and as a result would seek medical treatments, such as seeing a doctor. The second one is supernatural, where people ascribe their sickness to demons' tricks and/or God's selection strategies. As a result, they would turn to supernatural cures, such as shamanism or Christianity. The relationship between the medical and the supernatural is not mutually exclusive but complementary and connected. Zhu was converted because she heard from a relative that "God could cure not only physical diseases but also diseases caused by demons." According to Qian, even when one goes to a hospital, he/she should still pray to God to heal him/her through the hands of doctors.

Zhao got tuberculosis when she was young and later tuberculosis turned into lung cancer. "Previously, I was worshiping demons and could not get cured no matter how," she said. Zhao had a lung surgery at the age of 47 and has been carrying chest tubes since then. "I have been living with the tube for eleven years and people say this is a miracle," said she, "God could beat the demons. When God beats them, they would leave. Security is then granted."

While some encountered God because of their own illness, others sought God when their beloved needed cures. Jiang told the story of her husband who contracted typhoid fever. For two months, they went to many hospitals but did not find a cure for her husband. At last, they went to the best hospital in that area. However, the doctors advised them to give up. At that time, an uncle of her husband came to visit them and suggested them to go to church. "His uncle and his father went for a church gathering on a Wednesday on behalf of him," said Jiang, "exactly on that Wednesday, he got better." Because of the miraculous recovery, her whole family was converted. Similar to Jiang, Li's encounter with God was related to her children. Li had two children and when they were around five years old, they were often sick. Her husband was working far away from home at that time. The caregiving responsibility fell fully on Li. One of Li's friends suggested her to go to church and pray for the children's health. "Isn't the fact that believing in God gives only psychological comfort?" she asked her friend. Yet her friend assured her that praying to God could help. Gradually, Li started to attend the church and witnessed a lot of "miraculous signs." "When I prayed to God, God listened," she said, "and then I believed."

When people were telling stories of miraculous cures, they were telling not only those of their own and their beloved but also those of Bible characters and church fellows. Excited to share God with me, Han gave me the example of the woman who suffered from bleeding for twelve years and was cured immediately after touching Jesus's clothes.²¹ "She sold everything but could not find any relief. Yet when she touched Jesus, God's spirit entered her and she was cleansed," said Han, "Let me tell you, girl, do not research him. You just believe. It is that simple. When you believe, God would reveal himself to you." Wei said one of her church friends suffered from severe stomach pain before believing in God. When she went to the hospital, doctors could not even do a surgery for her immediately because her intestines were rotten. They just gave her some NSAIDs and asked her to come back for a surgery when she got better. After taking the medicine for several weeks, she went to see the doctor again and found the symptoms were all gone. Wei said excitedly "she believed in God. The symptoms were gone. She was cured, (even without a surgery)."

Besides offering to heal, God could also provide daily protection. Yang claimed that "God's word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path."²² She said:

Look, several months ago, a primary-school teacher passed away, only in his 30s. He died only in his 30s. Aging is not the only thing that would kill you. Miseries loiter around, disturbing the world. God comes and drives them away. He selects and loves people. If you follow him, you would defeat every other thing. He could bless you. Although you may not run into any difficulties today or tomorrow, if you do not have him with you, someday, you would find there is no path ahead. Only by following God would your path be brighter and clearer.

Wei said although she could not see or touch God, she could experience him. "Before I believed in God, I was very afraid, always flinching, no matter where I went. Since I believed in him, I am not afraid anymore. People say there are two caring spirits with us, two angels, because of which, I am not afraid anymore," said Wei. Similarly, Zheng expressed that when they run into any difficulty, they would pray, which give them

²¹ From Mark 5: 25-34, New International Version.

²² From (Psalm 119:105, New International Version)

something to rely on. She said, “Especially when you walk at night,²³ if you pray, you would be brave.” Qin said after believing in God, she felt free and comfortable. In contrast, before she was converted, she was often upset and worried, especially about her family's income. Now, she could rely on God and not be bothered. She believed that no matter what they get is God's blessing instead of the result of human endeavours.

In addition to good health and daily protection, God could also grant good luck. Qin felt her family was unjustly treated by her brother-in-law in an inheritance dispute. Yet, to maintain the family ties, her family decided to forgo their grievance and move on. At one night, while she was crying, she saw a dazzling figure in white and she thought it must be the Holy Spirit. Later that year, her family's investment in fishing, which had been one fifth of that of her brother-in-law's, had more returns. She took this as God's blessings. Zheng told the story of her neighbour Tao who was also a Christian. Once, Tao went into the city to buy goods for his grocery store. To carry the goods, he rented a motor-tricycle. Without Tao's notice, a woman secretly drove his tricycle away. When Tao found his tricycle was stolen, he knelt on the road, crying and praying. Passengers told Tao that there was no use of praying since the tricycle had been stolen. Yet, Tao did not give up. Soon, the woman came back and returned his tricycle with all the goods. “The Holy Spirit must have moved her and asked her to return the tricycle,” Zheng said.

More importantly, God promises eternal life. Zheng emphasized that believing in God will bring eternal life. She said: “when we die, we will go to heaven, our home, together with God.” Citing the Bible, Kong said: “God says that as long as you listen to him, he would save you. Whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”²⁴ She repeated, “as long as you believe in him, God will give you the life, everlasting life.” Similarly, Qin pronounced that “rely on God, not humans because human plans are temporary. Only God is eternal.” Han recounted that many years ago, a preacher came to her and told her about eternal life, of which she was very doubtful. Yet, the notion refused to leave her mind. Finally, one night she went to knock at the preacher's door and asked about eternal life. She was then converted. “Why do we have to believe in Jesus? There

²³ Unlike big cities where street lamps and crowds are everywhere, nights in many rural areas are almost in total darkness, except occasional moonlight and sparse lamps. Sometimes, graves are located besides field roads.

²⁴ From (John 3:16, New International Version).

must be an end for us to believe in him. Believing in Jesus, in the words of laypeople, must have some benefits, right? I do not believe in Jesus for nothing. He gives me eternal life and thus I believe in him,” said Han.

2.3 Investments: Following God’s Disciplines

What does being converted to Christianity require? It requires time dedication, behavioural commitments and sometimes the investment of money. In the following paragraphs, I shall demonstrate the investments my informants need to make in order to be a Christian.

To become a Christian, time dedication is needed. People need to dedicate time to attend church gatherings and read the Bible.²⁵ Attending church gatherings is an obligation for my informants to be a Christian. There are gatherings on Sunday, Wednesday, and Friday. Sunday gatherings are considered to be more important than those on weekdays. Attendees of the Local Church also gather on Monday. Each service lasts for around two to three hours. But if they are busy or suffering from health issues, they could be exempted from the gatherings from time to time. The gatherings require the investment of time. For other groups of people, time commitment might be a deterrent to conversion. For example, when asked why there were more females than males in their church, my interviewees often replied that “men are busy.”²⁶ Yet, for my interviewees, a group of middle-aged and elderly women, time dedication is not a problem.

In terms of behaviours, in Xie town, to become a Christian, people need to break away from “superstition”. In contrast to some scholars’ observation that “conversion” for Chinese Christians is only the inclusion of the Christian God into their previous pantheon of folk Gods (Madsen, 2014), Christians in Xie town need to demonstrate a break²⁷ from

²⁵ My interviewees usually read the Bible at church gatherings.

²⁶ It is questionable as to whether “men are busy” could qualify as an explanation of the gender disparity in many churches in China. Theoretically, retired men are not busier than retired women. Further researches are needed on the gender disparity in church attendance. What’s certain here is that “time” is an important dimension of religious investment.

²⁷ Here, “break” has a nuanced meaning. It is a break from their previous belief in that they do not practice both “superstition” and Christianity at the same time. Yet, the “break” does not mean their previous beliefs are totally abandoned.

their previous “superstitious” practices. “Superstitious practices” are defined, by Christian groups, as burning incense, kowtowing, worshiping idols and consulting shamans.

Breaking away from “superstition” is reflected in the ritual of iconoclasm. A lot of my interviewees had altars at home before they were converted to Christianity. On the altars were ancestors’ names and/or deities’ pictures. They invited priests and choir members to burn the altars when they decided to be a Christian. “Could you burn the altar yourself?” I asked my interviewees. They said they could not handle that. The altars were the embodiments of demons. They dared not to overthrow them without the presence of God. Not only must altars be burned, some rituals related to them are supposed to be abolished as well, such as kowtowing, burning joss paper, keeping longevity locks and smashing *laopeng*. Christians could still visit tombs. Instead of kowtowing or burning joss paper, they could buy their ancestors flowers. Alternatively, they could ask their non-Christian family members to burn joss paper on their behalf.

Breaking away from “superstition” is also reflected in the converts’ daily life. My interviewees mentioned “superstition” often. Yet, when I wanted to pursue that topic, they showed caution and reluctance. Cao warned me that it was not good for my health to pry into “superstition” while showing interest in Christianity. She said to me “you would be torn up, just like an official who would be torn up by two parties (if he/she is indecisive about which party to choose). People say you would die soon if you are pulled by two parties (*Liangtou Zhuai, Side Kuai* 两头拽，死得快).” During the interview with Zhou, I learned that one of her relatives was a shaman and just lived nearby. I was quite excited and wanted to ask Zhou to introduce me the relative. Yet, she refused, telling me it was not good for me to talk to her.

In addition, Christians are required to follow God’s commandments of not stealing, not robbing, not gossiping, not gambling, not coveting, being tolerant and respecting the elderly.²⁸ For example, Wei said that as Christians, they could not covet others’ belongings, no matter what it was. When they seized others’ belongings, they would feel uneasy, even if it was something as small as a chilli or onion. She then made a comparison of imprisonment and conversion by arguing that imprisonment could not stop

²⁸ The commandments are summarized from my interviewees’ responses.

a thief from committing further crimes but conversion to Christianity could, because God would discipline him or her. When I was interviewing Wu, she recounted the catechesis before her baptism: “Do not insult your father-in-law and mother-in-law. Be nice to your sisters-in-law.” She told me proudly that she had never had serious disputes with her in-laws. Some key debates around Christianity in other countries, such as abortion and LGBT, were never mentioned by my interviewees.²⁹ They were not even considered as an issue.

In Xie town, regarding Christianity, the monetary aspect of religious investment is not obvious. There is no membership fee and no requirement on how often or how much attendees should donate. The concept of the tithe is not popular. This is especially true for the House Church and the Local Church as their leaders serve on a voluntary basis. They do not need money to maintain church premises either since they do not have any formal premise. Only on special occasions, the leaders will call for donations, such as when they need to hold a feast to welcome preachers from other towns. The Three-Self church does not charge membership fees either but attendees would donate money to the church, during festivals, such as at Christmas, and when they have received God’s blessings. When the Church is in need of money to build or maintain its premises, it will also call for donations. The two-story building the Three-Self Church owns could not be possible without its members’ donations. Overall, donations to the church are voluntary in Xie town.

2.4 Conclusion: Christianity Vs. Popular Religion

The Christian God can expel demons and bring good health, daily protection, good luck and eternal life. In comparison, Gods in popular religion might be able to provide healing, daily protection, and good luck but none of them would promise an afterlife that is immediately free from sufferings. The afterlife in popular religion is featured by purgatory

²⁹ Heterogeneity and the rights, or sometimes, the obligation, of abortion are taken for granted in Xie town.

and transmigrations.³⁰ Transmigration also means recurrent sufferings. Only a small number of people could achieve nirvana or become Gods in the heaven.

In terms of religious investments, Christians are required to attend Church gatherings, break away from “superstition” and be a good person. Monetary investment is not compulsory. Popular religion requires its practitioners to burn incense and joss paper and prepare food for their ancestors and deities on the first and fifteenth day of each month, as well as at festivals, which involves expenses. They also need to pay if they want to consult a shaman.

Shamans are often described as greedy and demanding. For example, Zhou said once she was suffering from serious dizziness. She went to consult a shaman and the shaman told her that her disease was because she did not unlock her longevity lock at the right time. However, even after the ritual of unlocking, Zhou did not recover. The shaman again recommended other treatments, which required “money donations.” Every time when the treatment did not work, the shaman would say it was due to insufficient donations. Annoyed by the shaman’s greed, Zhou turned to Christianity in 2001, which was, according to her, free from human manipulation. Shamans have masters and junior shamans are supposed to send gifts to their masters from whom they learned shamanism. Suen said her mother-in-law was once a junior shaman. One year, her mother-in-law did not prepare gifts for her master. The master then sent fox spirits to torture her family. Both Suen’s mother-in-law and daughter-in-law were affected. They would often rave, cry and roll uncontrollably on the ground. They were not relieved from the demons until they were converted to Christianity.

The biggest deterrents for my interviewees from practicing popular religion are its risks. The risks include being a bad citizen and being punished in the long run. In the government’s discourse, popular religion is defined as “superstition” and practising superstition is against the government’s regulations. It is not so much that worshipping ancestors or consulting a shaman would result in imprisonment.³¹ More importantly,

³⁰ This is quite simplified. For a more detailed account of Chinese popular religion, refer to ((Feuchtwang, 2001).

³¹ The government would not imprison people who worship ancestors or consult shamans unlike what it did during the Cultural Revolution. At most, if the government receives reports from villagers about shamans,

governments' regulations serve as a kind of reference for people to judge what's right and what's wrong. Therefore, the contrast between Christianity and popular religion is that being a Christian means being a good person and practising popular religion means being a bad citizen.

Practising popular religion also risks long-term sufferings. From my interviewees' point of view, supernatural beings other than the Christian God are demons. Worshipping demons might bring temporary relief from some problems but would incur long-term sufferings. For example, Yang said her husband was a shaman before. He even performed healing rituals for others. Yet, she was often sick at that time. Later, she learned about Christianity from her neighbours. She went home and destroyed her family's altar. She told her husband to stop the healing rituals because those rituals would incur demons. She blamed her own sickness to her husbands' "demonic practices." When I was interviewing Zhou, at one point, she mentioned the greediness of a shaman she knew. Qian, another Christian, commented resentfully: "she would go to hell in future. Yes, fried in oil (*xia diyu, shide, xia youguo* 下地狱, 是的, 下油锅)."

To summarize, choosing Christianity over popular religion is a rational choice for my interviewees. The benefits of being a Christian are enormous and the investments are in line with the local morality. In comparison, popular religion does not promise an afterlife that is immediately free from sufferings. Besides, practising popular religion could be very costly, especially when the shamans are greedy and demanding. The risks of practising popular religion are also huge, which include being a bad citizen and long-term sufferings.

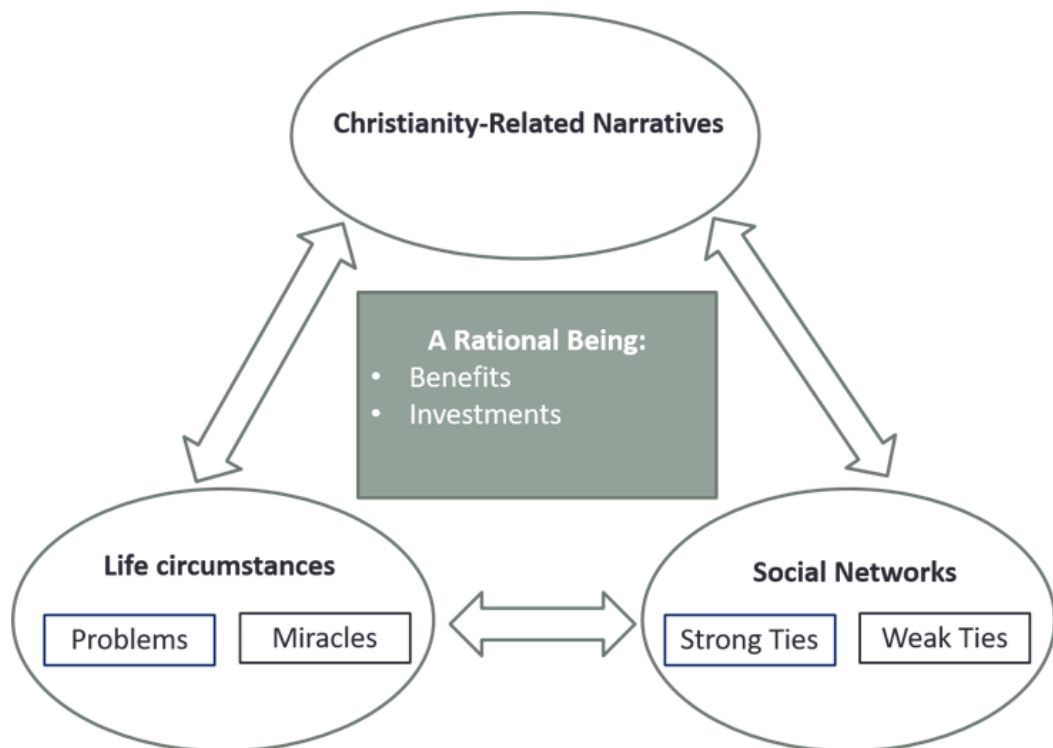
Yet, why do the benefits, investment, and risks described above make sense to them? Why do they accept the idea that the Christian God could bring blessings instead of misfortunes? In order to address these questions, the following chapters will move beyond individuals' rationality and locate their rationality in the local narratives, life circumstances, social networks and the larger political and historical context.

they would incarcerate the shamans for a while in order to "criticize and educate" (*Piping Jiaoyu* 批评教育) them. It is the same with attendees of unregistered churches. The government would only incarcerate the leaders for a while, leaving the common attendees alone.

Chapter Three: Rationality as Embedded

Chapter Two has demonstrated the religious market in Xie town and my interviewees' rationality in choosing Christianity over popular religion. This chapter examines how the rationality is embedded in Christianity-related narratives, life circumstances and social networks. Figure 3 illustrates their relationship.

Figure 3: Factors in My Interviewees' Conversion



I was suffering from chest pain. My niece came to visit me. It was very hard for me to speak. She asked what happened. I told her that I was sick. She asked if I went to see a doctor. I told her that I did but no disease was diagnosed. ‘Why not go to church?’ she suggested. I told her that I could not walk that far. She said I could walk as long as I pray. ‘Really?’ I asked. She assured me that I could walk if I pray God to let me walk. On that Sunday, I walked to the church which was four kilometres from my home. I went to the church on foot. Gradually, I recovered bit by bit. Since then, I have believed in God.

The above excerpt is from Chen, one of my interviewees. Her account also resonates with the other interviewees. It started with a problem, in the form of an illness. Then a person from Chen’s network came and told Chen that Christian God could help with her problem (Christianity-related narratives). Chen followed the suggestion and recovered gradually (miracles). She was, therefore, convinced of the Christian God’s power. Chen’s account shows the interaction of Christianity-related narratives, social networks, and life circumstances in her conversion journey. The following provides a deeper analysis of each of them.

3.1 Christianity-Related Narratives

The market theory of religion argues that religion is subjected to people’s rational choice. The essence of rational choice is the maximization of rewards over costs. In daily life, rewards are always limited in supply and people need religions because religions could provide otherworldly rewards (Stark & Finke, 2000). My respondents were making rational choices when they chose Christianity because the rewards were exorcism, health, good luck and eternal life and the costs were only praying, attending church, breaking away with “superstition” and being a good person.

Yet, for Christianity to be a rational choice, there must be a framework that could legitimize it to be one. As explicated by Bruce (1993), “economic or rational choice models of behaviour depend on us knowing what the rational choice is.” In other words, before calculating the rewards and costs prescribed by Christianity, my interviewees must accept its prescription of rewards and costs. For example, to embrace the rewards of

exorcism and eternal life, my interviewees must accept that there are ghosts to be exorcised and there is a heaven to be pursued. Besides, they must accept the Christian God can actually exorcise ghosts and lead them into the heaven.

As a result, an interpretation of religious choices purely based on the rational choice theory is not sufficient. The examination of a certain kind of rationality must be accompanied by the examination of the framework that conditions that rationality.

To understand the framework of a rational choice is to understand the narratives around that choice. In *the Postmodern condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Lyotard (1984) categorises knowledge into two kinds: scientific and narrative. Although the two types of knowledge seem to be governed by different principles, Lyotard argues that both types need to resort to narratives for legitimization. According to Lyotard, the reason why narratives could legitimize themselves is that

Narratives define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are themselves a part of that culture, they are legitimized by the simple fact that they do what they do. (1984, p. 23)

Here “narrative” is used interchangeably with “story”. It refers to a consequential account of events (Lawler, 2008). As many researchers have demonstrated, narratives are not just what people told but also what they lived (McAdams, 1993; Ricoeur, 2002). In the context of the present study, Christianity is legitimized as a rational choice by Christianity-related narratives. Christianity-related narratives refer to stories on how the Christian God has helped or will help with life problems. Christianity-related narratives play a central role in my respondents’ experiences with Christianity. They make sense of their experience through those narratives and it is often through narratives that my respondents encountered and engaged in Christianity.

A typical Christianity-related narrative is like what Chen’s niece told Chen: if you pray and go to church, you would be helped by the Christian God. Chen’s account of her own experience again becomes another narrative for other potential converts: I prayed and went to church and my illness was cured. There are many similar narratives: demons were exorcized, misfortunes got avoided and eternal life would be granted.

The sequence of events in a narrative is not random. They are arranged to make a point. As Franzosi (1998) notes, “the events in the sequence must be bound together by some principles of logical coherence.” Steph Lawler (2008, p. 34) explicates the relationship of events in a narrative lucidly:

Earlier events are understood as causing later events, but of course, not all earlier events are told. There is no narrative that can tell everything. What is told is selected because it is understood as having a meaningful place in the narrative. But it is then given meaning through its very inclusion in the narrative.

In Chen’s narrative, a reward was granted in the form of resolving a problem after the actor conformed to the Christian God’s disciplines (e.g. praying and going to church). Thus, the reward was explained by conforming to God’s disciplines. “Events in a story project a desirable or undesirable future. They make a normative point,” notes Polletta et al. (2011, p. 111). The point of Christianity-related narratives is that “if you follow the Christian God’s disciplines, you will get his rewards.” Those narratives are very attractive, especially for those who are in urgent need for exorcism, health, good luck and eternal life.

3.2 Social Networks

Christianity-related narratives need to be told by narrators. Social networks are important in my interviewees’ conversion because they could convey, endorse and recreate Christianity-related narratives. It was through their social networks that my interviewees learned about and started to trust the Christian God. The ninth column of Appendix One shows the list of people who introduced Christianity to my interviewees.

Social networks serve to convey narratives. My interviewees learned about Christianity through their family members, relatives and neighbours, who acted as the narrators of Christianity-related stories. While talking about narrative knowledge, Lyotard (1984) gives the example of story-telling among the Cachinahua.³² He argues that a Cachinahua does not need to be authoritative to tell a Cachinahua story. He or she could tell the story just because he/she has heard it himself. The narrators function to actualize the narratives

³² Here Lyotard is citing the example from (D'Ans, 1978)

by recounting them and listening to them as well as “recounting themselves through them,” in Lyotard’s words, “by assigning themselves the posts of narratee and diegesis as well as the post of narrator” in the “play” of their institutions (1984, p. 23).

Each time when narrators tell a story, they are legitimizing the story, which they could do not only through authority but also through testimony—the Christian God could solve your problem because *my* problem was solved by him. For example, Suen’s mother-in-law and sister-in-law were once possessed by evil spirits. In order to escape from the possession, they turned to Christianity. Suen believed in God because she was told of her mother-in-law and sister-in-law’s possession story. Her trust in them led her to believe that the story was true. This possession story was later Suen’s guideline in her Christianity-related practices. For instance, rationalizing her strong commitment to Christianity, she said, “my family was haunted by demons before. If we stopped believing in God and stopped chanting and praying, we would suffer. Demons would come back immediately.”

If narratives need to be legitimized by narrators, does it mean they cannot legitimize themselves as the last section suggests? Narratives *can* legitimize themselves because they themselves could set rules about legitimacy. Yet, the process of legitimization must be done through narrators. My point is that narrators and narratives are indispensable for each other. They are mutually enabling. Narratives could not only legitimize themselves but also legitimize narrators. For example, in the case of story-telling in Cachinahua, a Cachinahuan is a Cachinahuan because he/she could tell Cachinahua stories. That’s to say, he/she must know the rules of the Cachinahua to be a Cachinahuan and the rules are embodied in the Cachinahua stories. At the same time, narratives need to be legitimized by narrators through narration. A Cachinahua story is Cachinahua because it is told by a Cachinahuan. When anthropologists, such as D’Ans (1978) or philosophers, such as Lyotard (1984) himself, want to cite a Cachinahua story, they must cite a Cachinahuan. A Cachinahuan could legitimize a Cachinahua story because he/she is a Cachinahuan. That’s to say, the Cachinahuan’s authority comes from his/her authenticity of being a Cachinahuan. The same applies to the scientific discourses Lyotard (1984) has discussed.

A scientist must be able to speak scientific discourses to be a scientist and a scientific discourse must be acknowledged by scientists to be a scientific discourse.

Narration is not only a form of legitimation but also a process of recreation. Narrators do not only transmit but also transform stories. Thus, narrators also function as the creator of narratives. They serve as a knot of information-transmission but no information is transmitted without being changed at the same time. Because of the recreation involved, a “Western” Christianity is gradually transformed into a “Chinese Christianity” (Madsen, 2003) and becomes legible as well as accessible to my interviewees. In Lyotard’s words:

One is always located at a post through which various kinds of messages pass. No one, not even the least privileged among us, is ever entirely powerless over the messages that traverse and position him at the post of sender, addressee, or referent. (1984, p. 15)

In terms of my interviewees’ experience with Christianity, they learned Christianity was a good choice from their social contacts who justified Christianity as a good choice through Christianity-related stories. When the social contacts were telling Christianity-related stories, they were legitimizing and creating those stories as well— “You know A’s problem was solved after being converted. B’s problem was solved as well. *I* also feel much better after believing in God.” The time when my informants became a Christian, they learned Christianity-related stories—what should be told, what should be muted and in what way something should be told—and they went on to tell others their own versions of Christianity-related stories— “You know A’s problem was solved after being converted. B’s problem was solved as well. C’s problem was mitigated. *I* also feel much better after believing in God.”

There are two types of narrators in my interviewees’ conversion journey: people from their strong ties, such as their family members and relatives, and people from the weak ties, such as their neighbours. Here strong ties refer to close relationships and weak ties, loose relationships (M. S. Granovetter, 1973). Because of the trust embodied in strong ties, it is easier to understand why my interviewees are willing to believe in the stories told by their family members and relatives. Wei was converted to Christianity after her mother. Her mother had a good experience being a Christian, and thus asked her children to be

converted as well. Wei said, “how could your parents throw you into fire pits (*Huokeng* 火坑), right? She (her mother) says that it is good and I believe in her.” Wei’s trust in her mother led her to trust the Christianity-related narratives her mother told.

There are also cases where weak ties play an important role in my interviewees’ conversion journey. Many of my interviewees learned about Christianity from their neighbours, to whom they did not have a strong attachment. For example, Yang’s husband was a shaman and Yang practised popular religion as well before. At that time, she was often sick. One day, her daughter, about seven years old, told her that some people in her neighbourhood were singing. To satisfy her daughter’s curiosity, Yang accompanied her and visited the singing neighbours. The neighbours told Yang about Jesus and she was later converted. Her health also improved.

Yang and her husband were in a good relationship before she was converted. Her tie to her husband was apparently stronger than the neighbours. In fact, when Yang was telling me her experience, she did not even mention the neighbours’ names. Nor did she express any attachment to them. Why did Yang trust the neighbours instead of her own husband? Why did weak ties win over strong ties? The answers lie in Christianity-related narratives and life circumstances.

Christianity-related narratives prescribe that as long as you obey God’s disciplines, you will get his rewards. The rewards include good health and eternal life. The investments are just obeying God’s disciplines. The potential loss (L) is low and the potential gain (G) is enormous. Suppose the possibility that Yang’s neighbours were telling truth was p . According to Coleman, as long as $p/1-p$ is greater than L/G , it would be a rational choice for the actor to accept the deal (Coleman, 1990, pp. 91-116). In Yang’s case, L/G was extremely low and, therefore, the trustworthiness she required from her neighbours (p) to accept Christianity was low as well. In other words, Yang would not lose much even if her neighbours were lying. What she needed to do to become a Christian was just joining her neighbours’ activities and breaking away from popular religion. In contrast, if she refused her neighbours’ offer, she would lose the possibility of being healthy and happy ever after. Having conflicts with her husband was a potential cost. But the cost was almost nothing compared to the possibility that both of them could receive good health, daily

protection, good luck and eternal life. After Yang was converted, she destroyed her family's altar for popular religion. Yang and her husband had some fights at the beginning but her husband was later converted to Christianity too.

Yang's life circumstance also explains why weak ties won over strong ties in her case. When she was practicing popular religion, she was often sick, which forced her to seek explanations and solutions. Her neighbours offered an explanation by saying that her sickness was due to her superstitious and demonic worship and suggested a solution, namely, turning to Christianity. When she was converted, her health indeed improved. Therefore, she was convinced. The following section addresses the influence of life circumstances on my informants' rationale of conversion in more detail.

While talking about the influence of social networks on religious conversion, the attention is often paid to strong ties. As argued by Stark and Finke (2000, p. 117), "conversion is seldom about seeking or embracing an ideology; it is about bringing one's religious behaviour into alignment with that of one's friends and family members". While acknowledging the importance of strong ties, the section also demonstrates that in certain cases, weak ties are also important. Both strong ties and weak ties could influence an actor's religious choice. But neither of them have a determinist role. The actor's choice also depends on life circumstances and the narratives his/her networks tell.

3.3 Life Circumstances

Narratives are in constant interaction with life circumstances. My informants' conversion is often galvanized by their life circumstances. Two kinds of life circumstances are especially salient: life problems and miracles.

Life problems play an important role in my informants' conversion journey. They could objectify the crisis of previous narratives and initiate the search for new narratives. I am following David Smilde to use "life problems" to refer to "a persisting sense of 'dis-ease' in an individual experience" (Chesnut, 1997; Smilde, 2005). They include health issues, relationship problems, economic difficulties, emotional stress and so on. In a different context, there might be different dominant problems. Smilde's research on

evangelicalism in Venezuela found that among his respondents, namely, 55 men, 85% of their conversions to evangelicalism were “preceded by addictive behaviour, involvement in violence, relationship problems, or problems of personal adjustment”(Smilde, 2005). The eighth column of Appendix One shows the list of life problems which were signified as important in my respondents’ accounts. 20 out of the 24 interviewees reported that life problems initiated their participation in Christian activities. The dominant problem my interviewees recounted was poor health, either that of their own or their family members.

As many of my informants expressed, they turned to Christianity when they failed to get cures after consulting shamans and/or doctors. Chen’s case at the beginning of this chapter shows that she started to go to church when doctors could not provide any clear diagnoses regarding her condition. Qin worshipped Avalokitesvara at first. Her family even gilded the Avalokitesvara picture at home, which took more than 1000 Yuan. One year later, their house caught a fire, which destroyed almost all their belongings, including the Avalokitesvara picture. Qin said:

We believed in her (the Avalokitesvara). She should have protected us. She should have at least protected herself. But she was burned by the fire. Thus, she was not real. She could not offer protection.

Qin said she cried a lot because of the fire. On the second day after the fire disaster, Qin’s father-in-law suggested Qin’s family to turn to Christianity and Qin became a Christian thereafter. The fire disaster objectified the impotency of Avalokitesvara, which galvanized Qin’s family to seek another God.

Besides life problems, miracles are another type of life circumstances which have greatly influenced my informant’s conversion. My informants became deeply convinced of Christianity-related narratives when their problems got resolved or relieved after following God’s disciplines: illnesses got cured, demons were exorcized and terrible accidents were avoided.³³ The last column of Appendix One shows a list of miracles my informants experienced after following God’s disciplines.

³³ Those localized versions of Christianity-related narratives have biblical references. As illustrated in Matthew 11:5, “The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.”

Stark and Fink (2000, p. 109) define miracles as “desirable effects believed to be caused by the intervention of a god or gods in worldly matters” and they argue “confidence in religious explanations will increase to the degree that miracles are credited to the religion.” Their argument could be substantiated by my case.

Yet, why have miracles happened? Besides a supernatural explanation, what other explanations could sociologists offer? Here, I suggest understanding miracles in the context of miracle-related narratives. First, my informants learned of Christianity-related narratives on God’s blessings, which provided them a framework to interpret their life situations. When they turned to Christianity, they would expect their own life to follow the storyline prescribed by those narratives. Thus, when they obeyed God’s disciplines and good fortunes happened later, they would ascribe the good fortune to the fact that they have obeyed God’s disciplines as suggested by the narratives they learned earlier. Miracles happened and God was verified.

Narratives shape not only the interpretation of reality but also reality itself. As expressed by a common saying in China, “If you believe in it, it would be efficacious (*Xinze ling*, 信则灵).” A certain type of narratives could produce the consequences that correspond to the narratives, which is known as “the Thomas theorem” in sociology. “The Thomas theorem” (Merton, 1995) argues that “if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, p. 572). Merton (1948) further explains this concept³⁴ by saying that:

Men respond not only to the objective features of a situation, but also, and at times primarily, to the meaning this situation has for them. And once they have assigned some meaning to the situation, their consequent behaviour and some of the consequences of that behaviour are determined by the ascribed meaning.

³⁴ The reason why I am using “the Thomas theorem” instead of Merton’s own concept, “the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy” is that I want to avoid the negative connotation that goes with Merton’s own concept because Merton (1948) defines “the self-fulfilling prophecy” as “a *false* definition of the situation evoking a new behaviour, which makes the originally false conception come *true* [emphasis original].” I would argue whether a definition of a situation is true or false depends on the narrative a person uses to judge it. In the context of this study, whether a religious interpretation of a life situation is true or false depends on the narratives a judge use to judge the situation.

A certain interpretation of the reality would give rise to a certain action which would shape the reality in the direction of the interpretation. Scott (2010) has given a detailed account on how miraculous cures happen by examining healing stories associated with Catholic pilgrimages. He argues that physical pathologies are not only related to bodily dysfunctions and “culture, beliefs, cognitions, emotions, social relationships, and physical environment” also play a central role in the onset, course, and outcome of illnesses (Scott, 2010, p. xviii). The confidence in being saved, the religious rituals such as singing and sharing, and the communal support received from attending churches could all contribute to a person’s physical and psychological well-being. Many of my interviewees reported that their health status improved after believing in God. For example, Qin said she would often be worried and sick before. Belief in God gave her relief from worries, such as the worry about family incomes, which made her happy and relaxed. “Leaving everything to God,” she said, “Whatever you get is granted by God. If God does not grant something, you could not get it no matter how hard you try. Thank God.” She was seldom sick after that. Miracles happened and God was verified.

Miracles are the proof of God’s existence and benevolence, which often carry significant meanings for the believers. It would be arrogant and cruel to say miracles are only a “self-fulfilling prophecy” (Merton, 1948). Here, what I am doing is just to put up with another explanation while acknowledging the explanation could not prove itself “truer” than a theological one.

What if miracles have not happened? As asked by Stark and Wang (2015, p. 101), “if rural people convert because of ill-health, why do they remain in the church after they are not healed?” Besides the narratives to attract people to church, Christianity in Xie town also has narratives to retain people in church even though miracles have not happened.

When asked whether there were times when God did not help them no matter how hard they prayed, my interviewees usually responded with a “Yes.” Immediately, they added, “but you have to seek reasons.” They should ask themselves whether they committed crimes or whether they slackened in religious investment. “You must seek reasons,” Zhang said, “it must be because what you said or done violated God’s wishes.” “How

could you fulfil God's requirements all the time," said Zhu, "Even Xi Jinping³⁵ sometimes faces resistance. Didn't you watch the news? How could you be perfect all the time?"

When villagers did not witness miracles, they might strengthen their religious commitment, such as going to church more frequently. It is just like putting more investments to get more rewards. Some of them might embark on new journeys of seeking alternatives. If the Three-Self church did not help them, they might try out the House Church, the Local Church or other sects. In Xie town, I ran into cases where people had tried out different religious choices, such as consulting a shaman and attending different churches.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has addressed the importance of Christianity-related narratives, social networks and life circumstances in my informants' choice of Christianity.

Christianity-related narratives serve to legitimize Christianity as a rational choice. Social networks convey, legitimize and recreate those narratives. Christianity-related narratives and narrators are necessary conditions for my informants' conversion. For Christianity to be a rational choice, there must be favourable narratives and narratives must be told by narrators. Life problems and miracles are catalysts of my informants' conversion. Life problems could objectify the crises of previous narratives and initiate the search for new narratives. Miracles serve to confirm the effectiveness of the new narratives.

My informants' choice of Christianity is rational in that it involves cost-benefit analysis. Yet, the rationality is embedded in local narratives, concrete networks and specific life circumstances. Local narratives prescribe what are the benefits and costs. Networks control what kind of narratives are told and what are muted. Life circumstances are the testbeds, which invalidate failed narratives and certify successful ones. The three factors are interdependent and none of them has a determinist effect on an actor's choice. For my interviewees, conversion is not abrupt and one-time. Instead, it involves the

³⁵ Chinese president

constant interactions of the three factors. Becoming a Christian is not the end of their conversion journey either. When a certain type of Christianity-related narratives fails, they would seek new narratives. That's why religious institutions, such as churches, are crucial. They could constantly provide new narratives and respond to people's doubts.

Life circumstances, narratives and networks do not exist in a vacuum. They are embedded in specific political and historical contexts. Chapter Four will examine how the political and historical context of contemporary China has contributed to my informants' conversion to Christianity.

Chapter Four: Modernization and Christian Conversion

Chapter Three has demonstrated the interactions of Christianity-related narratives, life circumstances and social networks in my informants' conversion journey. The interactions do not exist in a vacuum but in a specific context. This chapter locates my interviewees' choice of Christianity in the large setting of Chinese modernization. It analyses how China's modernization efforts have generated a contributing context for their conversion to Christianity.

4.1 Chinese Modernization

In the 1840s, the fiasco in the Opium War³⁶ crashed China's isolationism, after which China embarked on its modernization (Soo, 1989). Here, modernization refers to the transformation from a traditional society to a modern one (F. Cao, 2009). The first several attempts at modernization were built on the Western model, which included technological modernization, political modernization, and cultural modernization. After being defeated by Britain, China started to reflect on its failure and launched the Self-Strengthening Movement (*Yangwu yundong* 洋务运动), which aimed to make the country strong (*Ziqiang* 自强) and rich (*Qiufu* 求富). The movement concerned mainly the adoption of western science and technology, especially in the military, for which it set up several factories and schools. Yet, in 1895, China again experienced a fiasco in the First Sino-Japanese War, which marked the failure of its technological modernization.

Chinese elites then began to review its institutional defects and initiated political modernization. In 1898, Guangxu emperor launched "the Hundred Days' reform" (*Wuxu bianfa* 戊戌变法), with the assistance of the reformists, such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao. This reform sought to establish a constitutional monarchy but was strangled in its cradle by the conservatives at that time. In 1912, Chinese revolutionists led by Sun Yat-sen overthrew the Qing Empire and established the Republic of China (1912-1949). It

³⁶ The war between the United Kingdom and the Qing Empire over trade disputes.

strived to achieve freedom, prosperity and national strength through comprehensive democracy and capitalist economy.

Things did not change much even with a modern state. Intellectuals in China thus called for a third attempt: cultural modernization, which was represented by the New Culture Movement (*Xin Wenhua Yundong* 新文化运动) and the May Fourth movement (*Wusi Yundong* 五四运动). The movements advocated a cultural transfiguration that aimed to transform Chinese traditional culture, represented by Confucianism and folk religions into a modern one, characterized by Western democracy and science.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, China embarked on another attempt: A Soviet model of modernization, featured with the one-party system and command economy. To advance political and economic development, the government organized people into production teams (*Shenchaidui* 生产队) and established the People's Commune (*Renmin Gongshe* 人民公社) in 1958, in which citizens worked together and shared food in public canteens.³⁷ Despite its imperfect application, the Commune System was not fully abolished until 1983 in rural areas.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, China outlined the strategy of 'Four Modernizations'-- that of agriculture, industry, science and technology, and national defence.³⁸ In the late 1970s, Deng Xiaoping rose to power and engineered another attempt of modernization: Chinese model of modernization. It was a combination of the command economy and free market, which further promoted the idea of "Four Modernizations" (Hsü, 1982, pp. 92-117). In 1977 and 1978 respectively, the idea of "Four Modernizations" was included in the CCP and State constitutions. For rural areas, agricultural modernization was very influential. And it involved mainly two changes (Soo, 1989). One was to introduce modern agricultural tools, such as machines and agricultural chemicals.

³⁷ In many areas, the public canteens could not sustain themselves and were closed within two or three years. "Collective production" also adopted some incentives, such as *Gongfen* (公分), to encourage people to work harder. *Gongfen* is a measurement of working hours and efficiency, which was recorded by the leaders of production teams and could be used to exchange food.

³⁸ Zhou Enlai, the first premier of PRC, was generally credited as the initiator of the "Four modernizations" (Bramall, 2008, p. 136; Hsü, 1982, pp. 92-117). According to Hsü, Zhou's advocacy did not lead to any concrete impacts due to the limitation of its historical context. The idea of the "Four modernization" did not become influential until Deng further developed it and put it into practice.

The agricultural chemicals included chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides. The other was to introduce the Household-Responsibility System. The system abolished its predecessor, the Commune System. Instead of collective production in the Commune System, the Household-Responsibility System contracted the collective land to individual households. As long as they could submit certain amounts of products as rents, they were free to keep the surplus for household use or sale.

As illustrated above, since the late nineteenth century, China has experienced different models of modernization: The Western model, the Soviet model, and the Chinese model. In practice, those models are not clearly divided in time, as a later model can be a continuation, instead of an absolute break-up, with the previous one. Besides, despite those modernization attempts, tradition has never been fully eliminated but always revoked and reproduced. The modernization efforts have resulted in a contributing context for my informants' conversion on three levels. Firstly, they have provided a favourable social environment for Christianity-related narratives by delegitimizing folk beliefs while retaining the notions of ghosts and evil spirits. Moreover, they have generated a conducive network of story-telling by increasing people's social contacts while maintaining their family, kinship, and communal ties. In addition, they have created social illnesses, such as environmental pollution, sequelae of birth control and a lack of social support, which gives rise to pervasive life problems.

4.2 Favourable Environment for Christianity-Related Narratives

Since the 1850s, in religious management, China has largely operationalized a Christian-secular model (Goossaert & Palmer, 2011, p. 73) that advocates the eradication of “superstition”, religious institutionalization and the separation between religion and politics. It is part of China's efforts to become a modern country. In the following paragraphs, I shall illustrate how the modernization efforts have provided a favourable environment for Christianity-related narratives, which in turn resulted in the popularity of the religion.

First, the modernization efforts have solidified the differentiation between “religion” and “superstition”, which grants Christianity legitimacy while delegitimizing popular

religion. The notions of “religion” (*Zongjiao* 宗教) and “superstition” (*Mixin* 迷信) did not appear in China until the end of the nineteenth century when scholars introduced those notions to China from the West via Japan. Although the compound *Zongjiao*, which was associated with Buddhism, appeared in usage from the Six Dynasties period (220-589) onward, it did not have the modern meaning of a distinct religious system. At that time, it referred to a school of thought or teachings. The modern use of *Zongjiao* appeared first in a maritime trade treaty between Japan and Germany to translate the German word *religionsübung* and the English phrase “exercise of religion” (Chen, 2002, p. 48; Nedostup, 2001, p. 23; M. M.-h. Yang, 2008, p. 11). Later the word *Zongjiao* was widely used by late Qing reformers, such as Liang Qichao. The modern use of *Zongjiao* was closely related to Christianity and implicitly took Christianity, more specifically Protestantism, as the standard model of religion. The term *Mixin* was from the modern Japanese *Meishin*, which first appeared in Japanese writing in 1889 to refer to idolatrous traditions like magic and exorcism (Nedostup, 2001, p. 26). It was Liang Qichao, the reformist in the late Qing, first publicly discussed the distinctions between *Zongjiao* and *Mixin* by saying that the moral teachings of *Zongjiao* should be retained but the *Mixin*, i.e. superstitious, part should be discarded (M. M.-h. Yang, 2008, p. 12). The Chinese adoption of the word, religion (*Zongjiao*) implied a denunciation and suppression of traditional religious practices.

Under the influence of the Western Enlightenment ideas, after the 1900s, Chinese popular religion, such as the worship of local deities, divinations, geomancy, and exorcism, became the targets of denunciations. They were stigmatized as “superstition” so as to be separated from “religion” which referred to Christianity-like systems with Bible-like texts and church-like organizations. Unlike Christianity which is legitimized for the most part of Chinese modern history (1840-present), Chinese popular religion is positioned as the opposite of modernity (Duara, 1991). Denounced as one root of Chinese “backwardness,” they have been targeted in almost all social movements. “The Hundred Days’ reform” launched by Guangxu emperor in 1898 required to transform local temples, where local Gods were situated, into schools and state offices, which marked the first anti-superstition movement in China (Goossaert, 2006). The Republican government (1912-1949) adopted the policy of “religious freedom” but recognized only Roman Catholicism,

Protestantism, Islam, Buddhism, and Taoism as legitimate religions and popular religion, viz. “superstition”, continued to be purged and condemned together with other old customs. The Communist government (1949-present) did not ban religion either, except during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Instead, it tried to unite with those who supported its governance in different religious groups by establishing “patriotic” religious associations: The China Islamic Association in May 1953, the China Buddhist Association in May 1953, the Three-Self Patriotic Association in April 1957, and the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association in June 1957. Although those associations were suppressed together with “superstition” during the Cultural Revolution, they revived immediately when the movement ended.

After the Cultural Revolution, reflecting on its religious policies, the government issued the Document No.19 (Potter, 2003) and reassured the policy of “religious freedom.” Most of the religious leaders were released and religious venues, such as temples, mosques, and churches, were reopened. Nevertheless, the government still only recognized Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, Buddhism and Taoism as the legal religions to the exclusion of “superstition” and “evil cults”.

As M. Yang (2008, p. 17) has observed, “the distinction between religion and superstition continues to have a strong hold today in China.” In Xie town, *Mixin* is a part of the daily language which is used to refer to anything related to shamans and ancestor worship. Before the introduction of the term “*Mixin*” and “*Zongjiao*,” shamans and ancestor worship were part of daily life instead of an independent system. They became a system only when those terms were introduced. “What is *Mixin*?” I would ask my informants whenever they mentioned this term. “*Mixin* is *Mixin*” was the most common reply. “Originally, it was called *Mixin* and now it is called demon,” said Qian. When asked about the difference between superstition and Christianity, Cao said: “this (Christianity) is supported all over the country. Have you watched the TV? People all over the country supported it.” “Don’t people support *Dao nainai* (shamans)?” I asked. “What was *Dao Nainai*?”³⁹ Cao answered with contempt. Her daughter-in-law (48 years old, not yet a Christian) chipped in and said, “*Dao Nainais* are secretive. They are the targets of

³⁹ By answering my question in the form of a question, Wang wanted to say that *Dao Nainai* could not be compared with Christianity.

anti-superstition movements. They belong to the ‘four pests’ (*Sihai* 四害).⁴⁰ In Xie town, the Three-Self Church is the biggest and the most legitimate religious institution. The priests often state that they are under the leadership of the Three-Self Patriotic Association and have proper registration with the government. Besides, each year, the church would send priests to get trained in established seminaries.

Secondly, the modernization efforts have retained the notions of “ghosts” and “evil spirits”, which requires the protection of benign supernatural powers. Since consulting a shaman and worshipping ancestors or local Gods are superstitious, people would turn to Christianity when they are tortured by ghosts or evil spirits. The ideas of ghosts and evil spirits have a long history, the records of which could be found in some very early books such as the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* which has existed in China for more than two thousand years. Anti-superstition campaigns in China might be successful in knocking down temples, destroying godly statues and persecuting shamans. They are very limited, however, in eliminating “ghosts” and “evil spirits”. In Xie town, “ghosts” and “evil spirits” are part of people’s lived experience. They are considered as one of the root causes of life problems.

Thirdly, the modernization efforts have ushered in religious institutionalization, which further strengthens the legitimacy of Christianity and, at the same time, provides a specific arena for Christianity-related narratives. Since the Republican era, the Christian-secular model has become normative (Goossaert & Palmer, 2011, p. 73), which is accepted both by the government and religious groups. This model informs the government’s principle of religion-state separation and the institutionalization of other religious groups. For the first time, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Islam began to set up their national unified organizations in order to be recognized and protected by the government. As an institutionalized religion, for the most part of Chinese modern history, Christianity has secured its legitimacy, which is further strengthened by the institutionalization of other beliefs, such as Buddhism and Taoism. Institutionalization not only secures the legitimacy

⁴⁰ “Four pests” was a term from the Four Pests Campaign launched by the government between 1958 and 1962. At that time, the four pests referred to rats, flies, mosquitoes, and sparrows. Here, Wang’s daughter-in-law might be referring to the “Four Olds” -- the old customs, old culture, old habits and old ideas, a term from the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976.

of Christianity but also provides a specific arena for its narratives. The gatherings each week are specific occasions for telling Christianity-related narratives in the form of Bible study or testimony-sharing. The narratives are told not only by specialists but also by lay members. For example, each Sunday service of the Three-Self church would begin with testimonies— illnesses get relieved, difficulties are resolved and so on. Wu said, “If Christianity is not good, how come are there so many testimonies each week?”

In contrast to Christianity, in Xie town, popular religion is denounced as superstition. It does not have Bible-like literature. Neither does it have church-like institutions. The religious authority of popular religion lies solely on individual shamans who are said to be able to communicate with the supernatural. Yet, individual shamans could easily be condemned as “unscrupulous charlatans” (M. Yang, 2015, p. 69), if their magic does not work. Some of my informants reported to have consulted shamans before but failed to get any help. For example, Zhou once went to consult a shaman about her dizziness. The shaman recommended one treatment first but Zhou did not recover. The shaman again recommended other treatments, which required “money donations.” Every time when the treatment did not work, the shaman would say it was due to insufficient donations. Annoyed by the shaman’s greed, Zhou turned to Christianity in 2001, which, according to her, was “free from human manipulation.” Zheng, another informant, said that she was almost tortured to death by a shaman when she was a child. At that time, she was sick. In order to expel hunting ghosts, the shaman pinched her and left bruises all over her body. Later, Zheng was asked to drink a bowl of cold water, which was said to contain some panacea. However, her illness only worsened and Zheng had to be sent to the hospital immediately.

Even if shamans did show supernatural power, their power could easily be rejected as demonic. Christian groups in Xie town denounce all the supernatural beings other than the Christian God as demons. And, shamans are often portrayed as the Head of Demons (*Mogui Touzi* 魔鬼头子). Worshiping demons might bring temporary benefits but would incur misfortunes in the long term. For example, Suen said her mother-in-law was once a junior shaman. When her mother-in-law once failed to send gifts due to a senior shaman,

the latter sent fox spirits to torture her family. The family did not get relief from the torture until they were converted to Christianity.

Christianity-related narratives enjoy a favourable environment in Xie town. On the one hand, they comply with the state's narrative of modernity, which legalizes Christianity as "religion" instead of "superstition." Further, they can build their dismissal of popular religion on the state's denunciation. It is easy for people to accept that popular religion is "demonic" when they already *know* that it is "superstitious." On the other hand, Christianity-related narratives are built upon traditional narratives of ghosts and evil spirits. People have the need for supernatural protection because of the existence of disease demons, fox spirits and wandering ghosts. In addition, Christianity has its scriptures and institutions, which can constantly provide favourable narratives and respond to people's concerns. In contrast, individual shamans could only hide secretly at their home. Even if some of them want to spread favourable narratives about popular religion, they are too powerless compared to the state and churches.

4.3 Conducive Networks of Narrators

As argued in the previous chapter, networks are crucial because they function to convey, legitimize and recreate Christianity-related stories. China's modernization efforts have broadened the social networks of story-tellers while maintaining the family, kinship, and communal relationships.

All the three churches I visited have trans-local networks and they have regular meetings as well, which is made possible by today's convenient transportation and telecommunication. Sometimes, the churches would also welcome guests from afar. For instance, during my field trip, the Three-Self Church was visited by a delegate from Singapore.⁴¹ People told me proudly that several months ago they also welcomed American guests. Besides, the Internet is becoming more and more popular, from which younger Christians download Christian songs and learn about Christian stories and they

⁴¹ This visit is part of the literacy program co-organized by the Bible Society of Singapore and the local Three-Self Association. A brief introduction of this program could be found in the Bible Society Corporate video (2015).

go on to spread the information to their family members, relatives, and church friends through daily interaction. For example, when I went to interview Youh, she was chatting with her friends, a group of female Christians, about a sermon she heard online the other day. The sermon was on the personal survival experiences of the preacher, which he attributed to God's blessings. The first time when I met Han, she recommended me a website and several public WeChat accounts she was following. In addition to the Internet, sometimes my informants also alluded to the videos and radios they once watched and/or listened to. Those remote social connections, facilitated by modern transportation and information technology, not only convey Christianity-related narratives but also legitimize them by showing the popularity of Christianity among *the educated* and *the modernized*. For example, Zhu said "our place is small. If you go to bigger places, such as Nanjing and Shanghai, you will see all of them (Christians) are college students. All of them are college students." For my informants, (poor, uneducated, elderly rural females), Christianity is not only for the poor, the uneducated, the elderly, the rural and the female. The well-off, the educated, the young, the urban and the male also believe in it.

On the one hand, modernization efforts have increased mobility, which enables stories about Christianity to be communicated quickly from outside, through trans-local networks and media. On the other hand, the modernization efforts have not totally broken the traditional strong family, kinship and communal ties in rural areas. Scholars who look at Christian communities in China tend to attribute the popularity of Christianity to the dissolving family and communal structures (Fiedler, 2010; Madsen, 2014). For example, Fiedler (2010) argues that rural-urban migration brought by urbanization has destroyed traditional social support systems and opened some gaps that Christian communities can fill. Madsen (2014) contends that "the collapse of the commune and *danwei* systems has made the search for the non-state controlled community more pressing than ever" and the boom of Christian communities reflects this kind of search. The idea that Christianity is popular because it could compensate some dissolving social systems is insightful. Yet, it is just part of the story. For many villages, the Christian community is not a completely new community in that it is built on their old communities, such as family, kinship and communal relationships. When one person is converted, she/he would go on to convert his/her contacts from the old communities. It is true that previous social systems, such as

kinship and communes, are dissolving but they are not totally dissolved. The comrade people have known for a lifetime could not stop being a comrade just because the Commune System was suddenly abolished. Christian communities, just like, Christianity-related narratives, are not completely new and they could grow rapidly just because of the existence of the old communities. For my informants, words like “production teams” and “Communes” are still part of daily language. Relatives still visit each other often and families are still the centre of social relationships. Through the daily interaction with those close networks, people in Xie town are able to convey, recreate and legitimize Christianity-related narratives constantly for each other.

4.4 Contextualized Life Problems

The previous chapter has demonstrated the importance of life problems in understanding my informants’ attachment to Christianity. The life problems are mainly related to their own or their family members’ ill-health, which is consistent with previous findings (Du, 2011; Hunter & Chan, 1993; Qi, Liang, & Li, 2014; S. Wang, 2015; W. Wang, 2015). For example, the 2008–9 Chinese Christian Household Survey showed that “more than two-thirds Christian respondents converted as a result of their own illness or that of family members” (Qi et al., 2014). Hunter and Chan (1993, p. 145) also found that “healing, or more accurately the widespread belief in it, is one of the most important factors in the spread of Christianity in the 1980s.” Even though some people’s conversion is not directly related to cure from illness, they still think Christianity may protect them from future illnesses and misfortunes in general.

The sociology of medicine has long demonstrated that pathologies are never purely physical or psychological. They are closely related to their social and historical context. For middle-aged and elderly people, their health status is influenced not only by their present social environment but also their past life course. As expressed by Barry and Yuill:

Older age is just another of many elements and phases that go to make up one’s life. How that life is lived, however, greatly influences health in the older years, in terms of both developing long-term illness or disability, for example, and shaping how illness and health are experienced and perceived (2011, p. 241).

The remaining part of this section shows how China's modernization efforts have given rise to the pervasiveness of life problems among and around my informants. I would highlight three aspects: the use of agricultural chemicals, the one-child policy, the limited social welfare.⁴²

In Xie town, almost every day, people would hear something about cancer— “You know, XX was diagnosed with XX cancer”— or other kinds of diseases. Sometimes, when they sit together, they discuss why suddenly so many people contract various diseases that they have never heard of in old times. One possible cause is the wide use of agricultural chemicals. Since the 1950s, chemicals together with



Figure 4: Spraying pesticides / herbicides. From Qiannong website, retrieved on May 2nd 2016. <http://www.qnong.com.cn/zhidao/changshi/3966.html>.

machines have been used in agriculture in an effort to increase productivity and enhance modernization. Since 1996, China has been the largest country in terms of fertilizer consumption. However, due to poor technological implementation, only around thirty percentage of the sprayed pesticides are absorbed by plants, while the remaining goes into the surrounding environment (Z. Zhang, Shi, & Zhou, 2003). Toxic organochlorines such as DDT and Hexachlorocyclohexane (HCH) were widely used until 1983. It was observed later that organochlorines “play havoc with human physiology, with effects that include cancer, infertility, immune suppression, birth defects, and stillbirth” (Hawken, 1994, p. 41). When those chemicals go into water, land, and air, they would lead to serious pollution. Take water for example, by studying 199 water samples from in Taixing, a city in Jiangsu, China, researchers found that harmful chemicals, such as Nitrosamine, in water, are largely responsible for the high morbidity of liver cancer, stomach cancer, and esophagus cancer in this city and those harmful chemicals are partly from pesticides (L. Huang, Yang, & Sun, 2002; Z. Zhang et al., 2003). Peasants in Xie town live in the presence of agrichemicals every day, by being in close contact with the

⁴² Those aspects would not explain all the problems my informants are faced with. Those are just examples used to demonstrate how modernization efforts have given rise to the pervasiveness of life problems among and around rural middle-aged and elderly women.

pesticide/herbicide in farms, and consuming the food and water contaminated by the chemicals (see Figure 4).

With the pervasiveness of cancer and other kinds of diseases, it is very hard to feel secure. For example, Yang said,

Look, several months ago, a primary-school teacher passed away, only in his 30s. He died only in his 30s. Aging is not the only thing that would kill you. Miseries loiter around, disturbing the world.

Whether the existence of demons, more specifically, disease demons is real or not is debatable but the feeling of their existence for my informants is real. As expressed by Suen, “They (demons) are like ferocious lions, searching around for vulnerable spirits.”

Besides the wide use of agricultural chemicals, the one-child policy— another crucial step China has taken to advance modernization — also has direct bodily effects on rural middle-aged and elderly women. The one-child policy was a family planning policy which was implemented between 1979 and 2015 to curb the surging population. For women, the specific methods included abortion, IUD insertion (*shanghuan* 上环) and tubal ligation (*Jiezha* 结扎), sometimes by force. As most rural middle-aged and elderly women had their reproductive years during the one-child policy period, they had to abide by its rules. A survey on “the reproductive health status and service demands of middle-aged and elderly women in rural China,” investigated 3,500 women from seven provinces who were born between Sept 30, 1946 and Oct 1, 1971 (Sun, Shu, Zong, & Mao, 2013). They found that many health problems of rural middle-aged and elderly women were related to their earlier reproduction, contraception, and sterilization. They did not receive sufficient perinatal health when they were young. 2/5 of all rural women investigated experienced induced abortions and 49.6% and 24.6% of them did tubal ligation and IUD insertion respectively. In addition, “more than half of them were puzzled with the menopause syndromes, gynaecological diseases, and sex problems” and “about one-fourth of them did not have IUD removed after their menopause” (Sun et al., 2013). On top of that, because many of them have passed their reproductive years, they are not the target of

the reproductive healthcare system anymore and other relevant systems have not been established, which makes them helpless when they run into problems.

Life problems, such as serious or chronic diseases, require the support of an established social security system. Under the dominance of the Soviet model (1950-1978), the social security in rural areas relied mainly on collective institutions. For example, “Model Regulations for the Advanced Agricultural Cooperatives,” launched in 1956, state that Agricultural Cooperatives should take care of the elderly, the weak, the orphaned, the widowed and the handicapped to ensure their daily living and the Cooperatives should guarantee that the young receive education and the elderly receive proper burial (National People's Congress, 1956).⁴³ In the early 1980s, the previous cooperatives and communes were dissolved. The responsibility of social security fell mainly on the shoulder of individual families. The Reform and Opening-up policy, launched in 1978, has ushered in rapid urbanization and globalization. Against this background, the land, the security base of traditional society, is losing its capacity of guaranteeing peasants’ lives. According to Liu Qun (2005), since the Reform and Opening-up policy was launched, peasants have faced double risks, that of nature and the market. Although China has tried to advance agricultural modernization, the productivity is still very low, sometimes unable to resist natural disaster. Moreover, low productivity keeps agricultural costs high, which makes the products vulnerable to global competition. On the one hand, land could not provide as much social protection as it did in traditional society. On the other hand, because land is losing its attraction, the younger generation is moving to the cities, leaving their aging parents behind, which leads to the decreasing capacity of the family in guaranteeing social security as well. To make things worse, the one-child policy has reduced the family size. Compared with a large family, the elderly would have less support to resort to when they run into problems. Further, most of the migrant workers from rural areas have not received education as good as their urban counterparts (Du, 2011). They often end up with low-end, low-salary jobs, which makes it difficult to support their parents even if they want to. Faced with those issues, in recent years, the government has launched a series of policies, such as the Rural Minimum Living Security Scheme (2007) which provides

⁴³ Due to poverty, most of agricultural cooperatives did not actualize their function of guaranteeing social security in its full sense (Song, 2004).

monetary assistance for the destitute, New Rural Cooperative Medical Care System (2004) that makes medical care more affordable especially for those who have contracted serious diseases and the New Rural Pension System (2009) which pays monthly pension to the senior citizens who are above 60 years old. Those initiatives are beneficial to the wellbeing of rural citizens. Yet, they are still at their embryonic stage. For example, in 2015, for most villagers in Xie town who were above 60 years old, the monthly pension was only 60 Yuan (about \$9.24), which was more like a token rather than actual help.

As illustrated in the previous chapter, my informants' conversion to Christianity is a response to their life problems, either that of their own or their family members. This chapter shows how the broader context of Chinese modernization has contributed to the pervasiveness of life problems among and around rural middle-aged and elderly women.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how the political and historical context of contemporary China has contributed to my informants' conversion to Christianity.

China's modernization efforts have created a favourable environment for Christianity-related narratives. In most of its history, the state has adopted a Christian-Secular model (Goossaert & Palmer, 2011) that advocates the eradication of superstition, religious institutionalization and the separation between religion and politics. It condemns popular religion, such as shamanism and geomancy, as "superstition", while upholding Christianity-like systems as "religion". The distinction between "religion" and "superstition" is so pervasive that they become part of people's daily language in Xie town. It is thus also one of the key guiding principles of my informants' religious choices. Chinese anti-superstition efforts may have knocked down the Gods and spirits-mediums in popular religion but they could not expel the ghost and evil spirits. Therefore, to escape the evil spell of those demonic power, my informants need to seek the protection of a new God.

Furthermore, China's modernization efforts have generated a conducive network of narrators. On the one hand, the development of transportation and telecommunication has

made frequent gatherings and trans-local meetings possible. People in Xie town could also learn about Christianity on the Internet through videos or WeChat. On the other hand, the traditional family, kinship and communal ties have not been totally broken. Through those strong and weak ties, Christianity-related stories are circulated and created rapidly.

Lastly, Chinese modernization efforts have created some social illness. The examples are environmental pollution, sequelae of birth control and the lack of strong social support systems. Arguably, not all my informants' personal life problems are directly related to China's modernization efforts. But the links between personal problems and their context are undeniable. Every society has its problems, together with other factors, the problems would give rise to different religious scenarios. Although social problems do not work independently in transforming religious landscapes, they are still important in understanding religious phenomena in any society. For example, plagues are important in understanding the rise of Christianity in the Rome Empire (27 BC-395 AD) despite the fact that the plagues were not the only reason why people were converted to Christianity at that time (Stark, 1996).

The "favourable environment" and "conducive networks" appear to be contradictory with the widespread impression that Christianity is severely suppressed under the rule of the Communist party. According to numerous news reports, the governments have forced to remove crosses on church buildings, arrest pastors and crackdown on church gatherings.⁴⁴ However, it should be noted that while Christianity has suffered from government regulations and crackdowns, other competitive religions such as popular religion discussed in this thesis might have suffered even more. Ultimately, this has helped Christianity because it removed its competitors.

⁴⁴ For a compilation of the recent events, please see (Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 2016).

Chapter Five: Conclusion

5.1 Embedded Rationality

This thesis has investigated the conversion of a group of middle-aged and elderly women to Christianity in a rural town in contemporary China. I argue that their conversion to Christianity should be seen as a rational choice but this rationality is embedded in local Christianity-related narratives, life circumstances, social networks and the broader context of Chinese modernization.

The conversion of the middle-aged and elderly women is rational in that it involves cost-benefit analysis. In Xie town, there are two supernatural systems to choose from. One is Christianity and the other, Chinese popular religion. The benefits of choosing Christianity include exorcism, health, good luck and eternal life while the investments are praying, attending church, breaking away from “superstition” and being a good person. Monetary investment is not compulsory. To these middle-aged and elderly women who are often poor, suffer from health and family issues and have spare time, the benefits clearly exceed the costs. In comparison, Gods and shamans in Chinese popular religion might be able to provide temporary relief from illness or misfortunes but none of them would promise an afterlife that is immediately free from sufferings. In terms of the investments, devotees of popular religion need to burn incense and prepare food for Gods and ancestors on the first and fifteenth day of each lunar month and at festivals. Consulting shamans also requires payments in the form of money or gifts. What’s more, from my informants’ perspective, popular religion is superstitious and demonic. Practising popular religion might bring temporary benefits but would incur long-term sufferings in future. Compared with Christianity, both the costs and risks of popular religion are much greater.

The rationality of the middle-aged and elderly women is embedded in the local Christianity-related narratives, networks, life circumstances and the broader context of Chinese modernization. Christianity-related narratives refer to stories on how the Christian God has helped or will help to resolve life problems, which prescribe the rewards and the necessary investments of being a Christian. Networks serve to convey,

legitimize and recreate those narratives. It was through family members, relatives and neighbours that those women learned about and started to trust the Christian God. Life circumstances, including life problems and miracles, galvanize narrative changes. Life problems objectify the crises of previous narratives and thus initiate the search for new narratives. Miracles would confirm the effectiveness of the new narratives. Many of the women started to attend church activities when they or their family members ran into difficulties, such as ill health. When life situations improved after their involvement in Christian religious activities, their confidence in the Christian God increased.

Christianity-related narratives, life circumstances and social networks are embedded in specific political and historical contexts. The broader context of Chinese modernization has contributed to the conversion of this group of middle-aged and elderly women on three levels. China's modernization efforts have provided a favourable social environment for Christianity-related narratives by delegitimizing folk beliefs while retaining the notions of ghosts and evil spirits. Further, those efforts have generated a conducive network of story-tellers by increasing people's social contacts while maintaining their family, kinship, and communal ties. Lastly, the modernization efforts have created social illnesses, such as environmental pollution, sequelae of birth control and a lack of social support, which gives rise to the pervasiveness of life problems.

This thesis advocates the image of active and rational seekers who would pursue "what they perceive to be the rewards and avoid what they perceive to be the costs" (Stark & Bainbridge, 1980, p. 115). At the same time, it argues that rationality is embedded in narratives, social networks, life circumstances and specific political and historical contexts.

5.2 Academic Significance

Each concept has its genealogy. I attribute the immediate ancestor of "embedded rationality" to the market theory of religion. In the late 20th century, to explain religious vitality in America and other parts of the world, a group of scholars, represented by Rodney Stark, William Sims Bainbridge, Roger Finke and Laurance Iannaccone, came up with the market theory of religion, otherwise known as supply-side theory, rational choice

theory, or the economic approach towards religion. Many supporters of this theory declared it to be a new paradigm (e.g. Warner, 1993; Wei, 2003), in the sociology of religion. This theory takes religions as firms which would compete with each other in an open religious market. It holds that human beings would “seek what they perceive to be rewards and avoid what they perceive to be the costs” (Stark & Bainbridge, 1980, p. 115) in terms of choosing religious affiliation just like making other choices. This theory has borne a lot of fruit when applied to the study of religious phenomena in China (e.g. Cheng, 2014; 2015; 2013; Lang, Chan, & Ragvald, 2005; Lu, 2005; Sheng, 2012; D.-R. Yang, 2005; F. Yang, 2006; Zhu, 2013).

Although the market theory of religion has taken the demand side into consideration, the emphasis has always been on the supply side. Little empirical research has been done to examine the demand side in detail. Although the market theory acknowledges that religious choices are rational, in the early version of the theory (Stark & Bainbridge, 1980, 1987), the rationality is reduced only to the calculation of rewards and costs without specifying the conceptual differences of “rewards”, “costs” and the ways of calculation across different contexts. In the later version, the theory has been revised to emphasize “subjective rationality,” (Stark, 1999; Stark & Finke, 2000). Yet, few empirical investigations have been done on “subjective rationality”. Therefore, the conventional market theory of religion is insufficient to explain why choosing one religion is considered to be rational in one context but irrational in another (Davie, 2013, p. 82).

What this thesis has done is to take the demand side as its focal point and examine the rationality of a group of individuals’ religious choice in a specific context. Borrowing Granovetter’s concept of “embeddedness” (1985), this thesis argues that individuals’ religious choices are rational but their rationality is embedded in narratives, networks, life circumstances and broader political and historical contexts. In Granovetter’s words, “what looks to the analyst like nonrational behavior may be quite sensible when situational constraints, especially those of embeddedness, are fully appreciated” (1985, p. 506). The concept of embedded rationality has the potential to explain why choosing one religion is considered as rational in one context but irrational in another. Take deathbed conversion as an example. In some people’s eyes, deathbed conversions might be desperate and irrational. Yet from the standpoint of the actor, deathbed conversion is probably the most

rational choice he/she could make at that point. The fact that he/she is going to die objectifies the crisis of his/her previous beliefs, such as the belief in medical science. Someone tells the actor that he/she will be saved through conversion. Being converted, at best, could save the actor from death. If God(s) are only fictional, the actor has nothing to lose. At worst, his/her situation remains the same. Thus, the deathbed conversion is a rational choice with the situational factors taken into consideration.

The concept of embeddedness also has the potential to bridge supply and demand. Many studies have been done on how religious groups market themselves. Few of them have addressed exactly how religious supplies influence the demand and what are the products that religious firms sell. This paper suggests the supply side, namely, religious leaders and institutions, could shape people's religious choices through providing narratives, making use of networks and offering actual help with people's daily problems.

Besides theoretical inputs, this thesis could also contribute to the discussion on the rise of Christianity in China. On this topic, extant literature has largely focused on the role of institutions and religious leaders. From the demand side, this thesis discusses the rationality of choosing Christianity from the standpoint of twenty-four middle-aged and elderly women. At the same time, it identifies the importance of Christianity-related narratives, life circumstances, social networks and the political and historical context in their conversion. The sample I have chosen is very small and specific. It cannot represent other Christians in China. Nevertheless, asking why there is a rise of Christianity is enquiring why millions of Chinese choose to become Christians. And this group I have chosen is part of millions of Chinese who are converted to Christianity in contemporary China. Their conversion might give clues on why other Chinese become Christians as well. Of course, whether the findings from this study apply to other groups should be verified with future research.

5.3 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This thesis is limited in its scope. It studies only a small town and focuses only on a group of middle-aged and elderly women. My informants share a lot of similarities with each other in terms of life experiences and social relationships, because of which I can summarize the patterns. Yet, studying only one group is insufficient to address variances.

Further studies are needed to examine the rationality and dynamism of different groups regarding their religious choices. The following are some areas that should be explored further.

Gender differences. In all the three churches that I visited, women account for more than seventy percent of the regular attendees. Due to the lack of interview data from men, this thesis is inadequate to answer why there are more women in churches. Future studies can compare the gender differences in terms of religious participation. Is it because “men are busy,” as some of my informants suggested? If so, is there any division of labour in terms of religious participation? Or is it because men and women have different social networks? Is it because women suffer more from life problems due to gender inequality? Or is it because women’s bodies are more responsive to evil spirits so that they have greater needs for God’s protection? Interestingly, all the cases I heard of on spirit-posessions in Xie town happened to women. In her study of shamanism in Wenzhou, Mayfair Yang found that most shamans were women. She suspects “women’s bodies in rural China are perhaps more sensitive to the callings and rhythms of traditional culture and more attuned and responsive to the voices of spirits and ancestors” (M. Yang, 2015, p. 81). All these are just hypotheses that need to be verified by future studies.

Generation distinctions. Each generation has its specific historical experiences, which greatly shapes their worldviews. My informants were born between the late 1930s and the early 1960s. Few people who were born during this period had attended schools in rural China. The government’s atheist propaganda for them was largely on the level of slogans. Yet, younger generations are mostly schooled and educated with a whole set of Marxist worldview. How do younger people perceive ghosts and evil spirits? How do they rationalize their beliefs? Do Christians of different generations share similar Christianity-related narratives? Besides, younger people usually travel more and have more access to different information. What are the available choices in their mind? What are their “religious markets”?

Class divides. This group of people I have studied are from the lower class. Would people of different classes share similar experiences in terms of religious conversion?

Would the point on “life problems” be still valid for people of the upper class? If so, what are their problems and how are the problems related to their religious choices?

Spatial variances. My study is conducted in a rural town where there are no temples. The only belief system that is in competition with Christianity is popular religion. How would cases be different in an area where there are many more competing belief systems? What would be people’s rationality in evaluating different beliefs? Further, are “religious markets” always tied to a geographic location? Is it possible that religions also have their online shops? How would online “religious markets” influence those offline?

Spiritual distinctness. This thesis has focused only on conversion to Christianity. Would conversions to other religions or belief systems be different? Even in Xie town, where Christianity is considered as a rational choice by many, why are there people who have not been converted? What would their rationale be? How would their point of view be different from those who were converted?

Appendix One: List of Interviewees

No.	Name [2]	Age	Education	Church Affliction [3]	Years of Being a Christian [4]	Previous Religion [11]	Related Life Problems	People from Whom They First Learned About Christianity	Miracles
1	Zhao	59	illiterate	Three-Self Church	around 20 years	popular religion (altar; shamanism) [12] [13]	tuberculosis, lung cancer	neighbours (“Following God is like going to school, one after another”) [8]	being still alive; better health; better conjugal relationship
2	Qian	68	primary school	House Church	6 years	popular religion (altar; shamanism) [12] [13]	conjugal conflicts; leg pain (osteophyte; arthritis)	younger sister	no miracles
3	Suen	75	primary school	Three-Self Church	around 35 years	popular religion (altar) [12]	mother-in-law and sister-in-law’s abnormal crying and raving [5]	mother-in-law& sister-in-law	mother-in-law and sister-in-law’s recovery
4	Li	51	primary school	House Church	around 20 years	no religion [14]	children's recurrent fever	a female neighbour [9]	many miracles [15]
5	Zhou	61	illiterate	Three-Self Church	around 15 years	popular religion (altar, shamanism) [12] [13]	vertigo	relative/ neighbours [8]	better health
6	Wu	53	illiterate	Three-Self Church	Less than 5 years	no religion [14]	husband’s Parkinson	brother, mother-in-law	no miracles

7	Zheng	62	illiterate	House church	around 20 years	popular religion (altar; shamanism) [12] [13]	shaman's torture; husband's stomach cancer	An elder female neighbour [9]	husband's better temper and better health
8	Wang	66	illiterate	Three-Self Church	around 20 years	no religion [14]	father's sickness; regurgitation (torture of evil spirits)	neighbours/ mother-in-law [8]	better health
9	Chen	66	illiterate	Three-Self Church	around 30 years	no religion [14]	chest pain	niece	better health
10	Zhe	68	illiterate	Three-Self Church	around 20 years	popular religion (altar) [12]	abnormal crying and raving (torture of evil spirits) [5]	Neighbours [8]	better health
11	Wei	62	illiterate	Local Church	around 20 years	popular religion (shamanism) [13]	neck pain	mother	better health
12	Jiang	52	illiterate	Three-Self Church	around 30 years	popular religion (altar) [12]	husband's typhoid fever	uncle	husband's recovery
13	Shen	60	illiterate	Three-Self Church	around 15 years	no religion [14]	husband's diabetes insipidus	relatives	husband's gradual recovery
14	Han	57	High School	Local Church	around 20 years	no religion [14]	no serious problems [7]	A preacher from another town [10]	no miracles
15	Yang	67	illiterate	Local Church	around 20 years	popular religion (altar) [12]	recurrent diseases [6]	a neighbour [9]	better health
16	Zhu	69	illiterate	House Church	around 25 years	no religion [14]	vertigo	Sister-in-law	better health; safety at a dangerous moment

17	Qin	59	Primary school	House Church	around 20 years	popular religion (altar) [12]	fire disaster	father-in-law	good luck in the family business; better health
18	Youh	53	Junior High School	Three-Self Church	around 15 years	no religion [14]	no serious problems [7]	mother, mother-in-law	husband's escape from a potential accident
19	Xu	76	illiterate	Three-Self Church	around 30 years	popular religion (altar; shamanism) [12] [13]	recurrent diseases [6]	churchgoers [10]	better health; relief from a financial difficulty
20	Heh	64	illiterate	Three-Self Church	around 15 years	popular religion (altar) [12]	no serious problems [7]	neighbours [8]	no miracles
21	Shi	52	illiterate	Local Church	Less than 5 years	popular religion (altar) [12]	overall discomfort	a neighbour [9]	no miracles
22	Zhang	67	illiterate	Three-Self Church	around 20 years	no religion [14]	recurrent discomfort, depression	mother-in-law	better health; her daughter's recovery from abnormal crying and raving
23	Kong	72	illiterate	Local Church	around 10 years	no religion [14]	no serious problems [7]	church brothers and sisters [10]	better mood
24	Cao	76	illiterate	Three-Self Church	around 30 years	popular religion (altar, shamanism) [12] [13]	psychoneurosis [5]	acupuncturist/neighbours [8]	better health

[1] The idea of making a table like this come from (Castro-Vázquez, 2013, p. 55).

[2] All names are pseudonyms.

[3] As there are people who attended more than one church in the past, the church affiliation here refers to those they attended predominantly when interviewed.

[4] The years refer to the span from the time when they started to identify themselves as a Christian to the moment when they were interviewed. As many of them could not remember the years clearly, the numbers only provide a broad estimate.

[5] “Abnormal crying and raving” is usually considered as the symptom of being hunted by demons. Some of those who had the symptom went to the hospital and were diagnosed with psychoneurosis. Some were dismissed by doctors who said they did not have any disease.

[6] “Recurrent diseases” refers to the situation where the interviewee said she was prone to be ill.

[7] “No serious problems” means the interviewee did not associate any life problem directly with her conversion in the interview. It could be the case that there were problems but they were too private to be shared. Besides, if some people did not associate any problem with their own conversion, it does not mean “life problem” does not play an important role. There is a special phrase, namely, “believe while being safe” (*pingan di xin* 平安地信) among Christians in Xie town to describe those who are converted without suffering from a particular problem. It is better to believe in God while being safe than “clasping Buddha’s feet only in emergencies” (*linshi bao fojiao* 临时抱佛脚) in case serious problems happen in future. For example, while demonstrating why people still need to believe in God even though they do not face any immediate problem, Yang (67 years old) gave an example of a primary school teacher who passed away recently in his 30s to show that “miseries loiter around, disturbing the world” and God’s protection is necessary.

[8]. “Neighbours” is used as a general term, which refers to people around. When my informants did not specify a particular person but talked about people around in general, I would use “neighbours” to designate their narrators, just as the first case shows.

[9] “A neighbour” is used when an informant specified a person who introduced her to Christianity and that person was one of her neighbours.

[10] All of the three churches I visited encouraged their members to spread God’s messages to others. The cases labelled with [10] were cases that I identified to be directly linked to missionary effort.

[11] “Religion” is defined as the belief in the supernatural (Stark & Finke, 2000, p. 89). Since there is no clear membership in popular religion, I define those who either had family altars at home or consulted shamans before as former believers of popular religion.

[12] I put “altar” in the bracket to denote that the interviewee had an altar at home before. On the altar were either pictures of some deities or papers/tablets with their ancestors’ names.

[13] I put “shamanism” in the bracket to denote that the interviewee consulted shamans before.

[14] “No religion” does not mean the interviewee did not believe in anything supernatural. Here, it means the interviewee have not had an altar or consulted a shaman before. Nor did she have had any other nameable beliefs. Yet, she might be involved in some aspects of popular religion, such as burning joss paper for ancestors.

[15] The interviewee did not specify what the miracles were but confirmed that there were many miracles after she became a Christian (in her own words, *shengji Changchang Bansui* “神迹常常伴随.”)

Appendix Two: Interview Outline

(In actual interviews, the questions were asked in colloquial Chinese)

1. What's your age?
2. How long have you been following God?
3. Which church do you go to?
4. Why do you choose to follow God?
5. What do you do to follow God?
6. When did you first hear about following God? In what circumstance?
7. When and how did you decide to follow God? In what circumstance?
8. Are you baptized?
 - 1) If yes, how did you decide to be baptized? In what circumstance?
 - 2) If not yet, why?
9. Have you believed in something else before?
 - 1) If yes, what did you do with the previous belief? Why?

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