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THE CONVERSION OF CHINESE MIGRANT WORKERS TO EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY IN THE JEWISH STATE

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ABSTRACT

The article describes and probes the conversion of Chinese temporary migrant workers in Israel to evangelical Christianity. Since 1995 thousands of Chinese workers have been recruited, mainly from villages across Fujian, for construction work in Israel. In 1998 an evangelical church was established in Tel Aviv, and its personnel evangelize with considerable success among Chinese workers. The work visa of Chinese workers in Israel is limited to a maximum of five years. Consequently, their church membership is limited in duration, and the church plays no role in the facilitation of migrants' settlement. The constricted role of the church forcefully raises the question of why Chinese workers convert to Christianity. This article draws attention to the impact of conversion on the life of Chinese workers upon their return to China. The article argues that a conversion to Christianity in Israel permits Chinese temporary migrants to accumulate cultural, symbolic and social capital, which can be effectively deployed in China.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The streets of Tel Aviv were mostly empty in the early hours of Saturday - the Israeli official day of rest following the Jewish tradition. In the poor neighborhood of south Tel Aviv, which during the last decade has rapidly turned into a migrant enclave for both legal and illegal migrants from many countries around the world, most residents were still asleep. In the obscurity of dawn, except for a man taking his dog out for an early walk, the only people to be seen were small groups of Chinese, walking determinedly towards a gray industrial building next to a gas station, and disappearing through a slightly open gate. Climbing the stairs to the first floor of the building they were greeted by a wide board hanging above a heavy steel door that announced in red Chinese characters: “Welcome to the Chinese Christian Association”.

The commotion inside the church sharply contrasted with the calmness of the empty early morning streets. Some men were energetically packing food into baskets, while two women were shouting out names from printed lists and handing out name badges in different colors to everyone around. Many people were talking on their cell phones and a group of women were chatting around a table, on which a warm Chinese breakfast was laid out for everyone. At around 6 a.m. one man looked out of the window and excitedly announced that the buses had arrived and that everyone should go down stairs quickly, without forgetting anything. After the two buses had been loaded with the equipment and last decisions had been taken about the seating arrangements, everyone was chivvied on board the buses. “We have to hurry”, Hu¹ explained to me: “we must be there before 9 o’clock; otherwise we won’t have enough time for the complete ceremony”. We were heading towards the Jordan River, right at the mouth of the Lake of Galilee: the place where centuries ago, according to the New Testament, Jesus miraculously walked on water. Today, this was to be the venue for the ceremonial baptism of thirteen new church members who had all successfully completed their Bible course, and were now ready for the culminating moment in their conversion process to Christianity.

¹ Pseudonyms are used throughout the article.

This article aims to closely examine the conversion of such Chinese temporary migrant workers in Israel to evangelical Christianity. Recruited since 1995 for construction work, initially mainly from villages in Fujian, and later also from Jiangsu, Hubei, Anhui and other provinces, these Chinese migrants² have been evangelized with considerable success by the evangelical church in Tel Aviv, established in 1998. Undergoing a conversion to Christianity is a major decision, which markedly affects one's identity and spirituality. More mundanely, converts pay the church a tithe (10% of their monthly salary) and they invest the little free time they have at weekends and holidays in attending the church's activities, rather than resting or, as is customary among Chinese in Israel, earning extra money by taking on additional informal ("moonlighting") work.

The evangelical church in Israel, like in other migration destinations, provides members with spiritual relief, a social network, a feeling of belonging and some practical aid such as free Hebrew language lessons. However, there are some central roles which evangelical churches regularly play for migrants elsewhere but not in Israel, namely, the facilitation of migrants' settlement, their assimilation into the host society, and the (partial) education of their children. Israel, in its capacity as the Jewish state, ideologically rejects the settlement of non-Jewish people, and it therefore strictly limits the work visas of Chinese migrants (like all other non-Jewish migrant workers) to a maximum of five years. The inviolable transience of the Chinese in Israel constricts the role that the evangelical church plays in members' lives, and inevitably prompts the question: Why do Chinese workers convert to Christianity and join the church?

This article suggests that the particular Israeli case sensitizes the gains that a conversion to Christianity yields for converts not only in the receiving society, but also, and perhaps mostly, upon their return to China. I argue that a conversion to Christianity allows the Chinese migrants to accumulate cultural, symbolic and social capital, which can be effectively deployed in China. I finally argue that Chinese migrants join the church not only because of instrumental calculations, but also because of a more deep-

² I use the term "Chinese migrants" throughout the article as shorthand for "Chinese temporary migrant workers".

seated disposition towards what they consider to be a modern reformation of their personal identity, as well as of China at large.

The article is based on six months of ethnographic research among Chinese workers in Israel in the years 2006 and 2007. I conducted 40 semi-structured interviews with workers. I frequently attended worship in church, joined members on trips and had numerous exchanges with converts and the personnel of the church. I conducted an extensive interview with the pastor and had several consequent conversations with him. In April 2006 and in December 2007 I conducted field trips to six villages and two towns in Fujian province from where migrants come to Israel. I interviewed several returnees, and on two occasions I was invited to spend a few days in returnees' houses, together with their families. In addition, I also interviewed pastors in evangelical churches and officials in the "Returned Overseas Chinese Federation of Fujian Province".

The article is structured in the following way: Firstly, I will provide a general background to the Israeli setting and the recruitment and lives of Chinese workers. I will then focus on the evangelical church in Tel Aviv, and seek to uncover and explain the different motivations that drive Chinese migrants to join the church and convert to Christianity.

2. THE ISRAELI SETTING AND THE ARRIVAL OF CHINESE WORKERS

The state of Israel has been internationally recognised (UN Resolution 1947) and legally established (The Declaration of Independence 1948) as a Jewish state. Israel's declared purpose has been to serve as a "home" for Jews worldwide. Induced by the Zionist ideal of the "Foregathering of the Diaspora", Israel actively encourages the immigration of Jews, while it ideologically rejects the immigration of non-Jews. Israel adheres to the principle of *jus sanguinis*, qualifying the incorporation of immigrants by an ethnic belonging to what Zionism has redefined as the Jewish nation. Both the Law of Return (1950) and the Nationality Law (1952) categorically refer to the term "Jew"; while the first law ensures the "historic" right of all Jews in the world to "return" to Israel, the latter stipulates the automatic inclusion of Jewish immigrants as full citizens in the state.

Besides these two laws, Israel has no explicit immigration law that considers, let alone allows for, the settlement of non-Jewish immigrants.³

Nevertheless, a series of global and geopolitical changes eventually led Israel, from 1993, to engage for the first time in its history in the importation of non-Jewish migrant workers.⁴ This move was condemned by several political parties in Israel as a betrayal of Zionist ideals, and it prompted the government to rectify its commitment to the Jewish character of Israel by ensuring that non-Jewish workers would not settle down in the country. Most notably, the government issued work visas to workers for a maximal period of five years.

Workers have been mainly recruited from countries in Asia (e.g., China, Thailand, the Philippines, Nepal and India) and Eastern Europe (e.g., Romania, Bulgaria, and Moldova), for jobs in three sectors: construction, agriculture and care-giving for elderly and/or disabled people. By the year 2000, there were already 113,000 temporary migrant workers in Israel, which comprised 11.5% of the total Israeli workforce in the private sector (Bank of Israel 2000).

In 1992, Israel and China officially established diplomatic relations. Soon afterwards, Chinese workers started to reach Israel: at first only a few hundred, but since 1996 thousands have arrived each year (see Figure 1). The recruitment of workers from China should be seen in a broader context of exponentially growing economic ties between the two countries. According to the Chinese embassy in Tel Aviv the Sino-Israeli bilateral trade increased from 50 million U.S. dollars in 1992 to 3 billion U.S. dollars in 2005, and more than 800 Israeli companies are currently doing business in China.⁵

³ It should however be noted here that since 1970 an amendment to the Law of Return expands the right to immigrate to Israel to non-Jewish children, grandchildren, and spouses, of Jews. It was this amendment that allowed around 200,000 non-Jews (in addition to around 800,000 Jews) from the former Soviet Union to settle in Israel during the 1990s (see Al-Haj and Leshem 2000).

⁴ For more on the process that led the Israeli government to take this decision, see Bartram 1998; Kalir 2006; Schnell 1999.

⁵ See <http://www.chinaembassy.org.il/eng/> (retrieved 26.04.2007)

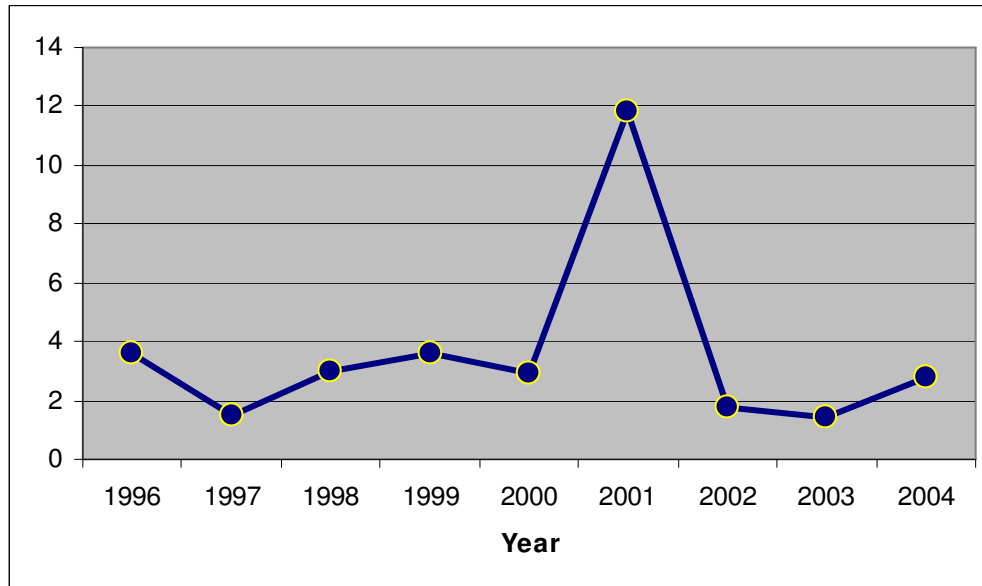


Figure 1: Number of Chinese Guest Workers Reaching Israel (in thousands)
 Source: Central Bureau of Statistics, 2006.

Chinese migrants in Israel are predominantly (around 90%) employed in the construction sector. The other 10% are employed mainly in agriculture.⁶ From an indicative sample of 40 Chinese workers that I interviewed, it appears that most of them come from a poor economic and educational background; they usually earned a pre-migration salary of U.S. \$50-100 per month from work in construction or agriculture, and they had around ten years of education, commonly quitting school at the age of 15-16 and beginning to work for their household's income.

Israeli law forbids recruitment companies from charging workers a fee for the opportunity to work in Israel. Nevertheless, in practice, all workers must pay an informal fee of thousands of dollars to recruitment companies in their countries of origin, which collaborate with Israeli companies that illegally "sell" them work visas for Israel. Chinese workers pay the highest and constantly mounting fee to recruitment companies (Berman 2007). From my interviews with Chinese migrants it appears that this fee stood at around \$10,000 in the year 2000, and had climbed up to \$23,000 in the year 2007. To pay the informal fee most Chinese have to borrow at least part of the money from loan sharks.

⁶ Around 100 Chinese "chefs" work in the kitchens of Israeli-owned Asian restaurants. In this article I do not refer to this group of Chinese workers, who differ significantly in their characteristics and employment conditions.

Much of the flow of Chinese workers into Israel is driven by recruitment companies that seek to profit from the payment of informal fees. It is not unusual for companies in China to scheme to collect fees from workers without delivering on their promises for a work visa and a contract in Israel. Tellingly, the peak in the number of Chinese migrants reaching Israel in the year 2001 should primarily be attributed not to market demand, nor to an increased governmental quota, but to the efflorescence of this kind of criminal scheme that occurred frequently around that time (Berman 2007).

In Israel, migrant workers in the construction sector must work a minimum of nine hours per day, which earns them a monthly salary of around \$900. However, most Chinese migrants choose to work extra hours, and thereby increase their wage to around \$1,200. They regularly begin their day at 5 a.m., preparing food for the whole day and commuting to their work sites. Work in construction usually starts at 6:15 a.m., and Chinese workers return to their lodging not before 6 p.m. and often, depending on the number of extra hours that they take on, much later. Although the hard and repetitive menial work in construction is physically exhausting and mentally fatiguing, many Chinese additionally opt to take on informal work in their free time. They thus “moonlight” in the evenings and/or weekends in the private houses of Israelis (painting, laying tiles, etc.) for which they can earn an extra \$300 per week.

Most Chinese migrants have to work in Israel for around one and half years in order to pay off the loan they took out to pay the informal fee. Since their work visas are limited to a maximum of five years, Chinese migrants operate under enormous pressure to work as hard as they possibly can in order to make their migration economically successful. When I asked Hua, one of my closest informants, who regularly “moonlighted”, how he physically managed his workload with only five hours of sleep each night, he answered in an offhand way: “I’ll have all the time I want for sleeping when I’m back in China”. Yet, Chinese migrants, like all other non-Jewish migrant workers, often have to deal with exploitation by powerful Israeli employers, while the Israeli government and law enforcement units do very little to protect their rights.⁷ There are known cases of Chinese migrants who were caught in the schemes of recruitment

⁷ For more on the many forms of migrant workers’ exploitation in Israel, see Ellman and Laacher 2003; Hotline for Migrant Workers 2003; Schnell 2001.

companies and Israeli employers, and were forced to leave Israel before being able to clear their debt. These migrants face a full-blown economic catastrophe upon their return to China.

The willingness of Chinese to pay high informal fees, in spite of the risk involved, reflects their readiness and strong desire to emigrate to Israel. Indeed, most Chinese migrants to Israel manage to pay back their loan and in addition save an amount of money. The exact amount of money that they manage to save varies mainly according to the period of time they work in Israel, and their ability to find and perform informal jobs. From my interviews with Chinese workers in Israel, as well as with returnees in China, it seems not uncommon for Chinese migrants who have completed a five-year term in Israel to save around \$50,000.⁸

Some 80% of all Chinese workers in Israel are in the age group of 30-44 (Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics 2007b), and many of them are married and have children. This latter fact is not a coincidence, but rather a deliberate policy of the Israeli government which is meant, in line with other measures, to prevent the possible settlement of workers in the country.⁹ It is strictly forbidden for migrant workers to bring over their families to Israel. The separation from their families undoubtedly wears Chinese migrants out emotionally. The Spring Festival, for example, has become known among some Chinese in Israel as “The Red Eyes Day”; referring to the many tears Chinese shed during this festivity while talking on the telephone with their family members in China.

Chinese workers do not settle down in Israel. This has partly to do with the restrictive Israeli policy: most Chinese migrants mention the practical impossibility of receiving Israeli residency as the major reason behind their unwillingness to settle down. Several Chinese told me in interviews that had they been able to receive permanent residence and bring their family to Israel they would have considered settlement.

⁸ The readiness of Chinese people to pay informal fees for going to Israel should also be seen in a wider context, where much higher fees (up to \$100,000) are paid by Chinese people for getting to other, more attractive, migration destinations such as the US and the UK.

⁹ This policy has never been formally adopted by Israel, as it is unlikely to withstand a legal appeal. However, Israeli officials communicate their preferences regarding the recruitment of married men to Israeli recruitment companies, which mostly choose to comply with the informal policy of the state.

Other reasons that Chinese migrants mention for not desiring settlement in Israel include the language barrier, the distinctive physical “otherness” of Chinese people in Israeli society, and their limited employment opportunities: in the words of one migrant, “In Israel I can earn good money but I can never do anything else but work in construction. With the money I earn here I can maybe open my own business or manage a team of workers in China. I will never work there [in China] like I work here”. In addition to these reasons, we should also consider the fact that very few Chinese female migrants reach Israel, and therefore the chances for Chinese men to develop romantic relationships with Chinese women and establish a second household in Israel are low. Mixed marriages between Chinese workers (either married or single) and Israeli women also practically never occur. While some Chinese expressed to me their admiration of Israeli women, they were mostly skeptical about the opinion of local women about them; in the words of one Chinese man: “Israeli women don’t like Chinese men”. Factually, to the best of my knowledge, there are only two registered mixed marriages between Chinese workers and Israeli women.

While the legal possibility of settling down in Israel is restricted for temporary migrant workers, one wonders whether settlement is not attempted by undocumented Chinese migrants, as is the case in so many other countries worldwide. Thousands of Chinese migrant workers have lost their legal status in Israel and become undocumented, mainly due to the dynamics that pertain to the stringent Israeli labor importation scheme, and the manipulative conduct of recruitment companies and Israeli employers, (see Hotline for Migrant Workers 2002). However, undocumented Chinese migrants also eventually decide to leave Israel. As one prominent activist in an Israeli NGO that deals with undocumented migrants told me: “on the spectrum of perspectives among illegal migrants in Israel, Chinese represent one end, that of the migrants who are totally busy with saving their money and investing it in China and not in their present or future position in Israel” (author’s interview with ES, 23.12.2006). Notably, at the other end of that spectrum one finds undocumented migrants from Latin America who invest every effort and a great deal of money in consolidating their position in Israel (see Kalir 2006). The efforts of Latinos and other undocumented migrants (mainly from the Philippines and Africa) eventually led the Israeli government in 2005 to recognize the de facto

assimilation of these migrants and legalize their status as Israeli citizens. Even Chinese migrants, who are aware of this Israeli precedence, choose, for one or all of the abovementioned reasons not to attempt to settle down in Israel (see also Li 2006).

3. THE LIVES OF CHINESE MIGRANTS IN ISRAEL

Chinese migrants in Israel reside mainly in makeshift residential sites that are built specifically for lodging workers and are mostly located outside big cities or close to construction sites. These residential sites are made up of strips of caravans or cargo containers that have been converted into residential units. Some Israeli employers prefer to accommodate groups of workers in rented apartments, not far from the construction site where they work. These residential arrangements, together with the fact that groups of workers are often recruited from the same area in China, result in the formation of small groups of Chinese roommates/co-workers/friends who speak the same regional dialect. If not working informally on weekends, Chinese pass their free time mostly with their close circle of friends, playing cards or mahjong, listening to music, watching DVDs and preparing collective meals together.

There is certainly no Chinatown in Israel in comparison to those in other countries. Historically, as in the present, Israel has forestalled the settlement of non-Jewish immigrants, including Chinese ones, and thereby prevented the development of a Chinese community. Nevertheless, the formation of a Chinese zone in Tel Aviv is evident and rather impressive in its magnitude given that Chinese migrants started reaching Israel only 13 years ago. A walk in the main pedestrian street in the labor migrants' enclave in south Tel Aviv divulges several shops that import and sell Chinese products. Israeli owners of supermarkets and butcheries put signs detailing their products and prices in Chinese, and some of them also hire (sometimes illegally) Chinese workers to attend to their Chinese clientele. Some bars in the street broadcast CCTV4 on their television screens to attract Chinese migrants who come there to drink at weekends. The street is also full of flashy posters in Chinese advertising money transfers and cheap calling cards, along with improvised ads in Chinese handwriting offering Chinese films, music, medicine, and so on. A Chinese hairdresser used to attend clients in public in one corner

of the street but after complaints by local residents about hygiene this practice was banned by the municipality of Tel Aviv, and there are now two Chinese hairdressers who receive clients indoors. Some apartments in this area have been converted by groups of Chinese migrants into informal gambling houses where some Chinese migrants spend their weekends playing cards and mahjong. In some of the side streets there are brothels with signs in Chinese clearly catering for Chinese clients.

At weekends and on holidays this embryonic Chinatown is visited by hundreds and even thousands of Chinese people from all over Israel, who, either individually or in groups, choose to do their shopping and spend their free time in this area. In addition, many Chinese migrants who work in construction sites in and around Tel Aviv live in this area of south Tel Aviv in rented apartments (this is convenient for Israeli companies as the rent there is very cheap).

An image of a flourishing Chinatown should not be confused with a lavish lifestyle of most Chinese migrants in Israel; on the contrary, many Chinese visit this area precisely because they can buy there everything they need for the lowest price (rice in bags of 20 kilos, smuggled cigarettes, second hand clothes, etc.), and bars there charge only a little more than the retail price for beer. Indeed, in order to save most of their salary, many Chinese migrants adopt a very frugal lifestyle in Israel. For example, some Chinese migrants count the number of cigarettes they smoke each day and carefully monitor their expenditure on food each week. As one prominent civil activist who works closely with different groups of migrant workers puts it: “from all the workers who come to Israel it is the Chinese who are willing to work the hardest, under the toughest conditions, in order to earn and save money. Some of them are willing to eat only rice or dry bread so that they can save a bit more” (author’s interview with SR 12.04.2007).

Most Chinese migrants ardently save money in Israel in order to finance the building of a new house in their village back home in China. Wei once proudly showed me a large photo that was sent to him from China, displaying the new house that was being built by his family with the money he was sending from Israel. It was a huge three-storey building designed in a neo-classical style with tall, sturdy pillars and classical European windows. “You see what a beautiful house!” Wei shared his enthusiasm with me as he excitedly held up his fingers and counted: “first floor 170 square meters, second

floor 170, third floor 150. There is also a big balcony in the back but you can't see it in the photo. Here in the front we'll have three shops and inside there are four toilet rooms beautifully laid with tiles'. I noticed in the photo a small old house that stood right next to the new building and asked Wei about it. Wei got seriously agitated: "This is the old house of my family; it's not beautiful; we'll tear it down once the work on the new house is finished. It's not beautiful; it'll go away very soon". As he talked, Wei repeatedly hit the side of the photo where the old house stood with the back of his hand, as if trying to bring it down already.

Against the backdrop of the frugal lifestyle that most Chinese migrants adopt in Israel, their conspicuous consumption of cell phones is very striking. All Chinese migrants in Israel have a cell phone, which is essential for their communication with Israeli employers, Chinese friends in Israel and family members in China. However, most Chinese have a cell phone of the latest generation with a built-in camera and speakers, MP3 music player, polyphonic ring-tones, etc. The market price of such a cell phone in Israel stands at around \$500. Some Chinese even have two cell phones, which are sometimes especially sent to them from China, not because they are much cheaper (as I wrongly thought) but because they contain Chinese characters, ring-tones and a calendar.

The tendency among Chinese towards a conspicuous consumption of cell phones is also striking in comparison to other migrant workers, such as Latinos and Romanians, who hardly ever buy expensive cell phones. It seems that the conspicuous consumption of cell phones is indicative of a strong desire among Chinese to become modern in a particular consumerist manner. Thunø and Pieke (2005:503) observed elsewhere that: "conspicuous consumption should also be read as a form of practice that reflects aspirations to achieve a modernity and civility that previously had been beyond reach".

One can generally say that Chinese people in Israel (as well as in other places in the world, including China itself) steadfastly strive to achieve economic prosperity that so often allows for, and progressively translates into, the adoption of a particular modern lifestyle that is mainly conceived materialistically in terms of consumer goods and the purchasing or building of a new (and modern) house.

4. THE CHINESE EVANGELICAL CHURCH

The Chinese evangelical church in Tel Aviv was founded in 1998 by Li Dao, an ethnic Chinese from Vietnam who received political asylum in Israel. Li Dao was among a group of 100 ethnic Chinese who in 1979 attempted to flee Vietnam on a boat that eventually got stranded in high seas close to the territorial water of the Philippines. The crew of an Israeli cargo ship that passed by rescued these refugees from their boat and asked instructions from the Israeli government for dealing with this peculiar situation. In an unprecedented and never-repeated move, the Israeli government decided to offer the refugees asylum and bring them to Israel.

Although the refugees received full Israeli citizenship and state assistance in their settlement, the majority of them eventually decided to immigrate to a third country (mainly the US and Canada). Li Dao was among the few who chose to remain in Israel. He worked in different jobs opening in 1986 a Chinese restaurant in the northern city of Haifa. Li had converted to evangelicalism in Vietnam at the age of 16 and had been practicing and studying it ever since. In 1993 Li allocated a space inside his restaurant for meetings that he organized, taking on the role of a pastor for a small group of ethnic Chinese (mainly from Taiwan) who practiced evangelicalism. Five years later, in 1998, Li “could not ignore”, as he puts it, the strong presence of Chinese workers and decided to open a church in the heart of the migrant workers’ enclave in Tel Aviv.

The personnel of the church includes the pastor, his wife and daughters, and two ethnic Chinese couples, one from Hong Kong and the other from Taiwan, who have a long-term visa for staying in Israel (not as migrant workers). The more veteran members from among the migrant workers sometimes join the personnel in an organizational or pastoral capacity.¹⁰ The church is non-denominational and non-charismatic. The personnel of the church actively evangelize among Chinese workers, occasionally visiting their residential sites, reading the Bible in public, telling them about the greatness of Jesus, and inviting them to church. Members of the church are also asked to “spread

¹⁰ Henceforth whenever I refer to “pastors” in the plural I mean Li and any of the church personnel who preach to members from the pulpit.

the good news” and invite their Chinese friends, roommates and co-workers to visit the church.

The number of members of the church has varied over the years, largely in correlation with the total number of Chinese workers in Israel. In its peak years between 2001 and 2003 the church had around 400 registered members. However, since 2004, as the number of Chinese workers in Israel has declined so has the number of members, which in the year 2006 stood at around 150. Most Chinese who join the church do not come from a Christian background and their membership is coupled with a process of conversion to Christianity.

The church clearly furnishes a distinctive space in Tel Aviv for Chinese to experience and practice religion. At the same time, it also abundantly provides worldly entertainment to those who attend it. For example, the church is connected to a satellite TV that receives CCTV4, and on Saturdays before worship the main Chinese news program is shown on a widescreen television. Attendees can also play ping-pong at a table that stands on one side of the spacious church. A large pot of soup is placed on a table close to the entrance and attendees can freely help themselves. On festivities such as the Chinese Spring Festival and Christmas, the church organizes special celebrations that include musical performances and plays. Also, the church periodically organizes sightseeing trips to different (holy) places in Israel.

Importantly, all the abovementioned activities that the church offers are not limited to members only, but are open for the participation of all Chinese people in Israel. Moreover, the personnel of the church encourage members to invite their friends and acquaintances to take part in these activities without any obligation to formally join the church. Pastor Li is very open about the church’s method and its desired effect:

On Saturday mornings many Chinese come here to watch the news on the big screen. The ping-pong tournaments also attract many. Chinese here in Israel are in a foreign country, they feel lonely and they seek entertainment and a community feeling. So first they come for these reasons and then slowly we tell them about the work of God and they understand that everything comes from Him.

Once in church, visitors are encouraged to remain for the worship, where they are exposed first hand to the spiritual relief that is being offered to members. In sermons pastors often mention the hardship and predicaments of Chinese workers, and repeatedly

emphasize that members in church form a new family: “you are all Brothers and Sisters, sons of God. This is your new family. God loves you”. Worshipers practice a ritualized manner of expressing and discharging their longings, frustrations and worries, and they receive alleviating understanding, compassion and encouragement from the pastor. Church rituals include collective singing of religious anthems while members often stand up and raise their hands up in excitement; biblical sermons which are regularly linked to and carry a lesson for the lived realities of Chinese migrants in Israel; and a few intervals where pastors ask members to close their eyes, concentrate and pray to God over personal issues.

5. WHY DO CHINESE WORKERS JOIN THE CHURCH?

Much has been written about the instrumentality of membership in evangelical churches for uprooted migrants with shared interests, difficulties and desires (e.g., Nyíri 2003; Pieke 2005; Yang 1998). This is to some extent certainly true in the case of Chinese migrants in Israel. In addition to the spiritual relief that the church offers, it also founds a social network, and disseminates among members a sense of belonging to Israel and an extra meaning, beyond the economic one, for their immigration. Pastors emphasize that Israel is the Holy Land for Christians (and not only for Jews). Members’ immigration to Israel is cast as an act of God and a reflection of His will. “You are here for a reason” or “it is not a coincidence that you ended up coming to Israel” are the kind of phrases pastors often weave into their sermons. Moreover, reproving smoking, alcohol, gambling and prostitution, may assist members to not go “astray” and to not spend their money on what the church considers to be immoral practices. Finally, we should consider that the church is the only religious institution in Israel that provides for Chinese migrants. Even more so, the church is the only formal Chinese organization that serves migrants in Israel. Since Chinese do not settle down in Israel they do not engage in the foundation of overseas and ethnic organizations (*tongxianghui*).

Notwithstanding the abovementioned motivations for joining the church, some pivotal roles that evangelical churches typically play for migrant members elsewhere in the world are markedly missing in the case of the Chinese church in Israel. Firstly, the

church does not play a role in enhancing or facilitating the settlement of Chinese, as such settlement does not occur. Another crucial role of ethnic churches is the education of migrants' children in light of the values and traditions of their homeland (Yang 1998:252). Since Chinese never bring their children to Israel the church has no role in this respect either. Finally, the church plays a very limited role in fostering assimilation of Chinese into Israeli society. Chinese mostly consider such assimilation to be futile, given their limited period of time in Israel, and their clear intention to return to China. Tellingly, members who attended free Hebrew lessons in church told the instructor (the pastor's daughter) that they were not interested in systematically learning the language but only wanted to know the relevant vocabulary for managing conversations with employers. As one member summarized it: "why should I study it [Hebrew] if in two years I will go back to China and never use it again in my life?"

The restricted role of the Chinese church is also evident in comparison with other evangelical churches in Israel, which have been established since the early 1990s by migrant communities from Latin America, Africa, Eastern Europe and the Philippines. As has documented by several scholars (Kalir 2006; Kemp and Rajjman 2003; Sabar 2004; Willen 2007), other evangelical churches have been playing an extensive role in the lives of their members; for example, they provide members broad assistance in settling down, which includes not only Hebrew courses but also lessons in Jewish traditions, and Israeli history and culture. Many of these churches also have Sunday schools and special cultural programme for migrants' children. Moreover, pastors in these churches perform civil ceremonies for members such as marriage, renewal of vows, and baptism of Israeli-born children. Pastors in other churches have also been among the leaders of a political campaign in Israel for granting legal status and permanent residence to non-Jewish migrant workers.

Given the general supportive and committed attitude of the Chinese church personnel, it is clearly the temporariness of Chinese migrant workers in Israel which constricts the roles that the Chinese evangelical church plays in their lives.¹¹ Against this

¹¹ Chinese evangelical churches that play a restricted role, especially with respect to the assimilation and integration of their members into local societies, have been documented by Nyíri (2003) in Eastern Europe. Interestingly, Chinese people who join these churches are very different from the ones I describe in this article. They usually come from an urban background, with good education and useful networks. Their

backdrop of temporary membership, it is surprising to learn that most Chinese join the church typically during their second or third year in Israel. Arguably, the initial period is the most difficult one for Chinese migrants, who have little or no local knowledge about the host country; who need to come to terms with the separation from their family; who seek a sense of belonging and a new social network; and who need all the practical and spiritual assistance they can possibly get. Moreover, joining the church at a later point in time means that Chinese have, at most, around two to three years to spend as members before they return back to China.

This late linking up with the church might be partly seen as a corollary of its limited evangelizing reach. However, from my conversations with members, it appears that even those who heard about the church shortly after their arrival mostly chose not to join it initially. Later membership of the church was revealingly explained to me by one of the church personnel as we were both observing three new members who registered their details in the church's office:

Almost no one joins the church in the first years of his stay in Israel. They don't have time for it. In the first years they are only busy with making money [giggles]. You know, they come to work here from small villages and they are mostly concerned with making enough money in the time they have abroad. Only after they repaid their debts and saved some money do they start to look around and do other things. Then they also reach us and start to be interested in our church.

This explanation, by an insider to the church, highlights a fundamental characteristic of most members, i.e. they perceive membership in church as a kind of luxury which they can only afford after achieving a certain degree of material prosperity. It is self-evident that making money is the first priority for Chinese workers in Israel. It is, however, important to note that those who join the church are workers who have economically succeeded in Israel. Although the church declares itself a home for every Chinese person, the nonstarters and illegal migrants only rarely join it.

We now have to uncover what precisely the "luxury" of joining the church consists of for Chinese migrants. In order to do so I believe we have to shift our analytical gaze from the host country and consider more pertinently the effects that a conversion to Christianity carries for Chinese migrants when they return back home.

entrepreneurial activities and mobility within Europe often lead them to cultivate a transnational identity, rather than to assimilate into their host society.

Here I contend that joining the church allows Chinese to accumulate, in addition to financial capital, three complementary forms of capital: cultural, symbolic and social (Bourdieu 1986). In what follows I elaborate on the significance and accumulation of each of these three forms of capital.

5.1. Christianity as Cultural Capital: Lessons in Modernity

Many Chinese associate the West with economic prosperity and opportunities (Ong and Nonini 1997). More interestingly, some Chinese draw a direct line between the material success of the West and its Christian character. When discussing the views of Chinese with respect to Christianity, Yang (1998:251) asserts that many Chinese believe that “today the most advanced societies are ‘Christian societies’ with Christian traditions”, and some Chinese who convert to Christianity in the US “express the conviction that there is a causal connection between Christianity, on the one hand, and modern market economies and political democracy, on the other”. Thus, for many Chinese being a Christian is tantamount to being Western, modern, and thriving economically.¹²

Chinese migrants do not necessarily think that being a Christian is the only way of achieving prosperity; most of them actually achieved economic success in Israel before their conversion to Christianity. However, some Chinese people desire to emulate the image they have of modern Western people. According to this ambition, becoming a Christian is seen as one more step in the direction towards achieving Western modernity. Put differently, simply achieving economic success is often seen as a necessary but not entirely sufficient step towards becoming modern.

Revealing in this respect is the view of Lin; one of very few Chinese women to marry an Israeli man and thereby receive Israeli permanent residence. Lin comes from a middle-class family in Xián and speaks good English.¹³ She has never become a member of the church although she attends worship frequently: “I go to service because I like it, I

¹² See Yang 2005 for an account of the links that a growing number of people in cities across China draw between Christianity and modernity, liberation, progressiveness, and cosmopolitanism.

¹³ Lin reached Israel on a legal visa to work as a nurse in a clinic for alternative medicine. After being exploited by her employer she quit her job and started to work illegally in a geriatric institution.

feel good there. I can be Chinese but in a civilized way”. Once Lin offered me her view on the attraction of the church for migrant workers:

Many people in China become now modern, but mainly in the big cities. In the big cities life is very similar to here...people are very modern, the women, for example, have jobs and work out of the house like the men, they also dress up modern and they get married not so young. But in small villages people are still rather backwards, all the modern things reach them very slowly. That’s why I think so many migrants here from small villages are going to church. They want to learn how to become like Western people. They want to become modern.

Indeed, the evangelical church in Tel Aviv, like in many other places in the world, radiates a particular modernity in both its spirit and the practices it promotes. For one, the church is very modern in its interior design, and the church personnel dress in suits or in a sporty, elegant style. The musical band that accompanies worship in church plays Western instruments such as a synthesizer and an electric guitar. Worship is largely computerized; the lyrics of songs and biblical verses are visualized through flashy PowerPoint presentations which are projected onto a large screen behind the pulpit. These presentations regularly contain colorful “fizzing” letters and animated figures from popular cartoons (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: A Computerized Sermon in the Chinese Church in Israel.
Author’s photo 17.02.2007

Members of the church are encouraged to learn to use the internet, and if they do, they can receive messages from the pastor to their inbox. A list of recommended websites also hangs on the message board of the church, encouraging migrants to go online and find more information about Christianity. Notably, for many members the first time they ever operated a computer or surfed the internet was in church.

The church in Israel also inculcates in members a Protestant ethic (*à la* Weber) that heightens an already existing capitalistic spirit among Chinese migrants. Given their temporariness in Israel, Chinese migrants are seriously preoccupied with their future plans in China. Many contemplate setting up their own business, from a grocery shop in Shanghai to a household utensils store in their own village.

Teaching members that hard work, discipline and frugality are values that constitute part of the Christian ethic is very encouraging for Chinese people already doing their best to endure difficult conditions in order to achieve their economic goals as migrant workers. Importantly, the notion of frugality which the church propagates is not one which promotes a Spartan lifestyle and forbids the consumption of modern goods; on the contrary, it is one which encourages members to save money precisely so that they can eventually afford what they materially desire. The riches of the church and its personnel buttress the belief of members that practicing Christianity indeed results in achieving economic prosperity. Here, for example, is how the pastor proudly informed members that the church was finally able to purchase a new car: “Our ministry’s car is more than six years old; we have been praying for a new vehicle and finally God has answered our prayer... we could now buy a Citroen Jumpy 8+1 seats! Thanks God!”.

As it has been widely documented, achieving individual prosperity often receives a strong doctrinal emphasis in the teachings of evangelical churches worldwide (Corten and Marshall-Fratani 2001; Freston 2001; Stoll 1990). Evangelical pastors preach a “gospel of prosperity”, encouraging members to excel and reach economic success. Such economic success is often considered an evidence for divine intervention in members’ lives, and in some cases it is also theologically conceived as the right of every believer to enjoy the wealth for which Jesus had fought (Gifford 2001: 62).

The prosperity gospel preached by evangelical churches notably corresponds with the Chinese government’s steady endorsement since 1979 of a free market ethos, which

encourages Chinese people to “get rich first”. As Wang (2002:13) points out: “the official encouragement of individual wealth has inaugurated a type of mentality that is bent on getting rich without any set of values whatsoever to guide or regulate it”. Many Chinese people, whose existence has been jolted by recent powerful economic currents in China, turn to religion as one source of guidance (see Yang 2005). In this respect, the evangelical doctrine is very appealing for Chinese people in general, and for Chinese migrants in particular, as it does not attempt to temper their desire for wealth and prosperity; but instead enhances it by providing members with heavenly justification and moral regulations for their economic behavior.

Finally, in discussing the cultural appeal of Christianity for migrants, attention should be paid to prevailing notions that Chinese people entertain about “Jews”, and the ways in which the evangelical church in Israel draws upon these notions in its discourse.

Images of “Jews” have been changing historically in China; sometimes dramatically from representing the “inferior” or the “oppressed” to symbolizing the “superior” and the “oppressor”.¹⁴ Nevertheless, since the economic reforms of the 1980s, images of Jews in China have mostly tended to be positive and stimulating. In contemporary China, as Xun (2001:163) reports, “the term ‘Jew’ represents ‘money’, ‘power’ and ‘success’ ...in other words, being ‘rich’, being ‘successful’, or being a ‘Jew’, is a new identity which many young Chinese are aspiring to”. Indeed, as the Chinese ambassador in Israel, Mr. Chen Yonglong, recently asserted: “The entrepreneur spirit and business talent of the Jewish people are well acknowledged all over China”.¹⁵ After the death of Mao Zedong, who was an ardent political foe of Israel, several prominent Chinese leaders, such as President Jiang Zemin, publicly expressed their admiration of Jews and highlighted the “similar experiences” of the two nations with respect to their “glorious civilizations”, “similar histories”, and “perseverance” during difficult times.¹⁶

Many Chinese in Israel have expressed to me their admiration of what they perceive to be the “cleverness” and “powerfulness” of the Jewish people. A common way for Chinese to illustrate their positive views about Jews is by referring to the position of

¹⁴ For a comprehensive account of the historical changes in the images of Jews in China, see Xun 2001.

¹⁵ See <http://www.chinaembassy.org.il/eng/zygx/t262634.htm> (retrieved 29.12.2007)

¹⁶ The terms quoted were used by Li Peng, Chairman of the National People's Congress Standing Committee, during his meeting in Israel with the late Israeli President Ezer Weitzman (see People's Daily, 27.11.1999).

Israel vis-à-vis Arab countries. Here, for example, is the view of Yin: “Jews are very smart people. The number of Jews is so little in comparison with the Arab people, but they are the strongest nation in the region. Jews beat all the Arab countries in every war. How is it possible?” Yin asked this question in a rhetorical sense, pointing a finger to his head as he provided the answer: “because of their brains”.

Zheng, who was intensively occupied with his future plans in China, once shared his thoughts with me: “it is not enough to have money, many people have money but they don’t become successful businessmen. The secret is to have knowledge and understanding of the market and the opportunities. You [Israeli-Jews] have this knowledge, you understand how it works. We not only have to save money here, we also need to learn new things, new ways of thinking”. Many Chinese see in Jews a thriving nation, and consider the Israeli businesses, where they are employed, as models for roaring entrepreneurship.

Gaining knowledge about the “Jewish entrepreneurial spirit” or “way of thinking” is, of course, a task that every Chinese worker can independently attempt while in Israel. However, some Chinese believe that the Bible is a central key for accomplishing this task, as even President Jiang Zemin once admitted “he was reading the Bible and was eager to study the texts, which, he said, represented the ‘wisdom and the unity’ of the Jewish people” (Xun 2001:159). It is in this sense that the teachings of the evangelical church can appear as valuable cultural capital to Chinese migrants in Israel.

Pastors in Israel regularly mention the commonalities between Jews and Christians, and they draw a theological circle that encompasses Christian evangelicals together with Jews. Pastors also stress the fact that the two religious groups rely on the same source, the Bible, for gaining their wisdom and understanding of the world. The religious discourse of the church strongly focuses on the promising future that awaits members who, like Jews, choose to conduct their lives with the help of God.¹⁷

¹⁷ It should be mentioned here that attempts to create a theological, and at times also political, unity between Christians and Jews are common among evangelical churches worldwide (Birman 2006; Gifford 2001; Kramer 2002). In Israel, there are other evangelical churches of migrant communities from Latin America and Africa, whose attempts at approximating Jews are even more pronounced (see Kalir 2006; Kemp and Rajjman 2003; Sabar 2004).

5.2. Christianity as Symbolic Capital: Jesus as a Marker of Distinction

Returning as a Christian to China serves the desire of migrants to symbolically distinguish themselves from non-migrants. Becoming a Christian is a powerful way, together with building a new house or setting up a business, for migrants to demonstrate their accomplishment of upward mobility and achievement of a higher social status.

The effect that the wealth of migrants has in triggering a sense of relative deprivation among non-migrants, and stimulating further out migration, has been well documented (Kalir 2005; Stark 1984, 1991; Thunø and Pieke 2005). The powerful impact of relative deprivation is compounded by the desire of returnees to publicly exhibit their economic success and create a marked distinction between their lifestyle and that of non-migrants. Such a distinctive lifestyle may include a different (Western) dress code, the conspicuous consumption of modern appliances, and cultural skills such as speaking a foreign language, obtaining an educational degree, and adopting distinctive perspectives and attitudes. As Thunø and Pieke (2005:503) argue, Chinese migrants aim to “develop a new modernity and identity that underline the backwardness of the remaining population in the village”.

When I interviewed returnees from Israel in China, they almost always bragged about their fluency in Hebrew. As I enthusiastically started to speak Hebrew with them, it became clear that most returnees knew very little Hebrew, if any. I was disappointed not to be able to converse with them in Hebrew and wondered why they exaggerated their command of the language so much. Importantly, the interviews were regularly conducted in returnees’ houses or shops, and other family members and friends were usually present. It later struck me that their claim to fluency in Hebrew was meant primarily to impress not me but the crowd around us. As Liu (1997:106-107) observes when discussing Chinese scholars who visited the West: “Overseas travel has a powerful impact on people back on the mainland...traveling to Western countries not only gives individuals access to wealth but also helps them gain tremendous symbolic capital”.

Chinese migrants in Israel face some objective difficulties in trying to accumulate symbolic capital. Firstly, they never receive a permanent residency in Israel – a status that increasingly constitutes a highly evaluated symbolic capital in China (see Liu 1997; Ong

1999). Secondly, they have a maximum of five years to consolidate their advanced economic position as returnees. Thirdly, mainly due to the language barrier, Chinese migrants hardly ever manage to establish deeper social relationships with Israelis, and their experiential exposure to Israeli “culture” is thus quite limited.¹⁸

There is always a delicate balance, or a tradeoff, if you like, between a certain loss of migrants’ own “culture” and the accumulation of symbolic capital that can be effectively deployed back home (Carruthers 2002; Ong 1999). Arguably, a conversion to Christianity constitutes a significant modification in the religious and cultural identity of workers from small villages who left China for only a short period. However, it might paradoxically be precisely because Chinese migrants in Israel have so little chance to accumulate symbolic capital that becoming a Christian presents itself as an ever more appealing marker for migrants’ adoption of a distinctive Western mentality and identity.

The claim that a Christian identity can serve as a major distinguishing feature in villages across China should be carefully gauged against the historical presence of Christianity in China. While the roots of Protestant Christianity in China can be traced back to the early 19th century, there were no more than 1 million Protestants in 1949 when the PRC was established (Brown 1986). Repressive attempts by the central government to eradicate Christianity during much of the Maoist Era (1949-1979) never fully succeeded, as some Christians managed to escape execution and lengthy jail sentences by going underground (see Aikman 2003). As Yang (2005:427) reports in his review of the growth of Christianity in China, since 1979, when China loosened its restrictive stand on religious practice, all authorized religions (Buddhism, Daoism, Catholicism, Protestantism and Islam) have experienced a surge in membership. The number of Protestants in China, although heavily contested due to the widespread existence of underground house churches, has recently been estimated by different researchers at around 50 to 80 million (see Bays 2003; Chao and Chong 1997; Lambert 1999).¹⁹

¹⁸ From my interviews with activists in Israeli NGOs and officers in the Immigration Police, who deal in very different ways with Chinese and other non-Jewish migrants, there appears to be a consensus over the considerable social isolation of the “Chinese community” in Israel.

¹⁹ Although none of the converts I interviewed mentioned the expansion of Christianity in China as a factor in the decision to undergo conversion in Israel, we cannot rule out the possibility that the spread of underground house churches in China increases the curiosity of many Chinese people with regard to

Indeed, in the villages I visited in Fujian Province the presence of Christianity is long standing and evident. Most villages have an authorized church, which is visibly situated and attracts tens of attendees for service on Sunday. Nevertheless, returnees who join authorized churches markedly differ in their appearance and demeanor from non-migrant members. Take for example, Feng, a 34 year-old returnee, who has for more than a year now attended an authorized church in his village. With his unbuttoned elegant shirt, shiny white shoes, and modern haircut, Feng, who walks energetically with his Bible in his hand, stands out strikingly in a crowd that is comprised mainly of middle-aged women and children who attend a Sunday school.

However, the majority of returnees that I met in China did not join authorized churches; instead, they mainly chose to become members of underground house churches. Some returnees, in villages where only an authorized church exists, preferred to travel to other villages in order to attend services at a house church. In explaining their preference for house churches, some returnees pointed to social ties and religious networks, as in the following reasoning provided by Tang: “Tseng, one of my best friends in Israel, became a member of this [house] church. When I got back he introduced me to his church and I also became a member there”. Other returnees primarily praised what they perceived to be the modern approach of their house church. Some returnees also insinuated that authorized churches were too conservative and did not do enough to fight for greater religious freedom in China.

Concurrently, I also met pastors in authorized churches who resented and complained about the illegal activities of house churches. In one authorized church I saw a huge board decorating the entrance hall, with the Religious Affairs Bureau’s regulations for the legal operation of religious institutions clearly written on it. When I asked the pastor there if returnees from Israel were joining his church, he answered somewhat irritably: “They don’t have time for the church. They are only busy with their work”.

It is also important to remember that in most villages the majority of people still practice mainly traditional religions, i.e. Buddhism and Daoism, or local folk religions. It is therefore true that in most villages, conversion to Christianity in Israel serves as a

Christian doctrines and practices, and thus also positively influences migrants’ desire to experiment with Christianity while they are abroad.

significant marker for distinguishing returnees from non-migrants, including “traditional” Christian ones. Most people do not link Christianity and modernity in the intense way returnees do. Consequently, non-migrants are faced with, and are forced to make sense of, the coupling of economically successful and religiously reformed returnees.

5.3. Christianity as Social Capital: the Religious Glue of New Social Networks

A conversion to Christianity is communicated to members in the Israeli church as a pact that binds them together eternally as brothers in faith. The ability of the church to instill individual spirituality with a strong sense of community fosters cohesion and unity among members. The church clearly provides social capital to members who develop ties and interact on a weekly basis with their fellow members and the church personnel.

Significantly, the social capital that members accumulate in Israel also effects the configuration of new social networks in China. Members who come from nearby villages in China might seek to attend the same congregation upon their return, or maintain some other kind of contact that revolves around their mutual religious belief and practices. The existence of such “religious glue” facilitates the formation of new and potentially beneficial social networks for returnees with a shared migratory experience and newly achieved social status and economic wealth. For example, such new socio-religious networks might serve members as fruitful platforms for the exchange of information and the induction of entrepreneurial initiatives and business collaborations.

Since the establishment of new churches is still unauthorized or even illegal in China, Christian returnees are mostly obliged to form clandestine house churches. These house churches are at risk of “coercive and punitive state action, including physical harassment, detention, fines, and labor re-education or criminal proceedings and prison sentences” (Bays 2003:492, quoted in Yang 2006). The threat and secrecy that surrounds the operations of house churches might discourage some returnees from engaging in collective religious practices, but it may also, reversely, enhance the cohesiveness and sense of brotherhood among evangelicals in China.

The religious brotherhood between members of a church can potentially expand or even partly replace traditional kinship networks. Consider the case of Dong who

regularly remitted a large part of his earnings in Israel to his father in China. Dong's father was in charge of the saving, and in telephonic consultation with Dong, decided how to spend it (building a new house, helping out relatives, etc.). At a certain point Dong and his father started to act as usurers, lending money out to people in their area who wished to emigrate and needed to pay recruiters (snakeheads). They decided how much money to lend and under what terms (interest rate, period of loan, etc.) mainly according to the relatedness of people to the family and the amount of trust they had in their future solvency. Dong, who was committed to his father's deliberation on economic decisions, exerted his full discretion when he once asked his father to lend \$2,500 to the brother of a member of the church in Israel. "I told my father that he was someone I fully trusted and that he should not worry at all even though he didn't know him". Dong's father went along with his son's request and lent the money to a man who was a total stranger to him (and in fact also to Dong) but who formed part of Dong's new socio-religious network.

The formation and increasing importance of religious networks can be found among many overseas Chinese evangelicals, as for example reported by Nyíri (2003: 288) in the case of Chinese converts in Hungary: "church ties proved more important in business and recruitment of employees than the usually strong native place network of the Fujianese." The Israeli case study clearly demonstrates how religious networks, which are formed in evangelical churches overseas, can be transposed and deployed back in China by returnees.

Finally, there is yet another, more abstract, type of social capital that membership of a church bestows upon Chinese people. The church in Israel forms part of a global network of evangelical ministries and has several "sister churches" across the world – from the USA and Canada to Taiwan and Hong Kong, and from Europe to mainland China. As mentioned earlier, the personnel of the church includes two ethnic Chinese couples, one from Hong Kong and the other from Taiwan. The two couples have strong connections to churches in their respective places of origin, and they build on these connections to enforce the global connectivity of the church in Israel. Moreover, pastor Li travels regularly to visit "sister churches" abroad and to attend biblical seminars. At

the same time, members and pastors of “sister churches” occasionally donate money to the church in Israel or pay it a visit.

The multiple connections of the Chinese church in Israel to other churches worldwide are celebrated as part of the pastors’ attempts to promote among members a feeling of belonging to a global network, and to cultivate a sense of borderless brotherhood. For example, in its celebration of the Spring Festival in 2007 the church hosted members from a sister church in the USA. The guests from America put on a special program that included a performance by a choir, public confessions and free acupuncture treatments by one ‘brother’, a doctor by profession. Guests freely socialized with members, and the Chinese-American pastor told the crowd in his sermon that members in Israel could always be sure of a welcoming home if they ever reached the USA. On another occasion, one of the church’s personnel had a pastor from Taiwan on the line on his cell phone, who delivered his blessings and a message of brotherhood to members in Israel. The cell phone was put next to a public address system so that everyone in church could hear the Taiwanese pastor directly. Finally, the church often invites pastors from other churches to take part in the ceremonial baptism of new members. In the ceremonial baptism described at the start of this article, an ethnic Chinese pastor from Singapore joined the group. In addition to a sermon that he delivered to all attendees, the Singaporean pastor assisted pastor Li in baptizing new members, lowering each of them carefully into the waters of the Jordan River.

Pastors in Israel regularly tell members that as evangelicals they are the sons of God and they belong to whatever place He takes them to. On one occasion, when several new potential members visited the church for the first time, pastor Li offered them at the end of his sermon a free copy of the Bible. Holding up and waving the Bible in his hand he told them: “This is your global passport, it is given to you by God”. Interestingly, the Bible he gave them was the size of a standard passport, and, wrapped in a red flexible plastic cover, it unmistakably resembled the Red Book.

Promoting a sense of belonging to a shared global community and universal mission is characteristic among evangelical churches in general (Freston 2001), and among Chinese ones in particular (Nyíri 2003; Yang 1999). In fact, the metaphorical equation of the Bible to a global passport is practiced by pastors in different settings (see

Levitt 2007). In Israel, Kalir (2006) has documented how pastors in Latino evangelical churches refer to the Bible as a “spiritual passport”, while they were “awaiting and hoping for a Godly intervention that would make Jews realize that Christians were their allies and award them a legal status in the country” (Kalir 2006:228).

The case of the Chinese evangelical church is different, as most members are legal migrant workers who do not plan to settle down in Israel. It is therefore true that in the case of the Chinese church, pastors’ stress on a sense of borderless evangelical brotherhood, and the notion of global connectivity, is more likely aimed at inspiring Chinese who often know that their migration to Israel might not be their only, or last, one.

6. DISCUSSION

Succinctly put, my argument in this essay has been that Chinese workers convert to Christianity not only because of the effects that membership in church have on their lives as workers in Israel, but also, and perhaps mainly, because of the various types of capital that it allows them to accumulate and potentially deploy as returnees in China. Employing terms like “capital”, and portraying the ample agency of migrants in making choices, however, might wrongly give the impression that I base my analysis on the assumption that Chinese migrants mostly apply reason and conscious calculations in reaching their decision to convert. I thus would like, in this final section, to elucidate my analytical position and locate my argument in a broader global context.

A significant process such as a religious conversion almost always results from a combination of different motivations. Chinese migrants are initially attracted to the church for different reasons; from enjoying worldly entertainment (CCTV4, ping-pong, etc.) to learning Hebrew, and from appreciating the impact of spiritual relief to realizing the instrumentality of membership. The decision to convert is hardly ever taken on one’s first visit to church; instead, it gradually evolves from an increased familiarity with the church’s teachings, activities, and community. As they acquire more knowledge about the church, potential converts clearly assess the effects of conversion on their lives. However, such assessments should not be conceptualized as overly conscious. People

often “feel” that converting is “the right choice” for them, without being able to explain their decision, using a step-by-step type of reasoning. Instead, members in Israel (as elsewhere in the world) habitually produce distinctive evangelical narratives regarding spiritual revelations that make them realize that Jesus is their Savior, and prompt them to “receive Him into their hearts” and call upon Him to “save their souls”.

One cannot deny the subjective, however standardized, perceptions of converts about their motivations for joining evangelical churches. Notwithstanding the emic views of converts, in what follows I offer a complementary sociological explanation for the conversion of Chinese people to evangelical Christianity in Israel (and elsewhere), based on Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of habitus.

Pierre Bourdieu (1977) developed the notion of habitus to refer to a set of dispositions that are inscribed and embodied in members of certain groups, given their immersion in certain fields. Habitus leads people to favorably perceive certain options and follow certain lines of action, not out of careful deliberation but out of an intuitive drive or “a feel for the game” (Bourdieu 1992). While some of the actions informed by this intuitive drive might appear strange to observers, Bourdieu (1992:130) asserts that:

People are not fools; they are much less bizarre or deluded than we spontaneously believe precisely because they have internalized, through a protracted and multisided process of conditioning, the objective chances they face. They know how to “read” the future that fits them, which is made for them and for which they are made...through practical anticipations.

It is my contention that there is a deeper motivational structure that disposes Chinese people in Israel (and potentially elsewhere) to positively consider joining the church, and which can be traced to their particular habitus. Chinese migrant workers represent a selective group of people who have internalized a similar set of conditions and conditionings throughout their particular life trajectory, namely, growing up in rural China in low-class poor families, receiving little formal education, and getting gradually more exposed to the positive economic advances of immigration to the West. Such a trajectory has not only disposed these people to favor immigration over all other life strategies (Thunø and Pieke 2005), but it has also, more generally, disposed them to prefer *change over fixity*, and in particular to evaluate positively a change in the existing social hierarchy in China and the current positioning dynamics which disfavor them.

Chinese migrants in Israel are very concerned about their future as returnees; they do not accept a return to their pre-migration jobs, and they know that as poorly educated workers from rural areas their upward mobility is restricted in China. They therefore develop an inclination for joining projects that aim, like immigration, to change their own position within the current Chinese configuration, and, on another level, to change the ordering mechanism of positions in China.

The evangelical church appeals to many Chinese people because it advocates and provokes changes on both these levels. On a personal micro level, it focuses on a reformation of the Self and the reshaping of one's identity and future. On a global macro level, evangelical ministries across the world (but especially in the USA) are playing a major role in a heavily politicized campaign for what they see as a necessary change in China (and other countries) towards democracy, human rights and greater religious freedom.

David Aikmen (2003) in his book "Jesus in Beijing" describes ongoing efforts by thousands of evangelicals in- and outside China to bring about a radical change in the PRC. The New York Times has recently published an article about a Christian scholar in Beijing, Li Baiguang, who sued the Chinese police in Shandong Province for jailing a 55-year-old evangelical who runs a house church in her living room. Mr. Li, who was invited by President Bush to the White House last year, won the case and the police withdrew the charges. Celebrating this small victory in his greater fight for religious freedom in China, Mr. Li had this to say: "In 20 to 30 years China will have several hundred million believers. That will make China the biggest Christian nation in the world, with more Christians than the entire U.S. population" (New York Times 31.05.2007).

In Israel, the evangelical church largely recasts Chinese workers as agents of change. Members are referred to websites which advocate religious freedom in China and a move towards a democratic and transparent regime. When I once talked with the pastor about underground house churches and the difficulties that members face upon their return, he summed up his thoughts in the following way: "they [members] know what the situation in China is like, but they also know and believe that a change is imminent and that they are part of this change". Even if this is just a personal perception, it is a

perception that resonates with stymied migrants and can embolden them in terms of facing difficulties in the present and future.

In a way, Chinese migrants in Israel are trapped between the two Chinese modernist imaginaries that Ong (1997) so brilliantly depicts. On the one hand, the nation-state imaginary praises Chinese migrants for contributing to the modernization of China, but emphasizes social essentialism and fixity.²⁰ On the other hand, the entrepreneurial capitalist imaginary, which stresses hybridity and fluidity, is constructed by the transnational affluent Chinese – a group to which Chinese migrants in Israel might aspire to belong, but into which they fail to fit, given that their immigration is limited in time and yields no concrete transnational ties.

The modernist imaginary, which the evangelical church promotes, manages to combine, as it were, the best of both other imaginaries from the perspective of Chinese migrants in Israel. Like the official state one, the evangelical imaginary consecrates a distinctive place and status for Chinese migrants, while at the same time, like the transnational variant of Chinese modernity, it promotes fluidity and change. What we face here is in a sense a reversal of David Harvey's (1990) observation about the tendency among those who experience mobility in an age of globalization to adopt transcendental ideologies that confer stability. The adoption of evangelicalism by Chinese migrants in Israel is partly meant to produce precisely the opposite effect, namely, to generate and heighten changes in their personal lives as well as in China at large.

It is important to note here that most Chinese people I met felt extremely proud about their country. Their desire for change in China should therefore not be confused with a feeble or a sectarian sense of nationalism. It is rather that their evangelically inspired sense of patriotism drives them to desire a change in China which they believe will be in the best interests of the entire country.

²⁰ In its attempt to recruit Chinese migrants to the cause of China, the PRC is even discursively “celebrating migration as a patriotic and modern act” (Nyíri 2001:635). See also Pieke 2004.

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