Christian bilingual practices and hybrid identities as vehicles of migrant integration

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Abstract

This paper investigates the conversion journeys from atheism to evangelical Christianity of a group of first-generation Chinese Australians. Based on qualitative open-ended interviews, we find that migration is experienced as an existential crisis of economic insecurity, loss of status, language barriers, marital problems, and parenting dilemmas. In this context, churches provide practical support. The support and community offered may lead to the acceptance of a new belief system. The long-term consolidation of the benefits of conversion were achieved through bilingual and bicultural practices and hybrid and adhesive identities, resulting in personal well-being and a high level of social integration. Christian beliefs also became a kind of objective standard that allowed participants to bridge generational, linguistic, and cultural gaps with their second-generation children. The chapter closes with a discussion of the lessons that this research holds for secular institutions as they try to improve the social integration of newcomers.

Keywords

Chinese migrants, Christian converts, gender, language learning, migration, multilingualism, parenting, social cohesion

Chinese immigrant converts

Li Sha[1] is a successful entrepreneur in her mid-50s who runs several health-related businesses she set up herself. The energetic PhD-credentialled professional has not always been an entrepreneur, though. Until her migration to Australia in 2000, she enjoyed a stable career as a university academic at one of China's top-ranked medical schools. Her migration not only transformed her highly regulated work-life but also her spirituality. Raised in an atheist environment, religion was alien to her until her mid-30s: "I had no contact with or interest in any religion, whether it is Christianity, Buddhism, or Taoism. I thought these were all false beliefs." she says.[2]

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The trauma of migration turned her into a religious seeker. Like many new migrants, Li Sha struggled to find adequate employment and to re-establish herself as a competent adult through the medium of a new language.[1] The economic insecurity took a heavy toll on her family, too: her marriage disintegrated, and Li Sha despaired at parenting her rebellious teenage daughter as a single mother. Comparing her life back in China with her new life in Sydney, Li Sha mused:

> Life in China was very stable. We did not have any worries and only needed to follow the work routine. But the uncertainty of our new life threw us off balance. When I started my business, I was so scared. I had never done anything like that before. I did not know whether I would be able to make any money or whether it would be enough to survive. In that situation, I craved protection and wanted to be able to predict the future.

Without extended family or a support network, Li Sha had to face this existential crisis alone. To find some calm, she started to visit a popular Chinese Buddhist temple in Sydney. However, attending the temple did not bring her any relief: "No matter how much incense I burned, I was still fearful and insecure."

Another new migrant from China and a recent convert to Christianity, Sai Na, suggested to Li Sha she should attend a church service. Initially reluctant, Li Sha eventually came along and had an intense conversion experience:

> Sai Na insisted on taking me to church. In that church I was touched by God, and that is the truth. I experienced a sense of safety and security, and I knew I had found my faith. Words cannot describe the awe I felt in that moment.

Li Sha was baptized into the faith shortly after and has been a devout Christian ever since. Twenty years on, she credits God with her economic success and with saving her daughter from being a "bad girl" to becoming a social worker.

Li Sha's experience is not unique. While Christians remain a small minority among Chinese people in general, Chinese migrants show high levels of interest in Christianity.[2] Indeed, Christianity was a frequent topic among the 31 Chinese migrant families who participated in Wang's PhD study.[3] Although the focus of that study was children's heritage language maintenance and had nothing to do with religion, Christianity did, in fact, loom large for the

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participants. Eight of the 31 families (26%) had converted to Christianity since coming to Australia and others professed an interest and occasionally attended church. This figure is roughly in line with census statistics that show that around 20% of Chinese Australians (267,000 out of a total of 1,214,000) identify as Christian.[3, 4]

The reason Christianity was such a popular topic among the families in Wang's[3] research was that many participants struggled with parenting in Australia. They did not want to raise their children in the strict and uncompromising Chinese ways they had been raised themselves, but they did not find western parenting appealing, either, considering it too lax. They regularly shared horror stories of out-of-control westernized children who failed academically or had slid into drug addiction or promiscuity. Against this background, joining a church was frequently pondered as a middle path that might allow parenting that is both relaxed and emotionally connected yet guiding the next generation on a path to good morals and a fulfilled life.

This chapter explores conversion to Christianity among Chinese migrants to Australia from a language learning and settlement perspective. After introducing the research participants in this qualitative study, we begin by showing that conversion is a specific response to the existential crisis some migrants experience. Community support provided by church groups coupled with Christian spiritual beliefs may help to overcome that crisis and allow migrants to re-establish themselves as competent adults. Over time, a bilingual and hybrid spirituality allows converts to claim a legitimate place in Australian society as bilingual and bicultural Chinese Australians. Christian doctrines also offer a discourse to bridge the linguistic and cultural gap between first generation migrant parents and their children. We conclude by discussing implications of our findings for secular migrant settlement support services.

Participants

The present study is an extension of two research projects: Wang's[3] ethnographic PhD research investigating heritage language maintenance among Chinese families in Sydney, and an ongoing research project directed by Piller examining the experiences of migrant parents with home learning during COVID-19 school closures. In total, 57 Chinese families with school-aged children participated in both studies. For the present paper, we re-approached ten adults from this group who had previously shared that they had converted to Christianity since coming to Australia. Seven of these, all women, agreed to be interviewed again with a

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focus on their religious beliefs and practices. This involved asking them about their pre-migration religious beliefs, their post-migration conversion journeys, and the role of Christianity in their language learning, settlement, and parenting experiences.

The participants were born between 1961 and 1981. This means that, except for the oldest, Sai Na, they started school around the time of China's economic "opening up" reforms of 1978 and grew up with China's economic progress. They migrated to Australia between 2000 and 2015 when they were in their late 20s to late 40s. All of them are highly educated and hold at least a Bachelors' degree, which they obtained in China. Prior to migration, all of them worked in professional roles in academia, engineering, finance, IT, and medicine. After migration, all experienced downward occupational mobility. By the time of the interview, which took place in 2020 between five and twenty years after migration, only two had managed to re-establish themselves in professional salaried positions. Three were self-employed and either ran their own business, as Li Sha did, or had a support role in their husband's business. Two were housewives.

All seven women had been raised as atheists in China but converted to Christianity within the first few years of settlement in Australia. In 2020, they attended four different churches of evangelical and pentecostal persuasions. Five of them attended English-language congregations and two attended a Chinese-language congregation. For most of them, the congregation they attended in 2020 was not their first church, and membership was not necessarily exclusive. Yao Lan, a health professional back in China and a housewife in Australia, for instance, used the boom in virtual services during the COVID-19 pandemic to supplement her involvement in her English-medium church in Sydney with online services and sermons streamed by a congregation in Beijing.

All seven women are highly involved in their congregations and engage in a variety of religious practices, including attending Sunday services and participating in Bible study groups, and other forms of discipleship. Additionally, they engage in private prayer, either individually or as a family, they privately read the Bible and other devotional materials, and seek out opportunities to grow in their faith online. They also consider it their duty to spread the faith and proselytize among other Chinese migrants. Indeed, their participation in the study may well have been motivated by a desire to evangelize Wang, as Yao Lan explained:

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> I really hope you can convert and find God. You are a good person, why don't you believe in God? Without God, you have to face so many challenges on your own. You will exhaust yourself. Your shoulders cannot carry all that pressure. You need God to be your savior, to protect you, and to relax you. You see, only very few people can board God's ship. To think that you might not be eligible to get on his ship makes me cry.

In presenting the following analysis, we acknowledge that we write as outsiders to the faith espoused by the women.

Migration as an existential crisis

Since the late 1990s, highly educated and economically successful professionals from mainland China have increasingly taken on migration as a cosmopolitan self-fashioning project.[5] Disillusioned with negative aspects of Chinese society, this group seek out new lifestyles and opportunities for personal growth. However, they may find that the economic stability that undergirded their migration projects eludes them in the destination country.[6-8]

The transition from enjoying stable professional careers in China to their inability to find employment at their level in Australia came as a deep shock for the participants and their husbands. Their economic insecurity was compounded by an attendant loss of status and self-confidence, strongly related to the language barrier, which made them feel incompetent. Their inability to re-establish themselves as highly successful competent adults in public turned into an existential crisis through the ways in which this affected their marriages and their relationships with their children. Cai Da described the crisis she experienced as "extreme pressure", and went on to say, "We felt broken, both emotionally and physically."

Yao Lan's case provides an example. Yao Lan comes from an upper-middle class family and worked as a medical professional in China. Due to her high-powered role as senior manager of a major hospital, she was able to hire a full-time nanny and housemaid, who relieved her of all housework and care duties. When Yao Lan's family decided to migrate to Australia for the sake of their young daughter's education, her husband stayed behind in China as breadwinner and Yao Lan took on the role of housewife and full-time carer of her daughter. She hoped that she would be able to continue her career in Australia but soon discovered that her English level was too low to pass the certification examination necessary to re-enter her

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profession. Furthermore, she experienced herself as incompetent even at routine tasks such as looking after her child and daily meal preparations:

> I had thought I was psychologically prepared at the time of migration, but it turned out that I underestimated the difficulties of living in another country. […] When I was in a grocery store, I had no idea what ingredients I should buy. […] I was in a panic. I was the only one to take care of my daughter in Australia, but she often fell ill or got a fever, and I did not even know how to message her teacher in English for sick leave. I was extremely anxious.

Given that their migration had been a project of self-seeking, the crises in which they found themselves seemed partly of their own making and some reported being consumed with guilt. Bai Rong and her husband, for instance, worked seven days a week to establish their business and had no time to look after their young daughter. Bai Rong lamented, "Oh, she suffered so much, and she was so lonely."

The existential crisis of migration constituted the beginning of their religious seeking. Six of the seven participants used the exact same phrase to describe the situation in which they found themselves during their early time in Australia: "人的尽头" (rén de jìntóu; literally "the end of humans"; "ultimate hopelessness"). And where human capacity ends, the divine begins, as they went on to say: "神的开始" (shén de kāishǐ; "the start of God").

Transformation through conversion

Spiritual seeking was not the primary purpose of turning to church, as the participants freely admitted. What they sought initially was practical support in the crises they experienced by making new friends that could fill in for the networks they had lost through migration. "I did not go to church to seek God," Sai Na confided, "but to find an educated and decent group of people." Church groups did indeed provide a community that could offer practical support. The experience of Yao Lan is a case in point:

> Most new immigrants feel overwhelmed because they are completely alone with all their problems. By comparison, I was much luckier. My church sisters and brothers helped me so much without asking for anything in return. When I came here, my mind was blank. They taught me English. They helped me to set up an English email. When the network at our house broke down, they

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> came and called someone to have it repaired. They even came along to house inspections when we bought our home.

The practical assistance offered by the church community helped to build up a supportive and trusting relationship that could partly compensate for the loss of family and friendship networks in migration. Sai Na explicitly framed her church as family: "I don't go to church to attend activities. The church is my home. And I go home every week to see my family."

Religion consists not only of practices but also beliefs.[9] Like the practical support provided by churches, Christian teachings were also helpful to the participants in overcoming the crises in which they found themselves. This was particularly evident from the positive influence their new-found faith had on their marriages. Mediating in marital conflict was a form of support often undertaken by the wife of the minister or another senior church member, who would come on home visits for the purpose. Additionally, the new belief itself had positive consequences, as Cai Da explained:

> We were touched when we listened to the lectures on marriage. The minister said if both husband and wife consider themselves as God or Goddess, they will fight to prove who is stronger. Right? But if both listen to the real God, they will not fight. Our relationship did not improve straightaway but found a new direction. Gradually, we quarreled less often. When our relationship clearly improved, we became convinced that God exists. You see, we could not have solved this problem by ourselves. But if you trust in God and listen to him, it is easy.

Bai Rong was another participant who credited her Christian beliefs with saving her marriage, arguing that the strong position of women in Chinese society was jeopardizing harmonious relationships: "I am a tough woman, a typical product of Chinese education. Our education emphasizes that women hold up half the sky. That is why we are not ready to compromise. But that is impossible in marriage when both husband and wife want the final say."

The participants argued that Christian teachings enabled them to humble themselves and to become more obedient wives. Accepting such fundamental gender transformation did not come easy to the women. Yao Lan, for instance, reported that when she had first heard that it was God's command for women to obey their husbands, she felt outraged. However, she

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discovered that practicing humility and obedience changed her husband, too, and improved their relationship. It is perhaps ironic that migration to Australia, a country espousing highly egalitarian gender ideals, resulted in the women giving up their previously held convictions of gender equality. However, this was not only due to accepting Christian teachings of the subordinate role of women.[4] The Australian migration system, in fact, tends to confer differential status as primary and secondary visa holder to men and women.[10-11]

Subordinate gender roles were not the only Christian belief the participants chafed at. As explained above, it was initially the search for practical support that attracted them to church. However, that did not mean they were open to accepting the idea of the existence of a transcendental deity. Such a belief constituted a complete break with their strong socialization into atheism and the scientific worldview, as Bai Rong explained: "I told the minister that I was an atheist; that I believed in the big bang theory as the beginning of the universe and in evolution. These were the three cornerstones of my outlook on life."

Another reason for their difficulty with Christian beliefs was that they considered Chinese and Christian identities as incompatible. Yao Lan, for example, was impressed what "good people" Christians were. However, at the same time, she felt that "Jesus belongs to foreigners" and had no relevance to Chinese people. Some ministers further reinforced this dichotomy by preaching against the "false idols" of Buddhism and Taoism. Yao Lan was one of those who were initially aggravated by such doctrines: "I didn't want to listen to this and just wanted to leave. However, I could not tear myself away from the sense of security I felt in church."

Reconciling the tension between desirable religious practices and problematic religious beliefs constituted a significant challenge. The participants resolved this tension by highlighting the congruence between Christian beliefs and traditional Chinese values of kindness, grace, gratitude, and humility. In this narrative, becoming a Christian was not such a big transformation after all because it involved espousing the values of one's ancestors. Tan Xi asserted that "the teachings in the Bible are very similar to my family instructions." She went on to talk about her grandfather who had instructed the family "to have three hearts: a heart of gratitude, a heart of humility, and a heart of fear." Tan Xi quoted several Chinese proverbs and sayings from the Confucian Analects which are all compatible with Christianity. Examples include "滴水之恩，涌泉相报" ("the grace of drops is repaid by the

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spring”, which is an exhortation to gratitude), “七尺之上有神明” (“there are gods seven feet above our heads”, which is the equivalent to “God is watching”) and “三人行，必有我师 ” (“out of any three people, there is one who can be your teacher”, which is a warning against arrogance).

Mai Li summarized the new person she had become as a Christian as follows:

> The most important result of my conversion has been the transformation of myself. Since I have become a believer, my outlook on life has fundamentally changed. I used to be self-important and considered my achievements a result of my own efforts. … I used to be worldly and materialistic. And I would compare myself with people who lived in a bigger house or whose children attended a better school. But now I am grateful for what I have.

In sum, what started out as a search for practical support to face the existential crisis of migration resulted in a radical transformation of the participants’ social networks and belief systems. In the vocabulary of their new faith, participants repeatedly stressed that their new beliefs had led to “生命的翻转” (shēngmìng de fānzhuǎn; “complete life transformation”).

Consolidating new identities

At the time of the interviews in 2020, the average time since baptism was more than ten years (Yao Lan was a notable outlier with only one year as a baptized Christian). This means that not only the crisis of initial settlement but also the period of transformation through conversion was well in the past. Participants had had time to consolidate their new identities, and they had become comfortable in new hybrid identities as Chinese-English bilinguals and Chinese Australians. In this section, we explore these hybrid linguistic and national identities.

The choice of an English or Chinese medium church was an important aspect of the participants’ conversion journeys. At the time of the interview, five participants worshipped in an English-medium church and two in a Chinese-medium church. However, except for Tan Xi, all had attended Chinese-medium churches at some point. Most had done so to speed up their learning of the new faith in the initial stages of their conversion journeys. Once they felt they had a good enough handle on both English and the Christian belief system, some switched to an English-medium church for practical or doctrinal reasons. Others felt that attending a Chinese-centered congregation was essential to their holistic spiritual

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development. Mai Li, for instance, attends a Chinese-centered church that has English, Cantonese, and Mandarin ministries. This multilingualism constitutes an essential attraction for her: "English and Chinese ministries differ in the target audience, the focus of the sermons, and some of their practices. I chose the Mandarin ministry because my Chinese identity can be best supported there." In this case, the target audience of the Chinese-language ministries are first generation worshippers like our participants while the English-language ministry targets the second generation, who usually have low proficiency in Chinese, as we will explain below.

Even the participants who worshipped in English-medium congregations supplemented their commitment to a particular church in Sydney with online Christian resources. The latter materials were reportedly almost exclusively in Chinese. However, this did not necessarily mean that they emanated from mainland China. Rather, the participants connected with a global Chinese Christian diaspora.[12] Li Sha explained the attraction of both English and Chinese language sermons, as well as localized and global ones:

> The sermons in my current church [an English-medium evangelical congregation in Sydney] are mostly related to daily life in Australia. But Chinese ministers in America have had experience living in China and they frequently relate their sermons to events there. We identify with both sides, and that is why we want to listen to ministers from different backgrounds.

Over time, the participants also discovered that different languages and styles touched them differently. Bai Rong could not imagine giving one preference over the other: "I have my favorite English and Chinese pastors. The words of [name of English-speaking minister] are so full of passion and power that you can feel your heart beating. Chinese preachers are more traditional but nonetheless excellent. [Name of Chinese-speaking minister] puts a lot of humor in his sermons, and the Chinese jokes and poems are very touching."

In the same way that both languages contributed to their spiritual development, their dual identities became fused, too. Bai Rong, for instance, experienced a strong sense of awakening of her Australian identity, when she heard the prime minister, Scott Morrison, himself a pentecostal Christian, pray for Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic: "At that moment, I realized I am Australian. I must serve both China and Australia. This is the work of the holy spirit."

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Sai Na was the only participant who rejected a Chinese religious or political identity and felt exclusively committed to Australia. Her fervent anti-communism sometimes made others uncomfortable, as Yao Lan confided: “

> Sai Na’s group pray for Australia to be free of its dependence on China. This makes me feel uneasy and I do not join those prayers. You see, my family and friends are still in China, and I cannot wish them ill. My group prays for both Australia and China. We hope that China stays safe and that our families there prosper.

This fusion of different national, linguistic, and religious identities in Chinese migrant converts has been described as “adhesive identities.”[13] Adhesive identities constitute an integration of different languages, different national identities, and different belief systems. This integration allowed the participants to find a comfortable space for themselves as first generation migrants in Australia. However, grounding the next generation in such a positive hybrid identity was more complicated, as we will explore in the next section.

Looking to the next generation

The seven women are the mothers of nine children. Four of these were born in Australia and five arrived in Australia when they were at elementary school age (the youngest was five and the oldest ten). At the time of data collection in 2020, the average age of these children was 17 years and ranged from eight to 27. All nine children are English-dominant and their Chinese proficiency is relatively low. Only two have some literacy in Chinese. The language proficiency of the second generation was not the main focus of this study but English dominance of the second generation is the most frequent heritage language outcome not only among Chinese[3] but other ethnolinguistic groups, too.[14-15]

The different linguistic repertoires of migrant parents and their children may mean that parents and children inhabit different discursive worlds. Such gaps between “Chinese parents” and “Australian children” were a major cause of parent-child problems, particularly in the teenage years. When “Chinese words” or “Chinese values” can no longer reach children, “God’s word” might seem the only way to connect to children about issues that were profoundly important to the participants. Mai Li explained this connection as follows: “If he [=her 17-year-old son] fears God and has faith, we can use God’s word to instruct him.

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Otherwise, children in Australia have too much so-called democracy, individual rights, and freedoms."

The most divisive issue was sexual orientation. While same-sex relationships enjoy equality before the law in Australia and discrimination based on sexual orientation is illegal, homosexuality was only decriminalized in China in 1997 and negative attitudes towards same-sex relationships persist.[16] These different discourses in their old and new homes caused considerable anguish to some participants, such as Bai Rong, who frequently fought over the issue with her 16-year-old daughter:

> We first generation immigrants have strong Chinese values. We cannot educate our children according to the standards of Australian society. For example, my daughter will argue with us that homosexuality is recognized by the Australian government. And therefore we should accept it, too. It is hopeless for us to try and influence her through Chinese values. So bringing her back to God is urgent for us. We might influence her through *cross is fix*. (In the original Chinese interview, "cross is fix" is a code-switch into English).

Others, too, had accepted that influencing their children through the medium of Chinese and through Chinese values was difficult. In this culture clash, the Christian faith became the parents' weapon of choice to positively guide their children and keep them safe from the perceived harms of Australian culture. Sai Na, for instance, took great pride in the Christian righteousness of her 27-year-old son, which she felt had kept him safe from the dangers faced by young people growing up in Australia:

> He is a firm believer and knows right from wrong, and what he can and cannot do. The things he cannot do include alcohol, drugs, and perverse sex, all of which are abhorrent to God. Why would anyone do things that are abhorrent to God? The greatest benefit of his faith is his fear of God.

While participants generally felt comfortable with their bilingual and bicultural identities, as outlined above, they struggled to find such a reconciliation of attitudes in their parenting. Partly due to different linguistic repertoires, they perceived Australia's individualistic culture as constituting a formidable threat to their parental authority. They felt that Christianity allowed them to bridge this gap by providing an objective source of moral reference that was beyond linguistic and cultural diversity.[17] Ironically, Christianity thus provided the

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participants with the vocabulary to instill what they considered Chinese values in the second generation; a generation that, by and large, lacked the linguistic skills to access those Chinese values directly by participating in Chinese-language discourses and reading its literatures.

Engaging in church practices as families even allowed them to confidently "outsource" their children's moral education to youth groups. The dreaded topics of alcohol, drugs, and sex outside heterosexual marriage were readily left to the church, as Yao Lan stated: "These youth leaders understand children's psychology very well. They have the wisdom to guide them positively." Youth leaders were thought to be able to reach children, even if parents could not, as Mai Li suggested: "Children want to listen to their peers rather than to me. What the youth group leader says has great influence on [my 17-year-old son]. He does not really want to listen to me, even if I say the same words." Simply by connecting their children with other Christian youths, parents felt they were protecting them from falling into bad company. Conversely, they considered church youths as academically studious and "clean-living", and hence good company and good role models for their children. Such friends and role models made parenting in the new culture less fraught.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have explored the intersection between conversion to Christianity and language learning, settlement, and parenting experiences of a group of first-generation Chinese Australians. In this concluding section we revisit the key findings and consider their implications for migrants' social integration into secular institutions. The significance of considering secular implications derives from the fact that a third of the Australian population follow no religion and that figure is double for one of the largest migrant groups, Chinese Australians.[4]

First, we noted that the experience of migration triggered an existential crisis for the participants. This crisis arose from a combination of economic insecurity, loss of status, the initial language barrier, marital difficulties, and parenting challenges. These migration traumas were closely connected to the loss of social networks in migration. The absence of family and friendship networks itself was deeply unsettling. Furthermore, it could escalate relatively mundane problems (e.g., who to call in the case of a power outage; how to send a sick note to school) and elevate them to personal crisis level. Church groups provided instrumental support to address these problems. This included a host of practical matters but,

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most importantly, the creation of new social networks. In other words, church groups offered new social networks and became a substitute for extended family and friends.

Given that migration is a key pillar of Australian nation building, how to help migrants navigate the initial phase of settlement is an important question for settlement support services. It seems to us that the potential for initial settlement problems in a new environment and the disorienting effects of having to establish new social networks from scratch as an adult continue to be underestimated. Our research has shown that the re-establishment of language- and culture-sensitive social networks is of paramount importance for successful integration. Secular alternatives include (ethnic) community groups, migrant resource centers, and pastoral care programs available to international students in some universities. These initiatives are currently fragmented, unsystematic, and may or may not be available to a newcomer.

Second, engaging in Christian practices ultimately requires an acceptance of Christian beliefs. Some of those beliefs were diametrically opposed to the participants' pre-migration beliefs. For instance, non-believers and Christians hold different views on the existence of a transcendental deity and its characteristics, on the role of science in understanding the world, and on gender equality. Reconciling old and new beliefs constituted a significant challenge that only came at the price of a radical self-transformation.

Self-transformation was experienced as positive and ultimately desirable by all our participants. This is, of course, to be expected as our sample consisted only of confirmed and devout Christians. For this research, we did not speak to anyone who might have turned to faith-based organizations for practical support yet unwilling or unable to commit to their belief systems. Similarly, we did not speak to anyone who might have converted at some point but have left the faith again since.

Conversion and the self-transformation that goes hand in hand with it had obvious benefits for the participants' wellbeing and their integration into Australian society. We would argue that in a secular society practical settlement support and human fellowship through new network building should be accessible to all migrants, irrespective of whether they accept a new belief system or not. To this end the provision of culturally-sensitive migrant support services particularly in the initial settlement phase is of paramount importance.

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Third, in the long-term, participants thrived by engaging in English-Chinese bilingual and bicultural practices. Being able to draw on both their languages and cultures, and bringing them together in a holistic hybrid fusion made them feel settled and comfortable. The Christian congregations they attended were pragmatic about the use of bilingual repertoires. They also readily combined Christian and Chinese ways of doing things, as long as core doctrine was not affected.

This linguistic and cultural syncretism significantly contributed to participants' long-term language learning, settlement, and overall integration into Australian society. This constitutes a significant contrast between these Christian churches and secular institutions such as schools, universities, and workplaces. The latter continue to implement English-only practices associated with "the monolingual mindset".

The harmful and exclusionary consequences of institutional monolingualism in the face of multilingual populations are clear.[1; 18-20] However, adopting multilingual and hybrid linguistic practices is often resisted because it is deemed impractical. However, the adhesive identities enabled in the Christian congregations discussed here shows otherwise. As such, our findings here echo emergent research into faith-based organization as educational spaces for identity formation, community development, and language learning.[21]

Finally, all parenting is challenging and migrant parenting maybe even more so. How to guide the next generation to keep them save from harm, to fulfil their potential, and to lead ethical lives contributing to the common good can be an enormous source of anxiety for migrant parents as they navigate not only generational but also linguistic and cultural gaps. The participants saw instilling the fear of God and a strong faith in Christian dogma as a way to bridge these gaps.

The gaps between migrant parents and their children evident here are as stark as they are because the two generations usually have different linguistic repertoires and move in different discourse worlds. While both generations are bilingual, our participants are Chinese-dominant while their children are English-dominant. As a result, the Chinese stories, literatures, and discourses that shaped the parents' moral education are not readily available to their children. By contrast, English-medium discourses were feared by the parents as they almost exclusively perceived the negative aspects of a western moral education.

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The parenting experiences documented here show a clear failure on the part of Australian schools to minimize those gaps. This failure is twofold: first, it relates to the well-documented inability of the Australian school system to support the language learning aspirations of heritage language learners.[22-23] Second, it relates to weaknesses in institutional communication with parents from non-English-speaking backgrounds.[24] The former means that the second generation, by and large, does not have the capacity to deeply engage with the discourse worlds that shaped their parents' socialization, world views, and values. The latter means that parents lack a good understanding of their children's Australian education. This may give rise to fears of and anxieties about the education their children are receiving. In the interest of social cohesion, it is vital to overcome these barriers by improving heritage language education and home-school communication.

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Notes

[1] All names are pseudonyms.

[2] Interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese by the first author. All direct quotes are translations.

[3] The figure is approximate because it depends on how the group of Chinese Australians is defined. In the 2016 Australian census, Christians accounted for 25% of people with Chinese ancestry, 15% of people with at least one parent born in China, and 18% of people who speak a Chinese language at home. Christianity is the largest religion among Chinese Australians, followed by Buddhism with 12-15%, but far outranked by those who claim no religion with 54-69%. This is in comparison to 52% Christians, 2% Buddhists, and 30% without a religion among all Australian residents.[4]

[4] The idea of male headship is contested in Christian doctrine but widely accepted among evangelical and pentecostal groups.[25]

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