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Christian Conversion and Cultural
Incongruity in Asia

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Abstract

Data from a large national survey of China confirm that it is the best-educated Chinese who are most likely to have converted to Christianity. We argue that this is the result of spiritual deprivation generated by the cultural incongruity that was produced when the rapid industrial and technological modernization of China was juxtaposed against traditional Chinese religious and philosophical perspectives. The best-educated Chinese are the ones who are most apt to perceive this incongruity and respond accordingly—some by converting to Christianity and many by abandoning Buddhism and other traditional faiths. We then examine five other rapidly industrializing Asian nations and find support in each for the cultural incongruity explanation.

A number of observers have noticed the very high rate of conversion to Christianity that is taking place among graduate students from China at American universities (Wang and Yang 2006; Yang 1998). Many also have remarked on the very Christian climate that prevails at the leading Chinese universities, where many students as well as many faculty members openly express their faith (Lin-Liu 2005), and a fine study by Fenggang Yang (2005) reported the prevalence of well-educated Chinese among urban Christians in China. But no one has adequately explained why Christianity seems to have such great appeal for the most-educated Chinese. In fact, if this is true, the special appeal of Christianity for educated Chinese is quite inconsistent with the still prevailing notion among sociologists that religion functions primarily to compensate the lower classes for their worldly deprivations.

In this study, we first demonstrate that the most-educated Chinese are more likely than the less-educated to become Christians and to reject Buddhism. We then review previous research showing that new religious movements are nearly always based on elites. We explain this linkage as the result of spiritual deprivation. Turning to the particular situation of educated Chinese, we explore how the rapid influx of technical and economic modernity into a traditional society can create a crisis of cultural incongruity—a conflict between the cultural assumptions of modernity and those of traditional religious culture. This conflict results in spiritual deprivation, which can be relieved by conversion to Christianity and by rejecting Buddhism and other traditional religions. Finally, to test this explanation, we examine five other rapidly modernizing Asian societies.

EDUCATION AND CHRISTIANITY IN CHINA

Any effort to study Christianity in China faces a number of difficulties. First are government restrictions on the content of surveys. Second is the considerable reluctance of Chinese Christians to participate in surveys and the unwillingness of many who do participate to admit to an interviewer that they are Christians. Third, the relatively small percentage of Chinese who have become Christians limits the variation available for statistical analysis. Finally, the Chinese have very odd notions about what it means to have a religion. For example, most Chinese who go to a Confucian temple and pray for some benefit, such as performing well on college qualifying exams, will say that they have no religion (Sun 2005). In the survey reported by Sun, 72 percent of the Chinese who said that they had no religion had “venerated ancestral spirits by their graves” in the prior year. Indeed, 10 percent of those who claimed to be without religion said that they believed in the God of Heaven (the Jade Emperor), and some even said that they believed in Jesus Christ. It seems that most Chinese define having religion as belonging to an organized religious group rather than as consisting of mere practice (praying in

temples, for example) or of faith. Hence some Chinese say that they believe in Jesus Christ while denying that they are Christians, as will be seen.

The Chinese government does not allow external survey companies to ask questions on certain topics, including religion. Hence the Gallup World Poll data for China (see below) are of no use for our study. However, this restriction does not apply to domestic survey firms, and a huge study of Chinese religion was conducted in 2007 by Horizon, Ltd., one of China's largest and most respected polling firms. The study was based on a national multistage probability sample of mainland China. Respondents were 16 years of age and older and had lived at their current address for at least three months. A total of 7,021 Chinese respondents were interviewed face to face in their homes. Subsequently, the data were made available to the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University by a generous grant from the John Templeton Foundation.

A total of 2.7 percent of these Chinese respondents said that they were Christians. But given the potential difficulties attached to being a Christian in China, it must be assumed that many Christian respondents denied that fact and that many more refused to be interviewed. To estimate the extent of this undercounting, a follow-up study was conducted, drawing on contacts within the Christian community. In this study, random samples were obtained from the active membership rolls of Christian house churches in many of the same areas that were used in the original sample. Interviewers then called on each person drawn in these samples. The interviewers were unaware of the purpose of the follow-up study. Of the individuals in the samples, all of whom were known to be Christians, 62 percent declined to be interviewed, compared with 38 percent of all respondents in the original study. Of the known Christians who agreed to be interviewed, 9 percent did not admit that they were Christians. Adjusting for these percentages yields an estimate that 4.5 percent of Chinese were Christians in 2007. However, this correction fails to deal with another bias against our hypothesis. It appears likely that, because they had less at risk, the less-educated Chinese Christians were more willing to be interviewed and to admit to being Christians. An additional bias is that members of the Communist Party are forbidden to have any religion, and, of course, party members tend to be concentrated among the highly educated. Thus although there is much anecdotal evidence that a nontrivial number of Communist Party members are Christians, all party members in the sample denied having a religion, as would be expected, given that answers were not anonymous but were made during face-to-face interviews.

There is no way to add the "missing" Christians to the Horizon Survey for our analysis. We could, however, exclude all members of the Communist Party and of the Communist Youth League from the analysis, and we have done so. Thus Table 1 shows the relationship between education and reporting oneself to be a Christian or a Buddhist. The results show that college-educated Chinese are more

apt to be Christians than are the less-educated. The least-educated Chinese are second highest in their Christian membership, which probably reflects in part their greater willingness to be interviewed and to admit their Christian affiliation. In addition, as will be discussed, the least-educated Chinese probably convert to Christianity for rather different reasons than do the most-educated. In any event, the relationship with Buddhism, which is much less compressed for lack of variation, is far stronger and linear, the least-educated being almost twice as likely to be Buddhists as are the college-educated.

Table 1: Education and Religion in China

Education	Christian	Buddhist	<i>N</i>
College	4.04%	11.62%	204
Vocational school	2.81%	15.07%	476
High school	2.76%	17.35%	3,800
Less than high school	3.61%	20.31%	1,043

Note: Members of Communist Party and the Communist Youth League excluded.

Source: Horizon Ltd.

Admittedly, the percentage point differences in the Christian column are not large. However the results are significant (probability: 0.0698) at the 90 percent confidence level.

The problem of the lack of variation that squeezes the analysis of Christian membership is somewhat reduced when we turn to an item on belief in Jesus. The Chinese respondents to the Horizon Survey were nearly twice as likely to express belief in Jesus (5.1 percent) as to admit that they were Christians (2.7 percent); 117 respondents (2 percent) who said that they had no religion claimed that they believed in Jesus, as did 32 members of the Communist Party and the Communist Youth League. Presumably, the government is much less opposed to believing than to belonging. When asked about belief in Buddha, 18 percent of the respondents said that they did, including 8 percent of Communist Party members and 14 percent of those in the Youth League. Table 2 reports logistic regression analyses of both beliefs.

In addition to education, variables measuring marital status, age, gender, health, and economic status are included. Column 1 includes members of the Communist Party and the Youth League and adds party membership as a control variable, which is, of course, highly significant. Of the other variables, only education and gender have significant effects. Column 2 excludes members of the Communist Party and the Youth League, and the effects of gender and education are significantly greater than those in column 1. Column 3 is the same as column

1 except that belief in Buddha is substituted for belief in Jesus. Here, the effect of education is negative, as is the effect of party; the effects of gender and age are positive. Column 4 is the same as column 3, except that party members are omitted; the other coefficients are essentially unchanged.

Table 2: Logistic Regressions of Belief in Jesus and Belief in Buddha

Variables	(1) Jesus	(2) Jesus	(3) Buddha	(4) Buddha
Education	0.195* (0.109)	0.208* (0.119)	-0.135** (0.0643)	-0.140** (0.0710)
Marriage	0.0215 (0.0350)	-0.0128 (0.0427)	0.0328 (0.0212)	0.0243 (0.0247)
Age	0.133 (0.235)	0.151 (0.256)	0.498*** (0.138)	0.433*** (0.151)
Gender	0.637*** (0.121)	0.708*** (0.132)	0.412*** (0.0686)	0.436*** (0.0746)
Health	-0.00920 (0.0700)	0.0106 (0.0737)	-0.0218 (0.0405)	-0.0337 (0.0437)
Economic status	-0.105 (0.0951)	-0.103 (0.102)	0.0282 (0.0548)	-0.00772 (0.0598)
Party	-1.101*** (0.333)		-0.704*** (0.153)	
Constant	-4.530*** (1.061)	-4.684*** (1.150)	-3.835*** (0.622)	-3.480*** (0.678)
Pseudo- R^2	0.0207	0.0155	0.0170	0.0207
Observations	6,297	4,952	6,369	5,016

Note: Standard errors are in parentheses.

* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

Measured by both membership and belief, in China education is positively related to being a Christian and negatively related to being a Buddhist. But why?

*ELITES AND SPIRITUAL DEPRIVATION*¹

Social scientists seem unable to free themselves from the iron grasp of deprivation theory (Glock 1964) as they continue to teach that the primary social function of religion is to provide people with relief from their material misery. Perhaps amazingly, the data have never properly supported this view. For more than 50 years,

¹ Portions of this section appeared in Stark and Smith (2010).

studies in the United States and other Western nations have consistently found that the lower classes are conspicuously absent from the churches on Sunday morning (Glock and Stark, 1965; Lazerwitz 1962; Lenski 1953; Stark 1964 1971). Moreover, the major religious movements that have erupted throughout the centuries, in both the East and the West, were generated not by the suffering masses, but by dissatisfied elites.

Buddha was a prince, fifty-five of his first sixty converts were from the nobility, and the other five may have been nobles too—we simply don't know their backgrounds (Lester 1993). The early Taoists as well as the Confucianists were recruited from the Chinese elites (Stark 2007). Or consider two small sects that appeared in ancient Greece: the Orphics and the Pythagoreans. According to Plato, both movements were based on the upper classes: Their priests “come to the doors of the rich . . . and offer them a bundle of books” (in Burkert, 1985: 296). Of course, Moses was raised as a prince, the prophets of the Old Testament all belonged “to the landowning nobility” (Lang 1983), and so did most members of the Jewish sect known as the Essenes (Baumgarten 1997). It is now widely accepted that early Christianity “spread first among the educated more rapidly than among the uneducated” (Ramsay 1893: 57; see also Judge 1960; Stark 1996; Stark, Mencken, and Smith 2011). As for the great Christian sect movements, most, if not all, were based on people who had considerable wealth and power: the nobility, the clergy, and well-to-do urbanites. For example, the Cathars enrolled a very high proportion of nobility (Costen 1997), as did the early Waldensians (Lambert 1992). Luther's Reformation was supported not by the poor, but by princes, merchants, professors, and university students; in fact, Luther despaired of ever reaching the peasants and villagers (Parker 1992). Methodism was founded by John Wesley and his classmates at Oxford. Finally, of 428 medieval Roman Catholic ascetic saints, three fourths were from the nobility—22 percent of them from royalty (Stark 2003).

It is difficult to explain why so many social scientists continue to ignore these well-known historical facts and to insist that religion is, as Marx famously put it, “the sigh of the oppressed creature . . . the opium of the people.” Perhaps it is because they have never been rich or powerful that scholars fail to realize that wealth and status often do not satisfy all human desires. But as the great Nobel laureate economist Robert William Fogel pointed out, “throughout history . . . freed of the need to work in order to satisfy their material needs, [the rich] have sought self-realization” (Fogel 2000: 2). Consequently, deprivation theory must be extended. It is not merely that people will sometimes adopt religious solutions to their thwarted material desires (as probably helps to explain why the least-educated Chinese become Christians), but also that people will pursue or initiate religious solutions to their thwarted spiritual desires—a situation to which the privileged may be especially prone, since they are not distracted by immediate

material needs. Thus it is people of privilege who are most apt to give serious attention to the great intellectual and existential questions: Does life have meaning? What can we hope for? Does virtue exist? Is death the end? When people are dissatisfied with the conventional answers to these questions that are available in their society or discover that there are no traditional answers to questions raised by changing conditions, they suffer from spiritual deprivation and often seek to alleviate it by formulating or embracing an alternative religion or philosophy. Of course, this raises the question: What causes spiritual deprivation? Obviously, it can arise in many ways. But for the purposes of this study, our focus is on cultural incongruity.

MODERNIZATION AND CULTURAL INCONGRUITY

Culture consists of all the material and intellectual elements of a society (the latter consisting of the people and their interrelationships). Perhaps the most significant feature of culture is that it is created by humans. This is not to say that the members of any given society created all, or even nearly all, of that society's culture. In most instances, much of a society's culture is borrowed from other societies in a process known as diffusion. Importing culture from elsewhere can be risky in that the result may be that important elements of the subsequent combination of cultures do not fit together, resulting in cultural incongruity. In recent times, the process of rapid modernization of non-Western societies has been a major source of cultural incongruity.

The primary impediment to modernization in Asia was devotion to the past, as symbolized by so-called ancestor worship. It was believed that history traced a descent from more enlightened times. Therefore when serious efforts to modernize China began early in the 20th century, they collided with the prevailing culture, which not only lacked a belief in progress, but also was committed to the idea that modern times were far inferior to the past. Indeed, it was precisely this commitment to the past that had caused China, once the most advanced society on earth, to have fallen so far behind the West. It was partly to rid China of these antiprogressive, traditional attitudes and customs that Mao Zedong resorted to many of his excesses. To the extent to which Mao succeeded, he may have facilitated China's entry into its current era of very rapid industrialization and modernization, but he also helped to create a severe moral and spiritual vacuum by persecuting all signs of religion, old or new. Although thousands of the temples that Mao ordered closed have since reopened and there has been a burst of new temple construction, this has not satisfied the spiritual needs of many Chinese who recognize that these traditional faiths, which celebrate the past, are rather incongruous with modernity. Where then are the Chinese to turn for spiritual enlightenment? What are the grounds for morality? What is the meaning of life? These are

precisely the questions that Christianity addresses directly, eloquently, and effectively. As Christian Smith (2007: 168, 169) put it, “For the Christian, the universe is not an empty, dead expanse of rock, gasses, and fire extending to infinity or nothingness. Rather, reality at its heart is living, warm, and personal. . . . [n]othing is meaningless.”

Because modernity came to China from the West, many Chinese have looked westward seeking spiritual answers. In the words of one of China’s leading economists, “In the past twenty years, we have realized that the heart of your culture is your religion: Christianity. That is why the West is so powerful. The Christian moral foundation of social and cultural life was what made possible the emergence of capitalism and then the transition to democratic politics. We don’t have any doubts about this” (in Aikman 2003: 5). One can hear this line of thought on many Chinese campuses (see Huilin and Yeung 2006). This may explain Christianity’s appeal to the most-educated Chinese, as they are the ones who are most sensitive to the incongruity between traditional Chinese faiths and industrial and technical modernity. We hasten to add that people may join religious movements for a variety of reasons and this may well differ substantially on the basis of privilege. Thus standard deprivation theory may well apply to the Christianization of the uneducated Chinese.

TESTING THE THEORY

Of course, the cultural incongruity explanation of why the most-educated Chinese are more likely than the less-educated to convert to Christianity and abandon Buddhism was developed after the fact. However, the theory purports to be general—not limited to the Chinese case but applicable to all similar cases in which rapid modernization has collided with traditional Asian faiths. Specifically, the theory ought to hold in the so-called Four Tigers (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan) and in Japan. In each of these nations, the most-educated ought to be the ones who are most likely to be Christians and least likely to adhere to a traditional Asian faith. We stress that this hypothesis was stated before the examination of any of these cases; hence what follows are five valid tests of the theory.

The data for all five nations are provided by the Gallup World Poll. The World Poll consists of annual surveys based on samples of 1,000 respondents in each nation. The World Polls began in 2005 with 119 nations, and more have been added until 162 nations are now included, making up 97 percent of the world’s population. In each nation, weights have been assigned to make the sample properly reflect the population in terms of gender, age, education, household size and socioeconomic status. Our analysis is based on merging the samples for all years, yielding very large numbers of cases, ranging from 3,934 in Taiwan to

8,973 in South Korea. In each nation, respondents were asked their current religious affiliation. We are among the few scholars who have been privileged to have access to these data, and we gladly express our gratitude to the Gallup Organization.

Hong Kong

Although Hong Kong has officially been a part of China since 1997, it has retained considerable independence, and there has been no significant interference with religious practice. This former colony of Great Britain is tiny, having an area of little more than 400 square miles, or about six times the size of Washington, D.C. Hong Kong was invaded by the Japanese during World War II, and its population plummeted from about 1.6 million in 1941 to 600,000 in 1945. With British rule reestablished, Hong Kong began to industrialize rapidly during the 1950s, initially by the manufacture of textiles, and it soon became one of the most industrialized and modern nations in the world and a leading center of international finance. Between 1961 and 1997, Hong Kong’s GDP increased by 87 times, and the population grew to 7 million by 2011. Since nearly all of the population of Hong Kong is ethnic Chinese, Buddhism was, and remains, the major religious affiliation. But the number of Christians is growing. Our theory predicts that in Hong Kong, the more-educated will be more likely to be Christians and least likely to still be Buddhists.

Table 3 supports the hypothesis. In Hong Kong, the college-educated are more than twice as likely to be Christians as are those with less than a high school education. Conversely, the least-educated are almost seven times as likely to remain Buddhists as are those who went to college.

Table 3: Education and Religious Affiliation in Hong Kong

Education	Christian	Buddhist	N
College	30.8%	4.1%	979
High school	21.3%	9.8%	3,372
Less than high school	12.3%	27.1%	645

Singapore

Singapore also was founded as a British colony. Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles set it up in 1819 as a trading post of the East India Company. Today, this tiny nation consists of a main island and sixty-two small islets, altogether making up 272 square miles. Singapore fell to the Japanese during World War II. After being liberated, it was once again a British colony, but it became an independent nation in

1963. Singapore soon began to industrialize. Today, it is ranked as the world's fourth leading financial center, and its port is one of the five busiest in the world—all this with a population of only 5 million.

As can be seen in Table 4, once again the hypothesis is strongly supported. The college-educated are more than five times as likely to be Christians as are those with less than a high school education. But the less-educated are far more likely to be Buddhists or Taoists.

Table 4: Education and Religious Affiliation in Singapore

Education	Christian	Buddhist	Taoist	N
College	32.7%	25.2%	0.8%	1,597
High school	17.2%	39.1%	1.7%	5,106
Less than high school	6.3%	51.9%	3.7%	1,877

South Korea

Korea was a Japanese colony from 1905 until 1945, when the Japanese were driven out, whereupon it was divided into two nations: an American-backed democratic south and a Soviet-backed communist north—a division that remains. Following the Korean War (1950–1953), South Korea began to industrialize at a rapid pace. Today, with a population of 50 million, South Korea has one of the world's strongest industrial economies, ranking sixth in the world in the total value of its annual exports.

Table 5 shows that in South Korea too, the college-educated are more likely than those without high school diplomas to be Christians and less likely to be Buddhists. So again the hypothesis is confirmed.

Table 5: Education and Religious Affiliation in South Korea

Education	Christian	Buddhist	N
College	39.1%	17.0%	2,187
High school	35.3%	20.1%	3,916
Less than high school	32.5%	27.7%	768

Taiwan

The island of Taiwan, once known as Formosa, has an area of 13,855 square miles and lies 110 miles off the coast of mainland China. Like the other three of the Four Tigers, Taiwan was occupied by Japan, beginning in 1895 in Taiwan's

case. In 1945, at the end of World War II, Taiwan was restored to China. In 1949, when the Communists came to power in China, leaders of the deposed Nationalist government, led by Chiang Kai-shek, along with many leading Chinese families and large numbers of nationalist troops, an estimated 2 million people in all, took refuge on Taiwan. Industrialization soon began, and by the mid-1970s, only Japan was undergoing more rapid economic growth than was Taiwan. Today, with a population of 23 million, Taiwan has one of the world's strongest economies.

Table 6 shows that in Taiwan, the more-educated are more likely to be Christians and less likely to be either Buddhists or Taoists. The hypothesis is supported.

Table 6: Education and Religious Affiliation in Taiwan

Education	Christian	Buddhist	Taoist	N
College	8.3%	27.1%	21.2%	1,284
High school	6.9%	35.9%	5.7%	1,924
Less than high school	5.2%	47.8%	29.2%	726

Japan

Once contact with the West was forced on the Japanese in the 1850s, the nation began an extraordinary period of rapid industrialization, imposed by the ruling elite and sustained by Shinto, an extremely nationalistic state religion that worshipped the Emperor as a living god. In May 1905, the Japanese astounded the Western world when their navy attacked and sank the Russian battle fleet. Defeat in World War II brought a sudden end to worship of the emperor, who personally informed the nation that he was not a god. The war also brought Japan's economy to a standstill, its factories and cities having been bombed out. But soon new industries sprang up, and Japan entered a new era of economic growth. Today, this nation of nearly 130 million has become one of the world's major manufacturing powers. However, this might not last. Unlike people in the Four Tigers, the Japanese seem to have lost their sense of purpose. Group and family suicides have become endemic, and many suicide groups are being formed on the Internet (Katsuragawa 2009). Japan's birth rate is far below replacement level and falling rapidly. A large proportion of both men and women between the ages of 18 and 34 are not involved in couple relationships and do not want to be (Metaxas 2013). According to a national survey conducted in 2011 by the Japanese Family Planning Association, an astonishing 36 percent of males aged 16 to 19 years and 59 percent of females aged 16 to 19 years say that they are uninterested in or even averse to sex (Hanrahan 2012). Little wonder that the population is declining rapidly and the average age is soaring. Japan soon will be a nation of elderly. Perhaps

contributing to the national loss of vigor and purpose, Shinto has become an empty set of superstitions, and no religion is growing rapidly. Nevertheless, the data shown in Table 7 support our hypothesis. College-educated Japanese are four times as likely to be Christians as are those with less than high school educations and much less likely to be Buddhists.

Table 7: Education and Religious Affiliation in Japan

Education	Christian	Buddhist	N
College	3.2%	22.9%	2,814
High school	1.9%	28.7%	5,226
Less than high school	0.8%	38.2%	933

CONCLUSION

Christianity is growing in many parts of Asia. Although only about 5 percent of Chinese were Christians in 2007, that amounted to more than 60 million people, a number that has no doubt increased substantially since then. Moreover, most of these conversions to Christianity have taken place in recent years, since the end of antireligious persecutions in China. Christianity has gained a much larger share of the population in South Korea (36 percent Christian), Hong Kong (22 percent), and Singapore (18 percent), in which there was no era of religious persecution. Christianity has achieved less growth in Taiwan (7 percent Christian) and Japan (3 percent). But in all six of these Asian nations, it is the more-educated who are most likely to have become Christians. This is consistent with our explanation that cultural incongruity resulting from the imposition of industrial and technological modernity on a traditional Asian culture has resulted in spiritual deprivation, to which the educated are the most sensitive.

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