

insight



# International Student Families

A Look at Ministry Challenges and Changes

**What About my Parents?** Four Women Come to Faith while Studying Abroad  
— Lynette Teagle

**Distance and Duty:** Family Expectations and the Mainland Chinese Student  
— Rod and Eugenia Lawrence

**"The Times They are A-changin'"** The Changing Face of International Student Families' Ministry  
— Ruth Archer

# Contents

|   |         |
|---|---------|
| <b>Editorial</b><br>— <i>Sue Burt</i>   | Page 2  |
| <b>What About my Parents?</b><br>Four Women Come to Faith while Studying Abroad<br>— <i>Lynette Teagle</i>                      | Page 3  |
| <b>Distance and Duty:</b><br>Family Expectations and the Mainland Chinese Student<br>— <i>Rod and Eugenia Lawrence</i>          | Page 7  |
| <b>“The Times They are A-changin’”</b><br>The Changing Face of International Student Families’ Ministry<br>— <i>Ruth Archer</i> | Page 12 |
| <b>Recommended Reading</b><br>— <i>Various</i>  | Page 15 |
| <b>The <i>Insight</i> Team</b>  | Page 18 |



## A Word From the Editor




**Sue  
Burt**

Sue is the Head of Returnee Ministry in Friends International. She has a passion to see international students disciplined in a way that ensures their growth continues long after they return home.

Family is God's great idea.

At its best it affords security, a sense of belonging, unconditional acceptance and the opportunity to develop and grow. In our fallen and fractured world, human experience of family can range from mildly frustrating to deeply dysfunctional. When different cultural emphases are part of the mix, the strengths and weaknesses of family life are often highlighted.

International student ministry has traditionally emphasised the great opportunities that exist to reach students who are away from home, family and peer pressure, and therefore more open to friendship and exploring new ideas and expressions of faith. The ideal has always been that finding Christ here, they will return with the good news and influence family and friends for the Gospel. Yet the reality is that no international student exists in a vacuum. Each one comes from a family and cultural context and, very importantly, will most likely return to that same context.

In this edition of *Insight* we explore how family dynamics impact upon hearing and receiving the Christian message and on continuing in discipleship. Some of the most powerful voices come from students or returnees themselves and Lynette Teagle's article allow some to speak about their journeys as their parents have responded to religious changes in their daughters. Rod and Eugenia Lawrence helpfully point us to the implications of social changes in China

such as the one-child policy and increased material prosperity, which have been layered onto a culture embedded in Confucianism. Ruth Archer vividly illustrates how changes in the international student profile have affected families' ministry and are forcing some re-evaluation.

Some common themes emerge of social changes influencing the students we meet, students who may be more time-poor than cash-poor, and modern communication meaning that most are in contact far more often with family back home than was once the case. All the articles should make us ask some hard questions about how we do international student ministry and where our priorities lie. The articles also challenge us about holding a longer-term view of ministry.

It's clear from our reading of the New Testament that families often embraced the Christian faith together. Do we perhaps need to have a more family-oriented mindset? Are there opportunities we have not embraced, perhaps partly because we haven't fully understood the challenges of returning as a Christian to a very non-Christian environment? How well are we preparing our returnees for these challenges? In brief, how can the Christian family in the UK influence not just 'the stranger among us' but also their wider home context?

May we be enabled to help each other in this journey.

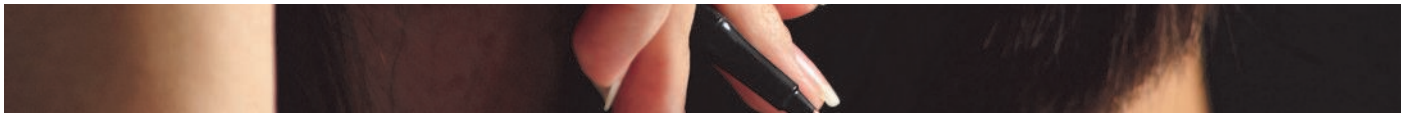






# What About My Parents?

## Four Women Come to Faith while Studying Abroad



**Lynette  
Teagle**

Lynette has been a Staff Worker for Friends International since 2001, alongside her husband Peter. Based in Oxford, she is working part-time on a PhD researching identity change in international students at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies.

For many of our international student friends, a decision to follow Christ must include consideration of the impact their decision will have on their family.

Relatively little research appears to have been done on the subject of parental response to religious change. Nonetheless, it is widely accepted that a person's decision to convert to a religion which differs from the beliefs of their family – even if these beliefs are described as “non-religious” – can feel destructive to family identity and cohesion. This has serious implications for new believers, particularly for those who come from collectivist cultures.<sup>1</sup> Personal commitment to Christ defies the collectivist expectation that individuals make decisions in consultation with – even in deference to – the will and desires of the larger community.

This article shares the experience of four women<sup>2</sup> who came to faith while studying overseas, between 2 and 20 years ago. Their words, I believe, speak for themselves.

### UNEXPECTED INTEREST

Three of the women describe their background as traditional Buddhist, with active involvement in ancestor worship and temple attendance.

**Emma, Taiwan:** *My mother is a Buddhist. I had followed my mom to the Buddhist or Taoist temples to worship ‘many gods’ since I was little. Therefore, I believed that there were ‘many gods’ including Jesus and they shared different responsibilities. I would say that Jesus in our society is a ‘foreign God’ and He would not be powerful in our region. My father was born in a Christian family, but he did not go to church after he got married.*

**Ngoc, Vietnam:** *My parents worship our ancestors and Buddha. However, they would identify themselves as “non-religious” in our identity documents.*

**Angela, China:** *My family had a habit of going to the temple, especially my mom was into believing fortune-telling. I was a non-believer before I went to UK to study. I had some bad beliefs like superstitions and fortune-telling. Then I was harassed by evil spirits. I came to know God and He rescued me. I gradually became very fervent with Christian belief, and in June 2014, I was baptised.*

The fourth is European:

**Julia, Moldova:** *My family is of Orthodox background, as is the majority of the population in my country of origin, Moldova. Sadly, the true message of the Gospel, even though proclaimed in local Orthodox churches every Sunday, is more*

1. Described by Rod and Eugenia Lawrence in ‘Distance and Duty’, Page 7. (Also see Endnote Page 11)

2. Names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

often than not 'lost in translation'... lost in the midst of all the church traditions that have been accumulating over the years.

None of the women had a particular interest in Christianity before arriving overseas, but found themselves attending church by invitation or circumstance:

*When I studied in Australia in 1995, I met a pastor (originally Taiwanese) from a small Chinese church in Melbourne. He specially took good care of overseas students from Taiwan. I had been to his church for several months and enjoyed all fellowships. However, I already had a religion which was Buddhism. Therefore, I declined the invitation from the pastor to get baptised. Until there was one Saturday night, I was depressed and troubled. My roommate, who is a Christian, suggested me to pray to God. I sincerely told Him all my troubles and went to bed afterward. Surprisingly, I heard a voice saying, 'Do not be afraid, for I am with you.' I knew He spoke to me – it was warm and firm. The next day, I went to the church and was very touched by all songs. I began to open my heart to listen to the pastor's preaching about God's words. I was baptised on Easter Sunday in 1996. I actually found those words in Isaiah 43:5 after I became a Christian few years after. (Emma)*

Their growing interest in the Christian faith evolved slowly, making it harder for them to articulate this change of heart clearly to their families.

*I was a 17-year-old exchange student in Ohio, USA. I spent a year living with a Christian host family. I noticed that they had something I did not have, and so I embarked myself on a journey to find out what it is. About halfway into my exchange year, having gone to church with my host family most of Sundays, the pastor preached on how Jesus died on the cross for our sins. At the end of the sermon he led me and others through the prayer of salvation. I was overwhelmed with tears and with joy. That day, I experienced God for the first time. It still is the most beautiful moment I have ever lived so far. (Julia)*

Despite Julia's dramatic experience, the anticipated conflict with her parents' views has led to an ongoing tension six years on:

*They knew I was going to church with my American host family. Did I expect that it would be difficult - yes, I suppose I did, but I had no idea it was going to be this difficult. I didn't*

*share with my family what happened that day at church in Ohio because I was afraid of their reaction. Sadly, I still have not shared that experience of "being born again" with them.*

Contrast this with Ngoc, whose parents in Vietnam were open to her 'exploration' of faith:

*I told them that I was going to some Bible studies at a local family's house. They said: "It's good to get to know local people and culture, tradition. But before you make any decision, you need to tell us first."*

## A RANGE OF RESPONSES AND CONCERNS

Parental responses when told of a definite decision to 'become a Christian' varied greatly: **Apathy:** *I think they took it a little bit positively. But my dad just ignored it, thinking it useless. (Angela)*

**Sense of Betrayal:** *I directly expressed my faith in God to my mother after I returned home from overseas. However, my mother was extremely angry because I had betrayed her, as well as those 'gods' who had protected me when I was growing up. My mother felt that I did not honour the family, because I have changed my beliefs. She thought that I have betrayed my gods and followed a foreign God. (Emma)*

**Fear of Brainwashing:** *They had some concerns like is this a cult? Or will it paralyse me? They did not give me too much advice. (Angela)*

*When I returned at home after my year abroad in the US, I started speaking about God and my new faith in Jesus Christ. Their reaction was unanimously negative – they believed I was brainwashed into a cult/sect. This is mainly because the Orthodox church explicitly condemns the Protestant churches. There is an ingrained fear amongst Orthodox believers that "Baptists are from the devil", and that therefore they should be feared and avoided at all costs. (Julia)*

**Wider Concerns:** Ngoc's parents, while not directly opposed to her conversion, expressed fears for her future and employment prospects in a Communist country:

*My mom tends to advise me not to be 100% religious or "trusting" as it can be inappropriate in doing business in Asia. Corruption is generally accepted in our culture (whether it's small or big). Becoming*



a Christian in the UK also means that I spent most my time learning/having discipleship with those Christians who are having a Christian job (to serve God as a fulltime and main job in the ministry). Christian jobs are by far too different from secular business jobs. Until now, there are still very few books/documents that give me a clear instruction or helpful stories to answer the question: "How do Christians do faithful business in Asian culture?". Most books written on this issue are more suitable for Western culture. I'm still asking God for an answer for myself. However, this also means my parents begin to worry for me and my future career.

**Conflict** sometimes seemed inevitable – and the strength of response especially from one's most beloved relations could be heart-breaking:

*One day we had yet another clash between my new faith and their understanding of what faith should be. I was crying as I was deeply wounded and grieved over their condemnation. In my tears and despair, I remember hearing my grandmother comforting my mother by telling her, "It will be OK. We need to pray for Julia, for God to bring her back to her senses." That hurt me and traumatised me. I decided that night that I will keep my faith to myself. It was too precious for me to allow others, even my very dearest and nearest family, to hurt it in any way or try to take it from me. Two years later, in Oxford, God led me to get baptised, which I did. My parents still do not know about it...* (Julia)

*My mother was strongly against my faith in Christ. She was really unhappy when I told her that I was going to the church. Every time when I was going out for the church, I would go through an argument with her first.* (Emma)

*Especially challenging issue is the malicious response of your parents, like they will say "This is b\*\*. Don't send me information about Christianity again." And Chinese society is cruel sometimes - trust is low, people simply believe in themselves and don't think they need God or that there is a God who can help them.* (Angela)

Even where there was **no outright opposition**, parents were concerned that this should not be an impulsive desire to 'fit in' to the new environment:

*My parents allowed me to be free to make the decision for myself as they trust that I'm mature enough. My mom wanted to make*

*sure that it was a serious and mature decision rather than an influence from Western belief. She warned me that after I became a Christian, I could not change my mind. My dad was not very happy with the fact that I became Christian. Although he keeps being quiet and hardly expresses his concerns, I understand that he has been worried that he is now losing his daughter to religious people.* (Ngoc)

## **SOME OF THE KEY LESSONS THEY HAVE LEARNED:**

### **1. Have Realistic Expectations**

*I have lowered my expectations significantly since then. I have also changed my behaviour to be in line with Galatians 5:6, "All that matters is faith expressing itself through love". Since then, I started noticing many positive improvements in my relationship with my family and also their faith.* (Julia)

*From my experience, things changed when I stopped having a high expectation that "my parents should understand me and my faith". Instead, it is helpful to try to understand my parents' thoughts and ask the question: "What do they think/assume of the Bible or God?", which helps me to have a good communication toward them.* (Ngoc)

### **2. Seek to Understand Your Parents' Perspective**

*Recently I begin to share with my mom about God's teaching of obeying our parents and respecting them. My mom is more than happy to hear that. They have been worried with the idea that "they are losing their daughter" as it is known that Christians love God most in their life. In Buddhism, the teaching of obeying your parents is very clear, comprehensive and important, which make lots of parents encourage their children to obey Buddha. In the Bible, God does teach us and command us to love our parents. I notice that this teaching is still not taught/ preached as often as other Bible teachings. Probably it's because in Western culture, people value individualism more than "obeying your parents". When I realize that I need to tell my parents more about the Bible teachings and the meaning of our relationship with God (He is our Father), my parents become more pleased to listen to the Bible.* (Ngoc)

### **3. Show Love in Practical Ways**

*I should not use God's words to fight against my mother. She may not know or believe God's words, but I just need to let her know that I am better in my life after following Christ. (I want to continue) to love my unbelieved family members and not argue with them over something that they don't even believe. I will show my care to my unbelieving family members and offer my help in whatever they need. My faith should shine through my actions, but not my words.* (Emma)



#### 4. Be Willing to Wait and Pray

*Don't be worried - God will do the work. Have faith in God no matter what. If your parents see you change for the better, they will gradually embrace your faith. Don't force them to change or believe in God. Respect and love them while also respecting your God.* (Angela)

#### 5. Support from Christian Friends is Vital

*I was advised to be patient, and to love my parents more – even when there are some tough situations when I totally disagree with them. I think having a good Christian friend who you can trust and talk honestly about your family issues is very important for any returnee. When I was back home, there were some situations when I was so totally angry, upset and disappointed with my parents that I lost my temper. When it was hard for me to be calm and patient, it was so helpful to listen to my Christian friend's advice and have them pray for me, which help me to feel comfortable and to seek comfort from God.* (Ngoc)

#### 6. Change Takes Time

*I communicated with my parents by sending them Bible verses, and also I asked God to help me. Then a Christian friend in China went to my mom and preached the Gospel to her, and helped with baptising her. At first, they wouldn't have a very strong interest in Christianity. But my mom finally believed in it for I believe in God.* (Angela)

Julia has been through a painful time, but slowly she is seeing progress:

*My relationship with them now is good. God has been working in them a lot! My sister has asked me to help her find a local church. My mum, dad, grandmother and cousins have all been going regularly to the local orthodox church for about a year and a half now. Things are not yet where I would like them to, but God really is moving powerfully in them!  
I hope not everyone had as a hard time as me. But equally, I am aware that many new Christians face death and persecution for their faith. It is the cost we have to be willing to pay for following Jesus.*

#### WHAT THIS MEANS FOR US

Regrettably, time did not permit a wider range of respondents, but here are some considerations from the stories shared above:

1. Students often lack the experience to anticipate their parents' response, placing a greater responsibility on Bible study leaders

and international student workers to **be aware of the potential conflicts** and prayerfully help smooth the way where possible, by encouraging seekers to sensitively communicate their new interest and attendance in church, or building relationships with parents even from afar.

2. In cultures where **respectful speech** is valued, addressing matters overtly and uncompromisingly too early on can lead to parental loss of face and alienation, even if the motive is to communicate Christ. Flashpoints can arise from mundane day-to-day issues, rather than religious matters per se. It is therefore vital for new believers to remember their pre-Christian background, seek to understand their parents' viewpoints, learn to withhold judgement and respond gently, seeking a mediator if necessary. A key passage is 1 Peter 3:15 "but in your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect..."
3. There are **no stereotypical parental responses** based on culture, although some generalities exist. The sympathetic response of Ngoc's Communist Buddhist parents contrasts greatly with the rejection conveyed by Julia's ostensibly Christian family. Without making assumptions based on cultural or national background, we need to help new believers persevere in demonstrating positive change, so they can slowly regain their family's trust and love.
4. Finally, as in all discipleship, it is vital to take the long view, to help new believers to see that there is value in 'choosing their battles', but also that **getting established in a supportive church** will be vital to their growth as disciples of Jesus. New believers anxiously long for their parents to turn to Christ: prayer, service and loving fellowship will strengthen their trust in a God who is faithful and desires to work in the lives of their loved ones even if it takes time.

*With many thanks to 'Emma', 'Ngoc', 'Angela' and 'Julia' for their honesty and example of persistent faith.*





## Distance and Duty: Family Expectations and the Mainland Chinese Student



### Rod & Eugenia Lawrence

Rod is a former Friends International Cluster Leader. His wife, Eugenia, is from China and they have spent many years living there, where he worked teaching in universities.

*I think people in UK would expect you to become a good person, or become what you like to be. But Chinese parents would like you to be success [sic] and rich. That's the most different thing between them. (Chinese Masters student)*

In international student ministry, we know that students from collectivist cultures (see endnote) are not here simply as individuals but as part of families. In this article, we will be exploring how this works out for the present generation of Chinese students. How does their Confucian heritage interact with the impact of the one-child policy under which they were born, and with the rapid economic and technological changes experienced during their lifetime? What different types of students should we be aware of, and how can the issues they face become opportunities for the Gospel and effective discipleship?

### Family Expectations in a Collectivist Culture

Obedience to parents is deeply rooted for Chinese students; filial piety being central to Confucian morality (explored in an earlier *Insight* by Peter Teagle.)<sup>1</sup> However, combined with rapid social

change this is a source of stress.

In her book *One Child* published in 2016, Mei Fong includes evidence on the psychological consequences of China's one child policy. A 2005 study of letters from only children showed a preoccupation with living under pressure, excessive parental love, and loneliness. One wrote *"Our generation of only-children is very self-conscious. For historical reasons, we must shoulder all of our parents' goals and their ever-bigger dreams. Compared to previous generations, we don't have our independent future, but rather, re-walk the path our parents didn't finish; we live for it and struggle for it."*<sup>2</sup>

A study of Mainland Chinese students who had chosen to study in Hong Kong found that for most students (65%), the decision on choice of country, programme / university was made by the parents. *Ninety-eight percent of students expressed dissatisfaction with aspects of the decision-making process and-or with the outcome. For some students in this study, (15%), there was the added stress that the future security of their families hinged on their achievements and that the cost of funding their study was an ongoing issue for the family.*<sup>3</sup>

1. Teagle, Peter "Jesus the Perfect Filial Son", *Insight* Autumn 2008

2. Mei Fong (2016) *One Child*. London: Oneworld

3. Bodycott, P and Lai, A "The Influence and Implications of Chinese Culture in the Decision to Undertake Cross-border Higher Education", originally published in *The Journal of Studies in International Education*. Edited version of the article at <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20120731122209685>



In a time of increasing graduate unemployment the stress gets worse. As one of our Reach Volunteers, now in Shanghai, put it;  
*Frequently the main motivation of sending one's child abroad to study in the eyes of the parents is to acquire a high status, secure job. However, hundreds of thousands of families have the same dream. When supply is this abundant and the market so competitive, the benefit of a foreign education is not as great as perhaps the parents assumed it was going to be. Yet for many, settling for a job with less status is unthinkable; who can bear to see their parents lose face when their relations learn that all the money and emotional sacrifice that the parents invested was merely to get their child a job in a retail shop?*<sup>4</sup>

This tension might affect their academic performance. Researching reasons why in the UK in 2013 only 42% of Chinese students gained a first or 2.1 degree compared with 52% of overseas students and 68% of all students, Crawford and Wang suggested it could partly be because many young people enrol in higher education due to pressure from family or the jobs market rather than their own motivation.<sup>5</sup>

### The Cultural Bubble

Communication technology is making it more likely that students will live in a “cultural bubble.” An online survey by Lynette Teagle in June 2011, with 121 responses from 40 nationalities, found 20% were in contact with home at least once daily.<sup>6</sup> Thoughts and actions are oriented to the cultural perspectives and personal expectations of their parents. There are cases where students almost live in their home country's time zone, skypeing and enjoying social media and internet at night, and sleeping much of the day. If, in their accommodation, conversation, cooking and cleaning are also shared with common cultural assumptions, it can indeed be a bubble.

Social media impacts local interaction, even in the Chinese church: *“Now when we organize an event, we will advertise it on social media and often within seconds there will be ‘like’ clicks and comments; but the actual turnout of the event is often disappointing, highly disproportionate to the attention drawn to the*

*post. More disappointingly, even those attending the event often will fiddle with their mobile phones, taking selfies/photos etc., rather than paying attention to the message being shared; making a good conversation is often difficult. After the event, posts, comments and photos flood on social media, especially from those who hardly seemed to be engaged in the event.”*<sup>7</sup>

Martin Boyle's research in the UK in 2008 showed that many Chinese students were “marginal sojourners” in that they ghettoise and fail to integrate with British and other international students. He commended the University of Kent International Foundation Programme where students are required to join a union club or society and to ‘take an active part’ in it; and to prepare a written report and a formal presentation, both of which count towards their final grade. Increased social interaction created “a virtuous circle of socialisation, acculturation and language acquisition”.<sup>8</sup>

### Exposure to British Culture is Getting Briefer

Students now travel more in vacations, usually with their compatriots, and increasingly also adding a trip with visiting parents. Richer students are now more likely to travel back home for a short visit during their course. For Masters students, especially, this can leave little time for serious immersion in the host culture.

“...70% of students' family members visit them during their study in the UK...”

Mei Si, a Chinese student at the University of Brighton, says in a guest blog for a travel agency: *June – July, and December – January are the hot seasons for Chinese parents to visit their children's graduation ceremonies. They normally stay from a few days to two months.*<sup>9</sup>

According to emergingcomms.com: *With over 70% of students' family members visiting them during their study in the UK, there is the additional*

4. E-mail from Ian Forbes

5. Quoted in <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/apr/15/chinese-students-in-uk-poor-results>

6. Teagle, Lynette “Virtually Going Home” *Insight* Winter 2011

7. Chinese Church worker, Southampton

8. Boyle, Martin Sojourner Adjustment among Chinese Students in UK Universities. In: Focus on the East Asian Learner, 11/7/08 - 13/7/08, Portsmouth. (Unpublished) <https://kar.kent.ac.uk/8359/>

9. <http://www.chinatraveloutbound.com/an-insight-into-the-travel-of-chinese-students-living-in-the-uk/>



opportunity to sell to incoming Chinese tourists, with students planning shopping itineraries on behalf of their families.<sup>10</sup>

## Different Types of Students

### • Bought Identities

Some students are here because they have failed to get to a good university in China. As the system is so competitive, the parents of a less academic student may buy them an easier route to qualification by paying for study overseas, with the challenge for the student being initially reduced to the ability to pass an English proficiency test. However, they have the ongoing challenge not only of keeping up with work aimed at students who are using their native language, but also of how they cope with their own self-image. They may still perceive themselves as failures and may imagine that other people are looking down on them. They may carry guilt that their parents are having to pay so much because of their failure. They may work hard, but can easily become frustrated under pressure. This can lead to constantly trying to catch up with work, often with inefficient or inappropriate study methods, short cuts of various levels of plagiarism, focus on last-minute cramming for exams or dropping everything to meet assignment deadlines, with an overall effect of significant withdrawal from social activities or reliance on a small group of ethnically similar friends, missing out on the opportunities to explore the culture of their host country, or even to be improving the language skills on which their success depends. Living on this “bought identity” can lead to psychological conflicts and sometimes depression. For **June**, this is what led to her becoming a Christian.

*June was an only child. Her parents worked hard to send her to an expensive boarding school; though she knew her parents expected her to do well at school, as an outgoing, fun seeking young girl she was not motivated enough to study hard; her final exam results were very disappointing. Seeing that she had little prospect of advancing in the Chinese education system, her parents scrambled together funds to send her to the UK to do a BA degree. June was so worried that her former classmates would laugh at her ‘buying an escape route abroad’, she did not tell anyone when she left the country. In the UK June worked extremely hard out of shame and guilt, but her low self-esteem and fear of failure haunted her. ‘I seemed to have gone through a complete personality change: I used to be bubbly and active, but became subdued and quiet, having depressing thoughts all the time.’ It was not until she went to a COCM New Year camp that she felt she was released from her depressive moods. ‘The*

*message taught was that God takes you on just as you are. For the first time, I felt accepted, I shared my heart out.’ June is now a Christian actively involved in church.*

However, for **Rob**, the depression has continued, despite his involvement in the activities of his local Chinese church and receiving care and counselling.

*Rob’s parents were divorced when he was a small child. His childhood was chaotic, living in different homes of relatives and grandparents. His parents were generous in supporting him financially, but emotionally distant. After university graduation in China, to enhance his career competency his parents paid for him to do a Master’s degree in England. Rob had always suffered from bouts of depression, and living abroad, stress of study and meeting new people etc. set it off more often. He was involved in the activities of local churches and had become a Christian; at times he was open to receiving care and counselling, but whenever his depression took hold of him, he retreated to his hideout. He has appealed to delay his graduation on grounds of depression a couple of times, and is still not sure what the future holds for him.*

Hard work and guilt are not the only reaction for this kind of student. For some, because money has got them here, they think money will continue to solve all their problems. They have learned that they don’t have to care about study and their parents are rich enough to buy their future for them anyway. These students may live a full social life of shopping, eating out and travel; possibly able to afford participation in whatever Friends International and others offer, but more likely enjoying life with similar compatriots. Guilt may finally hit them when they fail, or if the money runs out, but perhaps their parents will be happy enough to be able to boast that their child has studied abroad.

These students may join our activities either as some of the hardest to reach as they just seek the fun and the photos, or as potentially open to more as they realise the futility of such a superficial life.

### • Cross-Cultural Explorers

A second category of students are themselves very keen to go abroad, and have worked hard and persuaded parents and relatives to fund them to enable them to take this opportunity. They arrive full of enthusiasm and curiosity. They must satisfy both their own ambitions and those of their sponsoring relatives, showing that they have used

10. <http://emergingcomms.com/engage-chinese-students-in-the-uk-with-your-brand/>

their money well by achieving success. Some of these become very involved in café and other Friends International activities, and in a context of warm hospitality and open discussion, can start to question their previous education in the light of the Bible. From this type of student have come some of our Reach Volunteers – willing to seek further support from family back home as well as from contacts here for another year abroad even though it involves no further qualification or monetary reward. It has been encouraging to see even non-Christian families in China responding to this enthusiasm.

***Cara** regarded herself as a Christian before arriving in the UK; she used to follow her mum to her local church, which was crowded but full of mostly old people. 'My study was busy and I worked hard; when I got stressed my mum would pray for me, and I would feel better. That's all.' But her church experience in the UK was a real eye-opener for her. She soon realized the Christian faith meant much more than she had been used to. She was excited by many young Christians eagerly exploring faith; she enjoyed taking part in Friends International activities. She was baptised in the Chinese church and went on to become a Reach Volunteer.*

Also, some older students have already worked in China; their parents may not be rich, so they pay for themselves, and are likely to be highly motivated in both study and cultural exploration.

### • **Searching Scholars**

Visiting scholars are financially independent, but as well as still having parents to consider, probably also have a spouse and a child. They often have both time for, and interest in, discussing life and ideas with British friends, appreciate hospitality and a friendly environment for meeting others. We have found that our iExplore group with meal and Bible discussion is recommended by visiting scholars from one year to the next. If spouse and child visit, perhaps even stay long enough to go to school, they are likely to make even more local contacts and there is the potential for them all exploring faith together. However, they might be under greater political constraint through their work positions and probably Communist Party membership.

***Larry** chats everyday with his family who keep him informed about home life. Although anxious for them, he accepts he can't help with everything at a*

*distance. He is applying for a visa for his 4 year old son to come in the summer, and hopes that his father, mother, sister, father-in-law and mother-in-law will come too for a trip. "I have peace to think here. I want to find out what it really means to follow Jesus."*

***Harry** appreciates the international contacts here, and the politeness of local people. He was especially moved by those who cook freely for iExplore. "I've learned that it need not be all just fame and gain. My eyes have been opened in the UK. I want to read the whole Bible now."*

### **Changes Back Home**

Apart from the normal culture shocks, any crises at home will have a strong impact on student life here. Especially due to the one child policy, most students who come here leave behind an "empty nest". Couples who already may have had fairly separate emotional lives due to the demands of work and state are perhaps more prone to a marriage crisis when the focus of their one offspring in their home is gone. This can be a source of great anxiety for the student here.

***Hugh** is the only child of respectable academics. In the second year of his study in the UK during one Skype call he had a shocking confidence from his mother that she had found out his father was having an affair. His mother wanted him on her side, increasingly depending on him for emotional support. On the other hand, his father did not want to talk about it. Hugh found a lot of comfort from church support and counselling. He was able to introduce some Christian links back home to his mum. His mum became a Christian in the end. The marriage is on the mend.*

Illness and bereavement are also sorely felt at a distance. These crises have opened doors for conversation and prayer.

### **Responding to Students as Family Members** **Here are a few suggestions:**

- Listen! – so that we are aware of specific needs.
- Value the few in-depth relationships, even if so many others seem to go untouched. A solidly changed family could have massive impact.
- The 'identity' issue that many students face is a great opportunity to open up the Gospel.
- Disciple in a way that helps returnees to be willing to engage with family expectations in a Christ-centred, loving way.





- Model alternative ways of family interaction: hosting, church volunteers helping as whole families.
- Help students through family crises.
- Run workshops on anxiety, depression, coping with loneliness, work pressures, time management, boy-girl relationships, marriage and parenting.
- Link with the student's families where possible – when they come to visit – meet and welcome to activities, refer to them in conversation and prayer.
- In Bible discussion groups, encourage time to think, build community through meals and free conversation time, and arrange 1-1 meetings.

**Ben**, one of our iExplore students wrote: *I can feel your sincere care and help. As you know the relationship between people in China is indifferent recently. As a result, I felt at home each time I went to Friends International, and can't wait to join you each time. Inviting students to your home is very kind and we can know how local British live and feel the love from you.*

Another, **Clare**, wrote: *Every Wednesday night, I felt come back home and talk free [sic]. I learnt how to share my life with my parents from the talk we did every Wednesday night after dinner. That really helps me to express my feelings to my parents in an appreciate [sic] way as well as gradually my parents and I can talk like old friends.*

There are many broken families in China and around the world, and some unhealthy bonds which may yet need to be broken. But let us help to *rebuild* families, saying, with Jesus, to those He has released, "Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you" (Mark 5:19).

Endnote on collectivist cultures:

*Collectivism refers to a political, economic, or cultural system that values groups or communities over individuals. Collectivism is often understood in contrast to individualism, which privileges the individual interests over the group. Collectivist cultures focus on shame and seek to avoid it. If someone in the group deviates from the cultural norm, they are considered to be weak or to have bad character. Any type of conflict or saying "no" lessens the harmony of the group, so saying "no" or any sort of conflict is heavily avoided. In collectivist countries, being a part of the collective group gives a promise of safety and a source of identity as long as the person remains loyal to that group.*



# “The Times They are A-changin”

## The Changing Face of International Students Families’ Ministry



**Ruth  
Archer**

Ruth is a former Friends International Staff Worker. She worked for over 15 years in Guildford serving and reaching out to international families.

### Turn the Clock Back Twenty Years

...and meet a typical international student family in Guildford. Ali\* & Mufida\* and their two children are a Muslim family from the Middle East. Ali is studying hard to gain a PhD to obtain promotion to a professorship when they return home. Mufida speaks limited English and, although a graduate herself, is afraid to venture out of their university accommodation alone due to language and cultural barriers.

The family are delighted to participate in the Friends International programme specifically organised for international families. Ali is keen for Mufida to go out and meet other women and Mufida hopes to improve her English in a sympathetic environment. They desire that their children meet English speakers so they have opportunity to hear English spoken. They also want to learn about the UK and British culture because they will be here for at least three years and want to integrate.

The family are sponsored by their government and the exchange rate means they have to manage on a limited budget. This makes them appreciative of the low cost social events offered by Friends International

and they participate in the programme for the entirety of their stay in Guildford. Mufida promotes our weekday programme to other Muslim families and brings newly-arrived Muslim wives to meet us and enjoy our day time social activities. She happily accepts an Arabic Bible and literature about the Christian faith and attends a weekly enquirers group as she is keen to learn what the Bible teaches while she is in the UK, knowing she won't have the same opportunity when she returns home.

### Turn the Clock Forward Twenty Years

...and meet another international student family in Guildford. Zhao\* and Ying\* and their son are from mainland China and both parents are studying for one year Masters degrees. They come from wealthy families and are living in Guildford in the house they purchased with cash, with plans to rent out the house when they leave Guildford as they regard owning property in the South East of England as a wise investment for the future. During the week, their son attends a private boarding school fifty miles away so they can all focus on their studies. Ying is too busy with lectures and her studies to have time to attend the week day programme for international wives,



although she would dearly love to meet other international and British women. They are both interested in learning about the Christian faith but have no time to join an enquirers' course.

While in Guildford, they want to visit as many UK and European cities as possible because they regard travelling as essential for their education. Many weekends are spent visiting cities in the UK and the school holidays are spent travelling in Europe. This means the family have little time to participate in the weekend social programme organised by Friends International.

### **Practical Cultural and Language Skills**

The past twenty years has seen a major change in the international families coming to study in Guildford. The specific programme originally designed for international families sought to welcome and befriend lonely international wives, often with limited English language skills. Many of them lived in university accommodation which made it easy to locate them, introduce ourselves and invite them to our activities. The programme gave them opportunity to learn about British culture and to share their cultures with us. They picked up practical cultural survival skills as well as discussing useful topics such as parenting skills. We prepared the children for local nursery schools by teaching them some of the more popular nursery rhymes. We also taught them simple Christian songs and prayed they would remember the words as they grew up. Parents were helped to understand the British education system, the homework expectations, the meaning of the word 'mufti' and what to expect at a school parents' evening.

We discovered many cultures had limited awareness of dental hygiene or how to care for their children's teeth. Many international parents were unaware they could buy generic medication at a much cheaper price than the well-known brands. They also expected GPs to prescribe antibiotics every time they were ill and when they didn't do so, they would go to A & E to ask for them. Consequently, our social programme included Q & A sessions with a dental hygienist, a pharmacist and a GP to address some of these issues.

### **Meeting Friends and Relations**

As many of the families were here for at least three years we got to know them well. We were invited into their homes for meals and our children attended their children's birthday parties. We were able to advise them that in our culture, presents are opened as soon as they are received and it's considered rude not to do so.

Many other cultures around the world don't open presents in front of their guests, so they don't have to feign joy and surprise if the gift isn't wanted!

Our guests would often bring visiting relatives to meet us and to participate in our activities. Low-cost day trips at weekends to family-friendly locations drew international families, who were often on limited budgets, and could afford to participate. This meant we were able to meet and welcome the student husbands and invite them to the monthly men's group. Often we had opportunities to share our faith both naturally and intentionally, and we ran enquirers' courses for those who were interested to learn more about faith.

We encouraged local churches who organised social outreach programmes for families in their neighbourhood to include the Friends International community. We would give advice and simple cultural awareness training to help churches to do this, persuading some churches to partner us and host specific events for international families. This invariably blessed church communities as they discovered the openness and friendliness of those from other cultures. Sometimes, it increased churches' interest in world mission and their understanding of Muslims, particularly as the majority of our guests were Muslim families from the Middle East, Iran and North Africa and the rest were families from around the world.

### **Changing Demographics, Changing Priorities**

In recent years, the university Islamic Society has realised the need to provide a welcome for Muslim families and now run their own social programme which results in few Muslim families attending Friends International events. In the meantime, the numbers of families arriving from China and other countries in the Far East has soared.

However, many of them are in Guildford for just one year with both parents studying for Masters degrees or on one year post-doctoral research contracts. Some of the Masters students are only here for six months as the university has a Masters student exchange programme with a university in China. This makes their time in Guildford very pressurised. Their desire to travel as much as possible in the UK and Europe while they are here means they have little time to participate in a Friends International social programme. Their main focus for themselves and their children is primarily on furthering their education and acquiring skills useful for their future careers.

As opportunities to learn English are multiplying around the world, the majority of international wives now arrive fluent in English and quickly make



friends with other students on their courses. If not studying, they often arrive with a job waiting for them which they have arranged via the internet. More families are from wealthy backgrounds and are self-funded. They spend weekends in continental cities staying in hotels and eating in restaurants, and tend not to be very interested in budget family daytrips at weekends organised by Friends International.

Using social media, many of them are in daily contact with their family and friends in their home countries, so loneliness and isolation is not as big an issue as it was in the past.

The university now offers very limited accommodation for international families and actively dissuades international students from bringing their families with them, highlighting the high cost of living in the Guildford area. The families who come are expected to find their own private rented accommodation in Guildford. A few of the richer families will purchase homes while they are here. Consequently, they are scattered around Guildford, making it much harder to contact and welcome them. The university keeps no records of international families or where they are living. We have to rely on word of mouth and, sadly, some British Christians are reticent to introduce themselves to new neighbours, so fail to discover there is an international student family living in their neighbourhood.

### **An Urgent Need for New Ways of Thinking**

The result of this major change in the expectations and availability of international families has been that Friends International Guildford has made the decision to no longer run a separate programme for international wives and families, but to ensure the social programme for students includes some events which are suitable for international families.

However, this change suggests we will need to think creatively about the social programme we produce and ensure we offer activities and events which 'tick the right boxes' for current international families. Perhaps training in leadership skills and team building would be of interest to parents and children? In some cultures, parents rarely play with their children, so perhaps we could incorporate training in team building into a fun activity for parents and children to do together? Perhaps we should consider offering weekend trips to UK and European cities? However, we will need to be aware that many of our volunteers cannot afford to engage

in expensive activities themselves. With both parents studying, perhaps we could offer after-school informal homework clubs to help the children with their English fluency?

It has been a very real privilege and blessing to be involved in facilitating specific activities for international student families for almost thirty years. I have made many friends from all around the world and I have invitations to stay with families on every continent. I have met the children of international parents returning to the UK as adults themselves to further their own education. I have received email messages from the now adult children thanking me and the volunteer team for the experience they had in Guildford as children. They often say there was something really 'special' about our Friends International community and they now know it was the presence of God and they are learning more about Him. I have seen the children of local volunteers forming friendships with international children in a town where, in the past, opportunity to meet and play with children from other cultures was very limited.

My focus in this article has been the work in Guildford, but the picture I have painted of change over two decades is probably also visible in university cities all over Britain, particularly as the world economy has shifted its balance and UK immigration policies have changed. To adapt and adjust to meet students' needs means change is inevitable. It requires, for example, British Christian families to welcome the international families living in their neighbourhoods and to include them in their family activities, so they can quickly build good friendships. With international families only studying in the UK for twelve months, there is a limited window of time in which to befriend them and introduce them to the Gospel. Globalisation means "*The times they are a-changin*" and international student ministries in the UK need to adapt our welcome and social programmes to suit the aspirations of the current generation of international student families.

*\*Names in this article have been changed for confidentiality.*





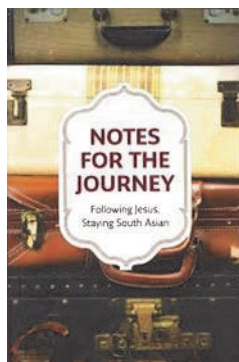
## Recommended Reading

There seem to be few books which discuss family dynamics from a non-Western perspective, let alone those which provide biblical teaching in a cross-culturally meaningful way. Here are a few suggestions which, while not fitting the bill completely, will provide food for thought on this issue's themes:

### NOTES FOR THE JOURNEY: FOLLOWING JESUS, STAYING SOUTH ASIAN

**C. Rasiah and Robin Thomson (eds.), South Asian Concern, 187pp, 2011**

Written primarily as a discipleship resource for South Asian followers of Christ, chapters 5, 8 and 9 are particularly useful in discussing how to relate to family, with practical advice on the biblical command to honour and obey one's parents (chapter 5), the place of birth family in the context of the wider church family (chapter 8), and the hows and whys of sharing one's faith with family (chapter 9) in a culturally-sensitive way.



### BUY ME THE SKY

**Xinran, Rider Books, 320pp, 2015.**

The relationship between parents and children in Chinese culture has always been intense – parents give up everything for their children, dreaming big dreams for them and expecting from them a reciprocal commitment. China's one-child policy (introduced in 1979) concentrated this dynamic.



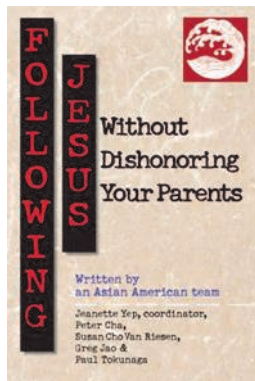
What was it like to grow up as the only child in a Chinese family, the lodestone of the lavish love, neurotic fears and high hopes of two parents and four grandparents? *Buy Me the Sky* provides an excellent way to begin to understand and empathise, through the fascinating real-life stories of ten such "only children" – Du Zhuang, the post-graduate student so cosseted by his mother that he didn't know how to open his own suitcase; Golden Swallow, who accused her parents of treating her like a pet for 23 years and severed all ties with them, triggering their divorce and her mother's depression; Lily, happily living with her parents at the age of 25 and who felt that dating was immoral...

Born in 1958, Xinran grew up in Communist China and is herself the mother of an "only child". Having lived in the UK since 1997, she presents the lives of the young people she writes about both sympathetically and critically. She is the author of international bestseller, *The Good Women of China*.

— Kah Foon Gillespie

## **FOLLOWING JESUS WITHOUT DISHONOURING YOUR PARENTS**

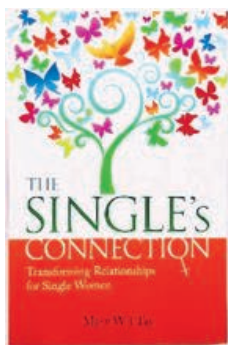
**Jeanette Yep (coordinator),  
Peter Cha et al. (an Asian  
American team), Inter-  
Varsity Press, 177pp, 1998.**



This rare book explores the Asian American Christian identity through the lens of relationship with parents. The team, drawn from several Asian backgrounds, share personal experience in order to demonstrate that negotiating obedience to biblical teaching is not always straightforward, even within Asian Christian families living in the west. While the book might not appear to be immediately relevant to international students, the writers manage to strike the delicate balance between uncompromising obedience to Kingdom priorities, appreciating and reciprocating parental love, and encouraging readers to persevere in times of difficulty – all issues which will strike a chord with international students who are new believers and/or returnees. A good book to read and discuss with international believers or within a staff or volunteer team.

## **THE SINGLE'S CONNECTION: TRANSFORMING RELATIONSHIPS FOR SINGLE WOMEN**

**Mary W J Tay, Genesis Books,  
188pp, 2010**



While this book may be difficult to obtain in the UK, its value lies in exploring what it means and how to find joy and fulfilment as a Christian single in Singapore, where married life is still seen as the norm. Mary Tay has served, among other roles, as linguistic consultant for OMF International and her thoughtful focus on key relationships while interacting with biblical teaching, case studies, and personal experience, translates well across a range of cultures.







## The Insight Team

**Sue Burt**  
Head of Returnee Ministry

**Lynette Teagle**  
Staff Worker, Oxford

**Jenny Hudson**  
Staff Worker, Exeter

**Peter Teagle**  
Centre Team Leader, Oxford

**Fiona Barnard**  
Staff Worker, St Andrews

**Jack Bentley**  
Communications & Media  
Coordinator



# **friiends** **INTERNATIONAL**

The Rowan Centre  
All Nations Christian College  
Easneye  
Ware, Herts  
SG12 8LX

01920 460006  
[info@friendsinternational.uk](mailto:info@friendsinternational.uk)  
[www.friendsinternational.uk](http://www.friendsinternational.uk)