

Re-entry Challenges – Church Case Studies Background Notes

*The case studies can be found at
<https://friendsinternational.uk/resources/downloadable-resources/returning-home>*

Case Study 1: Baptism and Honouring Parents

Baptism

Mei Li's church is not unique in its approach to baptism. Many Asian churches tend to treat baptism as the culmination of a steadfast, informed decision to follow Christ. Baptism is a public declaration to one's family and friends that you have decided to forsake your previous religious affiliations and align yourself with Christians, calling Christ Lord. Many non-Christian parents allow their children to go to church and attend bible studies etc, but become very upset and actively opposed when their children want to be baptised.

Thus, churches want to ensure that those stepping forward for baptism are ready for potential opposition. They are also keen that people do not publicly declare themselves Christians through baptism and then fall away because they did not know what following Jesus really entailed. In a culture where face is important, this can seriously disadvantage the young Christian. Church leaders are also keen to ensure that the person seeking baptism is not just adding faith in Jesus to a pantheon of other gods or following the crowd, but has personal faith. Hence the practice of holding a baptism class and interview.

Relating to parents

Filial Piety is a deeply ingrained value in Asian culture and in the personal psyche of many individuals. The fact that "honour your father and your mother" is one of the 10 commandments and is "the first commandment with a promise" (Eph 6:2) is important to Asian Christians. It is significant in terms of witness. Parents opposed to their children becoming Christians are sometimes mollified by being shown these verses, seeing that Christianity does not teach their children to reject and abandon their parents. Obeying the 5th commandment is also seen as positive witness because traditionally, one of the key markers of a wise, virtuous person is that they treat their parents well. Conversely, for a young Christian to callously disregard his parents' feelings and openly defy them can be seen as unconscionably ungrateful and immoral.

There isn't a consensus among Asian Christians regarding how exactly they should respond when God's values and commands are in direct opposition to their parents' wishes. Entire books have been written on how to honour one's parents while following Christ* and there is still more to be said. Here are some principles many Asian believers try to live out:

- It is easy to make an idol of honouring/obeying one's parents - it is often the path of least resistance and for many Asians, there is a visceral pull towards this because of childhood memories, cultural expectations, etc. Ex 20:12 needs to be set alongside Luke 14:26, Mtt 10:37 and Acts 5:29.
- On the other hand, to totally disregard your parents' feelings and show contempt for their point of view is surely to fail to obey God's command to honour them.
- So basically, the task is to actively and prayerfully persevere in trying to do all that God calls you to do - get baptised, read the Bible, be an active member of a church, choose a spouse who loves God, share the gospel with family and friends, become a missionary, etc, while also doing all you can to show your parents that you love, respect and care about them. For some, this means delaying baptism for a while, for others, it means not delaying, but finding some other way to show a commitment to their parents.

NB. Getting your parents' "blessing" doesn't mean they have to be enthusiastic. A grudging acceptance is sufficient.

Family Expectations

One practical dynamic worth noting is that whereas in the UK, a system of social security is provided by the state (medical care, unemployment benefits, pensions, etc), in many Asian countries, the only financial plan and safety net you have is your family. Paul's teaching in 1 Tim 5:4 & 8 that Christians should "first of all put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their

* E.g., "Following Jesus without Dishonouring Your Parents" by Jeanette Yep, Peter Cha, et al.

parents and grandparents” and that “anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” makes sense in a way it might not in the UK. Whatever choices returnees make when they return will either add to their family’s security and welfare or make it less certain.

Furthermore, most international students have not taken out a student loan; they do not owe a financial debt to a bank. Instead, their parents or families have paid for it, often having sacrificed and saved for years. How this debt is to be repaid is often implicit and varies from family to family.

Critiquing the local church

What if we believe Mei Li’s local church is wrong in their approach to baptism and honouring parents? Would we encourage her to argue the case with her church leaders or to find another church? If so, we should probably understand that it is often considered inappropriate for much younger people (and younger Christians) to directly disagree with church elders and that many (though not all) local churches would have a similar approach to these two issues. Moreover, Mei Li is such a young Christian, undermining her confidence in her local church may undermine her faith overall.

Case Study 2: Church Authority and Expectations

Bible Study Formats

Bible Studies where the bible study leader does most of the talking are not so unusual in Korea and China. Apart from faithfulness to the text, the mark of a good bible study in such models isn't that everyone fully engages in a lively discussion, but that the leader prepared well and is knowledgeable, insightful and interesting. Some Asian students genuinely appreciate this model more than a participative model, as they are wary of everyone sharing their own (relative) ignorance whereas a leader who has prepared well and is an older Christian can open up the text much better. And of course, some leaders are careful to draw responses from group members and encourage questions.

Overall, this more teacher-led approach reflects the general education system. It is how most students are accustomed to learning. Finding a more participative bible study is sometimes possible, but not always.

Church Hierarchy

Asian societies are generally less egalitarian than British society - students usually call their tutors Mr Lee rather than Jack, workers tend not to openly disagree with their boss in a meeting, and younger people are often expected to give up their seats for older people in trains.

Within the church, it's seen as common courtesy not to treat the pastor as "one of us", but to show him respect and deference (Heb 13:17, 1 Tim 5:17, 1 Thes 5:12-13 etc). It's also expected that young people should be humble in their dealings with older people (eg, 1 Pet 5:5, Lev 19:32). As a young person who has just come back from a Western education, it's all too easy to come across as arrogant and critical. If a young person has questions about a sermon, he is expected to first check with his peers or small group leader. Humility and patience are required.

Although it is by no means the norm, it is not very unusual for church leaders to be fairly directive in telling someone where they should serve rather than just relying on them to volunteer. The reason is that the church leaders know where the needs are, and also, if God has indeed gifted someone in certain areas, it should be apparent to others too. The priority is on the church body rather than each individual.

Busyness

As a society, Asians tend to be busy. Achieving a work-life balance is not generally a priority. Most students and young professionals are chronically sleep deprived so it is often just seen as a fact of life.

Within the church, engaging in activities which express your Christian commitment, for example, going to prayer meetings and bible studies, serving in a ministry, doing evangelism, etc, are all seen as important ways to grow as a Christian and love God. Most people assume that feeling tired should not stop Christians from doing these good things - of course service involves sacrifice. Biblical models they might look to are heroes like Paul, who worked harder than any of the other apostles (1 Cor 15:10) and tells us to follow his example, even as he followed Christ's example (1 Cor 11:1). Paul was able to work hard by the grace God gave him, so if people are too tired, perhaps it is because they are working in their own strength - they need to pray more.

On the other hand, the busyness can also be a symptom of a works-based mentality - a desire to repay God for all that He has done for us. There is also the unspiritual motivation of "face", not wanting to look like a bad Christian.

Focus on application

Asian churches tend to speak explicitly and extensively about how we should live as Christians. From a biblical perspective, they would say that Paul, Peter, James and other NT epistle writers weren't shy about instructing and exhorting their readers to live out their faith through their actions, addressing things like how to dress, how to speak, how husbands and wives relate, use of money, etc etc. Christians were told

to imitate Paul's way of life (Php 3:17, I Cor 11:1) and Timothy was told to live out his faith so that everyone could see his progress, and to watch his life and doctrine closely (1 Tim 4:14-15). So the focus on the exterior as well as the interior is regarded as normal.

More generally in society, East Asians tend to press advice on each other more than many British people would. Within the church family, this can mean that people take seriously the responsibility to teach and admonish one another (Col 3:16), encourage one another (1 Thes 5:11) and to turn a brother from sin (James 5:19-20).

Unfortunately, the focus on externals can sometimes convey the message that the Christian life isn't essentially about salvation by grace but by works. It can also foster judgementalism and phariseeism. Furthermore, not every Christian friend's advice regarding how to live is biblical or helpful.

Christian maturity

Not every returnee can weigh up the strengths and weaknesses of different churches. Criticising the local church to immature Christians may just provide them with an excuse to avoid accountability and costly obedience. Young people tend to see things as black and white anyway, so there may be a tendency to see the British church they are familiar with as perfect and any deviation from that model as unacceptably wrong.

Solo Christianity

Many returnees are tempted to survive as solo Christians, feeding themselves on teaching from the internet but having no fellowship with any Christians locally. There's no biblical warrant for this form of Christianity and experience shows that such returnees lose their faith over time.

Christian life often costs more at home

Being a Christian as an international student in the UK is often fairly comfortable - you're far from family disapproval and societal

persecution, you probably experience good fellowship with other students and yet your privacy is respected, churches are welcoming and tend to offer free food and lifts to church, etc. You can't match that experience at home. So the truth that following Jesus will involve sacrifice, service and submission is vital to teach students before they go home.

Case Study 3: The Right Church

A Critical Spirit

Many returnees struggle with a critical spirit when they return home. They have been exposed to new ideas and practices, expanded their understanding and ministry experience, honed their critical skills through their British degree course and they're now able to dissect every aspect of their home churches with great thoroughness, usually coming up with a dismaying list of shortfalls. Coupled with the effects of reverse culture shock and missing their experience of Christian life in the UK, it's easy for a returnee to feel that there's nothing he can learn from his home church - a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Limited choice

Depending on which city students go back to, there may not be much choice when it comes to finding a church. Students need to calibrate their expectations according to what exists in their location. Setting up an ideal of "excellence" may handicap students. The "quality" and style of preaching which they appreciated in the UK (especially in a large church in a British university city) will be hard to find back home.

Need for discernment

On the other hand, cults are prevalent in many parts of Asia; some cults even have huge church buildings and congregations. It is important to give students the tools to distinguish truth from heresy and non-negotiables from secondary issues, and to be prepared to leave a heretical church no matter the social cost.

The standard of preaching as a top priority

East Asian students returning from the UK, particularly if they have experienced excellent preaching while away, often judge their churches primarily (possibly even solely) by the quality of the preaching. The only way they can imagine growing is through the pulpit ministry.

However, many local Christians would be alert to other aspects of church too - the godliness of church leaders, how sincere their faith is, how loving the church family is and how much they share their lives, whether there are good small groups, whether they try to spur one another one towards love and good deeds, whether the congregation and leaders have a high view of God's word and seek to live under its authority, whether there is a vision for evangelism and discipleship, etc. These are all ways that a church helps us to grow. Even humbling ourselves to learn from imperfect brothers and sisters and serve an imperfect church is a means of growth. Sound (not heretical) teaching is essential and quality teaching desirable, but it isn't the only way to develop as disciples.

Furthermore, students returning home might assume that what qualifies as quality preaching is universal, based on what they most appreciated in the UK. For example, that it should be expositional, not topical, logical not emotional, structured around one main point rather than multi-focal, etc. Many East Asian pastors, even those who regard the Bible as God's authoritative word, do not have the same ideal in mind.

My good vs Our good

As a mature Christian, should Bernard make his decision based primarily on what is best for himself alone, or should he take others into consideration?

While British Christians sometimes face similar dilemmas, the extra dynamic to be aware of is that in Asia, lives are often more enmeshed and interdependent. In an individualistic culture, whatever Bernard decides is generally understood as his personal decision. In a collectivist culture, especially as a respected young leader, his decision is more likely to be read as making a statement, setting an example, etc.

If an East Asian Christian were advising Bernard, some of the things they might ask him to think about are:

- How much his church has nurtured him spiritually in the past and whether there is a debt of love owed.
- Whether his influence with the youth group is such that by staying, he can bring significant change to the whole church over the next 10 years by introducing good inductive bible study methods and expositional preaching to church leaders of the future.
- Whether his going will stumble anyone, especially the youth. Will they leave with him, or stay but be disparaging of church leadership and practices? How will he explain his decision to leave?
- What is his family's spiritual situation? Will Bernard's leaving have any effect on their walk with the Lord?
- It is true that if he is unable to grow personally, he will be unable to help anyone else. But is he sure he cannot grow while a member of that church? Can he try to find/develop a small group of likeminded individuals within the church? Can he supplement the teaching he gets by reading or listen to online sermons?
- Would he consider staying and praying fervently for change within the church and also within himself?

Relating to local church leadership

As a long-standing member of the church, Bernard should try to speak to his pastors back home if he is seriously considering leaving the church. To simply leave without a word of explanation would not be ideal.

Case Study 4: Communal Life

Ethnic Churches

It is an excellent idea for students who have come to faith in the UK to experience something of what going to church back home would be like by going to an ethnic church. It gives students the chance to process the differences while still in the same city as trusted Christian contacts.

It is unlikely that the local ethnic church will be exactly like the church the returnee will eventually go to at home, but it will still be a helpful stepping stone.

Group orientation

Most of the differences Laura notices are simply expressions of a group oriented culture in the church context. (Some practices are peculiar to this church.) But after 5 years of only experiencing British church culture, Laura has probably imbibed something of British individualism and assumes it is the norm for church life. In the Chinese church, she experiences a greater emphasis on doing things together, which has a higher demand on her time and feels like inefficiency at times. There is often an understanding of the church being your family in Asian churches (it is common to call other believers “brother” or “sister”), with all the corresponding interdependence and entanglement characteristic of an Asian family.

Expressing feelings and sharing deeply

This varies from person to person of course, but in general, British people tend to be a little wary of setting too much store by their emotions, trying to provoke an emotional response, and crying in front of others. High functioning individuals tend not to share too much of their personal struggles and family problems with everyone; they are generally expected to be independent and carry their own burdens. There is also a tendency to avoid coming across as being needy, or too earnest or serious.

Many East Asians don't have the same norms.

NB

These dynamics are possibly the reason why East Asian Christians sometimes find British fellowship groups rather cold, or think that local people are holding them at arms length.

Case Study 5: Boundaries and Work-Life Balance

The norms of working life

In general, life in East Asian cities is demanding - long working hours and chronic sleep deprivation are considered normal. In Britain, many people at least theoretically approve of the concepts of work-life balance and boundaries, but that is often not the case in Asia.

These expectations are carried over into the church, where they can take on biblical justification as well. After all, if secular workers can work so hard for the sake of a human boss and temporal reward, how much more should church workers do for the sake of the King of glory and for eternal fruit?

Attitude to suffering

Traditional Asian religions and philosophies esteem asceticism, suffering and self-sacrifice. This perspective can unconsciously carry over into Christianity, so missionaries, pastors and church workers are often seen as better Christians than ordinary Christians. But also, the more such Christian workers suffer, the more godly they are regarded. The expectation can be that they will be poor and overworked, possibly persecuted.

How this can affect Christians in general is that serving in church to the point of burnout is not always discouraged. Furthermore, Christians might also consider going into full-time Christian work simply as an expression of Christian commitment (i.e., not necessarily out of calling or gifting).

It would be unfair to say that these attitudes are purely cultural. Rather, they are enforced as Christians read about

- Jesus, who had nowhere to lay his head and gave his life for us,
- Jesus' disciples whose rest after their mission trip was interrupted in order to minister to the crowds,

- the early disciples who boldly served God despite severe persecution,
- Paul who was beaten, whipped, imprisoned, shipwrecked... and financed his own ministry,
- Old Testament prophets like Job, Jeremiah, Hosea and Ezekiel - none of whom had easy lives.

Arguably, the biblical norm is that God's servants suffer.* At the very least, God's servants need to be prepared to suffer.

Holistic thinking vs categorisation

Speaking very generally, people in Western societies more readily compartmentalise/categorise different aspects of life and relationships. Activity X is leisure and not work, Relationship Y is work and not family, Decision Z is just business and not personal, etc. Traditionally however, East Asians often do not make those distinctions so cleanly. For example, your boss might also be your father, and you relate to him at work and at home in a way that reflects both realities. Going for karaoke with your colleagues is sort of leisure... but if you do not go it will affect your work dynamics.

For a pastor to tell a member of his congregation that he will not see them or join them for an event on Saturday because it is his day off would usually cause offense and even consternation - is his ministry just a job, or is he genuinely serving? Does he really care about me as a person, or am I just of professional interest? (A more acceptable excuse might be for the pastor to say he is really tired and needs to rest, or that he has a family engagement he really needs to honour, etc.)

* Ajit Fernando's article "To Serve is to Suffer"

(www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/august/main.html) is a helpful introduction to one Asian attitude to suffering. His book *The Call to Joy and Pain: Embracing Suffering in Your Ministry* explores the themes more fully.

Mental Illness

This was just glancingly referred to in the case study (ie, Keiko's possible depression) but it is worth knowing that generally in East Asian countries, people often do not regard mental ailments as they would physical ailments, i.e., as having a physiological cause and therefore treatable with medication. Depression and anxiety are more often seen as emotional problems, to be dealt with by a change of circumstances or attitude. Christians might also regard it as spiritual in origin, and pray for deliverance. This is gradually changing however.

Why Rest?

When British Christians try to convince East Asian Christians that they are taking on too much, they sometimes base their arguments on terms like work-life balance, maintaining proper boundaries and self-care. But the latter do not necessarily share the same understanding of these concepts as desirable or biblical ideals. Rather, they can be misunderstood as valuing self more than others, protecting self rather than depending on God, and offering just parts of yourself rather than devoting yourself wholly to God and God's people.

It might be more helpful to unpack the concepts, perhaps picking up on a couple of the following:

- Humbly knowing our limitations as human beings. Our bodies need rest - that is how God made us. Jesus was sleeping on the boat when the storm hit.
- Acknowledging God's sovereignty. We are not God and we are not the Messiah. People should not depend on us the way they depend on God.
- The Sabbath principle. Even God rested from his work, and He clearly set in place a Sabbath principle of rest for us. Being able to cease our labours for one day a week shows that we understand that fruit comes from the Lord. (Some Asians will argue that that the Sabbath does not apply to ministry, since Jesus healed on the Sabbath, so you will need to think of why it does apply.)

- Resting for the sake of others - we often do not realise how impatient, judgemental, demanding and quick tempered we get when we are operating at capacity for extended periods of time, but the people around us feel the brunt of our exhaustion. It is often pride or a wrong image of God that makes us take on a bigger workload than we can actually handle graciously. Are we in danger of being like the older son in the story of the prodigal son - working grudgingly for God as if he were a hard master, and not appreciating our privilege as sons?
- Our responsibility to our families and friends - it is not just our “official” ministries that God has entrusted us with. He has given us the gift of families and friends, and we demonstrate our love for them by spending time with them and enjoying them.