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CHINA SOURCE · QUARTERLY ·

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Journey Back to China

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About ChinaSource

The mission of ChinaSource is to be a trusted partner and platform for educating the global church on critical issues facing the church and ministries in China, and for connecting Christians inside and outside of China to advance God's kingdom globally.



Publications

Regular readers get a variety of perspectives on current events and church responses in our blog, weekly news roundup ZGBriefs, and ChinaSource Quarterly. Our aim is to bring reliable information that will inspire prayer and collaboration among global Christians.



Partnerships

ChinaSource's partnerships aim to get key people together, asking thoughtful questions and influencing Christian attitudes toward China. Our partners share our vision to platform the contributions of China's Christians to the global church and the advancement of God's kingdom.



Training & Consulting

Under the ChinaSource Institute, ChinaSource provides easily accessible, high quality, professional services that are relevant and useful in equipping individuals and organizations that are serving Chinese people, both in China and the diaspora.



Engagement

ChinaSource acts as a conversational bridge between the church in China and the global church. This is primarily done via our network of Chinese Christians, conferences, research, events, and through media.



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To access embedded links to resources and other related articles, please go to the online version of this ChinaSource Quarterly (<https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/chinasource-quarterlies/journey-back-to-china/>).

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COVER PHOTO: A student with luggages waiting for the flight in the airport
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BY SEAN CHENG

Returnee Ministry: Reflecting on Developments

Image: Suganth | Unsplash



In recent years, returnee ministry has become an increasingly important aspect of **Chinese diaspora mission and international student ministry**. Even during the COVID pandemic, when the number of Chinese students studying abroad dropped (it is now rising again), the number of Chinese students and scholars returning to China has remained high—around 700,000 per year. In 2021, the total number of returnees to China exceeded one million. There are no clear statistics on how many of these returnees are Christians, but assuming the most conservative estimate of five percent would mean that there are hundreds of thousands of Christian returnees in China today. The opportunities remain significant for the church and international student ministries to reach and disciple Chinese students and scholars, the majority of whom (about 80 percent) will go back to China.

The purpose of this issue of *ChinaSource*

Sean Cheng is a Chinese diaspora missionary in action, experienced Chinese Christian media editor, and veteran digital evangelist. He served as Asia Editor of *Christianity Today* (2022–24) and Director of Evangelism for Overseas Campus Ministries (2011–19) and manages the personal evangelistic webpage [Jidian's Links](#).

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Quarterly is to revisit the topic of **Chinese returnee ministry**. This issue includes biblical reflections on returnee ministry, reviews of history and updates on developments in returnee ministry, reflections from returnee ministry workers, exhortations from a pastor in China, as well as a book review.

In his lead article, David Byron reviews and comments on the last eight years of developments related to returnee ministry since the **autumn 2016 issue of *ChinaSource Quarterly*** focused on returnee ministry. James R. reflects on the example of Onesimus in Paul's letter to Philemon, elucidating our calling and hope for returnee-focused ministry. Bill Hu, a returnee pastor in China, shares his understanding of returnee ministry based on the life of Jacob and offers suggestions and advice to overseas churches, churches in China, and Christian returnees. Lydia S. and her team of returnee workers in China share their views on the challenges and strategies of returnee ministry in the current context. Sean Cheng and Stacey Bieler review the contributions of Chinese Christian returnees in the first half of the twentieth century, noting the difficulties they faced and considering what today's Christian returnees and returnee ministry workers can learn from their lives. Lisa Espineli Chinn gives a helpful review of the new bilingual *Returnee Handbook* (海归手册) and shares how returnees and international student ministry workers can be equipped and benefit from its contents.

We hope that you will be blessed by this issue, encouraged to pray for returnees, and inspired to reach out to international student ministries. 🇺🇸



From “Run” to Return: Helping Chinese Returnees Stand Firm in Faith

BY DAVID BYRON

ChinaSource has been faithful to continually raise the banner of ministry to Chinese students and scholars who are going back to China as Christians. A blog

post in 2021 was entitled, “[Returnees—A Topic Worth Revisiting](#).” We are grateful that this issue of *ChinaSource Quarterly* is devoted to just that, as were the [winter 2011](#) and [autumn 2016](#) editions.

I commend to you the articles in these previous publications that address issues and challenges related to returning, which we will touch on again here. The last rather turbulent four years, related to the rise of COVID-19 and growing international

tensions, have changed the landscape for returnees in a variety of challenging ways. This edition will provide an update on current trends in ministry to Chinese overseas, as well as in returnee ministry

efforts within and outside of China, up to and through the COVID years.

US–China tensions have influenced the flow of students and visiting scholars to

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the US over the last few years, particularly those involved in certain tech fields, which are not being granted visas. According to OpenDoors, there was a nearly 15 percent drop in numbers of Chinese international students in the academic year 2020–2021, this largely due to the impact of the pandemic. The following year brought another nearly 9 percent drop in numbers, but in 2022–2023 the drop was only 0.2 percent.¹ So the figures are leveling off and likely going to climb again. It is worth noting that in spite of all of this fluctuation, Chinese international students have remained the largest percentage of the over one million international students in the US, 27 percent or 289,526 in 2022–2023.²

The opportunities remain significant for the church and international student ministries to reach and disciple Chinese students. Yet the recent issues related to the coronavirus, international tensions, and pressures put on Chinese international students from home have led to a sharp decrease in the numbers of Chinese students engaging in campus or church evangelistic outreach efforts. Initially this was spurred on by real fears of contracting

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Some report of warnings from authorities back home to not engage in “religious activities” or take part in events held in “religious buildings.” It seems evident that students are more aware of the potential that their activity overseas could impact their future opportunities in China.
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or spreading COVID. Until the outbreak of the pandemic, the majority of those engaging in campus ISM (international student ministry) activities were. But in the last few years that has not been the case. There are clearly other factors influencing this trend since the risk of COVID has dropped off. Some report of warnings from authorities back home to not engage in “religious activities” or take part in events held in “religious buildings.” It seems evident that students are more

aware of the potential that their activity overseas could impact their future opportunities in China.

The most coveted overseas study destinations for Chinese international students continue to be the US, UK, and Australia, though growing numbers are finding Asian destinations to be compelling alternatives, including Malaysia, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. Projections are that the numbers of those

electing to stay in Asia will continue to trend upwards.³ Increasing affluence and a more globally-aware group of younger students over the last few decades has also made ministries on campus and in churches less attractive to students. Felt needs that used to be economic in nature, like a free meal and fun activities are less attractive as many students have the economic freedom and practical mobility to pursue things on their own with fellow students. More and more students are coming with a higher level of English fluency than their predecessors. So, some English classes and conversation ministries have seen a decrease in engagement. The challenge remains for those involved in reaching Chinese students to find creative ways to engage with them as more traditionally-utilized methods are not yielding previous levels of interest.

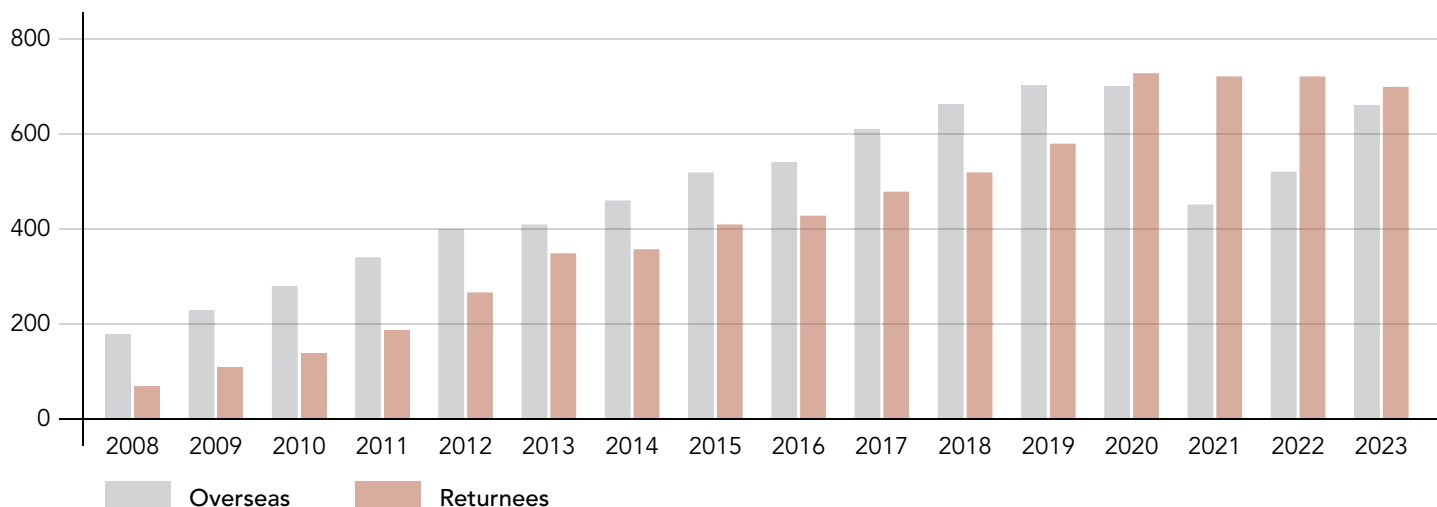
Returnee rates remain high! The chart⁴ below reveals this, showing how since 2012 returnee rates have been around or above 80 percent. Since 2020, the number of returnees to China has eclipsed the numbers of students who are going overseas each year, again due in large part to the impact of the pandemic. Contrast these numbers with those from 1987 when “the return rate was about 5 percent, and in 2007 only 30.6 percent.”⁵

Clearly there remains a need for thoughtful ministry to Christian returnees, helping them to prepare well for the practical and spiritual challenges that their transitions home will bring. The fact remains that times are hard for returnees. Economic challenges across China at present are significant. Jobless rates among college graduates have been high. In June 2024,

China reports the national unemployment rate among youth 16–24 years old was 21.3 percent.⁶ The actual numbers may well be higher. Many who return face challenges well beyond what they imagined and for many their response is to want to flee. The Chinese word being used for this is 润, which is ironically pronounced “run.” Perhaps they can get back overseas to pursue an advanced degree as a way to get out during these challenging times. Others respond by checking out of societal expectations and “lying flat” (躺平—*tang ping*), refusing to engage in the rat race of life and just passively lying on the sidelines. Others have become part of what is referred to as the *ken lao zu* (啃老族), those living with parents as a means to survive without working.

The present challenges of returning have not changed much in nature over the years, but in some respects they have increased in intensity. Simply readjusting to life back home after a prolonged period living in a different cultural context is challenging. On top of that are challenges related to family expectations and responsibilities, finding a job and managing the heavy demands of the workplace, and finding and settling into a local church. All of these take time, patience and persistence. In the midst of these adjustments, returnees need encouragement. Those who have not taken time to prepare, who return largely

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Numbers of Overseas Chinese Students vs Returnees, 2008–2023 (Unit: k)

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Those who have had time to anticipate and think through potential challenges in advance are less likely to be knocked off guard, are more likely to find fellowship, to persevere in trials, and to continue to grow in their faith.
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unaware of what's coming, do not tend to fare well when trials come. Large numbers do not manage to make meaningful connection with the church and slowly drift away in their devotion to Christ. Those who have had time to anticipate and think through potential challenges in advance are less likely to be knocked off guard, are more likely to find fellowship, to persevere in trials, and to continue to grow in their faith.

Demands in the workplace can be very heavy, usually requiring people to work significant overtime hours and to be available unexpectedly at off-hours. It is not uncommon for bosses to expect employees to work from 9 am to 9 pm, 6 days a week (a practice commonly referred to as 996, 九九六). Add this to what are often long commutes, and little time is left for attending to daily needs, to family, and of course to church and



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body life. Additionally, employees are often expected to engage in less than ethical behavior as a way of serving and showing loyalty to the company. Given the nature of these increasing challenges, it is understandable that some would choose to check out altogether (lying flat) or seek to escape.

Engaging with and finding a church home is more challenging than it has been in the last decade. Since most of the sizable urban house churches can no longer meet in large gatherings and have scattered to home-based small groups, it is more difficult for returnees to find them and make meaningful connection. Almost always a personal introduction is required

and that is only made possible through trusting relationships across the network of churches, ministry organizations and those in China serving returnees.

During the pandemic, many of those planning to return were quite available to join in online preparation retreats. But since the crisis has settled down, it has been more difficult to get their attention. There seems a greater reticence to return, with many pursuing any possible means to delay going back, waiting until the last minute when all possibilities to remain overseas are exhausted, and only then finding they have no meaningful margins to think about preparing. It has been increasingly challenging to find

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opportunities to serve these brothers and sisters.

The 2016 returnee-focused edition of *ChinaSource Quarterly* was a call to action; we hope this edition likewise is a call to get involved. [Lydia S. wrote](#) in the autumn 2016 *ChinaSource Quarterly* about the role of the overseas church in investing in returnees. Her comments are still relevant:

Overseas churches and organizations need to clearly and thoroughly communicate a holistic gospel to international students and scholars, help them establish a firm spiritual foundation after leading them to Christ, and systematically prepare them to face the challenge of contextualization upon return to their country. They should assist them in transitioning and making contacts with local churches, maintain contact with them for a while to care for and provide companionship after their return, and urge them to find and become involved in a local church. These are ways to address the returnee problem effectively and efficiently, but they require significant investment on the part of the overseas churches and organizations in collaboration with the mainland churches

and especially with returnee ministry organizations.⁷

Returnees today, as much if not more than ever, need to be supported in their transition back to China as followers of Christ. This is a task that is not accomplished without the trusting cooperation of those involved in serving returnees: churches (both overseas and back in China), ISM staff and organizations,

and receiving partners on the ground in China. As these scattered entities seek to coordinate efforts to serve Christian returnees, much prayer is needed. Please join us in lifting up those involved in this ministry. We long to see returnees not just survive their transition home, but return well, engage with and get involved in the local church, and be ambassadors for Christ to their families, friends, colleagues, and the world. Praise God that some

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Image: Jacob Lund | Adobe Stock

returnees are currently managing their transition well and making an impact.

The articles in this edition of *ChinaSource Quarterly* will consider the changing landscape in China and how it impacts Christian returnees. We will hear from brothers and sisters (including a pastor) who are serving returnees on the China side, reflect on some historical Christian returnees, and also consider a biblical example of a returnee. In the Resource Corner, we highlight a newly-published edition of the *Returnee Handbook* (海归手册), available for the first time in a side-by-side bilingual (Chinese and English) format. This resource is a useful workbook

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We hope this edition will challenge and resource those working with returnees and will increase your burden for investing in these brothers and sisters as they return.
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for returnees and those working with them, offering practical help in preparing for return. We hope this edition will challenge and resource those working with returnees

and will increase your burden for investing in these brothers and sisters as they return.

¹ “Institute of International Education: OpenDoors 2010-2022 Fast Facts,” *Open Doors*, accessed November 20, 2024, https://opendoorsdata.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Open-Doors_2010-2022.pdf.

² “OpenDoors 2023 Fast Facts,” *Open Doors*, accessed November 20, 2024, https://opendoorsdata.org/fast_facts/fast-facts-2023/.

³ “South Korea on Track to Attract Thousands More International Students within the Decade,” *ICEF Monitor*, July 24, 2024, accessed November 20, 2024, <https://monitor.icef.com/2024/07/south-korea-on-track-to-attract-thousands-more-international-students-within-the-decade/>.

⁴ Plotted using data from “2023 Survey Report on Returnees Employment” (2023 中国海归就业调查报告, 2024年3月26日), *Human Resources and Social Security Information Network*, March 27, 2024, accessed November 20, 2024, <https://www.hrssit.cn/info/3208.html>.

⁵ David Zweig and Zoe Ge, “How Chinese students Who Return Home after Studying Abroad Succeed—And Why They Don’t,” *South China Morning Post*, July 27, 2018, accessed November 20, 2024, <https://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/asia/article/2157081/how-chinese-students-who-return-home-after-studying>.

⁶ Stephanie Yang, “China’s Rising Youth Unemployment Signals the Nation’s Economic Woes Are Far from Over,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 25, 2024, accessed November 20, 2024, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2024-09-25/chinas-youth-unemployment>.

⁷ Lydia S., “Returnee Ministry at Home and Abroad,” *ChinaSource Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (2016), September 27, 2016, accessed November 20, 2024, <https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/returnee-ministry-at-home-and-abroad/>.

David Byron (pseudonym) has been involved in ministry among Chinese students and scholars for more than 30 years. His passion is to help Christian returnees prepare and return well and to help others to do the same.

Challenges and Strategies



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The Challenges and Strategies of Returnee Ministry in the New Era

BY JOHN Z., SARAH L., AND LYDIA S.

China has changed dramatically over the past decade or so. A rise in nationalist sentiment has led to rejection of and disengagement from connection with the West, whether it is with national leaders, intellectual

elites, or simply the general populace. The overall economic situation is in a state of decline, with wages being cut and often going unpaid, even for government employees. An inflationary crisis is on the horizon. Chinese people are relatively passive on social issues, lacking purpose, hope, and security. Overall, the pressure on Christian churches (and other religions) is increasing, and there is an upsurge in

people reporting church activities to the police. House churches are forced to adopt a small-group, community-based approach, and the requirements of church ministers are increasingly demanding. The church in China in this new era faces new challenges and opportunities, and so it is with returnee ministry.

I CHANGES IN THE RETURNEE POPULATION

According to the latest *Annual Report on the Development of Chinese Students Studying Abroad*, released by the Center for China and Globalization (CCG), the return of Chinese students has accelerated significantly over the past decade. From 2000 to 2019, the number of returnees increased from 9,000 to 580,300, with the return rate in 2019 reaching 82.5 percent. The pandemic and changes in international relations further boosted the number of returnees. In 2021, the number of international students returning to China exceeded one million for the first time,¹ making returning the preferred choice for most overseas Chinese students.

buildings overseas. Although some consider returning to their hometowns, most returnees choose first- and second-tier cities where they can develop their careers, and so they need to face the challenge of adapting to life in an unfamiliar metropolis.

Many who were first exposed to the gospel and came to faith in Christ overseas are still quite young in their faith. A study shows that more than 65 percent of Christian returnees were baptized or heard the gospel for the first time overseas, and roughly 30 percent of them each year are relatively new believers who have not yet been baptized.² The first one to two years after returning is the most critical period for them to adapt and keep their faith. During this time, finding ways to help

The church in China is often viewed from the outside as one facing significant persecution. But no matter where you are, any Christian serious about following Christ is bound to experience some degree of pressure and hardship. Before returning, many feel uncertain and worry about the pressures and persecution they may face. However, when they witness the steadfast faith of believers facing adversity in China, they rejoice in the power of the gospel for those who are rooted in Christ. This realization inspires them to be willing to live out their calling in the Lord. After adapting to life back home, many returnees begin to participate in the broader ministries of the church and Christian organizations, and some even have gone into the mission field. This exceeds their expectations when they first return and reveals God's grace and guidance.

The goal of the returnee ministry is not only to help returnees integrate into local churches and continue to grow in their faith, but also to connect brothers and sisters who have similar experiences so they can encourage one another and journey together. In such a community, returnees can use their gifts and experience and celebrate how their passion for God has evolved from mere ideas to practical reality, inspiring each other to keep growing. In the face of challenges, Christian returnees can practice loving one another and working together. We hope that in the future, we will be able to continue to journey with more and more returnees, sharing experiences and strengthening each other's faith, encouraging more young people to be salt and light in all levels of society.

II CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES

Returnee ministry exists to facilitate community among returnees, acting as a bridge to connect and serve them. Those involved both serve and are served by churches and Christian organizations at home and abroad.

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In recent years, there has been an increase in younger returnees, between the ages of 20 and 30. Many returned home after their overseas studies and are facing significant challenges, including finding jobs, being pressured by their families to get married, and the effects of reverse culture shock. They need to transition from being students overseas to becoming young professionals who take on more social responsibility. In the church, they need to shift from being served to serving others and adapt to the current small-scale, multi-site gatherings of churches, which are markedly different from the large-scale gatherings in formal church

them settle into a church and continue to grow is crucial. In recent years, some returnees, because of the additional pressures of having government jobs, do not dare to publicize their faith and choose to stay away from local churches. The pandemic opened the door to the widespread use of virtual communication, saving time and transportation costs, but also fostering a reliance on online tools. Many returnees are now unwilling to venture out and participate in in-person meetings and are therefore unable to grow spiritually and be built up through interaction with other believers.

Helping returnees acclimate to the church environment in China is crucial. Ensuring they find and integrate into local fellowships is the main mission of the ministry. This effort has led to a growing appreciation among local pastors for both returnee ministry and returnees, especially after the pandemic. It is the goal of returnee ministry to help returnees who go back to different cities to find suitable churches and build a broad network. It is a challenge for local churches to minister to returnees who are relatively weak in their faith. And to do so with a kingdom heart, supporting the development of local returnee ministries, is not easy.

International cooperation is necessary to reach the goals and resource returnee ministry. Facilitating returnee referrals requires extensive cooperation between ministry workers in China and those overseas. Timely and targeted pre-return preparation can greatly enhance returnees' ability to adapt to changes both before and after they return. There is much to do to help returnee ministries in China to effectively collaborate with overseas churches and Christian organizations. Returnee ministries in China should participate in overseas pre-return training with a willingness to go the extra mile. Overseas churches and Christian organizations should seek to proclaim the whole gospel, to lead people to Christ, to grow them as disciples, to prepare those who are returning, to establish a ministry strategy tailored to different locations, to respect local churches and ministries (helping them to succeed), and to fulfill God's mission for returnees.

Raising up returnees to serve other returnees is one of the important strategies of the ministry. Returnees do not have a special social status, but they do have special experiences at home and abroad. And because they share similar backgrounds, it is easier for them to build relationships with other returnees, and to understand and help them. Relationship building requires face-to-face contact, which entails the participation of many returnee co-workers. To ensure the stability

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of the returnee ministry in China, there is an urgent need for more full-time co-workers.

Building future leaders is an important goal of the ministry. Many returnees who have been ministered to as they returned have grown into leaders in the ministry. We are happy to see post-90s Christians (millennials) becoming a majority of our team members in returnee ministry. It is a goal of the ministry to identify, journey with, connect, and lead young returnees into the ministry God has prepared for them.

III FUTURE DEVELOPMENT AND OUTLOOK

Returnee ministry can be broken down into three stages:

1 RETURN TO CHINA

We encourage returnees to return with a mission. We seek to prepare them while overseas, establish reliable referral channels, connect them with a network of church ministries that have a burden to serve returnees, and encourage and help returnees to integrate into the local church.

2 GROW IN CHRIST

We recognize returnees are at different spiritual stages and aim to

connect them with suitable Bible studies and offer spiritual training in keeping with their needs, journeying with them in various ways, including both individual mentorship and small group ministry, helping them to be rooted in the gospel, grow in Christ, and influence this generation.

3 GO FOR THE KINGDOM

With the Great Commission as our guide, we mobilize, journey with, and support returnees to live for the sake of the gospel and to participate in global missions, wherever they are. We see returnee ministry as a timely part of the Great Commission call, an extension of overseas campus ministries, and one of the crucial strategies for mission to China.

In the 1920s, Chinese students accounted for one quarter of the total number of international students in the US; this was due to the Chinese Educational Mission initiative.³ In 1949, the door for Chinese students to study in the US closed. However, in the 1980s the fever and opportunity to study abroad surged. In 2016, Chinese students studying in the US accounted for one third of the total number of international students in the world.⁴ In 2019, the number of Chinese students studying abroad exceeded 700,000, and China became the country



Image: Jelsie zhong | Unsplash

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Returnee ministry is clearly for “such a time as this” (Esther 4:14) and stands as a God-given opportunity in this generation. We thank the Lord that we can have a part in witnessing his marvelous work.

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with the largest number of students studying abroad in the world.⁵ As noted earlier, the number of returnees to China exceeded one million in 2021. We don't know if or when the door to study abroad will be closed again for Chinese students, but returnee ministry is clearly for “such a time as this” (Esther 4:14) and stands as a God-given opportunity in this generation. We thank the Lord that we can have a part in witnessing his marvelous work. ■

¹ “2023 Survey Report on Returnees Employment (2023 中国海归就业调查报告, 2024年3月26日),” *Human Resources and Social Security Information Network*, March 27, 2023, accessed November 19, 2024, <https://www.hrssit.cn/info/3208.html>.
² Data from a 2023 survey of a few dozen returnee Christians by a returnee ministry organization in China.
³ “The Chinese Educational Mission (1872-1881),” *Chinese Students at Andover Project*, accessed November 19, 2024, <https://chinesestudents.andover.edu/exhibits/show/historical-context/the-chinese-educational-missio>.
⁴ “Studying in the United States: Chinese Students Account for One-Third of All International Students (美国留学：中国留学生占国际留学生总量三分之一),” *new.chazidian.com*, October 19, 2016, accessed November 19, 2024, <https://mnews.chazidian.com/news320698/>.
⁵ “Number of Students from China Going Abroad for Study from 2010 to 2022,” *Statista*, March 2024, accessed November 19, 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/227240/number-of-chinese-students-that-study-abroad/#statisticContainer>.

Editor's note: This article was originally written in Chinese and was translated by the editorial team.

John Z., Sarah L., and Lydia S. are all returnees themselves and have served in the returnee ministry in China for many years.



Image: Puttipong | Adobe Stock

From Beersheba Back to Haran: Reflections on Christian Returnees

BY BILL HU

During my three years pastoring a Chinese church in the United States, we sent more than 20 of our members back to China.

When I returned to China, I planted a church, which I have now pastored for four years. The church has received no fewer than one hundred Christian returnees, referred to us by overseas churches.

Today the issue of Christian returnees is so important. In this article, I will share my understanding of this issue, based on the

life of Jacob in the Bible, and try to offer some suggestions and advice to overseas churches, churches in China, and Christian returnees.

It is said that there are three ultimate philosophical questions in life: Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I

going? When we simply rely on the questions, "Where did I come from?" and "Where am I going?" to determine "who I am," it seems that the question of "Who am I?" cannot be answered adequately. The issues returnees face often center around questions of identity, "who I am." Yet if returnees try to define their identity purely in terms of their geographic location and horizontal relationships, there will likely be confusion.

If you were to ask Jacob in the opening verses of Genesis 28, "Who are you?", he would have told you, "I am from Beersheba where I had a good life and received many blessings, but I could not stay there and have return to Haran. I hope to find a way to make a living, start a family, and in turn become a blessing here." This is pretty much how the returnees whom I sent off from my overseas church and have welcomed

returnees. We know that the Bible is both historical and prophetic. It records the story of sinners and their sin-tainted lives, and it also predicts the trials that every sinner will experience in the present fallen world.

How many Christians with overseas experience, who have been blessed with great grace while abroad, have come back home with a clear mission? How many had to return because they did not win the H1B lottery, which determines work eligibility in the US? This is like asking Jacob: Did you leave Beersheba because of the Abrahamic covenant and the promise of "being fruitful and increasing in number to fill the earth" (Genesis 1:28), or did you simply listen to your mother and leave for fear of your father's rebuke and your brother's revenge?

If a returnee both knows God's precious promises and returns to his home country for practical reasons, there is little difference between him and Jacob. Both are sinners called by God, and for both the environment is tainted by sin.

The issues returnees face often center around questions of identity, "who I am."

The Old Testament tells of a man who, like today's returnees, left his place of birth and went to another land. His name was Jacob, and his story was recorded in Genesis. Where did Jacob come from? He came from Beersheba, a place where he received many blessings (Genesis 27:27) and a place where he could not stay (Genesis 27:43). In Beersheba, he inherited the Abrahamic covenant passed down through his father Isaac, whom he had cheated to gain his blessing. Also, there was his mother who was no longer able to protect him from his brother who wanted to kill him (Genesis 27:41). Jacob surely had some fond memories of Beersheba, but under the circumstances, he was not able to stay.

Where was Jacob headed as he left Beersheba? To Haran, the place his grandfather Abraham had left years before (Genesis 12:4). It had taken the family over a hundred years to leave Haran, and now Jacob was going back. Jacob still had extended family there, including his uncle Laban and his family. Laban was not a kind man; in his eyes, there were only hired hands, not family; there were only business interests, not personal affections. He was a nightmare of a boss for all who worked for him.

to my current church would introduce themselves.

Jacob's return journey to Haran was not easy. He traveled alone through the wilderness, and as the sun went down, there were no familiar tents and only cold stones to use for a pillow. Jacob "the returnee" was overwhelmed by loneliness.

Jacob was capable and self-reliant. He removed the stone from the well so that Rachel could water her father Laban's sheep (Genesis 29:10), and when given the chance, he worked very hard for his uncle (Genesis 29:15). Yet Jacob had a rough time. He was deceived by his uncle and labored for seven years, only to then labor for another seven years (Genesis 29:20, 30). He got two wives but was reduced to a pawn in the race between his wives to produce a son and heir. Leah said to him, "You must come in to me, for I have hired you..." (Genesis 30:16).

In spite of all the blessings that Jacob brought to Laban's household (Genesis 30:27), which his unscrupulous uncle recognized, Jacob was still trapped. It was a reoccurring story for him, stuck over and over again: in the wilderness, in his uncle's house, in his marriages. This is also the experience of every one of today's

If a returnee both knows God's precious promises and returns to his home country for practical reasons, there is little difference between him and Jacob.

So, the returnee should not expect to write a different chapter of his life, but to live out the biblical narrative of a sinner's salvation:

I EXPERIENCING LONELINESS

Jacob experienced loneliness in the wilderness when he lost almost all his earthly relationships. He continued to experience loneliness in Laban's household as he was mistreated and taken advantage of. Returnees will experience such times of loneliness after they return. Isolation in time and space, being removed from the company of old friends is like Jacob's loneliness in the wilderness; the loneliness returnees experience in big cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen is similar to Jacob's loneliness in Haran. There are millions of people around you, but few meaningful relationships, and where there are relationships, they are often tainted by mixed motives and efforts to take advantage of one another.

II EFFORTS IN SELF-PRESERVATION

Jacob was able to recognize Rachel by his own cleverness (Genesis 29:4-6). He showed his strength by helping his future wife water her sheep (Genesis 29:10). He exchanged his labor for his father-in-law's favor and grew his family through 14 years of hard work. It seems that Jacob had made his dream come true by his own gifts, efforts, and wisdom, but he still felt that he had nothing to his name. This is often the experience of returnees as well. Their experience of studying and living overseas enables them to increase their abilities and insights in their fields; these abilities in turn will enable them to excel in the workplace. The insights returnee Christians have into the Bible and the church will enable them to become objects of their pastor's affection and garner favor from the congregation; returnee Christians may also become competitive in the dating scene.

However, if all of this becomes for the returnee a kind of guarantee for a successful life, then one day we will likely

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**I believe this is the way God works:
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hear this complaint: "In my company as well as in my church, I am just a tool. Everyone only cares about my contribution. No one cares about me! I miss my church and college fellowship group in the US." When Jacob relied on his gifts alone, God sent Laban to act as the consumer of his gifts. I'm not excusing bosses who consume their employees or churches who consume their congregations, but I believe this is the way God works: allowing the dreams of those who are relying on themselves to come true, only to help them realize they are stuck in a vicious cycle of trying to save themselves.

III UTTER DESPAIR

Jacob's wives tried to gain their husband's favor by having more babies, but they were trapped in a dead-end race for pregnancy. Returnees, likewise, try to compete hard in the workplace. In the church they ask, "What more can I do?" But the search for fulfillment in horizontal relationships is bound to lead to constant disappointment. As returnees seek favor from their bosses, they find that the economy is failing. As they seek appreciation from their pastors, they find there are actually quite a lot of theological resources in the big cities, so their help is not so needed. As they seek recognition from the congregation, the next batch of returnees comes, stealing attention from them. As they seek approval from their families, they find their families only care about their contribution to their parents

and relatives.

SO WHERE IS THE WAY OUT?

What did Jacob encounter on his way to Haran? Not a tower of Babel built from the earth reaching toward heaven, but a ladder descending from heaven. The Lord did not make him climb the ladder, but revealed to him angels ascending and descending, connecting heaven and earth. Jacob was still on the road between his home and a distant place, but because of his vision of the heavenly ladder, that desolate place became the temple of God, the gate of heaven (Genesis 28:17). His circumstances did not change, nor did his broken earthly relationships, but Jacob went from being a fugitive in the wilderness to a worshipper on the road to heaven.

It is similar with Leah, who, after giving birth to Reuben, Simeon, and Levi, gave up her obsession with earthly relationships because of Judah—at that moment, she began to praise the Lord (Genesis 29:35). It is also like Rachel, who, after a long battle with her sister, named her son "Joseph" (Genesis 30:24), putting her hope in the future rather than the present.

Jacob's family's sense of identity could not be worked out through earthly relationships, but they were able to build their identity on the worship of Yahweh and the hope of a future Son. The way out was finally fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ: he became incarnate as the true

ladder from heaven (John 1:51). He was born of the tribe of Judah, a descendant of David, to show what true worship is (John 4:23). And he is the one who is the true Son.

Jesus Christ is the true hope of Christian returnees who have experienced loneliness, who have struggled to save themselves, and who have faced disappointments and despair. As a "returnee pastor" and a pastor of returnees, I would like to offer the

needs returnees to serve her. Allow the returnees in your church to take time before they begin to serve. And when you come across a particularly "useful" Christian returnee, consider your mentality as a leader and be a faithful and good shepherd as you steward the resources they bring.

To Christian returnees: When you call yourself a "Christian returnee," you may inadvertently feel tempted to add a little bit of your own experience and effort

or accomplishments. Jacob's life is memorialized by the author of Hebrews for his hope in the future and his worship of God.

It is difficult for sinners to live in a fallen world. It is even more so for Christian returnees, sinners who are intelligent, capable, knowledgeable, and familiar with the Bible, who arrive in cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, where their opportunity to sin is magnified. Yet our hope does not rely on worldly things—it does not matter whether my work in Shanghai is smooth, or whether my service in my church in Beijing is revitalized, or whether my marriage in Shenzhen is happy, or whether my children in Guangzhou excel in school. What matters most is our assurance in the promise of the heavenly ladder and our future worship in the new heaven and new earth. Our identity is not defined by where we come from or where we go, but only by whether we worship the true God of heaven. ■

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Jesus Christ is the true hope of Christian returnees who have experienced loneliness, who have struggled to save themselves, and who have faced disappointments and despair.
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following suggestions and advice to overseas churches, churches in China, and returnee Christians.

To overseas churches: Please encourage brothers and sisters who have left you to worship God in person with other believers in the local church, not virtually. Remember that one-on-one friendships alone and Bible studies on the internet do not equate with worship as described in the Bible, and neither is it a substitute for [worship in a local church](#). Don't replace vertical, upward-directed praise and worship with horizontal fellowship relationships.

To churches in China: Please do not see returnees as a commodity to be consumed or leveraged. They are first of all sinners in need of grace, and only after that, returnees by grace. Christian returnees need the body of Christ (the church) to shepherd them more than the church

to your Christian identity. Hold your "returnee" status more lightly, which will help you to become a more devoted follower of Christ.

Finally, whether you are a pastor, a brother or sister in the local church, or a returnee, you must, to some degree, have experienced the pain of "returning to the land." Even though Jacob experienced a tangled and complicated life, the author of Hebrews commented on him, saying: "By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff" (Hebrews 11: 21). God did not define Jacob according to his guile, nor did he write an epitaph that pointed to his trials

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Editor's note: This article was originally written in Chinese and was translated by the editorial team.

Bill Hu (pseudonym) is a returnee pastor of a house church in one of China's largest cities. He did his theological training in the US and returned to China in 2020.



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Onesimus, Philemon, and Paul:

An Example of Returnee Ministry

BY JAMES R.

Ministry to people on the move is nothing new. Since people first started turning away from God, he has been working out his redemptive purposes in the lives of men and women as they move locations.

There are many examples throughout the Bible of people who encountered the Lord in their travels, such as Jacob and Naaman in the Old Testament, or the Ethiopian official in the New Testament.

THE LETTER TO PHILEMON

One example that is helpful as we consider Chinese returnee ministry is that of Onesimus. He is spoken about in the short letter to Philemon. Verse 1 of

Philemon tells us that this letter was written by Paul and Timothy, probably around AD 60 when Paul was imprisoned in Rome. It was written to a man called Philemon, who appears to host a church in his home at Colossae, a city in present-day Turkey. The fact that he had a household suggests that he was somewhat wealthy.

Verse 2 tells us that the letter is to be shared with others in the church, including Apphia and Archippus, who may be

Philemon's family members. Some of those mentioned later in verses 23–25 are also mentioned in the letter to the Colossians, which was probably written to the same church about the same time. In particular, both letters refer to Epaphras, who seems to have been sent out from the church in Colossae to support Paul.

Verse 10 reveals that Paul is writing this letter in order to advocate on behalf of Onesimus. Onesimus was a slave in Philemon's household who had run away from his master. It is unclear why he ran away. Like so many people traveling out from China today, it may have been a combination of *pull* factors (seeking better education and employment) and *push* factors (fleeing restriction and ill treatment). The mention of compensation in verse 18 suggests that Onesimus may have stolen money or goods when he ran away.

What is clear is that, while he is on the move, Onesimus comes to faith. He may have already heard some things about the Lord Jesus through the church that met in Philemon's house, but it is only when he goes on the road that he starts to own it for himself. Praise God that many Chinese people are also encountering Christ as they travel around the world today and are committing themselves to follow him.



Image: Miguel Bautista | Unsplash

would not have been an easy thing for him to do. Runaway slaves could expect severe punishment and even death if they were captured. Recognizing the challenges ahead, Paul writes this letter to prepare the way for Onesimus' return to Colossae.

linguistic and cultural challenges to be grappled with. Perhaps they came to faith through a second language and do not know how to relate to God or God's people in Chinese. It is also likely that the model of church they enjoyed overseas is very different from what will be available to them back in China. Thankfully there are those around the world who are also seeking to help prepare the way for their return.

So, in summary, we have a returnee who has come to faith on his travels (Onesimus). We have a church that will receive him back (Philemon). And we have a missionary who works to increase the likelihood of a successful re-integration (Paul).

LESSONS FOR RETURNEE MINISTRY

What can those of us who are involved in Chinese returnee ministry learn from this letter? In verses 3–7, Paul begins by

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Praise God that many Chinese people are also encountering Christ as they travel around the world today and are committing themselves to follow him.
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We do not know if it was Paul who shared the gospel with Onesimus, but it is clear that he is now helping Onesimus to grow in his new faith. Paul is encouraging Onesimus to go back to Colossae, which

Similarly, there are many reasons today why new Christians would not want to return to China. There is a strong possibility of persecution from their family, friends, and government. There are also many

affirming Philemon's love and partnership in the faith. A cynical interpretation might suggest that Paul is only using flattery to force Philemon into doing what he wants. What stops it from being manipulative is that Paul is appealing on the basis of a true relationship. He knows Philemon personally and is sincere in his words.

This highlights the importance of those involved in returnee ministry around the world maintaining deep and current relationships with the church in China. We do not want to force an outsider's agenda upon them, however well-intentioned, or to merely use them to further our own ministry purposes. Developing and maintaining true partnership will require the involvement of Chinese believers in our returnee ministry teams and leadership structures.

Paul does not send Onesimus back to take unilateral action or to violently overthrow the institution of slavery. Instead, he is more interested in changing the worldview of the church through changed relationships. In verses 8–16, the heart of Paul's appeal to Philemon's church is for them to see the new potential in Onesimus. He encourages them to change their perspective of Onesimus from useless to useful (verse 11) and from a slave to a brother (verse 16).

In our own advocacy for Chinese returnees, we want to help the church in China not to see them as a problem to be dealt with (coming back with strange foreign ideas and a sense of superiority). Instead, we need to cast a vision for ways in which they can strengthen and enrich the church. We need to talk about how

they may have become useful for the church, serving locally and as catalysts for evangelism and cross-cultural missions.

Paul has not only developed a close relationship with the church that Onesimus will go back to, but he also has a close relationship with Onesimus. Paul strongly identifies himself with Onesimus, referring to him as "his son" (verse 10) and "his very heart" (verse 12). In verses 17–22, he appeals to Philemon to treat Onesimus as if he were welcoming Paul himself. Additionally, Paul is willing to bear the financial cost on Onesimus' behalf (verse 18) and plans to visit to check up on how his transition has gone (verse 22).

Are we similarly invested in the Chinese returnees with whom we are journeying? Do we identify closely with them, or do we just see them casually at a weekly Bible study? Are we willing to go the extra mile for them, as Paul did for Onesimus? Do we continue to follow up with them after they have returned to China?

Paul's approach to returnee ministry follows the example of Christ. It is Jesus who identifies with us, who substitutes himself in our place, who intercedes on our behalf, and who will come again to follow up! Are we similarly modeling Jesus in our ministries to those who may one day return to China?

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Developing and maintaining true partnership will require the involvement of Chinese believers in our returnee ministry teams and leadership structures.
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Image: Miguel Bautista | Unsplash

CONCLUSION

Onesimus was called to be useful. What is our hope for Chinese returnees? Do we just desire for them to persevere in faith after their return, or are we working towards something greater? Onesimus went back to Colossae as a powerful agent of change, demonstrating the gospel's power to redeem and break down barriers. May those returning to China from around the world also be used powerfully for God's kingdom.

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The church in China is called to welcome back returnees today. May the church in China see the great potential in these people.
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Image: Jamie Street | Unsplash

Philemon was called to welcome Onesimus back. History does not record how he responded to Paul's letter, but it seems likely that there was a good outcome. Church tradition suggests that Onesimus went on to become a bishop in Byzantium or Ephesus. Similarly, the church in China is called to welcome back returnees today. May the church in China see the great potential in these people, rather than just regarding them as burdensome.

Paul was called to support Onesimus in his difficult transition. However, he did not need to do this alone. Timothy, Epaphras, and others were also working alongside him. May God also raise up teams of people around the world today, serving closely together to prepare and equip those returning to China. Sometimes, we may not feel able to offer much. We can take comfort from the fact that Paul was able to have a large impact on the life of Onesimus—and through him, in the church in Colossae—even while he was restricted in prison. May we similarly be used in all our weaknesses and limitations to have a meaningful impact on the lives of Chinese returnees, and through them, on the church in China. ²⁵⁴

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James R. (pseudonym) has been serving the East Asian church since 2006 and is currently the global field director for Returnee Focus. He is married with two daughters.

Back to the Fold:

Rediscovering Faith and Community for Chinese Returnees



Image: No-Te | Adobe Stock

BY VIVIAN

The following returnee testimony was written by a returnee whose name and some details have been changed to protect her identity. Her experiences bear testimony to some of the practical and spiritual challenges faced by returnees today.

NO MORE RUNNING AWAY

When I was young, I was raised by my

grandma, who was a Christian. She told me from a young age that a child of God has nothing to be afraid of, because Jesus is with us. I did not really understand and just thought my grandma had a powerful friend named “Jesus.” I never sincerely tried to know God. As I grew, faith didn’t mean anything to me. Yet every time I took a test, all I needed was to look to my grandma’s old friend to bless me with a good score. My life was a mess when I went to college, and it was then that I began to know the Lord through the campus fellowship. It was the Lord’s special mercy and blessing that he brought

me to England to study for two years, so that I could know and experience him more deeply.

I returned to China in the fall of 2015 and had a very difficult time adjusting. I had been in a loving, truth-filled fellowship in the UK, where the teaching of the church, the freedom of religion in society, and the power of the Word came so naturally to us that we took it for granted. We dreamed that we would be able to do great things for the Lord after graduation, but the deepest dreams of returnees are sometimes like a bubble being popped.

First comes a feeling of panic, not being able to adapt to the restricted environment and feeling uneasy in society. I thought about ways to escape. There must be an easier way. I considered applying to schools abroad again to continue my studies. However, in the process of preparing for interviews, looking for a job, and finding a place to live, I clearly saw God was leading me to stay. I was both excited and subconsciously nervous.

God's will. It was too easy for me to ask for his blessings, but to forget his great plan to save the world.

I was working for an international company where my coworkers pursued the so-called "American lifestyle": tattoos, bar hopping, messy sexual relationships, and pursuit of everything that made them look cool and sophisticated. I didn't fit in, but to be honest I didn't want to, and I didn't care. Yet, like a Pharisee, I judged my

for a late-night snack, I did not want to join them. I became quite a loner, but in my heart, I was not happy. Compared to campus life, the biggest challenge with working was that there was no way for me to take time off and rest. I felt that there was no way to do the things I wanted to do, and it felt like my whole person was bound up without any freedom. At my lowest point, I would often wake to thoughts of how I might justify taking a leave from my work. I was so excited when I came down with a cold or a fever, because I finally had a valid reason to take a day off. Whenever I met with other Christian brothers and sisters who had also returned from the UK, we would laugh together as we shared our stories about our various challenges as if there was no worse situation on earth.

Suddenly one day, I came to understand God's heart. I was thinking, "Lord, why do you let us go through all these things? We would have preferred not to have experienced all the good things we did overseas, so that life back home would not look so strange now." But God helped me to see that he knew the raggedness and filthiness of the world much better than I did. He sent his only son, Jesus, into the world in the likeness of a man and gave himself up for us, going to places where no one else wanted to go, healing the sick, ministering to prostitutes, and tax collectors, and fellowshiping with them. What mercy and kindness! I felt humbled before God. I had been so full of pride.

I considered applying to schools abroad again to continue my studies. However, in the process of preparing for interviews, looking for a job, and finding a place to live, I clearly saw God was leading me to stay. I was both excited and subconsciously nervous.

I was excited that the life lessons that I had learned in the UK seemed to have finally found a practice ground. As a Chinese proverb says, "You can tell if it's a mule or a horse by taking it for a walk," meaning, "your actions will reveal who you really are." On the one hand, I was excited that my faith could be tested in this way; but on the other hand, the more I was tested, the more I panicked. It was all too difficult. When I was with my colleagues at work, the faith that I had thought was sufficient to deal with life seemed to be merely theoretical, like a powerless and helpless little flower bud in a harsh environment. I was discouraged by too many things, including my circumstances and my failure to fulfill my own spiritual ambitions. I had to admit that I had become timid and scared. I felt so inadequate to face the challenges before me that I was blind to

colleagues by my moral standards. I avoided team-building events whenever I could. I went out alone for lunch, so I didn't have to hear their gossip, and when my coworkers went out after work

At my lowest point, I would often wake to thoughts of how I might justify taking a leave from my work. I was so excited when I came down with a cold or a fever, because I finally had a valid reason to take a day off.

I prayed every day, asking the Lord to arrange a work environment that would be beneficial to me. I thought that was the way God would bless me.

But now, my thinking had completely changed. I asked God to help me become a servant, a blessing to those around me, to experience not only the struggles and brokenness of loving people, but also the fullness and sweetness of walking with God. My circumstances didn't get better, but by leaning on God as I engaged with the world, I was no longer held back by my timidity. I attended company social events and listened carefully to my colleagues' discussions about topics they were concerned about. I learned how the world binds and blinds the hearts of people. I realized that it wasn't really my coworkers who were the problem, it was I who had isolated myself from them and hadn't even given myself a chance to know them. My self-righteousness and pride had been blocking God's ability to love people through me. Until then, I had thought I was willing to do the Lord's work out of love for him. If he called me to go to Africa, I was willing. But I never thought about why he hadn't taken me to Africa. Wasn't it his calling and his will that I be working in my current company? If a servant is not faithful in small things, his master will not give him bigger things to do.

God does not intend for us to stay isolated in the church, content to just relate to one another, judging others, and not having anything to do with the lost world. The biggest lesson I learned is that our holy God, who set us apart from the world, is

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I asked God to help me become a servant, a blessing to those around me, to experience not only the struggles and brokenness of loving people, but also the fullness and sweetness of walking with God.

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Image: Zinkevych | iStock

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God does not intend for us to stay isolated in the church, content to just relate to one another, judging others, and not having anything to do with the lost world.

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sending us into the world to influence the lost for him.

“The purpose of life is to glorify God with all of our days.” Is this just the stock answer that I grew up with or is it my deepest desire? A grape, no matter how perfect, cannot become a fine wine until it is pressed, crushed, and blended together with other grapes in the vat.

There will always be times when I struggle

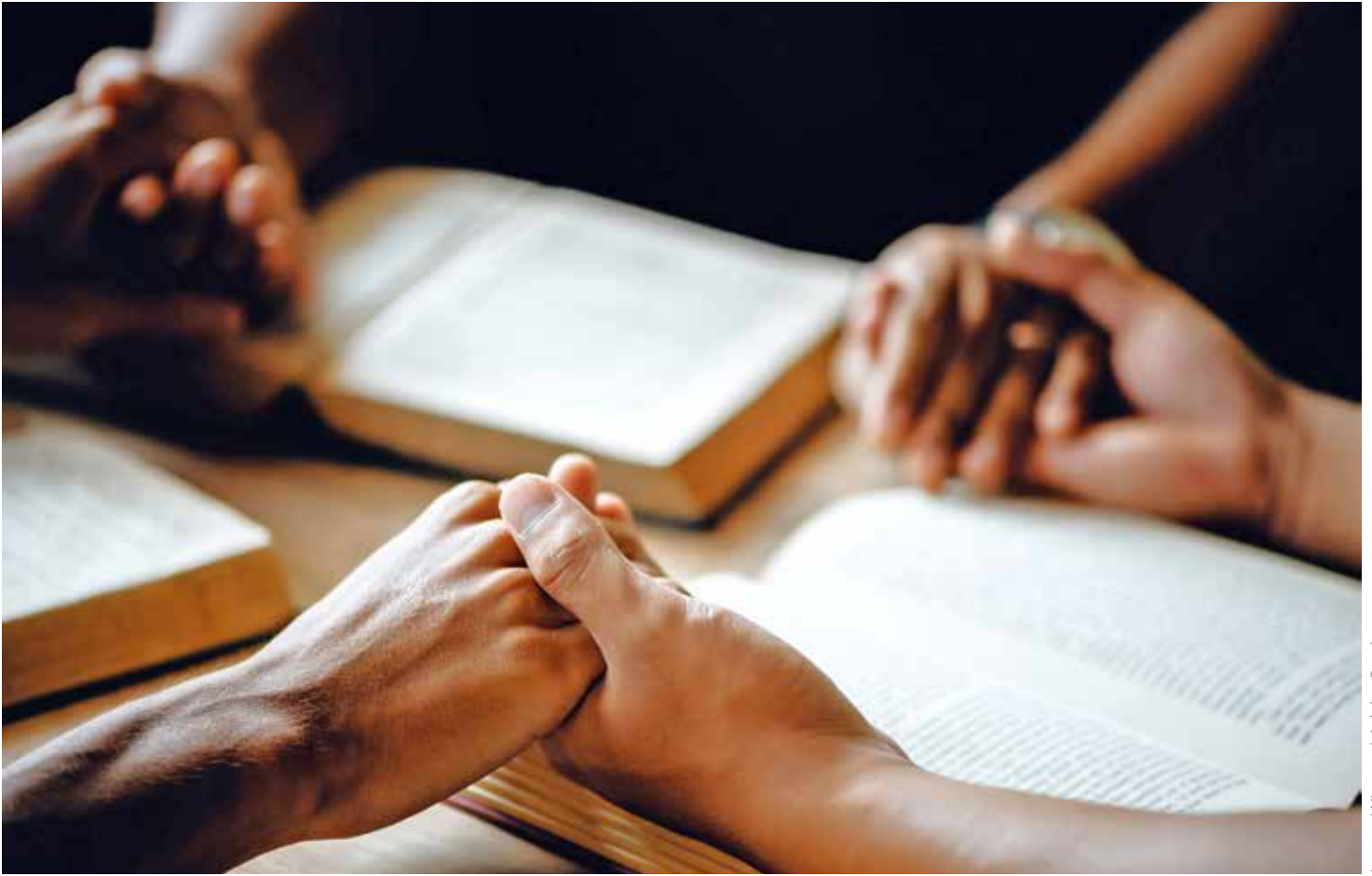


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In truth, it is always easier to run away than to face challenges, but fleeing from difficulties is not God’s will. I thank the Lord for protecting and keeping me in my work and in helping me find a church, and for giving me confidence and joy to rebuild my life.

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to learn and can’t hide, but I’m willing to ask the Lord to help me through every challenge. Like a medical student who should not be satisfied with simply conducting a skillful autopsy in a lab, when the purpose of his years of study is to serve the living. I know I am not able to do it on my own, but as I come to God, he

will fill me and grant me ability, confidence, and courage from his infinite and almighty power. In truth, it is always easier to run away than to face challenges, but fleeing from difficulties is not God’s will. I thank the Lord for protecting and keeping me in my work and in helping me find a church, and for giving me

confidence and joy to rebuild my life.

I would like to use my time now to further equip myself to no longer be afraid to live in the world, and to be the lamp on the lampstand, and to serve those among whom God places me (Matthew 5:13-16). ■

Editor’s note: This article was originally written in Chinese and was translated by the editorial team.

Vivian (pseudonym) was born into a Christian family, but did not really know God until after high school and college. She was baptized in her home church in 2011, studied in the UK in 2013, and returned to China in the fall of 2015.

Historical Returnees



Image: NG-Spacetime | Adobe Stock

Chinese Christian Returnees in Late Qing Dynasty and Early Republic: Contributions and Difficulties

BY SEAN CHENG AND STACEY BIELER

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eturnees who studied and worked overseas before returning to China have a long history. Since 1854, when the first overseas student Yung Wing¹ (Rong Hong, 容闳, Yale University, 1854) returned home after completing his studies in the US, returnees have left deep impressions upon China.



Image: Fred Hsu - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0

Yung Wing (Rong Hong, 容闳)

The first generation of Chinese returnees was the young students who came to the US through the state-sponsored Chinese Educational Mission (1872–1881), as well as a few students who were sponsored by their families or churches before 1900; the second generation was the large number of students in the US who were sponsored by the Boxer Indemnity beginning in 1909 and those who studied in Europe and Japan from 1900 to 1927.² A considerable percentage of the Chinese who studied in the US were graduates of Christian colleges in China, and perhaps around one-third of them had some connection with Christianity during their time in America, primarily through the Chinese Students Christian Association (CSCA) or the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA)/ Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), but only a minority of this group were baptized and practicing Christians.

“

A considerable percentage of the Chinese who studied in the US were graduates of Christian colleges in China, and perhaps around one-third of them had some connection with Christianity during their time in America.

”

Focusing on several well-known Christians from these two generations as examples, this article will briefly review the contributions of these historical returnee Christians to China in various social and cultural fields as well as in evangelism and mission. It will also discuss the social, cultural, and political difficulties they faced and some of their responses to these challenges. It is hoped that such a review will help today's Chinese returnee Christians and Christian workers in returnee ministry gain insights about their callings and strategies.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF CHINESE RETURNEE CHRISTIANS

The first generation of Christian returnees made contributions mostly in the field of engineering. Zhan Tianyou (Tien-yow Jeme, 詹天佑, Yale University, 1881) was the first Chinese engineer who led a team of Chinese to build a railroad. Zhan was in the first group of thirty young children sent by the Qing dynasty government to study abroad in 1872. His host family, L. H. and Martha Northrop, not only gave him attentive care but also led him to convert. From 1905 to 1909, Zhan served as the chief engineer and general manager of the Jing-Zhang Railway, which was an important achievement in the history of modern Chinese engineering.³ Though Zhan's remarkable professional achievements are known, his Christian identity is less well known.



Image: Wikipedia

Zhan Tianyou (Tien-yow Jeme, 詹天佑)

For Shi Meiyu (Mary Stone, 石美玉, University of Michigan, 1896), a female medical missionary, healing the sick and



Image: Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity

Shi Meiyu (Mary Stone, 石美玉)

saving lives was inextricably linked to evangelism and missions. Shi returned to China in 1896 under the auspices of the Women's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church. During her 20 years of medical practice in Jiujiang, Shi trained more than 500 nurses and led them in Bible studies. In 1920, Shi and American missionary Jennie V. Hughes founded the Bethel Mission and in 1930, Ji Zhiwen (Andrew Gih, 计志文) took the mission further and initiated the Bethel Worldwide Evangelistic Band, which led great spiritual revivals in 13 provinces of China and Southeast Asia.⁴

In that era, many Chinese intellectuals paid special attention to education to save the country from perishing and to promote the transformation of China into a modernized country. Yan Yangchu (Y. C. James "Jimmy" Yen, 晏阳初; Yale University, 1918; Princeton University, 1921) initiated the national mass education movement in 1922 and formed the Chinese National Association of Mass Education Movements (MEM) in 1923. The MEM established a model of rural reconstruction (education, agriculture, medicine, and so on) in North China. In the 1930s, the Nationalist government promoted Yan's experience of rural reconstruction nationwide. In his later years, Yan looked back on his life and said that his spiritual inspirations came from the "three Cs"—Christ, Confucius, and coolies.⁵



Yan Yangchu (Y. C. James "Jimmy" Yen, 晏阳初)

“ In his later years, Yan looked back on his life and said that his spiritual inspirations came from the “three Cs”—Christ, Confucius, and coolies. ”

Engineering major Mei Yiqi (Yi-chi Mei, 梅贻琦; Worcester Polytechnic Institute, 1914; University of Chicago, 1922) is the “forever president” of Tsinghua University in the minds of its alumni. Mei began teaching at the Tsinghua School in 1915 and he often led Bible studies on campus. In 1931, Mei was appointed as the president of Tsinghua University. During his 17 years as the president of Tsinghua, Mei advocated for professorial governance and freedom of thought, which made Tsinghua's academic reputation rise rapidly. Because of the Japanese invasion, in 1938, Peking University, Tsinghua University, and Nankai University moved to Kunming, Yunnan, and formed the National Southwest Associated Universities (NSWAU). Mei served as the president of the NSWAU, leading a group of outstanding academics that greatly influenced China's higher education.⁶



Mei Yiqi (Yi-chi Mei, 梅贻琦)

Liu Tingfang (Timothy Ting Fang Lew, 刘廷芳; Columbia University, 1915 and 1920; Yale Divinity School, 1918) was a talented scholar in liberal arts. After finishing study in the US and returning to China, Liu was an assistant to the chancellor at Yanjing (Yenching) University and dean of its School of Religion. Liu edited the Christian magazine *Life* (which later became *Truth and Life*) and responded to the New Culture Movement. He also edited the Christian literature and art magazine *Amethyst*. He is best known for leading and editing *Hymns of Universal Praise*.⁷



Liu Tingfang (Timothy Ting Fang Lew, 刘廷芳)

After Song Shangjie (John Sung, 宋尚节, Ohio State University, 1926) completed his PhD in chemistry, he entered Union Theological Seminary, which taught liberal theology, and he had a crisis of faith. But he experienced a renewal of his spiritual life in February 1927 and began to witness to his seminary professors and classmates.

Image: Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity



Song Shangjie (John Sung, 宋尚节)

The seminary leaders thought he had a mental illness and committed him to a mental hospital, where he stayed for 193 days, during which time he read through the Bible multiple times. After his release from the hospital in November 1927, Song immediately returned to China. From 1927 to 1930, Song preached in revival meetings in towns and cities along the coast of his native Fujian Province. In the 1930s, Song traveled throughout Southeast Asia to evangelize diaspora Chinese there. Song “preached multiple sermons each day to huge gatherings of people while often experiencing intense pain from intestinal tuberculosis.”⁸

DIFFICULTIES FACED BY CHINESE RETURNEE CHRISTIANS

From 1916 to 1937, China was not an easy country to return to politically. With Yuan Shikai’s death in 1916, the Chinese Republican government fell apart, and warlords in various parts of the country vied for power. After the Chinese Communist Party was founded in 1921, members caused disruption in urban areas. They had a different goal for the future of China than the liberal-minded returnees.

The Anti-Christian Movement in the 1920s was part of a growing reaction to imperialism. Socialists and Communists protested against a conference of the World Student Christian Federation in China being held at the Tsinghua campus in Beijing in 1922. The Restore Educational Rights Movement in 1924 demanded that the Christian colleges in China cease to make religious instruction compulsory and appoint Chinese presidents. Strikes and boycotts followed the May Thirtieth Movement after Shanghai police opened fire on Chinese protesters in 1925. Finally, during the Nanking Incident of 1927, church property was damaged, and six Westerners (including a Christian missionary) were killed, resulting in one third of the missionaries leaving China.⁹ The Japanese annexation of three

provinces in northeast China (Manchuria) in 1931 caused greater turmoil. Students marched in protest. Tsinghua President Mei Yiqi tried to quiet the campus by arguing that studying was a good response. Later, he knew the invasion was coming so he boxed up the university’s library and shipped it south to Changsha. Wang Liming (王立明, Northwestern University, 1920),¹⁰ the leader of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) in China and her husband Liu Zhan’en¹¹ were active in leading resistance against the Japanese in Shanghai.



Wang Liming (王立明)

When the Japanese invaded northern China in 1937, Yan Yangchu’s work in the countryside was disrupted. After the Japanese Army took Shanghai, Liu Zhan’en was assassinated in 1938, so Wang Liming and their three children fled to the wartime capital of Chongqing. Other Christian returnees left their children with mothers, aunts, or uncles as they moved to central and southern China. After Pearl Harbor in December 1941, campuses with connections to the US were taken over by the Japanese Army. Zhou Xuezhong (Henry Chou, 周学章, Columbia University, 1923), a professor at Yanjing University in Beijing, the largest Christian college in China, was jailed by the Japanese military with other Yanjing teachers. He died before the war finished.¹²

“

In the 1930s, Song traveled throughout Southeast Asia to evangelize diaspora Chinese there. Song “preached multiple sermons each day to huge gatherings of people while often experiencing intense pain from intestinal tuberculosis.

”

After the war ended, the Chinese Civil War began again. As the Chinese Christian returnees saw that Mao and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) were going to win in 1949, they had to choose whether to stay on the mainland, go to Taiwan with Chiang Kai-shek and the Nationalist Party, or migrate to the US. Those who stayed in China had difficult years once China entered the Korean War because of their connections with the enemy, the US. Their Christianity was one more liability in the early 1950s since Mao wanted to bring all the churches under the leadership of the Party.

The returnees were a very small percentage of the Chinese population, but they had great effect because of the roles that they played in education and other fields. They multiplied their influence by working together informally and formally through organizations (e.g., quite a number of them worked with the YMCA), writing articles in journals, joining clubs and attending conferences, participating in university reunions, and hiring returned students as professors in universities. These networks of friendships had the common goal of implementing social change. They also were pioneers in new professions, including journalism, law, and medicine, among others.

began in 1919, many hoped that “Mr. Sai” (science) and “Mr. De” (democracy) would renew Chinese culture. Chinese Christians hoped for a deeper change—to see their countrymen have new life and new hearts of service through following Jesus.

As the power of the CCP increased, China’s political future was openly and fiercely contested. Though the returned students considered themselves as patriots, their competitors, who wanted political and educational power, often labeled them as traitors who were denationalized and enslaved to foreign interests. These accusations were more powerful in the larger setting of growing resentment towards Western and Japanese imperialism.¹³

The upheaval and dangers caused by the warlords and wars led some liberals to despair, and their groups dissolved due to internal disagreements and external pressures. However, Chinese Christians continued to work optimistically to improve the lives of the urban and rural poor as well as devote their lives to the next generation of scholars. The Christian returnees’ goal of gradual change was at odds with both the traditionalists and the Communists’ goal of revolution. During the war, all had to

IMPLICATIONS FOR TODAY’S RETURNEES

There are significant differences and similarities between the China that these historical Chinese Christian returnees went back to and the nation that returning Chinese Christians live in today. On the one hand, China is no longer “the sick man of East Asia.” The nation has become powerful and wealthy, and it is now competing with the US in science and technology. Chinese youth are proud of the high-speed railway and many other economic achievements that the country has made over the past 40 years. China has not been at war for decades.

On the other hand, the China–US relationship has deteriorated in the last decade, and nationalism has risen again, encouraged by the CCP. Anti-Western and especially anti-American rhetoric has become popular, in contrast with 40 years ago when China was opening her doors to the world. Animosity towards Christianity has come back. Christianity is still viewed as “a tool of Western cultural invasion.” Domestic Chinese churches are experiencing real persecution. “Rumors of war” with Taiwan have sharply risen. After the COVID-19 epidemic, the world has seen a new wave of immigration of the “path-runners” who have chosen to leave China by dangerous means.¹⁴

Today’s returnees are experiencing many challenges and difficulties in terms of the political environment similar to what the first two generations of returnees faced. But current Christian returnees are still making contributions in the growth of the church and mission in China. Dozens of *shen gui* (神归, “seminarian returnees”) have returned to China after completing theological education abroad to plant and pastor house churches in Chinese cities. Often the churches pastored and led by these *shen gui* also have more returnee Christians in their congregations, who likely feel more comfortable worshiping and serving in such churches.

Most of today’s Christian returnees are

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The returnees were a very small percentage of the Chinese population, but they had great effect because of the roles that they played in education and other fields. They multiplied their influence by working together informally and formally.

Many Chinese students went to study in the US in order to help modernize their country through science and technology. During the May Fourth Movement that


pull together for the immediate goal of saving China. At the end of the war, those differences came to the fore once again and led to conflict.

professionals in the fields of science and technology, the humanities, medicine, law, and education. Many of them were visiting scholars instead of students while overseas. Though they were involved in “religious activities” while abroad, many do not openly admit that they are believers. A lot of modern Christian returnees strive to follow Christ by excelling in their professions and careers while being low-key about their Christian faith. They desire to purposefully use their influence to promote Christian values in their professional endeavors.

Although today’s Christian returnees may not be able to make contributions as groundbreaking as their historical counterparts did, they can be salt and light in China as were the Christian returnees in the early decades of the twentieth century. China does not allow professional missionaries, but returnee Christians who are “marketplace missionaries” can serve the church by leading Bible studies or worship, teaching Sunday schools, engaging in (low-profile, private) personal evangelism, and going on short-term mission trips.

“
It is important for returnee Christians to ask God for wisdom as they follow Peter’s admonition to early Christians who were struggling: “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.”
”

When returnees first arrive back in China, most will experience reverse culture shock. They will fit back into their culture more easily by growing in humility. By learning to let their light shine through life and work (Matthew 5:16), they can influence their neighbors and bring change to their

communities. It is important for returnee Christians to ask God for wisdom as they follow Peter’s admonition to early Christians who were struggling: “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace” (1 Peter 4:10). 

¹ In this name and all subsequent Chinese names, we follow the Chinese custom of listing the family name first.

² *Returnee Handbook*, 1st bilingual version (Overseas Campus and Reframe Ministries, 2024).

³ “Zhan Tianyou: Railroad Engineer, Warm Gentleman, Doctor of Law, Returnee from the US (原来詹天佑除了会修铁路，还是暖男、法学博士、留美幼童……),” *Spread the Gospel* website, April 27, 2020, accessed November 4, 2024, <https://posts.careerengine.us/p/5ea6d0481bd5066d225c6fd6>.

⁴ Yading Li, “Stone, Mary,” *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity (BDCC)*, accessed November 4, 2024, <https://www.bdconline.net/en/stories/stone-mary>.

⁵ Stacey Bieler, “Yan Yangchu,” *BDCC*, accessed November 4, 2024, <https://www.bdconline.net/en/stories/yan-yangchu>.

⁶ Stacey Bieler, “Mei Yiqi,” *BDCC*, accessed November 4, 2024, <https://www.bdconline.net/en/stories/mei-yiqi>.

⁷ John Barwick, “Liu Tingfang,” *BDCC*, accessed November 4, 2024, <https://www.bdconline.net/en/stories/liu-tingfang>.

⁸ Andy Pearce, “John Song: A Fruitful Returnee,” *ChinaSource*, October 25, 2021, accessed November 4, 2024, <https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/blog-entries/john-song-a-fruitful-returnee/>.

⁹ Stacey Bieler, “Patriots” or “Traitors”? *A History of American Educated Chinese Students* (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2003).

¹⁰ John Barwick, “Wang Liming,” *BDCC*, accessed November 4, 2024, <https://www.bdconline.net/en/stories/wang-liming>.

¹¹ China Group, “Liu Zhan’en,” *BDCC*, accessed November 4, 2024, <https://www.bdconline.net/en/stories/liu-zhanen>.

¹² Stacey Bieler, “Zhou Xuezhong,” *BDCC*, accessed November 4, 2024, <https://www.bdconline.net/en/stories/zhou-xiezhong>.

¹³ See note 8.

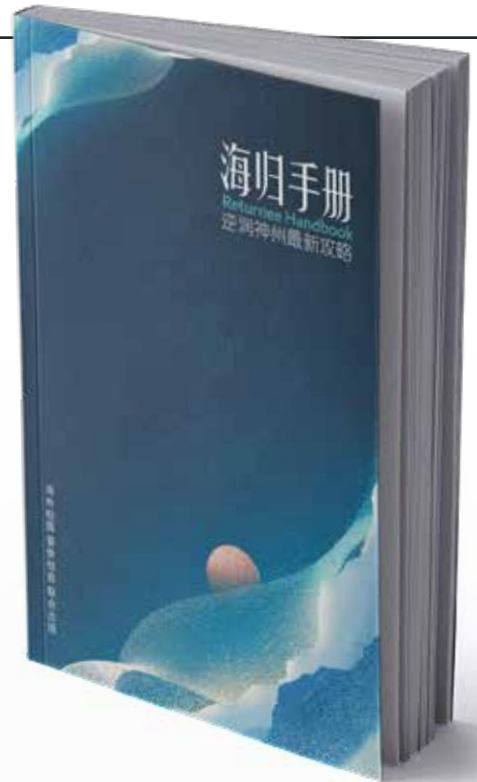
¹⁴ Sean Cheng, “The ‘Route Runners’ Are Coming to America. Are Chinese Churches Ready?,” *Christianity Today* online, May 3, 2023, accessed November 4, 2024, <https://zh.christianitytoday.com/2023/05/fleeing-china-immigration-chinese-church-mission>.

Sean Cheng is a Chinese diaspora missionary in action, experienced Chinese Christian media editor, and veteran digital evangelist. He served as Asia Editor of *Christianity Today* (2022–24) and Director of Evangelism for Overseas Campus Ministries (2011–19) and manages the personal evangelistic webpage [Jidian’s Links](https://www.jidianlinks.com).

Stacey Bieler is the author of “Patriots” or “Traitors”? *A History of American-Educated Chinese Students*, which focuses on the 1900–1930 generation of Chinese students in the US. She has enjoyed friendships with Chinese students and scholars since 1982. Her blog is at <https://www.staceybielerbooks.com/>.

Preparing Returnees to Go Home Well: A Review of the *Returnee Handbook* for Chinese Christians

BY LISA ESPINELI CHINN



When I asked international student ministry colleagues what they did for international students returning to their home countries, they gave me three answers: we give them a goodbye party; we present them with gifts; and we pray for them. Great responses, but inadequate.

That was 42 years ago!

But look what we have now. The fourth edition of the *Returnee Handbook for Chinese Christians*, in Chinese and English! Once you read and use this resource, you will understand why there is more to re-entry than the three answers I received.

Back then we were thoughtful, generous, and trusting God for the welfare and future of our returning international students. Today we continue to be thoughtful and generous and exercise faith in God to take care of our returnees. But our thoughtfulness has led us to serve them

better with more practical resources in their hands, like this handbook. It is filled with scriptural, historical, cultural insights, current data and services, a list of other resources, and thoughtful reflection questions designed for a culture-specific context. Now we have a variety of reentry resources for different countries, including adaptations or translations of *Think Home: Reentry Guide for Christian International Students Returning Home*, available from InterVarsity/ISM in the US, and in the UK, Germany, New Zealand, Japan, and Europe through International Fellowship of Evangelical Students.¹

Providing reentry resources for our international students and those who minister among them excites me. This handbook is a needed addition to the growing body of reentry literature. Forty-two years ago, I wrote notes on a cafeteria napkin after my colleagues gave me their three responses mentioned above. I had returned to the dining room of the conference center with my active toddler in my arms and a mind racing with reentry questions and ideas. The result was *Think Home*, a reentry workbook with over 300 questions. It was initially published by International Students Inc. to help future

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Our thoughtfulness has led us to serve them better with more practical resources in their hands.
”

Christian returnees prepare for their return home. It was a watershed publication that helped catapult the awareness for reentry preparation in the international student ministry world.

In the past it has been difficult to obtain data on how many Chinese students return to China. But as this handbook points out, through the latest data from the Ministry of Education of China, the number of returned Chinese students consistently exceeded the number of Chinese overseas students, from 2020–2023. Previously, from 2008–2019, the number of overseas Chinese students outnumbered those who returned.²

According to this handbook,

More than seven million have returned to China over the past 40 years. There are no accurate statistics on how many Chinese students and scholars made decisions for Christ and how many returned to China as Christians. However, if we take a conservative estimate of 5% returning as Christians, tens of thousands return to China every year as Christians. We estimate that at least 350,000 Christians may have returned to China in the past 40 years!

This number is staggering. But this handbook also acknowledges the sobering reality of a high number of Chinese Christians returning to China who did not continue in their faith and reports that the estimate of evangelical and missionary organizations is that 80% or even 90% of Chinese Christian returnees have fallen away from the faith. Is it possible that one of the factors contributing to this trend has been insufficient or lack of reentry preparation? I believe it is.

We have a responsibility to provide our returning Chinese Christians with a full service that includes a more comprehensive reentry transition resource or publication. We know that our love for God, for his kingdom in China, and for returning Chinese Christians demands that we equip our returnees with all that they need to remain faithful to Jesus.

Overseas campus ministries have taken this responsibility to heart in the publication of the *Returnee Handbook*.

Any reader will appreciate the handbook's two-prong approach of addressing what to prepare for (pre-departure) and what adjustments would look like after returning to China (post-return). Returning Chinese Christians will also value the practical suggestions on how to relate with the house church and the Three-Self Church in China. And who would not like to hear stories of actual returnees that embody the challenges and victories of the reentry transition? Those stories are in this handbook too.

What is also notable in this edition are the critical chapters devoted to how both churches in China and overseas can help in the ministry to returnees. This publication reports about the Returnee Care Network (RCN), a network of overseas churches devoted to assisting in returnee care and support. This group is a testament to the ongoing commitment to the strategic role Chinese Christian returnees have in the life and future of the church in China and the need to provide them with all the necessary support to thrive as God's ambassadors back home. It does *take a village* to have a robust reentry service. The more people and resources we can enlist to join in this endeavor, the better

we can serve our returnees. Is there anything missing in this handbook? A chapter devoted to the subject of suffering would enhance the relevance of this resource. What does the Bible say about it? How does one respond to persecution and suffering? How does God use suffering in a person's life? What does Peter say about the normalcy of suffering in a Christian's life?

International student ministry workers globally are better equipped by having this resource at their disposal.

Returnees still appreciate a goodbye party. Prayers for them are indispensable. For a gift, I recommend offering this handbook, in whatever format is applicable. It is a present they can use for themselves or share and work on with others on a similar journey. They will forever thank you for it. 🙏

ORDER A COPY



Returnee Handbook

A joint project of Overseas Campus and ReFrame Ministries, available at:

↘ **ReFrame Ministries**
reframeministries.org/
books/returnee-
handbook



¹ Lisa Espineli Chinn, *Thinking Home: A Reentry Guide for Christian International Students* (Lisle, IL: Intervarsity/ISM, 2011). Available at: <https://store.intervarsity.org/think-home-a-reentry-guide-for-christian-international-students/>.

² Plotted using data from "2023 Survey Report on Returnees Employment" (2023 中国海归就业调查报告, 2024年3月26日), *Human Resources and Social Security Information Network*, <https://www.hrssit.cn/info/3208.html>, March 27, 2024, accessed December 3, 2024.

Lisa Espineli Chinn is the Former National Director of International Student Ministry for InterVarsity/USA and author of multiple international student reentry publications, including *Think Home: A Reentry Guide for Christian International Students*.

Resource Corner

A Reading Roundup for Returnees

BY CHINASOURCE TEAM



Image: tuiphotoengineer | Adobe Stock

We hope that the books on this list will be of help to returnees, to international student ministries, and to churches in China and beyond who minister to this group of believers. May the Lord bless the students and their mentors wherever he leads them!



RETURNEE HANDBOOK / 海归手册

A joint project of Overseas Campus Ministries and ReFrame Ministries
(2024)

This handbook is aimed at Chinese returnee Christians, especially returnees-to-be—those who have decided on or are considering a return to China. Our purpose is to help them prepare and equip themselves before their return, to provide them with resources related to issues they need to consider as they return, and to encourage them to bring the gospel back to their home country with a sense of calling from God.

➤ Available from the [ReFrame Ministries website](#).



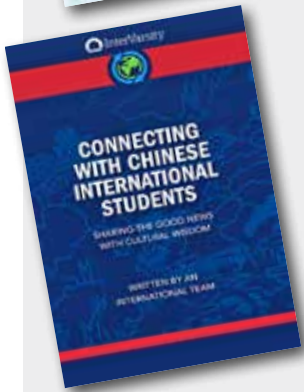
THINK HOME: A REENTRY GUIDE FOR CHRISTIAN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Written by Lisa Espineli Chinn

Published by Intervarsity/ISM (2014)

This popular workbook by Lisa Espineli Chinn helps Christian international students think through the challenges they will face upon returning home. It includes thought-provoking questions, exercises, Bible studies, comments from past returnees, reentry teaching, and a list of additional resources.

↘ Available at the [InterVarsity Store](#).



CONNECTING WITH CHINESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS: SHARING THE GOOD NEWS WITH CULTURAL WISDOM

Written by an international team

Published by Intervarsity (2021)

This booklet (published in 2021) will help you start and grow friendships with university students from mainland China, understand major cultural influences like Confucianism and honor-shame, share Jesus in ways that make sense, and equip them for lifelong discipleship as they return to China or work overseas.

↘ Available at the [InterVarsity Store](#).

↘ [Check out our review](#) from 2021.



HEADING HOME WITH JESUS

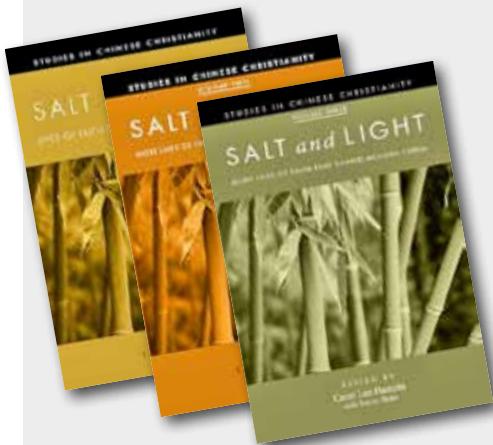
Written by Debbie D. Philip

Published by William Carey Library (2018)

Thousands of Chinese students visit our churches and join Christian activities. Many even say they have become Christians while abroad. Some go on to make great contributions to Chinese church and society. Sadly, however, many fall away after they return to China. Debbie Philip has visited hundreds of returnees. She offers a new perspective for understanding what happens when Chinese students encounter Christians abroad and what needs to happen if they are to continue following Christ after returning home.

↘ Available in both e-book and paperback formats from [William Carey Publishing](#) and [Amazon](#).

↘ [Check out our review](#) from 2019.



SALT AND LIGHT

Three volumes edited by Carol Lee Hamrin with Stacey Beiler

Published by Pickwick Publications (2009)

Salt and Light presents the life stories of outstanding Chinese Christians who, as early modernizers, promoted China's nation building and moral progress in the early twentieth century. Lively anecdotes and photographs highlight the strong character of pioneers in the modern professions of education, medicine, journalism, and diplomacy. These professionals were motivated by faith to build up China's civil society.

↘ Available from Wipf and Stock: [Volume 1](#), [Volume 2](#), and [Volume 3](#)

↘ Available from Amazon: [Volume 1](#), [Volume 2](#), and [Volume 3](#)

↘ [Check out our review](#) of all three volumes from 2011.



Image: MIA Studio | Adobe Stock

Returning from a Sojourn

BY JOANN PITTMAN

I love the word sojourn, which the [Oxford English Dictionary](#) defines as “to make a temporary stay in a place; to reside for a time.” Maybe that’s because I have spent a good part of my life as a sojourner, one residing in a place for a time. During my childhood I lived in Pakistan. Every few years my family would return “home” to the US for a leave. It may have been going “home” for my parents, but it certainly wasn’t for my sister and me. At the end of each sojourn in the US, we couldn’t wait to return to our home in Pakistan. I have also been a sojourner most of my adult life, having worked in China for most of the years between 1984 and 2012. When I headed there in 1984, my plan was for a one-year sojourn.

Obviously, God had other plans for me. My sojourn in China ended when I joined the ranks of returnees by moving back to the US.

A returnee is someone who returns to their home location after a sojourn somewhere else. Because sojourn refers to a temporary stay in another place, we

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Having been on a sojourn implies having been in a place long enough to learn something about the new location, and perhaps even to absorb some of the values of a place.
”

don't use the term returnee to talk about a tourist, someone who returns home after a holiday. Having been on a sojourn implies having been in a place long enough to learn something about the new location, and perhaps even to absorb some of the values of a place. A sojourn abroad almost always changes people in some way. Maybe they learn new ways of eating or speaking. Maybe they learn new ways of thinking. As we have seen from the articles in this issue, many Chinese people encounter Christ during their time as sojourners.

The Bible is also filled with stories of sojourners and returnees. In the ESV, the word "sojourn" is used 122 times, and the word "sojourners" is used 67 times, a fact that prompts me to sing the old gospel tune, "This world is not my home; I'm just a-passing through...."

This is the perspective I brought to my reading of this issue of the *Quarterly*, realizing that the stories of returnees are really the stories of sojourners. And since all who follow Christ are sojourners, how might we be challenged and encouraged by these stories?

What follows are a few key observations that I had:

1. The numbers are interesting and tell a story of opportunity. There are approximately 1 million Chinese studying abroad, with close to 300,000 of those in the US alone. Sean Cheng notes that the returnee rate is now approximately 700,000 per year. This means that 80 percent of Chinese students and scholars are now returning to China. This is in contrast to 5 percent in 1987 and 20 percent in 2007. If even 5 percent of returnees are believers, that means there are possibly 10,000 Christian returnees each year. If that's not a ministry opportunity I don't know what is!
2. The past four years have seen significant changes in the landscape

of returnee ministry. These have been brought about by several years of harsh pandemic restrictions as well as rising international tensions, particularly between China and the US. During the pandemic, the number of students arriving in the US drastically declined, leaving many international and Chinese student ministries wondering what the future would hold. While the numbers have rebounded, many ministries report a decrease in student engagement with church or campus outreach activities. Furthermore, the ever-tightening political environment and crackdowns on civil society and religious practice mean that returnees must contend with more intense scrutiny than before. Leaving behind a Western political environment that may view them with suspicion, they also face suspicion at home of being spies for the West. It is harder to find and connect with good churches, and societal pressures remain tough. Support during this increasingly challenging transition is both more important, yet more difficult than ever before.

3. There are lessons to be learned from the Biblical stories of Jacob and Onesimus (the runaway slave of Philemon) about returning from a sojourn. Jacob struggled with his identity as a sojourner since he was fleeing his brother. But God was using the sojourn to fulfill the Abrahamic Covenant. Despite a life of loneliness and toil, he set his hope on the promise of God for future blessing. He lived by faith, both while he was away and when he returned home. In Paul's letter to Philemon, we read Paul's admonition for Philemon and his church to receive this young believer Onesimus upon his return. In this story we see that there is a church to receive him back and a missionary who helped

prepare him for a successful re-integration. Returnees need to be disciplined to put their hope in God, not in their identities as either Christians or returnees, and churches in China must be called and prepared to receive them.

4. While we tend to think that the era of students and scholars from China studying abroad is a recent development that started with the opening and reform policy of Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s, it actually has a long history, dating back to the 1880s. Learning about these early returnees and their contributions to the development of Chinese society offers us important insights as we disciple returnees.

Recently, I listened to a talk by a well-known American "China hawk" about the current state of play in the relationship between the US and China. It was not an upbeat talk. During his presentation, he referenced the hundreds of thousands of Chinese students in the US. Coming from a military and national security background, he was only able to perceive these students as current or potential future spies. Further, he suggested that attempts at positive engagement with these students were an exercise in futility. It was an incredibly disheartening talk and the opposite of how Christ calls his followers to both perceive and treat those who are sojourners in our land.

May we as Christians, no matter our nationality or political leanings, never perceive Chinese students and immigrants in our midst this way. May we welcome them, love them, tell them about Jesus, and disciple those who believe. May we prepare them well to return and may the churches in China prepare well to receive them. 📖

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