

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY IN ENGLISH

MAINLAND CHINESE STUDENTS AND IMMIGRANTS IN IRELAND AND THEIR ENGAGEMENT WITH CHRISTIANITY, CHURCHES AND IRISH SOCIETY

Our study examines encounters of the mainland Chinese with Irish society. Given that Ireland may be described as a Christian society where the Churches have a role in the integration of immigrants, the study is particularly concerned with the engagement of Chinese immigrants with Christianity and the Churches. The study was commissioned jointly by the Dublin University Far Eastern Mission at Trinity College, Dublin and the China Educational and Cultural Liaison Committee. Our research is partly based on a questionnaire distributed to 264 Chinese students, 229 of whom were attending two English language schools in Dublin. The research is supplemented by 42 face to face interviews with Chinese students, academic staff, businessmen, workers, housewives, church members, pastors, community leaders and others. The survey and interviews were conducted in Chinese in 2006.

The Chinese have become one of the largest minority ethnic communities in Ireland as a result of immigration since the 1990s. The largest component of the Chinese community is believed to be students from mainland China, especially students at language schools. Three quarters of the language school students in our survey are aged between 23 and 27, over half are male, nine out of ten are single as is the proportion from urban China. Compared to their peers in China or indeed in Ireland these language school students are highly educated – almost half have primary degrees from China and the other half are educated to High School level. They have been in Ireland on average for 3.2 years. The vast majority is working, and they work in the non-Chinese sector of employment. Over four fifths live with only Chinese housemates.

A quarter of all language and university students claimed that they believed in religion and over half of these self-identifying believers said that they believed in Buddhism. Four in ten described themselves as Christian. However, these Christians amount to no more than one in ten of all respondents. One of the ways in which Chinese students may engage with Christianity is through their experiences of evangelism by Christians. We found that a surprisingly high proportion of three quarters of students had received Christian literature, mostly in the Chinese language. About half of respondents had ever been invited to church. About three in ten of the invitations to attend church were taken up. However, most Chinese couldn't say whether it was a Catholic or Protestant church! The non-Christians who ever attended at a church highlighted the social and cultural rather than the religious experience of visiting a church. For most Chinese attendance at church appears to be a once only experience.

For Chinese who are attending church but who may not be Christian their interest in Christianity was often related to their personal experience in meeting church people and leaders and receiving either spiritual or practical help. However, given the high level of distribution of religious material and the relatively high level of visits to a church on at least one occasion, there is apparently a rather small numerical result in terms of the number of regular church-attending or baptized Chinese in Ireland. Overall, our survey results suggest widespread indifference by the mainland Chinese to institutional religion

in general. About a half of the respondents appeared to be uninterested in Christianity, a small minority is actively interested and a larger minority showed some interest or engagement with Christianity.

Our survey inquiry recognized that Chinese may be less likely than Westerners to self-identify as believers in religions for reasons connected with their different understanding of the meaning of 'believe in religion'. Nevertheless, the relatively small number of Chinese religious believers in general, and Chinese Christians in particular, may also reflect Chinese realism, which drawing on deep-rooted Chinese traditional culture, particularly Confucianism, emphasises practical benefits of prayers and blessings.

A theme to emerge from our research is that for most of mainland Chinese in Ireland religion does not appear at present to be an important area of their lives in Ireland. They are much more concerned with the many difficulties in their lives in Ireland. A majority of our survey respondents and interviewees were or had been concerned about their immigration status, felt a lack of knowledge about the legal system and struggled with an English language barrier. Over two fifths of the survey respondents and a majority of the interviewees were concerned or had a concern with racism and racial discrimination. We argue that it is in this context that their engagement with Christianity and with the Churches in Ireland needs to be understood.

There is some interest by the mainland Chinese in our study in the potential for the local Irish Churches to provide an introduction to Irish and Western culture and thereby improve the interaction between the Chinese and the local Irish community. Above all, Chinese were interested in practical help which might be provided by the Churches. By practical help we are referring to advice services (through the medium of Chinese) about jobs, legal and visa matters, advice on the health system, translation services. The local Irish and ethnic Chinese Churches in Ireland may feel that providing practical help to the Chinese is not their role, but we note that the Chinese, mainly because of language, may miss out on the support of many local charitable organizations. Given that most mainland Chinese have little or no knowledge or experience of Christianity and are ignorant of Christian distinctions (Catholic/Protestant), this suggests an advantage in collaboration by the Christian Churches in Ireland in any response they may make to the expressed needs of the Chinese students and immigrants.

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CONCLUSION

In this final chapter we will not summarize the material on the Chinese encounters with Christianity, individually and institutionally, about which the reader can consult the preceding chapters. Rather given what we have learned from this research we reflect on the following three issues.

- (i) The number of Chinese Christians in Ireland
- (ii) Are the Chinese in Ireland receptive to evangelism?
- (iii) Points for consideration in the responses of the Churches to the Chinese population

6.1 How many Chinese Christians are there in Ireland?

The number of Chinese Christians in Ireland is a question of interest to many readers. The honest answer is that no one knows how many there are, however, we can attempt to provide a rough guide to the quantification. We hope that by now the reader will realize that the definition of 'Chinese Christian' is itself problematic. We found in our survey of mainland students that the percentage reporting themselves as having a religion which was Christianity (10%) was lower than those who reported they believed in Christianity (14.8%), when they were asked the question in the context of interest in Christianity. We heard in the interviews how some Chinese who declare themselves to be 'Christian' are not baptized, while other 'Christians' are not exclusively Christian but have syncretic beliefs.

Nor will this question of the description of and interpretation of Christian religious affiliation be resolved simply by the publication of any results from the 2006 Census which inquired about both religion and ethnicity. For readers information, the British Census for 2001 found that over half (53%) of Chinese declared themselves to be 'No religion', a fifth (21.1%) declared themselves to be 'Christian' and 15.1% to be Buddhist. The ethnic Chinese community in Britain is older than in Ireland, with a more substantial community of Hong Kong origin, and of second generation Chinese, both categories who are more likely to be Christian than recent mainland Chinese immigrants. Therefore, we expect a lower percentage of Christians to be returned for Ireland and propose that the figure of 10% we found in our survey is plausible as a very approximate indicator.

The next stage in our calculation is the total number of ethnic Chinese in Ireland. We reported in chapter 2 a plausible middling estimate number of 60,000. On that basis there could be 6,000 self-identifying 'Chinese Christians' in Ireland. This figure is higher than the numbers of ethnic Chinese who appear to be members of either ethnic Chinese or Irish church congregations. One Chinese pastor we spoke to put the number at no more than 1,000, and believed that the large majority of these were Protestant Christians rather than Catholics. Our student survey agrees with the view of the preponderance of Protestants as does the presence of ethnic Chinese Protestant congregations (at least 2 churches in Dublin, plus fellowships in Limerick and Cork) compared to a single Chinese Catholic congregation in Dublin.

At the time of going to press, some results on religion ('what is your religion') and nationality have just been released for the 2006 Irish Census of Population. The reported nationality of 'China' refers to the People's Republic of China and is therefore a smaller category than that of 'ethnic Chinese'. Furthermore, the number of person declared to be of nationality 'China' in the Census (11,161) is considerably less than other estimates for Chinese nationals and for ethnic Chinese in Ireland. Therefore, the following numbers are very likely to be an underestimation, although

the percentage breakdown may provide some insights. Of 11,161 persons of Chinese nationality, three quarters (75.3 %) described themselves as having 'no religion'. Just under one in ten persons (9.8%, 1,089) declared one of the Christian denominations as their religion - evenly shared between Catholic (4.9%) and Protestant/Christian (4.9%). Just under one in ten (9%) stated an 'other religion'. These results are broadly consistent with our survey of students.

6.2 Are the Chinese in Ireland receptive to evangelism?

This question was addressed in both our survey of Chinese students and our interviews with other mainland Chinese. We found that three quarters of students had received Christian literature. Three in ten reported that they did not read the material. A quarter read it and found the content difficult to understand. A fifth read it and found it uninteresting. A seventh read it and found it interesting. These results on responses to religious tracts are not very different from the results reported on interest in Christianity, with a half appearing to be uninterested in Christianity, a small minority being actively interested and a larger minority showing some interest or engagement with Christianity. About half of respondents have been invited to church. About three in ten of these particular invitations to attend church were positively responded to.

Overall, the majority of the evangelism to Chinese students in Dublin appears to be initiated by other Chinese, notably by evangelists from the ethnic Chinese churches. In this regard it is interesting to recall a view reported in *The Hard Gospel Report* on the perception that conservative evangelical denominations may deal somewhat more harshly with 'non-believers'. On the contrary, it would appear that the ethnic Chinese evangelical churches in Dublin are *actively* welcoming and recruiting Chinese non-believers (that in the longer term they may be strict with members is a separate matter).

Given the high level of distribution of religious material and the relatively high level of visits to a church, on at least one occasion, there is apparently a small numerical result in terms of the number of regular church attending or baptized Chinese. Our qualitative interviews suggested a variety of reasons for this including their background of atheistic education in China, a view that church attendance was an unnecessary accompaniment to Christian belief, the rejection of conservative Christian teaching (including that on sexuality), disappointment at the provision of practical help. Perhaps more importantly, our survey results and interviews suggest widespread indifference by the mainland Chinese to religion.

Clearly the task facing the Christian evangelist to the Chinese in Ireland is a challenging one. From the Christian evangelist's point of view as many as half the Chinese may be described as being in a pre-evangelism stage. In our survey half of our respondents reported that they have never attended a Christian church and they express no interest in Christianity. However, we should not consider most Chinese as entirely irreligious. There was widespread exposure to some traditional Chinese practices and beliefs and acceptance of Confucian morals.

A number of interviewees highlighted non-religious reasons (notably seeking practical aid, practice English, encounters with local Irish), at least for their initial attendance at church. Therefore, Christian belief may lag somewhat beyond the engagement with churches.

Invitations to attend church are most likely to be accepted if they come from a Chinese Christian or Irish Christian who is known to the respondent. Being a

Christian known to the respondent may be even more important than the ethnicity (being Chinese) of the inviter. There appears to be resistance to evangelism from strangers, particularly Irish strangers. This has implications for strategies of evangelism.

6.3 Five points for consideration by the Churches in their responses to the Chinese population

In our view the ethnic Chinese Churches and the Irish Catholic and Church of Ireland denominations are sufficiently different linguistically, socially, theologically and liturgically that it is appropriate to highlight different points for consideration for the two sectors.

6.3.1 The forms of Christian worship available to the Chinese

The Churches tend to see their main activity in teaching the gospel, facilitating group worship and providing pastoral care. The first and third of these are more language dependent which puts the Irish Churches at a disadvantage compared to the ethnic Chinese congregations.

The ethnic Chinese Protestant congregations are offering a form of worship in Mandarin and Cantonese which in terms of language is more accessible to Chinese than the worship available in the local Protestant Churches. Their form of worship is also more accessible in terms of the type of hymn singing and the relative informality.

Persons in local Irish congregations with particular responsibility for welcoming visitors would benefit from being aware that Chinese visitors may be ignorant of the rituals of Christian worship. If the Irish Churches wish to communicate about their church to visitors then some information would need to be available in Chinese. The issue of making its services available to other linguistic groups is one which the Irish Churches have encountered with other minority ethnic groups (as noted in the Church of Ireland's *Hard Gospel Report*), although it is arguably presents a greater challenge in its engagement with the Chinese.

Most Chinese, including those who become Christian, seem largely unaware of denominational differences. They may be unaware that the Protestant Christian worship services and pastoral care currently provided to them through the medium of Chinese are provided by theologically and socially conservative, evangelical churches with 'low church' ritual. This is broadly in line with the experiences internationally of the overseas Chinese Protestants. Therefore, the Catholic Church and most Irish Protestant Churches can offer a different form of worship and theology.

6.3.2 The Churches as educators about local Irish and western culture

When mainland Chinese students were asked which activities which might be organized by Church they would find attractive, the second ranked of six items was 'an introduction to local Irish/western culture'. The Irish Roman Catholic and older Protestant denominations are ideally placed to respond to this. They also possess some fine examples of Ireland's European architectural heritage and have old European liturgical and musical traditions. Given that most Chinese are not Christian, but all have heard of Christmas, this might present a particular occasion for outreach, especially as a Christmas carol service (say organized on a multi-denominational basis with some bilingual hymns) could be both enjoyable and relatively accessible.

The very high occurrence of Chinese living with other Chinese and drawing their friends from their own ethnic group reduces their interaction with the majority community (outside of the work situation). Therefore, all opportunities for social and cultural interaction between the Chinese and the majority Irish community may provide a small positive contribution to mutual understanding.

We wish to point out that the Chinese are aware of themselves as a distinct ethnic population, different from other ethnic groups in important ways such as language and cultural background (traditionally non-Christian). Therefore, 'catch-all' events for 'all the ethnic people' are unlikely to have the necessary specific appeal than would events targeted and designed around the Chinese. Prior information about the event would need to be in Chinese and would be largely dependent on co-operative networks (e.g. ethnic Chinese Churches, Chinese Student and Scholars Associations, and language schools who might be open to the provision of introductions to majority Irish culture).

6.3.3 The Churches as providers of practical help

Above all, mainland Chinese were interested in practical help which might be provided by the Churches. We believe this is indicative of the difficult living situation experienced by many of the ethnic Chinese in their lives in Ireland. We note that for the students their concerns with their lack of legal knowledge and their visa situation ranked second and third out of twenty possible concerns. This situation has already deteriorated as more Chinese students lose their visa entitlement and may become illegal. The Irish Churches may feel that providing practical help to the Chinese is not their role, but we note that the Chinese, mainly because of the language barrier and lack of knowledge, may miss out on the support of many local charitable organizations. The Catholic Church may be best placed to respond, if it chooses to do so. It was suggested by an interviewee from the Chinese Catholic congregation that a full-time Chinese priest might be appointed to support the development of that initiative. The Chinese Catholic congregation is exceptionally placed as it is both ethnic Chinese and part of a majority community Irish religious institution. It was also suggested by the same interviewee that the Catholic-supported Migrant Rights Centre might increase its work among the Chinese.

By practical help we are referring to advice services (through the medium of Chinese) about legal and visa matters, advice on the health system, translation services. This is different from the provision of additional English language classes which was ranked lower, at least among students. However, the survey respondents did not think of the churches as an obvious outlet for addressing their problems. They appear to be making a distinction between practical matters (information, knowledge) and more personal problems. Moreover, a number of interviewees were repelled by the conservatism of the Churches on sexual matters.

Many UK cities (including Belfast) have long standing Christian organizations (such as Friends International) with Christian outreach programs to international university students providing welcome on arrival, hospitality schemes, providing English conversation classes. This type of outreach by Irish Churches seems to be undeveloped in the Republic of Ireland.

The largest ethnic Chinese congregation gives priority to their teaching the gospel and evangelism over practical social service. However, a number of interviewees highlighted non-religious reasons (seeking practical aid, friendship), at least for their initial attendance at a church. They may wish to reflect on what more they could offer in terms of practical help, given the serious concerns and expressed interest of the

mainland Chinese in practical help from the Churches. Ethnic Chinese congregations are especially well placed to respond to this social need. Indeed they may consider whether they could offer more social activities which are not exclusively Christian in purpose.

The ethnic Chinese congregations value their conservative theology but they may wish to reflect that this may be a barrier between them and some Chinese young people. This is not simply a matter of moral challenge but an issue of how to provide pastoral care to Chinese who might present themselves with crisis situations such as unplanned pregnancy and abortion.

6.3.4 The Churches and anti-racism

Our findings on the high exposure of Chinese students to racial abuse will be of concern to the readers and to the Churches. While many of the perpetrators of racism may not be church-goers, nevertheless, it highlights the importance of the anti-racist initiatives being taken by the Churches to raise awareness of anti-racism among their members and in the wider society.

6.3.5 Collaborative responses by the different churches

Given that most Chinese have little or no knowledge or experience of Christianity and are ignorant of denominational (Catholic/Protestant) distinctions in our view this suggests an advantage in collaborative responses from the Irish Christian denominations. Collaborative responses would also be efficient in terms of the use of resources. Collaborative responses might be made at deanery/circuit or college campus levels. The latter may be a particularly suitable starting point as the college chaplains already have experience of cooperation. However, we note the great majority of students are at language/private schools, not at the universities. However, contacts between the ethnic Chinese Protestant congregations and the local Irish Protestant Churches seem relatively undeveloped. Both sectors may wish to explore increased contact and co-operation, especially as both are concerned about the welfare of the Chinese population.