

Constructing a Calling: The Case of Evangelical Christian International Students in the United States

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In this study of evangelical Christians from India, China, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan enrolled in American colleges and universities, the idea of a calling emerged as an important component of identity and action. A narrative approach that incorporates visual methods was used to collect the stories of 46 interviewees in Boston and two cities in China. Among study participants, 78 percent specifically connect their faith to their professional aspirations; and all participants refer to their future career as a calling and/or part of "God's plan." Through involvement in conservative Christian congregations, I argue, these women and men are socialized into communities in which the narratives of who they are, what it means to be a Christian, and how their faith relates to the many domains of modern life are part of the conversation. The idea of a calling is carried by these narratives and offers study participants a compelling way to interpret the past, navigate everyday life in the present, and pursue a meaningful future.

Key words: calling; narrative; lived religion; visual methods; international higher education; evangelicalism.

THE IDEA OF A CALLING

"One of the constitutive components of the modern capitalist spirit, and moreover, generally of modern civilization," Max Weber famously argued a century ago, "was the rational organization of life on the basis of the *idea of the calling*. It was born out of the spirit of *Christian asceticism*" (Weber 2002:122; his italics). The asceticism that once "attempted to transform and influence the world," however, was overcome by the world's "inescapable power over people" epitomized by the material goods it produced and the success of the

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rationalized forms of life it enshrined. Now victorious, capitalism “no longer need[ed] asceticism as a supporting pillar.” The search for a calling rooted in “the substance of religion” was suspended and one’s occupation was no longer thought to be “connected to the highest cultural values of a spiritual nature.” Instead, along with much of everyday life, work became disenchanting, locked behind the steel-hard casing of rationalized pursuits.

The notion of a calling to a this-worldly profession, however, was not entirely lost. Bellah et al. observe that “the idea of a calling has become attenuated and the largely private ‘job’ and ‘career’ have taken its place, something of the notion of a calling lingers on, not necessarily opposed to, but in addition to, job and career” (1985:66). Their suggestion that certain careers are more conducive to a calling is consistent with the findings of Davidson and Caddell, who report that those who “worked with people thought of their work as a calling more than twice as often as people who worked with things” (1994:141). Davidson and Caddell also find a positive relationship between calling and social justice beliefs, high rates of religious participation, and the salience of religion among the Midwestern Catholics and Protestants in their survey. Wuthnow (1994) identifies a connection between calling and religious commitment in his treatment of faith’s influence on attitudes toward work and money among actively religious Americans. And conservative Protestants, as Scott (1999) observes, more readily make connections between faith and work in ways that shape workplace behavior.

The idea of a calling is also alive and well among evangelical Christians from Asia pursuing undergraduate and graduate degrees in the United States. For study participants, calling emerged as an important component of everyday life: it infuses their life histories, present pursuits, and aspired futures with other-worldly meaning. This article explores how a calling becomes part of these individuals’ life stories, its consequences in everyday life, and its persistence among international students who return to their home country.

My approach parallels a sometimes overlooked feature of *Protestant Ethic*, namely the role of narrative in constructing the social self and informing agency. One way to read Weber is to regard his evidence for the idea of a calling as a collection of narratives, stories that carry cultural ideas about the way the world works, what is plausible, and the possibilities of human agency. The maxims Weber extracts from the works of Benjamin Franklin, for example, epitomize “the essential elements of the frame of mind” (Weber 2002:123), a narrative as important to the American story as it was to Franklin’s own life history. Luther’s conception of the calling is something more than a religious idea, a product of the Reformation. It became an important feature of what the faithful did: “the fulfillment of [religious] duty in vocational callings” (Weber 2002:39). As such, a calling became integral to the story of what it meant to be a certain kind of Christian and eventually extended its reach beyond the walls of the congregations influenced by the teachings of Luther, Calvin, and Baxter.

In a similar fashion, I turn to narratives as a way to explore the role of religion in everyday life. This research is based on an understanding that religious and spiritual narratives lend meaning to experience, inform identity, and guide action. Through life history interviews, photo elicitation interviews (PEIs), and participant observation, I collected the stories of 46 international students from Asia during or after their sojourn as undergraduate and graduate students in the United States. Drawing from these accounts, I describe the narrative construction of a calling and discuss its consequences in everyday life.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY

During the 2007–2008 academic year, 623,805 international students were part of a global flow to American colleges and universities (Bhandari and Chow 2008). Half of all international students in the USA (49.3 percent) that year came from five Asian countries: India, China, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan (table 1). In pursuit of professional credentials, social capital, and cultural fluency, these future professionals stimulated the U.S. economy to the tune of 22 billion dollars, making higher education one of the United States' most important service sector exports (Bhandari and Chow 2008:16).

On and off campus, international students encounter a demographic reality that may perpetuate the perception that to be American is to be Christian. According to the Pew Forum Religious Landscape Survey, for example, 78 percent of Americans claim affiliation with Christianity and 26 percent of the population identifies as evangelical (Pew Research Center 2008). College

TABLE 1 Leading Countries of Origin for International Students in the United States, 2007–2008 (Bhandari and Chow 2008:5)

Rank	Country of origin	AY 2007–2008	% of total
1	India	94,563	15.2
2	China (PRC)	81,127	13.0
3	South Korea	69,124	11.1
4	Japan	33,974	5.4
5	Canada	29,051	4.7
6	Taiwan (ROC)	29,001	4.6
7	Mexico	14,837	2.4
8	Turkey	12,030	1.9
9	Saudi Arabia	9,873	1.6
10	Thailand	9,004	1.4
Total		382,584	61.3

students, according to the 1998 survey of college freshmen conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI 2009), fall into a similar pattern, with 77 percent of American college freshmen identifying as Christian (table 2). And Astin et al. report that among entering freshmen, over “three-fourths believe in God, and more than two in three say that their religious/spiritual beliefs ‘provide . . . strength, support, and guidance’” (2011:3).

Off campus, many international students encounter curious rates of religious participation among immigrant communities from their own countries (figure 1). These shifts in religious affiliation among diaspora communities are known to “shape the negotiation of religious and ethnic identities” (Chen 2008:190). Migration to a context where the dominant religious framework is different from that of their homeland, among other things, “free[s] people to experiment with new religious identities” (Lien and Carnes 2004:41). It is within this milieu that some international students come into contact with evangelical Christians in America (Abel 2006; Phillips and Norsworthy 1997; Salem and Salem 2009; Wang and Yang 2006). Among those who do, some convert to Christianity and embrace evangelical culture. Others, who are not the focus of this research, may become less conservative or give up their faith as a result of studying in the United States.

The Meaning(s) of “Evangelical” and the Idea of a Calling

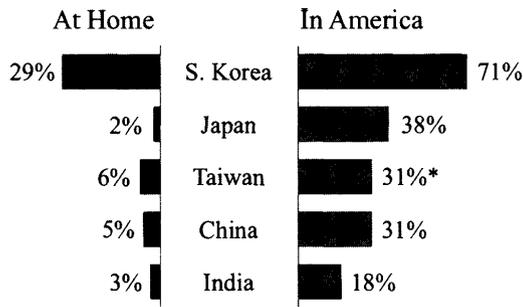
Definitions of evangelicalism abound across the many disciplines interested in mapping its contours. Within sociology, three definitional strategies have been identified: denominational affiliation, self-identification, and personal beliefs (e.g., Hackett and Lindsay 2008; Smith 2000; Woodberry and Smith 1998). Depending on the definition employed, research on evangelicalism may arrive at different conclusions (Hackett and Lindsay 2008). And to complicate matters, “evangelical” carries different meanings around the world (cf., Freston 2007; Offutt 2009; Smith and Prokopy 1999; Stoll 1993).

TABLE 2 Religion Among First-Year Undergraduates, 1998 (HERI)

Religious preference	Noncitizens (%)	Permanent residents (%)	Residents (%)
Christian	48	53	77
Muslim	9	5	1
Jewish	2	5	3
Other	8	9	4
Buddhist	7	7	1
None	26	22	16
Total	100	100	100

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

FIGURE 1. Adherence to Christianity in Country of Origin (Pew Research Center 2011) as a Percentage of the Overall Population Compared to Christianity among Corresponding Immigrant Populations in the United States (Pew Research Center 2012; see also Abel 2008; Bays 2003; Chen 2008; Johnson and Grim 2009; Lambert 2003; Lein and Carnes 2004; Ming 2010; Tang 2009; Yang 2005). *Pew Research Center (2012) includes Taiwanese immigrants in the overall Chinese immigrant population.



Evangelicalism is not only a set of beliefs, a denominational affiliation, or a self-identification, it is a cultural system that supplies meanings and strategies of action. That someone is likely to have a view of the Bible as being authoritative, to affirm a “personal relationship” with God through Jesus Christ, and evangelize unbelievers is only part of the story. Evangelicalism also includes a vast inventory of symbols, practices, and narratives that shape the everyday lives of adherents in ways that make it distinct from other forms of Protestant Christianity and make a concise definition of evangelicalism difficult. For the purposes of this research, participation in an evangelical religious group or self-identification as evangelical was the practical starting point for exploring the meanings and strategies of action a calling supplies.

Within the American evangelical toolkit lies the concept of a calling. While they may be unaware of the history of the concept, many evangelicals are familiar with calling in the Bible. As Swanson observed in his study of calling among American missionaries to Ecuador, “To inquire of an evangelical as to the origin or basis of any significant moral idea turns out to be the same, in the end, as to ask, ‘Where is it written in the Bible?’” (1995:74). The term calling and its cognates draw upon biblical narratives to inform evangelicals’ expectations about how God works in the world, how to conduct oneself as a Christian, and how God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit might pursue divine purposes in and through ordinary people. For these conservative Christians, God calls people to salvation and eternal life. In turn, many evangelicals believe that they are called to live in a way that is consistent with the norms and values of their religious community, which include a call to voluntary service through their church or into full-time ministry, a call to a specific task, a call to a specific place in pursuit of religious or spiritual purposes, and/or a call to a job or

career. The extent to which the idea of a calling is transferred to or amplified in the lives of men and women from Asia during their sojourn as international students in the United States is the subject of this study.

Study Participants and Research Sites

This research involves 46 international students from the five Asian countries that consistently supply significant numbers of students to American colleges and universities: India, China, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan. Participants include women and men, current undergraduate and graduate students (at the time of their interview), former international students, and people who converted to Christianity before and after coming to the United States (table 3). Along with being affiliated with a variety of schools, interviewees' fields of study approximate the overall population of international students enrolled in the United States during the 2007–2008 academic year (table 4). I note study participants' countries of origin and majors throughout the article as a way to demonstrate the diversity of national, cultural, and academic backgrounds upon which this research is based.

Fieldwork took place in Boston and two cities in China. Boston boasts the third highest concentration of international students in the United States behind New York City and Los Angeles (Bhandari and Chow 2008:11). A coalition of churches and religious organizations in the Boston area with established international student ministries played an important role in helping to identify research sites and participants. At the beginning of the study, five ministry leaders agreed to provide lists of 10–15 students who were active participants in their groups. From these potential subjects, I randomly selected interviewees. As the study progressed, I recruited additional participants in an effort to create a sample that reflected the academic diversity of the international student population in the United States (table 4).

TABLE 3 Select Characteristics of Interviewees

Country	Total subjects	Current students	Former students	Male	Female	Grad students	Christian pre-United States
India	8	5	3	3	5	8	8
China (PRC)	19	10	9	11	8	18	9
South Korea	8	8	0	3	5	4	8
Japan	4	4	0	1	3	1	3
Taiwan (ROC)	7	5	2	5	2	6	4
Total	46	32	14	23	23	37	32

TABLE 4 Interviewees' Fields of Study Compared to Total Enrolled International Students in the United States, 2007–2008 (Bhandari and Chow 2008:60–61)

Field of study	Interviewees (%)	International student population in United States (%)
Agriculture	N/A	2
Business and management	16	20
Education	4	3
Engineering	20	17
Fine and applied arts	7	6
Health professions	4	5
Humanities	8	3
Intensive English	2	5
Mathematics and computer science	9	8
Other	4	11
Physical and life science	20	9
Social sciences	7	9
Undeclared	N/A	3
Total	100	100

Fieldwork took place in three primary research sites in Boston during the 2007–2009 academic years:

- (1) Beacon Evangelical Church: a large, predominantly white, historic American church with over 500 members and a well-established international student ministry, which attracts approximately 100 students from a variety of countries to its weekly meetings.
- (2) Cornerstone Chinese Church: an immigrant congregation with two weekly Friday evening services (one for mainland Chinese, the other for Taiwanese) with a combined average attendance of 140 Chinese-speaking college students.
- (3) Chinese Student Fellowship: an outreach group founded by graduate students from China with 8–12 people in attendance weekly.

These groups shared a similar pattern in their gatherings: two-to-three-hour-long meetings which included food, socializing, singing, Bible study, and prayer.

In January 2009, I traveled to two cities in China—Han-chang (pseudonym) and Beijing—for two weeks to interview people who returned after earning degrees in the United States. Through the help of study participants and ministry

staff in Boston, I scheduled appointments with nine former international students, which took place over a two-week period and were conducted in interviewees' offices, homes, and restaurants. During my time in China, I also had numerous informal conversations with Chinese Christians at a house church meeting for college students in Han-chang and after worship at a "gray market" church in Beijing (Yang 2006). I interviewed an additional returnee to Beijing when she visited Boston.

CONCEPTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs the narrative approach advocated in Ammerman and Williams (2012). This methodology emerges out of an interest in understanding religion as lived (Ammerman 2007; McGuire 2008) and emphasizes the purchase of religious and spiritual narratives in analyzing experience, meaning, identity, and action (e.g., Ammerman 2003; Collins 2004; Davidman and Greil 2007; Manglos 2010; Nelson 2005; Roof 1993; Singleton 2001; Smilde 2003; Smith 2003; Yamane 2000). Along with taking what might be considered the "narrative turn," this methodology also invites a "visual turn" that recognizes the visual as introducing an important layer of data, one that is too frequently overlooked.

A narrative approach asserts that social life is storied (Somers 1994). Narratives about the way the world works, what is plausible, and what one should do (or not) lend meaning to experience, inform identities, and guide action. In turn, these experiences, selves, and actions are preserved and perpetuated (however selectively) as stories (Somers and Gibson 1994), and constitute a repertoire (Swidler 1986) of narratives that are drawn upon in the ongoing human project of constructing meaning (Smith 2003).

During fieldwork, I gathered stories through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and PEIs. Through participant observation, I listened for the narratives interviewees encounter and co-construct at their worship services, Bible studies, and social events. When I attended meetings conducted in a foreign language such as Chinese, a person was appointed or volunteered to act as my interpreter. Even though these women and men were capable translators, much of what happened in these meetings admittedly went unobserved. Like Warner, however, I experienced the ways shared actions involving music and bodily motion "can bridge linguistic and other cultural boundaries" (1997:224). Likewise, because food was a common feature of these meetings, I came to appreciate Warner's insights regarding the bonds created around the shared experience of eating together.

I attempted to move beyond the occasional language barrier by using multiple interview techniques: semi-structured interviews with all 46 subjects and PEIs with 26 participants for a total of 72 interviews. Interviews were scheduled at a time and place—in their lab or office, apartment, a library meeting

room, church, or my university office—convenient for the interviewee and lasted approximately one hour. These conversations were recorded (on a digital audio recorder in the United States and handwritten in China) and transcribed; transcripts, photographs, and fieldnotes were analyzed and coded using qualitative data analysis software (MAXQDA).

I began semi-structured interviews by asking participants to tell me their life story by imagining that their life was a book organized around chapters (McAdams 1993). As the interview progressed, I also explored subjects' beliefs and practices, the relationship between faith and field of study (or profession), their career aspirations, if they believe God had a plan for their lives, and what a better world might look like. Following Ammerman and Williams (2012), I invited participants to relate stories from their everyday lives throughout the interview. For example, instead of asking them to list and describe their religious practices, I asked them to discuss their important habits and routines, to recall the most recent episode, and to reflect on what makes these practices important. To probe their conceptions of God and what God does in the world, I asked subjects to recall a time when they saw God at work. By proceeding in this way, respondents related stories. While some narratives seemed well rehearsed, the stories offered concrete descriptions of specific episodes and events.

I also employed PEIs to gain further insight into the lives of participants (cf., Clark-Ibáñez 2004, 2007; Harper 2002; Williams 2010). At the end of my initial interview, I invited subjects to think about the places, objects, events, and people that are an important part of their everyday lives. I explained their assignment in easy-to-understand language saying, "Imagine that your camera is me and you are giving me a tour of your life. Where would you take me? What practices would you introduce me to? What events would we participate in? Which of your possessions would you show me? And which people would you make sure that I meet?" I also provided subjects with a one-page description of the procedure. Subjects were invited to use their own digital camera to take 10–20 pictures documenting their everyday lives. If they did not have a digital camera, I provided a 27-exposure disposable camera. In either case, they were assured that the photos did not need to be professional quality; a snapshot was sufficient. After two to four weeks, the subject e-mailed their photos to me (or I retrieved their disposable camera), an interview was scheduled, and I ordered prints of the photos.

At the time of the photo interview, participants reviewed their pictures and were invited to organize the photos in a way that made sense to them (thematically, chronologically, geographically, relationally, etc.). I also suggested that it might be helpful to lay the photos out on the table or desk at which we were sitting, and they usually did. With these preparations complete, interviewees were prompted to pick a photo (or set of photos) and to discuss the image, describe what happens there, or indicate the scene's importance in their everyday lives. I followed up their descriptions with probes that guided

interviews away from generalizations toward specific, narrative accounts. Through this process, subjects introduced new, valuable layers of detail into the study. Likewise, PEIs enhanced the communication process in interviews with nonnative speakers of English. Where language may have failed, a photograph taken by the interviewee provided another medium of communication, an additional way to tell their stories. At the conclusion of the interview, I offered each subject the prints as a small token of gratitude and I retained electronic copies for later analysis.

Due to the short length of time I spent in China and out of an abundance of caution for interviewees' identities, PEIs were not part of the research design for returnees. In Boston, 26 of 37 subjects (70 percent) agreed to the second interview, which yielded 416 photographs and generated numerous narrative accounts of their daily lived experiences. As busy students navigating academic life in a foreign culture, those who did not participate in the PEI typically declined due to time constraints.

Participants' photographs fell into several broad categories (cf., Harper 2002; Williams 2010). Photos of their campuses, labs, offices, churches, living spaces, nature, city, and objects such as Bibles, devotional materials, coursework, their thesis, cars, computers, food, tools of their trades (recording equipment, piano, violin, or lab instruments) offered *inventories* of participants' everyday lives. They captured *events* including holiday and birthday celebrations, religious services, and cultural events (e.g., a Boston Red Sox game or piano recital), and *activities* such as Bible reading, praying, studying, teaching, corresponding with home, and hanging out with friends. Photographs also captured *social institutions* including marriage, family, education, and religion, and represented *processes* such as migration, globalization, and socialization. Below I include photos as data and as a way to indicate instances in which I draw specifically from PEIs.

During fieldwork, ministry leaders and interviewees were interested in my relationship to the subject of my research. I explained that my undergraduate study abroad experience in Ecuador shaped me in meaningful ways and I wondered about the experiences of internationals in America. I discussed my Christian upbringing and current church attendance. And I mentioned the graduate degree I earned from a respected Boston-area seminary. Like other sociologists of religion, I found my own religious background to be an asset (e.g., Ammerman 1987; Chai 1998; Marti 2009; Yang 1998, 1999). My insider credentials helped me to gain access to research sites, to establish rapport with ministry leaders and informants, and to participate more fully.

CALLING NARRATIVES

The idea of a calling presented itself early on in my research. While not everyone claimed to know what "God's plan" for their life was, they were

actively pursuing—and thereby constructing—an answer to the question, “What does God want me to do with my life?” While this enterprise often sounded like an individual project, the idea of a calling was a collective product of the evangelical subculture to which interviewees belonged. Among participants, 78 percent affirmed a relationship between their faith and academic or professional pursuits; that is, as far as they were concerned, their Christian faith was relevant to—in many cases essential to—their everyday lives as international students or professionals. Likewise, all participants referred to their studies or career as a “calling” and/or as part of “God’s plan.” The notion of a calling is located in this cluster of ideas: this-worldly work (studies and professions) infused with other-worldly meaning.

Below I explore the consequences of a calling in the everyday lives of study participants under three headings. These representative examples reveal ways in which the idea of a calling helps interviewees make sense of the past, navigate the present, and find meaning in the future. In the telling of their life histories and future aspirations, their narratives begin to reveal the ways a calling infuses participants’ lives with religious significance.

Interpreting the Past

Like many international students, Jasmine Chowdary¹ (India) “was always fascinated with America and . . . always had this dream of, like, coming here.” Taking stock of the events that opened the door to study in America, Jasmine believes that God was behind the events that made it possible.

I would say that God was very gracious. I mean this was a childhood dream that I had, and I had no clue how this was going to work out. Like, you know, coming to America just sounded so distant. . . . So, like, it was just a dream, you know, that God gave me. . . . I feel like I don’t deserve it, but God just offered it to me to just come here. . . . So this began like a new life that opened up here in the US.

The path to achieving the dream of an American education involves navigating a gauntlet of requirements prior to setting foot in a classroom. The right academic pedigree for one’s aspirations is necessary, complete with challenging coursework and a high GPA from a reputable high school. Academic accomplishments must be reflected in one’s scores on the various examinations required for admission to undergraduate (SAT or ACT) or graduate (e.g., GRE) programs. Likewise, English language proficiency must be achieved and demonstrated by taking the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Along with these academic preparations, financial resources are necessary for studying abroad—most undergraduate international students pay full tuition rates. Even the best efforts to prepare, however, do not guarantee an applicant acceptance in their program of choice. The application process and logics of

¹All personal names are pseudonyms.

university admissions offices are rife with uncertainty. From gaining admission to finding funding to getting a student visa in a post-9/11 world to attending classes in America, the process seems far beyond one's control.

Many who aspire to study abroad prepare by enrolling in a course like the ones shown in advertisements I observed outside Han-chang University (photo 1). Sonya Liu (China), for example, enrolled in a "language program . . . designed for the GRE test" in Beijing. Through a conversation with a Christian classmate also preparing for the GRE, Sonya decided a little other-worldly help might give her the edge she needed to do well on the examination.

So we shared some [of] our opinion[s] about [the] GRE test and I said, "Oh, I don't think I can do it, the writing is so hard, the vocabulary are too much." And [he] said, "Oh, me too, I feel frustrated. But at least I can pray." And I thought, "Wow! You can pray. What do you believe?" And he said, "Christ Jesus."

In the end, Sonya was successful in navigating the uncertainties of the application process. Today, she attributes being admitted to a competitive Boston University (BU) degree program to God. "[T]he reason I came to BU is that God helped me and, uh, most of part is from God's hand. . . . If God didn't help me, I wouldn't come to BU. BU is my tops of my application list. And when I received the offer, I can't believe it for four months." Sonya represents the consensus of study participants: the best explanation for navigating the uncertainties of applying, for being accepted to degree programs, and for things mysteriously working out was God.

Reflecting back on her path, South Korean undergraduate at Boston College (BC) Jihye Lee also is certain that it was God who brought her to Boston. "I think it was really God's schedule, God's plan. I mean God always

PHOTO 1. Advertisement for NEW Oriental's GRE Preparation Course "I SAY" English" outside Han-Chang University, China.



has plan for my life. But coming to Boston was, I guess it was another chapter for my life and my Christian life and—because I didn't think of coming to BC" Her "last choice" college, she suggests, was God's first choice. This type of reframing is not uncommon. Like other interviewees, when Jihye looks back at her life history through the lens of her faith, she sees God at work, unfolding a plan for her life.

By virtue of having made it to America, study participants are confident that they are headed in the right direction. Although they believe that God has a plan for or calling on their lives, how one's faith and aspired profession relate to one another may remain an enigma. Weiwei Li (China), for example, is convinced that God wants her "to be a professional," but when asked if her faith is connected with the career she envisions, her answer reveals a measure of apprehension. "This is a good question," she says. "But a very difficult question. I'm still thinking about it. Especially right now I'm looking for my future direction. Um, and praying for it. How can I relate education to God's purpose for me and what is his will?" Heejung Yoon (South Korea) shares these uncertainties regarding the future. "I definitely know that God has a pathway for me, but I don't know exactly what that is yet." Nonetheless, she is confident that God will, "just, like, lead me." Across their coming-to-America narratives, interviewees confidently held on to the idea that God had brought them to the United States even if they were uncertain about the precise reason(s) for doing so.

By asking interviewees to tell me the story of their lives as a book with chapters, I gave them the opportunity to offer an interpretation of their past. Consistently, participants' stories concentrated on their origins (i.e., home country and culture, parents and family, and important events growing up), their conversions (its process, significance, and effects), and the sometimes extraordinary events surrounding their coming to America. Although there was some linguistic variation in the way people described their journey, the meanings they expressed intersected with the idea of being called. They were called to faith, called to a purpose in life, and called to pursue a career through study in the United States.

Navigating the Present

Through involvement in churches, campus Christian groups, and international student ministries, interviewees become familiar with narratives that inform how they think about their present pursuits and professional aspirations. Influential among these stories is the idea that God has a plan for their lives. Indeed, many interviewees arrived in the United States with a sense that God has a plan or purpose for them to discover. Theirs is a spiritual quest, one informed by participation in evangelicalism and the compelling narratives it supplies.

Many congregations, ministers, and volunteers also believe that God has special purposes for international students among them. They consider outreach to foreign students a global strategy that is pursued locally—in many

ways, it is the religious parallel to the environmental movement's familiar charge to "think globally, act locally." Through ministry to international students, they see themselves fulfilling Jesus's commission to evangelize the world (Phillips and Norsworthy 1997). Ultimately, Christian international students are regarded as potential missionaries to their own people and agents of social change. Because these sentiments are shared by leaders and participants, the idea of a calling or seeking God's plan for one's life is part of an ongoing conversation in international student ministries.

Among the strategies for helping international students discover their purpose in life is to involve them as volunteers and leaders in ministry. Examples abound among interviewees. Youngchul Lim and Jinhee Choi co-lead a student-organized Korean student prayer group that meets weekly on campus at Boston College and is loosely affiliated with their church. Weiwei Li is involved in her church's music ministry and participates in a small group Bible study, which she sometimes leads. Lincoln Wu is a greeter at his church who hands out bulletins with a handshake and a smile. Jungho Kwon plays piano, Fawn Lin plays violin, and Katie Hwang sings during worship services. Ming Zhang is the treasurer of Cornerstone's Chinese student ministry. E. V. Joseph helps to coordinate Vacation Bible School in the summer. Study participants also performed practical tasks such as setting up tables and chairs or preparing the weekly meals served at Beacon, Cornerstone, and CSF meetings.

As volunteers, these international students receive personal attention and training from ministerial staff. They also become employed in the mission of the organization and are given the opportunity to teach, organize, manage, and lead. Through higher levels of commitment and participation student volunteers become socialized more completely into evangelical subculture, more familiar with the idea of a calling, and integral to the narrative of the organization in which they serve. In turn, the narratives they encounter are transposed into students' everyday academic lives (cf., Ammerman 2003; Sewell 1992; Smith 2003).

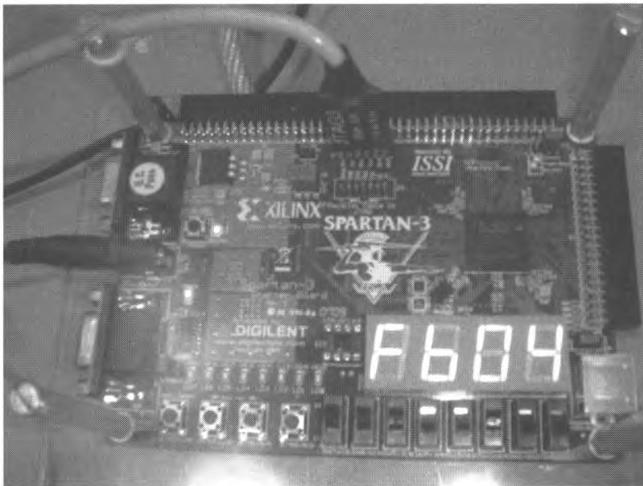
Lincoln Wu, for example, is preparing to fulfill what he perceives to be his calling by becoming an engineer who will use his professional credentials as a means to propagate his faith. To prepare this future, Lincoln regularly attends church and volunteers at CSE and his church, reads the Bible daily, and studies books about missionary life and methods. A map of western China hanging in his dorm room guides Lincoln's prayers and reminds him of his calling (photo 2). He aspires to join friends already employed there who use their professional skills as a means to the religious end of converting others.

As Lincoln pursues a calling, he negotiates the relationship between his faith and field of study, which has implications for action in everyday life. Lincoln approaches his life as a student with prayer: ". . . I pray for my study every day. . . . [And] pray for . . . each of the courses every day. This is very important." Amidst the pressure to complete difficult assignments in the computer lab, the Bible informs his relationship to his work (photo 3).

PHOTO 2. "So this map is important for me . . . every evening I pray before the map . . ." (Lincoln Zhang).



PHOTO 3. "... this board is very important because this is maybe some of us they graduate in future and they will live on this. This is a board and we can program on that. We are hardware designers" (Lincoln Wu).



So we were doing this lab and we stayed up until 2 a.m., but nothing made any progress. But nobody wanted to leave. But I remembered the verse in the Bible [about resting] so I went back to get some sleep in my apartment. . . . And I also went to the church, went to the fellowship regularly. So I spent less time in the lab, but also I could get the lab done.

While his friends pressed on sleeplessly into the night, Lincoln rested. “And the next morning,” he recalls, “when I came to the lab, I discovered, I knew the problem, where the problem is and I knew how to solve that.” To him, it is very clear that, “according to [his] own ability, [he] could not figure out the least of that [problem].” As far as Lincoln is concerned, God provided the answer.

Each week, Paul Wang meets with other Chinese Christians for one-on-one mentoring sessions with members of his group (photo 4). Along with their interest in doctrine and Christian outreach, Paul notes that people in his group are “very interested in how to connect their faith and theology into their professional career or their . . . academics.” He instructs them, saying, “. . . stay in your profession to influence [others]. To show God’s glory . . . Stay there, you know, concentrate most of your time there. That’s your call. That’s your gift.”

Although he has never met Paul, Ming Zhang (Taiwan) carries a similar sentiment into his laboratory. Prayer during his 15-minute walk to campus prepares him for his day; and to keep his faith on his mind, he listens to gospel or contemporary Christian music on his iPod as he works. Likewise, Ming finds inspiration and solace in a ceramic memento he keeps on his lab bench (i.e., lab table) inscribed with Psalm 119:18, which petitions “Lord open my eyes that I may see wondrous things” (photo 5). Other Bible verses (Psalm 37:3–5, 7) in Chinese are tacked to a bulletin board in sight of where he works.

PHOTO 4. “Yeah this is the student union, you know. I spend a lot of time there, eating; also especially Bible studying with [fellow] students” (Paul Wang).



PHOTO 5. “[W]henever I feel frustrated or depressed by the result of certain experiments and I look at the words of God, that could refresh me and cheer me up” (Ming Zhang).



The significance of praying, listening to Christian music, and having scripture in sight are best understood within the realities of scientific experimentation. Ming and several other interviewees describe scientific discovery in the lab as a long, slow process of one failed experiment after another. With an uneasy laugh, Ming explained that “frustration probably happens more than success in our study, so most of the time you fail—you fail. You fail at this experiment, you fail at another experiment.” Prayer on the way to the lab, religious music while working, and inspirational Bible verses comfort, reassure, and encourage Ming.

Ming’s practices and reminders also frame his work in a larger narrative context. Ming’s explanation of the meaning of Psalm 119:18 illuminates the way these reminders serve as markers that situate his work as a calling in his narrative.

It’s a good reminder for me that . . . what I’m doing now is not only for me to get a degree or just to publish a paper. While they’re important processes . . . they are just tools of the process. They are not the goal. They are not the ultimate mission I have. So what I want to do is . . . explore the wonders that God creates. So . . . whenever I feel frustrated or depressed by the result of certain experiments and I look at the words of God that could refresh me and cheer me up.

Psalm 119:18 represents Ming’s “ultimate mission,” his calling, to be a scientist who “explores the wonders that God creates.” Along with other mementos, this Psalm focuses his attention on the trajectory of his calling and infuses his this-worldly work in the lab with other-worldly significance.

Through their participation in evangelical congregations and college groups, these men and women were socialized into a variety of narrative communities in which the stories of who they are, what it means to be a Christian, and how their faith relates (or not) to the many domains of modern life are

part of the conversation. In these contexts, participants learn to transpose the idea of a calling onto their academic lives and career aspirations.

Maintaining a Calling

It is one thing for students to infuse their coursework and aspirations with other-worldly significance while living in the United States, but what happens when people who claim to have a similar calling graduate and return home? As was true of participants I interviewed in the midst of their programs of study, returnees to China described having a calling that infuses their this-worldly work with other-worldly meaning.

Peng Zhu and Jane Ma, a husband and wife, returned to mainland China in 2002 after completing their academic training in the natural sciences in the United States. They went home with an aspiration to propagate their faith among college students. To do so they took jobs as university professors and used their positions of influence as a platform to evangelize. Their efforts gave birth to a ministry for college students called Issachar's Seed,² which was several hundred strong when I met them in China in 2009. They encourage the students under their spiritual care to use their professional pursuits as a vehicle for the Christian message. The group's vision, according to one student I met at the Issachar's Seed meeting I visited, "was to preach the gospel all over the China, every part of China. So we [would] graduate and . . . go to different parts of China and preach gospel . . ." And a group of students influenced by Pastor Zhu was establishing a business in a nearby country, where they planned to use their professional skills to support themselves while sharing their faith with coworkers, neighbors, and friends.

According to Jane Ma, their "call" is to send others as professionals to spread Christianity, but not to go themselves. As a capable researcher with a comfortable appointment in a Chinese university, she is successful in her lab's official purpose of making scientific discoveries. Likewise, she uses her position to proselytize people in her lab. With satisfaction in her voice, Jane explained, "Today I have my own lab and use my position to share [my faith] with the people who work in my lab. They often leave as Christians." While the use of workplace power for religious ends clearly runs counter to western standards of conduct and Chinese law (see Chan 2009:46–50), it stands as an example of one way in which people who regard their this-worldly professions as a religious vocation mobilize them for other-worldly ends.

Jin Guo characterizes his return to China as "God's hand moving me back, in his own way." His success in a consulting firm allows him to live a comfortable lifestyle with ample free time to spend as a lay minister in a large house

²The name Issachar's Seed comes from a passage in the Old Testament that describes the Israelite tribe of Issachar as those who "understood the times and what to do" (1 Chron. 12:32). It is a pseudonym intended to reflect the logic of the group's actual name.

church network. "I spend all of my free time serving my church. I preach almost every Sunday. And I'm considering becoming a full-time evangelist. I have sufficient time to attend seminary, since my job gives me a lot of free time." This self-described "missionary" strives to "be a good testimony to [his] co-workers." He also hosts "a Bible study at home for people in [his] community." Jin is convinced that "God didn't just send me back for my sake, but for the sake of everyone in my neighborhood, workplace, bus, even taxi drivers. If they accept [the gospel] I have them say the sinners' prayer and lead them to church." He sees himself as part of the next wave of Christian witness in China: professionals who use their careers as a conduit for evangelization.

The kind of Christianity Jin practices is risky business in China, where independent Christian pursuits—i.e., those not associated with the state-sanctioned Three-Self Church, or "black market" religion as Yang (2006) calls them—are largely prohibited. As a result, Jin knows what it is like to be startled awake early in the morning by the confident knock of a Federal Security Bureau officer. He has seen the fear on the face of a wife as one is led away for questioning. He is familiar with the uncertainty of not knowing how long one will be detained for so-called subversive Christian activities. He also knows the relief of being released. Even though the prospect of another run-in is very real, Jin is undaunted. He believes that he is called to these pursuits.

From the perspective of her career, Ying Sun's return to China was not exactly successful. In fact, she admits to being frustrated about the state of her professional life. Initially, she spent several months trying to figure out what she could do professionally, but has not found a job in her field that suits her. Even though she finds some measure of satisfaction in her role as a wife and mother, Ying would like to work outside of the home. "So it's just still trying to figure out what is the best in terms of professional career and—so right now my concentration is still my family because now there tends to be more responsibility now because of all the kids and . . . then so I have to really spend time on them and be blessed."

Ying makes every effort to influence her extended family with the Christian message. She is a resource to believing members of her family: Ying attends church with them, explains Christianity, and circulates religious books for them to read. Ying had a hand in the conversions of her mother and mother-in-law. Her father, although he has not yet converted, has adopted some Christian practices such as "reading [the] Bible and trying to solve problems . . . applying the things that he learned from the Bible." To Ying, it seems that "there's just people who constantly want to hear about Christianity" and she is glad to share her faith with them.

Huang-Fu Gao makes his living as a computer instructor in a Beijing college. He also does freelance work as a consultant, translating, and as an adjunct in computer science at several colleges and professional schools. Huang-Fu uses his role as an instructor to befriend students and invite them to the college student Christian fellowship he started. On Sundays, Huang-Fu gives sermons in the house church network to which he belongs and

occasionally teaches Sunday school. In addition to these other-worldly activities, he teaches in an underground seminary and discusses “philosophy and theology on the internet and in chat rooms about two hours a week.”

The theme of a calling echoed across all returnees’ narratives. None regarded their work as professors, engineers, consultants, or business people as a mundane occupation. Instead, they shared an extraordinary task: accomplishing other-worldly purposes in, through, and even despite their work. For them, the idea of a calling animates their everyday lives and transforms work into a religious expression.

THE NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF A CALLING

When the international students in this study invoke the notion of a calling in the stories they tell about their lives, they are saying a great deal, not just about the relationship between their faith and academic or professional pursuits, but also about who they are. In describing their lives in terms of a calling, a central component in their sense of self is revealed, what McAdams calls a personal myth. A personal myth is “a psychological structure that evolves slowly over time, infusing life with unity and purpose” (McAdams 1993:20). Like any good myth, this self-defining story is structured around a plot, with compelling characters, and an overarching theme that unifies the various accounts and episodes of a person’s life history, giving the story some semblance of coherence. This central theme, McAdams argues, “contains and expresses a characteristic set of images” (1993:55) around which people construct a personal myth, a process he characterizes as an “imaginative reconstruction of the past in light of an envisioned future” (1993:53). For interviewees, the idea of a calling offers a theme around which compelling and coherent narratives of the self are constructed.

A personal myth does not exist in a vacuum. The narratives that individuals tell about themselves are woven into the fabric of congregational stories, myths that “ground our history in something bigger . . . speak of divine actions in ways that define who we are . . . [and] are likely to tell something about whom people identify with and how they understand their own lives” (Ammerman 1998:95). A calling becomes part of an international student’s sense of self through the repertoire of narratives made available to them in congregations and international student ministries. As they participate in congregational life and volunteer in ministries, interviewees become familiar with what Somers calls public narratives, which are “attached to cultural and institutional formations larger than the single individual, to intersubjective networks or institutions, however local or grand, micro- or macro-stories” (Somers 1994:619). These stories provide participants with a sense of “who we are,” people with a calling to believe, to witness, to behave morally, and to accomplish God’s purposes through their work.

Study participants also cast themselves in a metanarrative which portrays God as active in human history to save the world through the efforts of ministers, missionaries, and ordinary people. By incorporating these stories into their autobiographical narratives (Ammerman 2003; cf., Somers 1994), individuals are situated in the relational and cultural terrain of public narratives and meta-narratives in which having a calling is expected. These narratives, following Yamane, constitute a “vehicle through which people grasp the meaning of lived experience by configuring and reconfiguring past experiences in ongoing stories which have certain plots or directions which guide the interpretation of those experiences” (2000:183).

Stories about the way the world works, what it means to be a member of a particular community of faith, and the self also serve as “a precondition for knowing what to *do*” (cf., Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Somers 1994:618, her emphasis). Calling engenders actions which range from attempts to convert one’s co-workers or family to using one’s area of expertise to affect policy, to pursue social justice, or to act morally and ethically in the conduct of one’s work responsibilities all in pursuit of other-worldly purposes. While these actions are never without some measure of risk and uncertainty, a calling superintends these feelings. Practices such as applying principles from the Bible to everyday life, praying for success, or visual reminders (e.g., Ming’s Psalm 119 figurine) regulate feelings and manage the uncertainties of navigating academic life in a foreign language, culture, and educational system (cf., Williams 2010). In turn, the belief that God is behind favorable outcomes establishes a foundation of confidence upon which future action is based.

Calling builds upon this confidence to overcome the risks, for example, associated with overtly propagating or practicing one’s faith outside of the official boundaries in China. Interviewees and the literature (e.g., Bays 2003; China Aid Association USA 2010; Grim and Finke 2011; Kindop 2004; Yang 2005) attest to the perils of unsanctioned religious pursuits. However, when a person is called to bring about change through their career, the belief that God is on one’s side mitigates these tensions. To be certain, risk is still a very real factor, but exercising agency to accomplish religious ends because of a belief that one is called to do so by God helps to overcome individual and social barriers to action. When aversions to risk are reduced, people are more likely to act on the impulse a sense of calling engenders, to venture out in business, politics, government, and the like, with the intent of achieving other-worldly goals through this-worldly professions.

FROM CAGE TO BRIDGE

However victorious capitalism may have become in exerting its power over people and confining some to the so-called iron cage, the search for a

vocational calling “anchored in the substance of religion” (Weber 2002:124) has not been abandoned entirely. Where Weber anticipated the widespread disenchantment of everyday life, this is not the case for the evangelical Christian international students in this study. Instead, their experience is one of enchantment, so much so that participants may seem to regard everything as part of a divine plan. Indeed, as a central theme in the story of the self and as a guiding principle for action, the idea of a calling establishes remarkably “powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations” among these women and men (Geertz 1973:90).

For study participants, everyday life becomes enchanted as the idea of a calling bridges the taken-for-granted boundaries—however fixed or permeable, actual or perceived—that exist between other-worldly and this-worldly contexts, relationships, and resources. On the bridge of a calling someone like Ming, for example, carries a religious motivation to “explore the wonders that God creates” into an otherwise secular evolutionary biology laboratory. In the lab, Ming embodies a response to cynical colleagues who wonder how a responsible scientist could possibly be an evangelical Christian by maintaining a productive research agenda. As is evident in the discussion above, Ming is not alone: interviewees consistently describe ways the idea of a calling acts as a bridge over which other-worldly meanings and agendas are carried into their this-worldly academic and professional pursuits.

This-worldly resources also cross over the bridge of a calling into other-worldly territory, where they are accumulated, transposed, and mobilized. Cultural capital including English language proficiency, fluency in American culture, and the ability to live and learn in a cross-cultural setting become part of a toolkit for accomplishing other-worldly purposes. Skills such as performance, administration, and the production of knowledge are employed in interviewees’ campus ministry groups, congregations, and underground churches. And the prestige of advanced degrees and the social networks fostered by higher education represent a valuable cache of social capital that may be drawn upon in religious settings and for religious ends.

Those familiar with Warner’s “Boundaries and Bridges” (1997) may detect echoes of his thinking when I describe calling as a bridge. Warner uses the term “bridges” to discuss the role of embodied ritual—making music together, collective ritual movement, and sharing food—in forging social bonds between people and in the creation of interesting forms of hybridity in religious communities. While the idea of a calling is no less embodied and also results in curious hybridities (e.g., an evangelical Christian from Taiwan pursuing a PhD in evolutionary biology in Boston), my use of the term bridge differs from Warner’s. Here bridging refers to the ways identities and actions may extend other-worldly ideas across taken-for-granted boundaries and how this-worldly resources may be appropriated for religious ends.

CONCLUSION

This research offers a new way to think about the idea of a calling. Previous research on international students and Christianity has focused on conversion, religious experiences, and beliefs (Abel 2006; Osburn 2005; Ramanayake 2002; Rawson 1999; Wang and Yang 2006; Zhang 2006). Others have taken a historical approach to exploring evangelicalism among American-educated Chinese who return home (Bieler 2004; Hamrin and Bieler 2009, 2010, 2011). This study adds to this small body of literature by exploring the narrative construction of a calling, the consequences of a calling in everyday life, and its persistence among returnees. Likewise, the narrative and visual approach of this research makes a methodological contribution to the sociology of religion.

The novelty of this research, however, must be balanced with the limitations of the project. It would be premature to suggest, for example, that all evangelical international students for whom conservative Christianity is salient will, sooner or later, regard their career as a calling. Likewise, it would be a mistake to assert that all those who return home with a well-developed sense of calling will remain committed to that way of life. By focusing on these international students, others within the population were not observed. Perhaps internationals with different national or religious backgrounds associate otherworldly purposes with their vocation. For some, a degree from an American college or university might represent the opportunity to pursue dreams of fame, fortune, or power and may have little or no connection to religion, spirituality, or the common good.

There are some indications, however, that the idea of a calling extends beyond the people described in this research. On a national level, similar methods, programs, and narratives are found among Christian organizations that cater to international students. I observed these similarities at the annual meeting of the Association of Christians Ministering to International Students (2007), and through conversations with students and leaders in the international student program of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship's triennial Urbana conference (2006). It is plausible that international students may emerge from these settings with callings similar to those described in this research. Even so, the prevalence and persistence of a calling among evangelical international students remains an open question and awaits future research.

Among study participants, the idea of a calling offers a compelling way to organize the self around a coherent past, to navigate the terrain of the present, and to anticipate a meaningful future. A calling helps to situate an autobiographical sense of self within the larger relational and cultural framework expressed in evangelicalism's public narratives and metanarratives. A calling also guides action in everyday life and it superintends feelings, uncertainties, and risks associated with living in a foreign country, academic life and scientific discovery, and the public expression of faith while living abroad and upon

a student's return home. As these women and men pursue callings as professionals in the United States, in their home countries, or farther afield, they represent an important conduit through which Christianity is practiced, shaped, and propagated globally.

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