

**From Folk Religion to Evangelical Christianity:
A Case Study on the Process and Challenges of Retirement-age Chinese Males
Converting from Folk Taoism to Evangelical Christianity in Hong Kong**

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Introduction

This Hong Kong case study considers conversions from indigenous folk religions to Christianity. This case study can resonate with experiences outside of Hong Kong, such as ethnic churches in the Western world, where folk religion and syncretism are relevant issues. Conversion to Christianity in these contexts is difficult to describe and analyze since it involves “the complexities of interwoven religious, cultural, and societal issues affecting and effecting change.”¹ Thus, this paper demonstrates a case study of how to handle conversion from folk religion to evangelical Christianity. For the purpose of the case study narrative, the discussion of folk Taoism will be based on the importance of individuals being a part of a community rather than representing an academic pursuit of knowledge of Taoist philosophy.

Lewis Rambo argues that “We are all inherently connected through the sociocultural world, and perceived spiritual realities are generally shared, not unique. All conversions are mediated through people, institutions, communities, and groups.”² Given Rambo’s assertion, how should we understand the Hong Kong Christian context? The Roman Catholic Church was recognized in Hong Kong as a mission prefecture in 1841 and became a diocese in 1946. The presence of the Protestant community in Hong Kong dates back to 1841, and apart from many indigenous denominations, most of the major international denominations and former mission agencies have ecclesial branches in Hong Kong.³ As of 2016, about 379,000 Catholics and 480,000 Protestant Christians were in Hong Kong; 11.7% of Hong Kong’s total population.⁴

Most Chinese senior citizens are likely to be or have been participants in folk religion. As Paul N. Markham says, “Conversion is often cited as the central point of Christian religious identity—the moment at which or the process through which one becomes a Christian.”⁵ However, conversion denotes more than basic religious experiences. It generally also involves sociomoral reorientation and can be a complex process involving personal, social, cultural, and religious forces that impact an individual’s life in several ways. Thus, it is important that the spiritual, psychological, and social needs of the population are attended to after conversion.

With this in mind, this study analyzes the experience of converts from folk Taoism to Christianity in Hong Kong. To accomplish this, I conducted qualitative interviews with retirement-age male Christian converts who had experience with folk Taoism. During the interviews, conducted in 2014, I aimed to assess whether retirement-age Christian converts

¹ Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), xi.

² Rambo, 1.

³ Hong Kong SAR Government, “Hong Kong: The Facts - Religion and Custom,” last modified May 2016, <https://www.gov.hk/en/about/abouthk/factsheets/docs/religion.pdf>.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Paul N. Markham, “Conversion,” in *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics*, ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), loc. 7649–701, Kindle.

understand the meaning of converting from folk Taoism to Christianity and whether they are able to commit to Christianity after their extensive folk Taoism experiences.

Defining folk Taoism

In order to explore the similarities between other pantheistic cultures and this cause, I would first like to define Taoism. Taoism was founded in China by Laozi in the sixth century. As one of the three most prominent religions in China, it displays features of folk religions, including pantheism, occultism, and superstition, influencing the general public with its values and general morality. Like other pantheistic religions, the practice of folk Taoism involves fortune-telling, divination, and use of charms. Folk Taoism is syncretic in that it is highly influenced by Buddhism and Chinese culture. This can be seen in the similarities of Taoism with Buddhism, such as the construction of its temples, hierarchies of its clergy, practice of ceremonies, and use of canons.⁶ Folk Taoism is one of the most prominent indigenous religions in China, with an important aspect of believers gathering more for the social aspect than for pursuing academic knowledge of Taoist philosophy. While China and Hong Kong have different cultures, there are still underlying influences of Taoism in Hong Kong.⁷

Methodology

The data in this study comprises qualitative interviews I conducted in Hong Kong on March 9, 2014 and March 29, 2014 with Adam (alias), who is in his 80s, with supplementary information provided by Adam's brother, Benjamin (alias), who is in his 70s, and Adam's son, Caleb (alias). Adam and Caleb attended the same Baptist Church, while Benjamin attended a nearby Evangelical Free Church of China. Caleb was the deacon of his Church, while Adam was the elders' fellowship leader and worship leader.

This research takes a phenomenological approach as I analyzed the interview participants' lived experiences through bracketing my own experience to construct the life world of the participants. After this, I conducted a reflexivity exercise to consider how I participated in the interview, as well as the strength and weakness of the data. I collected the data through two interviews: one with Adam and Benjamin, and one with Caleb. I chose to use semi-structured interview as a method because a conversation between interviewer and participants enables the collection of detailed and rich information about individuals' lives, experiences, and behaviors, and how they understand and make sense of the world. The reason for interviewing them separately was so Caleb could give a more genuine depiction of how he perceived Adam and Benjamin's conversions. The purpose of drawing from the experiences of Adam, Benjamin, and Caleb is not meant provide an all-encompassing, generalizable account but, rather, to illustrate a narrative account that can resonate with other Christian converts in various contexts. Therefore, the point is not to interview many individuals to come up with a conclusive theory but, instead, to illustrate their narrative accounts so readers can be immersed and attempt to understand the context through the lens of my interview participants.

The questions were generally split into four parts: Adam and Benjamin's reactions to their family evangelizing before their conversion, their service at the Taoist temple, their service in the Christian Church, and what they perceive their difference is before and after conversion. I then analyzed the interviews based on the verbal content alone, without addressing non-verbal

⁶ Samuel Hio-Kee Ooi, "A Study of Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare from a Chinese Perspective," *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 9, no. 1 (2006): 143-61.

⁷ Tik-Sang Liu, "A Nameless but Active Religion: An Anthropologist's View of Local Religion in Hong Kong and Macau," *The China Quarterly* 174 (2003): 373-94.

cues. The focus of the analysis is on the experience and how the participants felt during the process of conversion, concerned with questions around subjective experience, how the participants perceive and conceptualize their experiences, and what this tells us of the conversion experience.

Adam and Benjamin's Taoism experience

Adam's friend had invited him to join the Taoist temple his friend established when Adam was around fifty years old. Adam participated in their congregation for over ten years and invited Benjamin to participate shortly after Adam joined. Before converting to Taoism, their family worshipped traditional Chinese deities, such as ancestral tablets (祖先), Guan Di (關帝), Kitchen God (灶君), and Earth God (土地), in a cultural rather than a religious manner. Despite participating in the temple life for many years on a directorate level, Adam reported he did not understand what he claimed to believe in: the temple, though under the realm of the Hong Kong Taoist Association, was originally a cover for gambling because small-time gambling would be deemed as unlawful assembly. The Taoist initiation process involved potential members being introduced by an existing member, and then their names would be put forth for consideration by their spiritual master (祖師), Lu Dong-bin (呂洞賓), through Fuji (扶乩), a form of planchette writing that uses sand as a medium. After Lu accepted them as members, he gave them new names, and the temple provided them with ceremonial uniforms, Kasaya (袈裟). Adam and Benjamin did not acquire other deities for worshipping at home after their conversion. Both Adam and Benjamin did not study *Tao Te Ching*, the Taoist classic, nor did they fully understand the meaning behind the ritualistic rites they performed in the Taoist ceremonies. A possible reason Adam and Benjamin converted to Christianity easily is because of their loose ties to and lack of understanding of Taoism. They are suitable informants because of their involvement both in folk Taoism and evangelical Christianity, having held leadership roles in both their worshipping communities. These interviews demonstrate there is no one way of conversion, and the evangelical Christian Church in the majority world needs to be in a supporting position for converts from various backgrounds.

The importance of previous religious affiliations lies in the fact that believers attempt to lean upon the assistance of what they believe to be good spirits, and those spirits do not base their functionality on morality. It is common in Chinese culture to believe in the existence of good and evil spirits, where good spirits protect one from attacks by evil spirits, though the good spirits do not necessarily have to act morally.⁸ While this assumption does not cover folk religions across the board, most do have a worldview where the spiritual realm is prominent, unlike the post-Christendom Western world. This can be seen in the persisting belief of the Chinese people that the spirits of their ancestors or those of historical figures and heroes are good spirits that protect them. The Chinese people's connection with the spirit differs from that of Western Christian Pentecostals because Chinese spirits are not considered gifts of God manifested in forms of tongues or other spiritual gifts which demonstrate a close relation to the Christian God but a pragmatic, functional relationship where respects paid to the good spirits will help ward off bad ones.

In Adam and Benjamin's folk Taoism experience, they encountered the spiritual realm through Fuji and religious rites. Fuji, known as automatic writing, is mostly used in folk Taoism for prescribing healing therapy, casting out demons and evil spirits, and promoting members within the Taoist ranks. The Fuji operators collect background information from those

⁸ Arnold M.K. Yeung, "Union with Tao in Tao Te Ching: A Dialogue Between a Taoist and a Christian," *Dialogue & Alliance* 5, no. 1 (1991): 68–80.

concerned before conducting the religious rites. Thus, Adam believed that their knowledge was not from the spiritual realm but rather from human manipulation.⁹ While Adam considered this process to be human manipulation, Benjamin found it to be spiritual intervention. Fuji can be interpreted as mere acting or even motor automatism, which exists in many folk religions and occultism. Caleb considers Fuji to be in conflict with his Christian faith because he thinks that whether its powers are derived from the spiritual realm or not, its use allows for developing habitual tendencies to rely on a process to inform them of what to do, which might be carried forward to evangelical Christian practices.

Other than Fuji, Adam and Benjamin also underwent training for Taoist religious rites, which included chanting and musical performances (念經打齋). These events were of a more social nature, as believers would gather for blessings and a meal. Roles in their religious rites were assigned by Adam's master (師父), who would take up the more spiritually-inclined role of the sacraments, such as Po De Yu (破地獄). Caleb considered Adam to be participating in the less spiritual parts, such as chanting. Contrary to the usual understanding that Taoists charge phenomenal amounts for religious funeral sacraments, Adam said they merely received red packets (利是) of a nominal sum and provided service only to members of their temple. These religious rites are common in folk religions in the majority world and have a strong presence even after conversion to evangelical Christianity.

The influence of prior religious experience and contextualization on conversion

For converts to better connect with evangelical Christianity and accept the evangelical Christian faith as part of their own culture, rather than seeing it as a foreign colonialist religion, it is important that converts and their religious leaders address the issue of contextualization: "Christianity is a world religion, but it also has its own distinctive features and characteristics in specific places as it is always embodied in individual and particular contexts. In other words, whenever Christian message is spread to a new world, the process of contextualizing has always been happening."¹⁰ This is obviously a difficult area to address, and it would benefit the religious leaders, in this case the evangelical Christian churches, to assist their congregations in bridging the theological, contextual, and experiential gaps.¹¹ There are no cultural vacuums, so when a new religion such as evangelical Christianity enters a local community and is set to convert new followers, it must directly address the existing cultural context, since the existing culture inevitably influences the local evangelical Christian converts. In the case of evangelical Christianity entering Hong Kong, the Church cannot simply assume that the converts will favor Western culture simply because Christianity was brought to them by Western missionaries. Adam reported that part of his hesitation in accepting the evangelical Christian faith when Caleb first converted to evangelical Christianity was not due to theological issues but rather issues with cultural and religious identity, such as evangelical Christianity being a foreign religion. Adam's case demonstrates that, to aid in transition from one religion to another, it is worthwhile for the incoming religion, in this case evangelical Christianity, to devote more resources to investigating how to contextualize their religion within the local

⁹ Ooi, 143–61.

¹⁰ Hye-jin Lee, "Comparing the African Veneration of Ancestors with Korean Ancestor Worship in Relation to the Attempts to Reconcile It with Christianity," *Asian American Theological Forum*, October 16, 2015, <https://aatfweb.org/2015/10/16/comparing-the-african-veneration-of-ancestors-with-korean-ancestor-worship-in-relation-to-the-attempts-to-reconcile-it-with-christianity/>.

¹¹ Ooi, 143-61.

tradition, such as the Chinese culture.¹² In Adam and Benjamin's case, since they were not financially dependent on the Taoist temple, this factor did not add another difficulty for them to convert to Christianity. However, for others who may depend financially on their religious organizations, it can prove much more difficult; therefore, it is important to contextualize evangelical Christianity.

Traditional folk religion practices will inevitably affect how new evangelical Christian converts view evangelical Christianity and its sacraments. With people converting to evangelical Christianity in Hong Kong, the converts' previous religious experience will influence the way they interpret sacraments in the Reformed traditions and practices.¹³ For retirement-age evangelical Christian converts from folk Taoism backgrounds, chanting on religious occasions might have been habitual.¹⁴ Retirement-age evangelical Christian converts with experience in other religions also might have been accustomed to having religious language that differs from the language of daily use, which allows the religious language to take on a higher status than daily language. When converting to the evangelical Christian faith, new evangelical Christian converts can be encouraged to memorize Bible verses and creeds to fill the void of previous religious practice, specifically Taoist chanting and memorization. For funeral rites, instead of Taoist chanting, Adam now participates as part of the Christian Church choir, which avoids the Taoist factor and yet still allows the new evangelical Christian converts to participate in paying respect to the deceased.

When pastoring converts from folk Taoism to evangelical Christianity, it is important for the religious leaders of the new faith to consider that the converts come from a specific communal culture. For example, the postmodern Christian culture, having minimal communal engagement, might be difficult for Taoist converts coming from a communal culture to integrate into. Alternatively, converts might feel the need to overcompensate with their involvement in the new Church, feeling that the more they perform, the more they earn their salvation. Thus, it is important for religious leaders, such as pastors, to stress that salvation is performed by God and not earned by the work of converts. Churches can intentionally create communities where converts can be nurtured and not just focused on participation and performance.¹⁵

It is understandable for retirement-age Chinese evangelical Christian converts to be highly influenced by Chinese culture, which has been influenced by folk Taoism religious rites, much like other people groups from majority world countries. In contextualizing evangelical Christianity to the local Chinese community, evangelical Christian churches should be able to offer simple yet respectful sacraments to capture the symbolic meaning of Chinese traditions so new evangelical Christian converts can understand the Gospel and yet be comfortable with the religion since it is still within the context of their own culture. For example, after a retirement-age individual converts to evangelical Christianity, instead of worshipping the ancestral tablets with incense, they can replace the tablets with photos of the deceased decorated with fresh flowers and pray to God about their memories of the deceased, instead of offering incense. This would allow retirement-age evangelical Christian converts to feel more at ease instead of asking them to abandon their ancestors entirely after converting to evangelical

¹² Phill Parshall, "Going Too Far?," in *Perspectives on the World Evangelical Christian Movement: A Reader*, ed. Ralph D. Winter (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2009), 663–67.

¹³ Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 75–92, 203–16.

¹⁴ Col 2:8; Eric Reinders, "The Economies of Temple Chanting and Conversion in China," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 31, no. 4 (2007): 188–92.

¹⁵ Gordon T. Smith, *Transforming Conversion: Rethinking the Language and Contours of Christian Initiation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 3–8.

Christianity. In the majority world, the spiritual realm is real, and as pastors, it is important to address these issues rather than dismiss them.

Adam and Benjamin's conversion experience

After experiencing Fuji and religious rites, Adam and Benjamin both converted from folk Taoism to evangelical Christianity for different reasons. In 2000, Adam traveled to Canada and saw the government's unprompted issuing of his new driver's license as a sign of Jesus providing for him. When Adam returned to Hong Kong, due to interpersonal issues in the Taoist community, Adam stopped attending his temple and, as a result, lost all his friends. In 2003, Caleb invited Adam to attend Sunday service together before going to lunch, which from then on became a habitual activity. At a Christmas evangelical event in 2003, Adam converted and, in 2004, was baptized. Caleb noted their relationship was rebuilt through regular Bible study together.

Benjamin converted in 2006 when he was suffering from appendicitis and was baptized in 2008. Adam and Benjamin claimed they were open-minded when their children converted to evangelical Christianity. However, according to Caleb, they were against it when Caleb converted to evangelical Christianity, especially since all of Caleb's siblings converted within a short span of time. Caleb understood Adam's disapproval of his conversion as being rooted in his fear that his children were being conned and because Sunday service deprived Adam of spending time with his children. However, "Through conversion an individual may gain some sense of ultimate worth, and may participate in a community of faith that connects him or her to both a rich past and an ordered and exciting present which generates a vision of the future that mobilizes energy and inspires confidence."¹⁶ Caleb noted that, as Adam is outgoing, it is easy for him to find his place in a Church community. This transition into a Christian community may not be as easy for those with different dispositions, and pastoral work is not meant to be one-size-fits-all.

Fellowship, discipleship, and prayer: The Christian Church's post-conversion support

Based on Adam and Benjamin's experience converting from folk Taoism to evangelical Christianity, the major factors at play in the conversion of retirement-age male converts from folk Taoism are fellowship, discipleship, and prayer. Immediately after the interview, I had doubts as to whether Adam truly believed in evangelical Christianity, as his point of conversion was weak, as was his commitment to Jesus Christ and his evangelical Christian Church. As Rambo suggests, "While this transformation occurs through the mediation of social, cultural, personal, and religious forces, I believe that conversion needs to be radical, striking to the root of the human predicament. For me, that root is a vortex of vulnerability."¹⁷ Caleb confirmed that Adam understood evangelical Christianity much better than folk Taoism and considered Adam's faith to be solid, so perhaps Adam found it difficult to express eloquently. Although Adam's precise moment of conversion was not initially convincing, it is mainly because much of the work, both in terms of praying and evangelizing, had been performed diligently by his children beforehand. Conversion is rarely just one point in time, which is why, if it is interpreted that way, many like Adam and Benjamin would struggle to speak meaningfully about their conversion experience. Adam told Caleb that folk Taoism is unsatisfying, while evangelical Christianity is, as it offers love, forgiveness, peace, and ultimately, hope. In terms

¹⁶ Rambo, 2.

¹⁷ Rambo, xii.

of fellowship, Caleb concluded that companionship and sharing between family members, especially when Adam was in need, was a big attraction for him. Caleb commented that Adam had feared death before his conversion; though changes were not immediate after his conversion, Adam's mindset altered gradually. Drawing from the understanding of Adam's personal journey from one religion to another, conversion is a slow and incremental process, and that process can have a positive impact on the convert's life and worldview if their conversion is allowed to take a natural course in a prolonged manner.¹⁸

Though pursuing the points above to solidify their faith, Adam and Benjamin are still lacking in their conversion in the public denunciation of previous religious affiliations. They merely stopped attending Taoist events. Adam and Benjamin said that neither of them faced any struggles when converting from folk Taoism to evangelical Christianity. Neither Adam nor Benjamin acknowledges spiritual ties with folk Taoism, though it does not mean that the rites they performed lack a habitual influence or are not spiritual in nature. Living within a supportive evangelical Christian community and having undergone baptism, even without formally cutting ties with folk Taoism, has worked for Adam and Benjamin. There are no specific paradigms for moving from one religion to another per se; religious leaders simply examine the method of cutting ties in light of the fact that stating specific necessary paradigms will lead to mere legalism.¹⁹

Conclusion

Through this paper, those who attempt to understand the emotional and cultural processes of religious conversion can identify the importance of appreciating that different ways and methods can lead different people to Jesus Christ. In this case, both Adam and Benjamin are retirement-age Chinese men and would be more interested in establishing better relationships with their immediate family. In leading them to Jesus Christ, evangelical Christian churches need to satisfy their need for companionship and for face within the evangelical Christian Church community instead of asking them to blatantly reject their previous ties with folk Taoism, as they have been in folk Taoism for over ten years and have linked it to their own identity and self-worth.

This case study is relevant for other folk religions in other parts of the world because of the Church's potential lack of knowledge of folk religion, the desire of the believers to seek out religion, and the uniqueness of each case in converting to Christianity. This paper demonstrates the need for fellowship, discipleship, and prayer, while not forcing one way of conversion. In summary, evangelical Christian churches in the majority world should seek to contextualize the Gospel to better suit the local Chinese community, both for existing Christians and for potential believers. The Christian Church needs to be aware of the potential needs of converts from diverse faith backgrounds in order to pastor them according to their specific needs.

¹⁸ Smith, 3-8.

¹⁹ 1 Sam 15:22-23