

Cognitive Collision:  
Chinese Students' Experience of Cognitive Dissonance Regarding Christianity  
in the United States

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This Project is Dedicated to My Dear Parents---

Xin Min Li and Xi Ying Qi

---Who Have Devoted Their Whole Lives to Their Children

### Abstract

This study explored if Chinese students experienced cognitive dissonance when they were exposed to Christianity at a large southeast Christian university in the United States, and what were their responses regarding the reduction, increase or change of the cognitive dissonance after they were exposed to Christianity in the United States. Utilizing a qualitative study, the researcher interviewed twelve undergraduate students who were studying at a large southeast Christian university in the United States with eight primary questions and five sub-questions. The ages of the interviewees in this study were from 18 to 22 years old. The results of the current study indicated that Chinese students experienced cognitive dissonance when they were exposed to Christianity in the United States. The three themes that emerged from those twelve interview responses were awareness, uncertainty, and denial. In addition, those Chinese students tended to reduce their cognitive dissonance either by ignoring the new beliefs or by changing their existing beliefs and accepting Christianity.

*Keywords:* cognitive dissonance, Christianity, Chinese student, the United States

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## Chapter One – Introduction

China is a great country with a long history and cultural tradition. Chiu (2001) asserts that Chinese culture has been dominated by Confucianism for over 2000 years. Confucius as a scholar, teacher and philosopher expounded the virtues of filial piety, loyalty, social decorum, humility, obedience and self-awareness. He expressed no specific religious beliefs but saw ancestral worship as an acceptable and important ritual. Overall, the Chinese government used Confucianism as a justification to dominate China as it provides a structured, hierarchical life system that can lead to a peaceful and orderly society. After the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the Chinese government declared that they would respect and protect belief in five sanctioned faiths: Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism. However, Chinese students were still required to learn atheism in the Chinese schools (Brown & Tierney, 2009). As for Christianity, students have gained the perception that Christianity is an expression of cultural imperialism, a symbol of stupidity, and a part of mankind's spiritual ballast. Thus, they think that people who are Christians are old, peasants and less educated (Yang, 2005). To sum up, Chinese students are inclined against Christianity.

However, Henley and Schott (1999) stated that Christianity has been the predominant religion in the western world for more than 1000 years and has shaped western culture and beliefs. The United States is one of these western countries where Christianity is the dominant religion. The United States is rooted in Christian principles. America's principal festivals are Christmas and Easter, which are legal holidays in many western countries.

For the purpose of this study, the research participants in the study are limited to Chinese students who are studying in the United States. According to Lindsay and Norman (1977), perception is the process by which organisms attain awareness or understand sensory information

to produce a meaningful experience in the world, which can be influenced by family background, culture, personality and so on. They further explained that sensation and perception are part of one continuous process, which means one's perception changes with different sensory input. Thus, those Chinese students may have different perceptions of Christianity from their previous education-influenced ideas after they go abroad and study in the United States because of the culture differences between China and the United States.

### **Previous Studies**

A large body of research has been conducted in order to understand human beings' psychological and physical reactions to cultural and perceptual differences. Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory demonstrates that people tend to maintain consistency among their cognitive elements, which are attitudes, beliefs, and values. When inconsistencies arise among these cognitive elements, people experience psychological discomfort, which is a component of dissonance. Scholars have studied many variables that are related to this theory. Piety (1966) found that a person's parents' perceptions of the world or the way he or she was raised can be one of the sources for the person's perceptions of the world and it can be one of the sources of cognitive dissonance. Egan, Santos, and Bloom (2007) report that people had a decrease in preference for one of two equally preferred alternatives after they had chosen against it. Chow and Thompson (2003) propose that personal development and cognitive dissonance were inversely related to each other. Matz, Hofstedt, and Wood (2008) focused on personality traits and found that extraverted people are less likely to experience dissonance brought about by exposure to attitudinally inconsistent information than introverted people. In addition, Cooper and Duncan (1971) found that self-esteem was a factor that influenced dissonance.

Studies about ways to reduce cognitive dissonance have been done by researchers as well.

Starzyk, Fabrigar, Soryal, and Fanning (2009) found that people under free-choice conditions experience less cognitive dissonance than people under forced-choice situations when they have inconsistent cognitions with their previous cognitions of the same thing. In addition, maintaining a positive attitude can reduce cognitive dissonance according to Starzyk, Fabrigar, Soryal, and Fanning's study in 2009. Another study done by Ruiz and Tanaka (2001) found that helping behavior from other people can lessen people's cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance can also be reduced through derogating the source of an inconsistency, distraction, misattribution of arousal, ingestion of arousal reducing substances, and maintaining self-affirmation or self-enhancement (Glass, 1964; Zanna & Aziza, 1976; Zanna & Cooper, 1974; Cooper, Zanna, & Taves, 1978; Tesser & Cornell, 1991).

A large body of studies has focused on the history of Christianity in China as well. Lam and Shi (2008) found that religion plays an important role in affecting ethical attitudes though its effect varied with different types of religions. In their study, Christianity was found to be the religion that has the most favorable higher ethical standards. The 21<sup>st</sup> century is a great century, "not only for the advancement of information technology, but also for the advancement of interreligious and intercultural interaction" (Ng, 2005, p. 169).

Though China's economy is developing rapidly, schools are still teaching atheism. Therefore, the transformation of Chinese Christianity from being restricted into a growing religion is still in progress. Because of globalization and advanced transportation, many students go abroad and study in other countries. When people go to another country, they take their culture with them, which may result in a culture collision, especially if the country a person goes to has different religious beliefs from his or her own country. In addition, Xu and Mehta's (2003) study stated that Chinese Buddhists who travelled to Singapore and lived in a Christian

community would experience cognitive dissonance since people around them thought Christianity was the only true belief in the world. However, prior to going to Singapore those Chinese Buddhists had thought their religion was the only true belief in the world. Later, many of these Chinese Buddhists started to deal with the inconsistent belief in their minds by deciding which one was the true belief and some of them became Christians.

Though many studies have been done on cognitive dissonance and people's perceptions of other religions, only limited studies have been done on the relationship of cognitive dissonance to religion and how to reduce the cognitive dissonance caused by religion. Especially, no studies have actually been conducted on how Chinese students understand, view, and react to Christianity when they study in the United States. How Chinese students in the United States perceive and adapt to western religious norms is a valid subject to be studied.

### **Rationale for Study**

After implementing the reform and the opening-up policy in 1979, China went through a tremendous transformation during the next three decades. This transformation has contributed to a more than tenfold increase in GDP (Gross Domestic Product) since 1978, and China stood as the second-largest economy in the world after the United States in 2008 (Central Intelligence Agency, 2009).

Because China has been playing a more significant role in the world under the trend of globalization, Chinese citizens keep trying to adjust themselves and to cope with western cultures and the international economy. To better seek western knowledge and to thoroughly understand western culture, more and more Chinese students have chosen to study abroad in western countries, especially in the United States. According to Lewin (2008), in the 2007-2008 academic year, there were 81,127 students from China enrolled in higher educational institutions

in the United States, increased by 19.8% from the previous year. These Chinese students face severe cultural shock and different social norms from the people in China, and religion turns out to be a significant difference among the many social and academic differences. The intensity of this difference may exist in every aspect of a Chinese student's life, especially if the student attends a Christian university where there are such things as religious convocation, prayer meetings, campus church, and assignments related to Christianity. In China, there are no universities like this.

Therefore, it is important to explore and analyze the Chinese students' cognitive dissonance regarding whether they resist or adapt to Christianity and what their psychological and behavioral changes are. Through this exploration and analysis, these Chinese students' adaptation to American life and culture can be evaluated, which will be helpful for the university to develop attainable programs to assist those students in recognizing and transforming their inadequate sense of western norms and to reduce the culture shock caused by their first personal exposure to Christianity.

Besides, to better communicate cross-culturally and to bridge the gap between different countries caused by religion, it is necessary to pay close attention to the differences between Chinese and American culture. From a religious perspective, American culture is rooted in Christianity, while Chinese culture emphasizes Confucianism and atheism. This difference brings out different communication patterns and different attitudes toward religion. Especially, Christians and Christian schools in the United States need to know more about Chinese students' perception of Christianity to develop suitable ways to talk with the Chinese about religion. Therefore, this study will bring a certain contribution to the entirety of scholarly literature of communication studies.

**Purpose Statement**

The central research question for this study is: What are the Chinese student's perceptions of Christianity, when they are studying in the United States and are exposed to Christianity? The purpose of this study is to discover if the Chinese students experience cognitive dissonance when they are exposed to Christianity at a large southeast Christian university in the United States, and their reactions regarding the reduction, increase or change of the cognitive dissonance after they were exposed to Christianity in the United States. Therefore, this study addresses the following two research questions:

(1) Do Chinese students experience cognitive dissonance when they are studying in the United States and are exposed to Christianity?

(2) How was the cognitive dissonance reduced, increased or changed after the Chinese students were exposed to Christianity in the United States?

**Overview of the Thesis**

This thesis is divided into five chapters and an appendix section. The first chapter provides a brief introduction about Christianity both in China and the United States, the rationale for the study, the rationale for using qualitative research methods, statement of the problem, and the research questions. Chapter two presents a comprehensive review of the literature. The third chapter describes the research methods including strategy of inquiry, interview procedures, interview analysis, and the validation procedures aimed to increase the validity and reliability of the study. Chapter four presents and highlights the results of interviews conducted. It also includes a discussion of the results of the study and the implications for religious practice. Chapter five presents recommendations for future research, the strengths and limitations of the study, and a conclusion.

## Chapter Two – Literature Review

This literature review is divided into two sections. The first section focuses on cognitive dissonance and cognitive dissonance theory. It also reviews several studies that have been done on cognitive dissonance, cognitive dissonance theory, and ways to reduce cognitive dissonance. The second section explores Christianity in the past days of China and Christianity in contemporary China.

### Cognitive Dissonance

Ehinderer and Ojediran (2009) defined cognitive dissonance as “a psychological phenomenon which refers to the discomfort or disequilibrium one experiences between what one already knows or believe in (cognition) and new information, transformation and interpretation” (p. 233). In addition, the social psychologist Festinger described cognitive dissonance as follows:

Dissonance and consonance are relations among cognitions that is, among opinions, beliefs, knowledge of the environment, and knowledge of one's own actions and feelings. Two opinions, or beliefs, or items of knowledge are dissonant with each other if they do not fit together; that is, if they are inconsistent, or if, considering only the particular two items, one does not follow from the other (p. 25).

Many articles in disciplines as diverse as anthropology, economics, history, philosophy, psychology, and sociology have explored the applicability of cognitive dissonance to a wide range of situations.

George and Edward (2009) stated that the discomfort caused by cognitive dissonance triggers a mental recovery process in the affected individual that can lead to “(1) search for information supportive of the held belief coupled with constant attempts to downplay the cognition that resulted in the phenomenon of dissonance, or (2) to a change in belief reflective of

the new condition” (p. 7). They conducted a study about how the degree of personal involvement in a purchase decision affects the information needed to reduce cognitive dissonance associated with the purchase. The results showed that cognitive dissonance as a mediator could interlink people’s purchase involvement and buying behavior.

Specifically, the study revealed that customers tend to seek pre-purchase information to reduce the cognitive dissonance associated with the high purchase involvement in their minds. From the understanding of the pre-purchase information seeking behavior of their customers, the marketers can decide on a number of operational variables, for example, the quantity of information necessary to help reduce cognitive dissonance in the minds of their customers to stimulate their buying behavior. In addition, another finding of the study was that the willingness of a dissonant individual to accept the new cognition increases with the elapse of time from the occurrence of the cognitive dissonance (George & Edward, 2009).

Cognitive dissonance can also be used to prevent negative stereotypes. Presently, negative stereotyping of older workers has been identified as a major factor in employment discrimination against them presently. Gringart, Helmes, and Speelman (2008) sampled 267 employers in Australia and tested three interventions aimed at promoting positive attitudes toward older workers and increasing the likelihood of their getting hired. The results showed that combining cognitive-dissonance-based and information-based interventions in combating hiring discrimination against older adults can promote more favorable attitudes toward older workers and greater preference toward hiring older workers in the workplace. The researchers stated that the results of the current study emphasize the potential of psychological interventions to bring about social change and to enhance compliance with legislation.

Ehintero and Ojediran (2009) conducted a study to identify how a group of pupils who

grew up in different cultural environments approached a problem that required the application of logical and scientific process. Those two cultures were rural non-western culture and urban western culture. The results showed that cognitive dissonance operated to influence how children from non-western Yoruba culture explained the phenomenon of the rainbow. To be specific, the results showed that “the conflict in cognition inherent in the prevailing cultural environment prevented the children from providing a scientific explanation of the rainbow task” (p. 234). This study showed that a person’s perception of a certain thing can be affected by the cultural environment that the person grows up in.

Because of globalization, the workforce is very diverse. Yu and Flaskerud (2007) stated that with the rapid growth of foreign-born nurses working in U.S. health facilities, cultural dissonance between nurse and patients has become an increasingly important issue. They conducted a study to explore this issue and found that cultural dissonance, which many people more commonly call cultural shock, occurs in communication, both verbal and nonverbal. As for the verbal communication, the various elements, such as rhythm, pace, and accent all affect people’s ability to understand one another and engage in effective interactions. Further, the meanings of nonverbal communication behaviors are largely determined by culture. In addition, lack of knowledge of health care and social services in the U.S., including the legal system, may lead to additional problems between the nurse and patient. Another area of difference is in cultural and professional values. The study proved that cultural dissonance can lead to cognitive dissonance for people who work in a place where the culture is different from their culture.

In addition, in 2003, Xu and Mehta conducted a study to explore how religion plays a role in the adjustment to the physical, social, and existential aging processes. Based on the data that they gathered from in-depth interviews with five Buddhists and five Christians, Xu and

Mehta found that Christians who went to a Buddhist country experienced cognitive dissonance.

### **Cognitive Dissonance Theory**

In 1957, Leon Festinger outlined an important theory called cognitive dissonance theory in his book, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Festinger proposed that people tend to maintain consistency among their cognitive elements, which are attitudes, beliefs, and values and so on. When inconsistencies arise among these cognitive elements, people experience psychological discomfort, which is a component of dissonance. The presence of dissonance leads to an unpleasant state. Festinger further proposed that people tend to reduce dissonance by restricting their cognitive systems to restore consistency when the unpleasant state emerges, just as the presence of hunger leads to actions to reduce hunger. Specifically, cognitive dissonance theory can be divided into two phases. The first phase is when people experience psychological discomfort or dissonance. The second phase is when people seek ways to reduce this kind of dissonance to restore consistency (as cited in Matz, Hofstede, & Wood, 2008).

In addition, in 1956, *When Prophecy Fails* was co-authored by Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken and Stanley Schachter. They explained people's reactions to cognitive dissonance are as follows:

Dissonance produces discomfort and, correspondingly, there will arise pressures to reduce or eliminate the dissonance. Attempts to reduce dissonance represent the observable manifestations that dissonance exists. Such attempts may take any or all of three forms. The person may try to change one or more of the beliefs, opinions, or behaviors involved in the dissonance; to acquire new information or beliefs that will increase the existing consonance and thus cause the total dissonance to be reduced; or to forget or reduce the importance of those cognitions that are in a dissonant relationship.

(Festinger, Riecken and Schachter, 1956, p. 25-26)

Kearsley (2010) gives an example of cognitive dissonance:

Consider someone who buys an expensive car but discovers that it is not comfortable on long drives. Dissonance exists between their beliefs that they bought a good car and that a good car should be comfortable. Dissonance could be eliminated by deciding that it does not matter since the car is mainly used for short trips (reducing the importance of the dissonant belief) or focusing on the cars strengths such as safety, appearance, handling (thereby adding more consonant beliefs). The dissonance could also be eliminated by getting rid of the car, but this behavior is a lot harder to achieve than changing beliefs. (p. 1)

Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory inspired an extraordinary amount of exciting research after its publication. Recently, many studies have been done on the relationship of cognitive dissonance to different variables.

In 2007, Egan, Santos, and Bloom raised two questions related to cognitive dissonance theory, which focus on the origins of cognitive dissonance. Their first question was "Does cognitive-dissonance reduction begin to take hold only after much experience with the aversive consequences of dissonance cognitions, or does it begin earlier in development?" Their second question was "Are humans unique in their drive to avoid dissonant cognitions, or is this process older evolutionarily, perhaps shared with nonhuman primate species?" (p. 978). Their study was based on the assumption that people will have cognitive dissonance if the two options that are provided for them are equally valuable and unique. The goal of this study was to examine "human children and nonhuman primates on similar tasks to address the question of how adult mechanisms for cognitive-dissonance reduction originate and when these mechanisms originated

phylogenetically” (Egan, Santos, & Bloom, 2007, p. 979). It was found that both people and monkeys demonstrated a decrease in preference for one of two equally preferred alternatives after they had chosen against it. In addition, both children and monkeys changed their current preferences to fit with their past decisions. The researchers came to the conclusion that cognitive dissonance emerges innately.

Piety (1966) stated that people learn how to behave in different situations depending partly on the available role models. Past studies demonstrated that there were relationships between parent child-rearing attitudes and schizophrenia. Piety conducted his study to examine whether these relationships really existed, and he found that “children with functional disorders experience much more intensely emotionalized dissonant or conflicting perceptions of their parents and of role behavior as it is exemplified by their parents” (p. 13). To be specific, this study proved that children’s perceptions of parents as role models may be consistent with socially defined role behavior and facilitate role learning; if not, this inconsistency will cause confusion of roles. This confusion of roles resulted in cognitive dissonance in the children. Therefore, the parents’ perceptions of the world or the way the children were raised can be one of the sources for children’s perceptions of the world, and it also can be one of the sources of cognitive dissonance.

The American Psychiatric Association stated that personal development of individuals is basic and important for success in all human endeavors. Personal development can be divided into two categories, which are personal maturity and social integration. Personal maturity refers to the ability of a person to live independently in a society. Social integration refers to the ability of a person to get along with others in the society (as cited in Chow & Thompson, 2003, p. 733). Chow and Thompson (2003) proposed that cognitive dissonance causes pain and hinders

personal development. They did their research based on two different tests, which are the Personal Development Test and the Cognitive Dissonance Test. The Personal Development Test focuses on testing a person's personal maturity and social integration. The Cognitive Dissonance Test is "a means to helping individuals find their hidden feelings, which are harmful to them but on an unconscious level" (p. 734). The results showed that "personal development and cognitive dissonance were inversely related to each other. [However,] the gender effect was not significant in the Cognitive Dissonance Test" (Chow & Thompson, 2003, p. 737).

Even though the gender effect was not crucial in the Cognitive Dissonance Test, what about a person's personality, self-esteem, and attitude? What about the effect of externals' effects including physical exercise, helping behavior and culture on a person's cognitive dissonance? Different people have various reactions to dissonance-arousing situations. Many variables that can affect people's dissonance have been tested by the research so far. Matz, Hofstede, and Wood (2008) tested the personality trait of extraversion as a variable to see how dissonance is different for different people. In this study, they hypothesized that extraversion moderates the feeling of discomfort associated with dissonance. Specifically, the researchers believed that extraverted people are less likely to experience dissonance brought on by exposure to attitudinally inconsistent information than introverted people because they tend to be less easily aroused in general. In the end, this hypothesis was supported.

Cooper and Duncan (1971) examined the importance of self-esteem, as opposed to logical inconsistency, as a factor that causes dissonance. The results of the two experiments that were done by Cooper and Duncan showed that people with high self-esteem experience as much dissonance when they have two discrepant cognitions as people with low self-esteem, which is inconsistent with Aronson's explanation of cognitive dissonance. Aronson believed that

“dissonance arises from a cognition that is discrepant with one’s self-concept” (as cited in Cooper & Duncan, p. 289). Therefore, the self-esteem effect was significant in developing cognitive dissonance.

Chatzisarantis, Hagger, and Wang (2008) conducted research based on the hypothesis that physically inactive persons would experience dissonance between their behaviors and belief that physical exercise is beneficial to health. The goal of their research was to “examine cognitive dissonance related attitude change in the domain of exercise” (p. 97). It was found that people in a free-choice condition would report more positive attitudes and stronger intentions to exercise than people who were pressured to perform a boring task (forced-choice situation) and participants in a control condition. In addition, mental frustration would be positively associated with intentions and attitude for free-choice participants and not for forced-choice participants (p. 102). Therefore, cognitive dissonance can influence people’s attitudes toward exercise.

People tend to believe that the external world is the same as what they perceive. Past research has proven that a person’s internal state can affect his or her perception of the external world. Balcetis and Dunning (2007) designed a research study to explore whether cognitive dissonance as an internal state can influence people’s visual perceptions of natural environments. In order to answer this research question, two studies were done. The results of those two studies showed that people’s motivation to resolve cognitive dissonance affected people’s perception of the natural environment. Specifically, those two studies demonstrated that cognitive dissonance can affect people’s perception process of an object.

People have to make choices every day either for themselves, for their family members, or for their close friends. Therefore, people have equal opportunities to experience cognitive dissonance and justify their decisions. What is the role of cultural variation in the experience of

cognitive dissonance to justify an individual's decision making? Hoshino-Browne and colleagues (2005) proposed that "cognitive dissonance is experienced whenever people's important self-concepts are threatened, but dissonance reduction depends on the particular nature of important self-concepts espoused in a given culture" (p. 295). The researchers developed four studies to do the investigation. They found that westerners justified their choices more when they made choices for themselves; whereas, Easterners justified their choices more when they made choices for a friend. Therefore, culture as a factor can affect people's cognitive dissonance.

Another study was done on culture by Maertz, Hassan and Magnusson in 2009. As organizations continue to increase their international activity and presence, the cross-cultural adjustment of expatriates has become a critical issue for research. Much research has been done on expatriates' adjustment, but little concern has been put on the psychological processes causing change in adjustment outcomes. When people are learning and exhibiting culturally appropriate behaviors, internal conflicts arise and create stress in the form of discomfort if the behaviors demanded in the person's expatriate role are inconsistent with his or her values, attitudes, and beliefs. Maertz, Hassan and Magnusson's research focused on how to relieve the discomfort to balance home versus host cultural identifications. The researchers proposed that dissonance experiences and the methods used for dissonance reduction influence expatriates' adjustment outcomes. In addition, the researchers provided many methods to relieve the dissonance.

Past studies proved that cognitive dissonance creates an unpleasant feeling or state of mind. However, no study has tested the idea that cognitive dissonance produces a negative affect or an unpleasant feeling. Harmon-Jones (2000) conducted his research and found that individuals report more negative affect following a free choice rather than being told what to do. In addition, the negative affect was reduced following attitude change and eliminated an alternative

explanation from a similar past experience. Since the publication of the cognitive dissonance theory, many studies have been done to try to find different dissonance reduction strategies. This study prompted the question as to whether cognitive dissonance is always negative.

Cognitive dissonance theory promotes the idea that a learner seeks consistency between his or her thoughts and behaviors. When a new thought or behavior is colliding with a previously existing thought or behavior, the learner experiences dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Burns conducted a study in 2006 to explore these three research questions: (1) How does cognitive dissonance impact student learning?, (2) Does cognitive dissonance theory illuminate the potential of manipulation of students' beliefs?, and (3) Does cognitive dissonance theory suggests any means for dealing with this situation in an open way?" (p. 3). Burns (2006) found that a teacher can help students reduce their cognitive dissonance by invoking their critical thinking. Through the process of critical thinking, students are able to justify their thoughts and behaviors from the previously existing idea to new ideas by themselves. Then, they formulated one idea from the previously existing idea and the new ideas in order to maintain the consistency between their thoughts and behaviors. Therefore, cognitive dissonance is not always negative since teachers can challenge their students by promoting new ideas that collide with the students' previously existing idea of a subject to train the students' critical thinking skills.

### **Reducing Cognitive Dissonance**

Over the years, researchers have investigated a myriad successful of cognitive dissonance reduction strategies. Those strategies are acts of helping, attitude and behavior change, derogating the source of an inconsistency, distraction, misattribution of arousal, ingestion of arousal reducing substances, and self-enhancement (Ruiz & Tanaka, 2001).

Ruiz and Tanaka (2001) conducted their study to test whether the act of helping has an

effect on dissonance arousal. The researchers hypothesized that acting helpfully in a situation adds consonant cognitions to the normally good and competent self-image that most people are likely to have. Therefore, dissonance arousal will be reduced and consequently disappear. An experiment was designed to test the hypothesis. It was found that there is a relationship between cognitive dissonance and helping behavior. In addition, the results of this study proved that helpfulness can reduce dissonance arousal.

In 1957, Leon Festinger said that attitude plays an important role in cognitive dissonance. Starzyk, Fabrigar, Soryal, and Fanning (2009) examined “whether people’s use of dissonance reduction strategies differs as a function of level of attitude importance and whether the personal importance of an attitude is salient” (p.126). The results showed that both the level of attitude importance and salience affect high-choice participants’ tendency to use attitude change and trivialization. Furthermore, high-choice participants changed their attitude irrespective of attitude importance when they were not reminded of the personal importance of their attitude. Therefore, this study revealed the effects of attitude importance on cognitive dissonance reduction.

Glass (1964) conducted a study to test the importance of “choice” in arousing cognitive dissonance. Three hypotheses that developed by the researcher were (1) “postaggression increments in unfriendliness are directly related to the amount of cognitive dissonance aroused in the aggressor; (2) dissonance is greatest where the aggressor has a positive self-conception, and chooses to deliver pain when this aggression is contrary to his beliefs; (3) it was predicted that under these conditions the aggressor would reduce dissonance by becoming more unfriendly toward his victim, a cognition which is consonant with his aggressive behavior” (p. 548). The participants of the study were sixty male undergraduates, and they were opposed to using electric shock on humans. Then, the researcher divided those participants into two groups. One of the

groups received a fraudulent psychological test report designed to enhance self-esteem, and the other group received a report designed to lower self-esteem. Participants in both groups delivered electric shocks to an experimental confederate posing as another student. In addition, half of the participants in each self-esteem group delivered the shocks under voluntary conditions, but the other half delivered the shocks under nonvoluntary conditions. The amount of change in participants' self-ratings of friendliness toward the confederate from before to after administration of the shocks was the dependent variable in the study.

The results of the study showed that the first hypothesis was true. Participants with high self-esteem in the choice condition had a significant increase in unfriendliness but only minimal change in the other three conditions. These findings indicated that "choosing to engage in behavior discrepant with one's beliefs must imply a discrepancy with one's positive self-image in order to arouse dissonance and consequent increased unfriendliness, and perceived obligation and pain minimization were not employed as alternative modes of dissonance reduction" (Glass, 1964, p. 548). In conclusion, the study showed that people can reduce their cognitive dissonance by derogating the sources of an inconsistency.

Zanna and Aziza's (1976) study aimed to provide evidence of distraction as an effective avenue of dissonance reduction by investigating how different personality types might be affected by the distraction manipulation employed. The researchers used Byrne's repression-sensitization scale to analyze participants' dissonance-resolving behavior. Repressors usually coped with threats by employing avoidance mechanisms as repression, denial, and rationalization. However, sensitizers coped with threats by employing approaching mechanisms as intellectualization, obsessiveness, and rumination. The researchers used two experiments to determine "whether repressors in contrast to sensitizers, would be more likely to adopt the

distraction mode of resolution, when given a chance” (p. 591). Two months before the two experiments, all the participants took an attitude-and-personality-test. In those two experiments, participants were asked to complete an opinion survey concerned with their repression-sensitization scale and instructed to write counter-attitudinal essays under either high or low decision-freedom conditions. After that, they were distracted by an interesting puzzle.

The results showed that repressors tended to bring their attitudes in line with their behaviors to a greater extent under the high decision-freedom and low distraction conditions, while sensitizers tend to change their attitudes greatly in the direction of the essay under the high decision-freedom and high distraction conditions. Also, the results indicated that repressors exhibited self-justificatory attitude change under conditions of focused attention to their dissonance; whereas, there was no attitude change among them under conditions of forced distraction. On the other hand, the exact opposite pattern of responding occurred for sensitizers. In addition, no matter whether sensitizers were intellectualizing and/or obsessing about their cognitive dilemmas, they did not change their attitudes under conditions of focused attention (Zanna & Aziza, 1976). Thus, those findings suggested that “the repression-sensitization dimension be taken into account in contexts where various modes of dissonance reduction, especially distraction, are possible” (Zanna & Aziza, 1976, p. 592), which means that distraction may be used as a way to reduce an individual’s cognitive dissonance.

Zanna and Cooper (1974) designed a study to test whether dissonance has arousal properties. Participants in this study were 77 freshmen males. All the participants were required to take a pill before they were induced to write counter-attitudinal essays under either high dissonance or low dissonance conditions in an experimental setting. One third of all participants “were led to believe that a pill, which they had just taken in the context of a separate experiment,

would lead them to feel tense. Another third were led to believe that the pill would cause them to feel relaxed. The final third were expected that their pill would have no side effects whatsoever” (p. 703). It was predicted that if dissonance is truly arousing, “a standard dissonance effect when the pill had no side effects, a diminished dissonance effect when the pill provided a ‘tense’ label, and an enhanced dissonance effect when a ‘relaxed’ label was provided” (p. 704). The results of the experiment showed that participants’ dissonances were eliminated when they could attribute their arousal to the pill; whereas, their dissonances were enhanced when they thought they should have been relaxed by the pill. Thus, misattribution of arousal can reduce cognitive dissonance.

Cooper, Zanna, and Taves (1978) examined whether arousal is a necessary condition for attitude change in the induced compliance paradigm. Participants in this study were 63 university students. Those participants were asked to take a pill before they were induced to write counter-attitudinal essays under either high decision-freedom or low decision-freedom conditions in an experimental setting. In addition, they were led to believe that the pill that they had taken in the context of a separate experiment was a placebo. Actually, participants “were given a pill that contained either Phenobarbital (tranquilizer condition), amphetamine (amphetamine condition), or milk powder (placebo condition)” (p. 1101). The results showed that participants tended not to change their attitude and engage in attitude-discrepant behavior when their autonomic arousals were reduced because they were given an unknown drug under conditions of high decision-freedom.

However, “increasing autonomic arousal with amphetamine caused subjects to increase their opinion change, even if the attitude-discrepant behavior was committed under conditions of low choice. Although a lack of freedom usually has the effect of eliminating dissonance,

chemically heightened arousal gave participants in this condition cause to attempt to reduce this arousal through attitude change” (Cooper, Zanna, & Taves, 1978, p. 1105). The findings of the study suggested that “by systematically varying the degree of arousal as one of the independent variables, [...] at least when subjects are induced to perform counter-attitudinal behavior, attitude change would appear to be at the service of reducing autonomic arousal” (Cooper, Zanna, & Taves, 1978, p. 1101). Thus, the ingestion of arousal-reducing substances can help to reduce cognitive dissonance.

Tesser and Cornell (1991) did a study to explore self-evaluation (self-affirmation) as a hypothetical intervening variable in human behavior. The researchers developed three studies to examine the role of self-evaluation. Study one revealed that participants' propensity to engage in self-evaluation maintenance behaviors can be reduced by providing opportunities for participants to affirm themselves. The findings of studies two and three showed that self-evaluation processes can affect dissonance reduction processes. Specifically, the results showed that “making salient positive self-affirmation scenarios reduced the propensity to engage in dissonance reduction, whereas making salient a threatening self-affirmation scenario did not” (p. 501).

In Festinger's (1957) discussion of dissonance reduction, he wrote:

...[I]t is worthwhile to emphasize that... the presence of pressures to reduce dissonance, or even activity directed toward such reduction, does not guarantee that the dissonance will be reduced... In fact, it is quite conceivable that in the process of trying to reduce dissonance, it might even be increased. This will depend upon what the person encounters while attempting to reduce the dissonance. The important point to be made is that... if attempts to reduce dissonance fail, one should be able to observe symptoms of psychological discomfort. (p. 23-24)

Galinsky, Stone, and Cooper (2000) conducted a study to examine what happens when a person attempts to reduce dissonance through a strategy of self-affirmation and it fails. They used two experiments in the study. The first experiment aimed to investigate whether disconfirmation of an affirmation rearouses psychological discomfort. The second experiment aimed to investigate whether disconfirmation of an affirmation restates dissonance and ultimately leads to dissonance-produced attitude change. The outcomes of the two experiments showed that “high-dissonance participants who affirmed on a self-relevant value scale and received disconfirming feedback about their affirmations expressed greater psychological discomfort than either affirmation-only participants or low-dissonance/affirmation disconfirmed participants, and disconfirmation of an affirmation resulted in increased attitude change” (Galinsky, Stone, & Cooper, 2000, p. 123).

The results of both experiments also showed that a failed attempt to reduce dissonance reinstates psychological discomfort and dissonance motivations. In this situation, people return to the original source of their arousal, re-experiencing psychological discomfort and changed their attitudes. The affirmations related to the dissonant act can enhance rather than attenuate dissonance. Also, the results indicated that an attempt to reduce dissonance might fail and a person's psychological discomfort may reemerge or continue. In addition, if this is true, then a failed reduction strategy might motivate a search for, and the use of, another reduction strategy.

Based on the reviewed studies, it is clear that cognitive dissonance can be reduced in many cases. In order to explore if Chinese students experience cognitive dissonance when they are exposed to Christianity in the United States, and their reactions regarding the reduction, increase or change of the cognitive dissonance after they were exposed to Christianity in the United States, it is important to know the history of Christianity in China.

### Christianity in China

Since the fifth century, Christianity has existed in China. From the historical view of Christianity, it looks as if the God of Christianity is completely foreign to the Chinese culture. To be specific, Christianity has been treated as a foreign religion since it first came to China, and the spread of Christianity has been treated by some traditionally minded Chinese as a kind of cultural invasion. People tend to claim that the Chinese culture is non-religious. However, many Chinese people believe that the God of Christianity is in fact the unknown God of the ancient Chinese. The most common Chinese translation of the word *God* is *Shang-di*, which means “the emperor.” Between 1656 and 1730, Joachim Bouvet and J. F. Fouquet proposed the approach of Figurism. The Figurists suggested that some ancient Chinese classics prefigure the truths of Christianity just as the Old Testament prefigures the New Testament truth (Kai-man & Siyi, 2008).

Therefore, many scholars believe that the truths of Christianity are in fact in the Chinese characters and Jehovah is the unknown God of the ancient Chinese. Kai-man and Siyi (2008) listed several Chinese characters that were interpreted by the Figurists in their study as follows:

(1) 木 means tree; 女 means woman. 婪 means greed. It can be seen that 婪 is in fact a woman under two trees. It is taken to refer to the first act of greed in human history:

when Eve was faced with the choice of two trees, she took the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil out of her lust for food.

(2) 舟 means boat; 八 means eight; 口 means mouth but can also be taken to mean the number of people. 船 means ship, or a big boat—in fact eight people in a boat. It seems to suggest the most important ship in human history—Noah’s Ark which saved humanity from universal disaster. There were exactly eight people on the Ark!

(3) 羊 means lamb; 我 means me, self; 義 means righteousness. You can see that 義 in fact stands for the self beneath the lamb. It seems to contain the gist of the Christian message of redemption: righteousness can be attained only when the Lamb stands in the place of me (my self). (p. 32)

In 635 A.D., the first Christian missionary named Alopen arrived in Chang'an, the Chinese capital of the Tang Dynasty (Wei, 1947). He translated the Scriptures into Chinese. Later, Gaozong, who was the one of the Emperors of the Tang Dynasty, issued an edict requiring the Chinese to tolerate Nestorianism or Christianity. For the next two centuries, Nestorianism spread throughout China until the reign of another Emperor of the Tang Dynasty, who issued an edict prohibiting Nestorianism. During the 11<sup>th</sup> century, China was ruled by the Liao Dynasty. At that time, Nestorianism was tolerated and called Yelikewen. During the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), Yelikewen was prevalent in China. After the Qing Dynasty conquered the Yuan Dynasty, Yelikewen died out. In 1583, another Christian missionary called Matteo Ricci arrived in Guangdong. He not only spread the word of Christ but also taught the Chinese about western science. In 1732, Yongzheng, the Emperor banned Yelikewen from China. After the Opium War, many missionaries went to China (Huang, Chen, & Richard, 1994).

Christians suffered harsh suppressions in the first 30 years (1949-1979) of the People's Republic of China (PRC) under rule of the Chinese Communist Party. The Chinese Communist Party regarded Christian missionaries as spies of western imperialism and drove them out of PRC. In order to control Christians, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) set up a "Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee." In 1966, the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" broke out, and Christians were forced to denounce their faith; if not, they would be sent to jails or labor camps. Meanwhile, the underground church emerged. Since 1979, when the CCP adopted the

“open-door” policy, Protestant Christianity has been tolerated and allowed to operate “under the auspices of the ‘patriotic’ associations” (Yang, 2005, p. 427).

In recent years, Christianity has been growing fast although China is still under communist rule. Many people think that the converts are old, less educated, and peasants, but beginning in the late 1980s, an increasing proportion of the new converts in urban China have been young, well-educated, middle-class people (Lee, 2007). In Yang’s (2005) study, he said that one of the reasons why it is easy for urban people to accept Christianity is because their sense of security has been lost because of the fierce competition in the market.

With the development of technology and globalization, the current era has become not only exciting but also confusing. There have been many changes in China, which include both crises and opportunities. In Kai-man and Siyi’s research (2008), they introduce the relationship between Christianity and Chinese culture, and many exciting recent developments of contemporary Christianity in China. They explain that the Chinese church has already been well established, and they have more and more opportunities to participate in culture and society. People in China have started to renew their appreciation of the strength and relevance of the Christian faith, and some people are longing for something that can satisfy their spiritual needs. Presently, many people are searching for God. In addition, many missionaries believe that it is God Himself who has been actively searching for the Chinese since very early times.

Another study done in Hong Kong and Mainland China by Lam and Shi (2008) examined the effect of various factors (gender and belief) on moral judgment and ethical attitudes of working persons. The results of this study showed that the effect of various socio-demographic factors on ethical attitudes varied between two different categories of ethical issues. Specifically, it was found that religion played an important role in affecting ethical attitudes though its effect

varied with different types of religions. Among those religions, Christianity was found to be the most favorable to higher ethical standards.

As previously stated, Ng (2005) believes the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a great century, “not only for the advancement of information technology, but also for the advancement of interreligious and intercultural interaction” (p. 169). Though China’s economy is developing rapidly, it is still governed by one political party. Therefore, the transformation of Chinese Christianity from being persecuted into a fast-growing religion is still in progress. Because of globalization and advanced transportation, many Chinese students go abroad and study in other countries. As Xu and Mehta (2003) stated in their study, when people go to another country, they take their culture with them, which will result in culture collision, especially if the country persons go to has different beliefs from their own countries. China is an atheism-dominated country; whereas, the United States is a Christianity-dominated country. Therefore, the Chinese students in the United States may experience cognitive dissonance because of the cultural differentiations or religion differentiations between China the United States.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the review of studies on cognitive dissonance and cognitive dissonance theory, it can be found that people who come from a place where the culture is different from the place where they work and live will experience cognitive dissonance. People traveling in places where people have different beliefs will experience cognitive dissonance. In addition, studies have proven that the willingness of a dissonant individual to accept the new cognition increases with the lapse of time from the time of occurrence of the cognitive dissonance. Studies that have been done on cognitive dissonance theory show that cognitive dissonance can be reduced in several ways depending on the person, which include maintaining a positive attitude, seeking external

help, derogating the source of an inconsistency, distraction, misattribution of arousal, ingestion of arousal reducing substances, and maintaining self-affirmation or self-enhancement.

Based on the review of the development of Christianity in China, it can be found that many Chinese people do not believe in Christianity and they have the perception that Christianity is an expression of cultural imperialism and a symbol of stupidity, and people who are Christians are poor, elderly, and uneducated. Therefore, the Chinese students who are studying in the United States, which is a Christianity-dominated country, may tend to experience cognitive dissonance. In order to reduce the cognitive dissonance caused by religion difference, these Chinese students may ignore Christianity, oppose Christianity, or accept Christianity.

### **Chapter Three – Methodology**

This present study explores two questions: (1) Do Chinese students experience cognitive dissonance when they are studying in the United States and are exposed to Christianity? (2) How was the cognitive dissonance reduced, increased or changed after the Chinese students were exposed to Christians in the United States?

The methodology chapter is divided into five sections. The first section states the use of research strategies and methods for this study. The second section describes the interview process in detail, which includes settings, participants, processes, and ethical considerations. The third section discusses interview analysis. The fourth section discusses the validation procedures. The last section is a conclusion.

#### **Strategy of Inquiry**

This study utilizes a qualitative methodology because the purpose of qualitative research is to understand and explain participant meaning (Morrow & Smith, 2000). Creswell (1998) defines qualitative research as an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting (Creswell, 1998). Thus, using a qualitative methodology allows the researcher to study the target Chinese students' perception of Christianity in a naturalistic setting.

Face-to-face Interviews were used in this study. Stake (1995) explains that interviews are employed as means of investigation because

we are interested in them [interviewees] for both their uniqueness and commonality. We would like to hear their stories. We may have reservations about some things the people

tell us, just as they will question some of the things we will tell about them. But we enter the scene with a sincere interest in learning how they function in their ordinary pursuits and milieus and with a willingness to put aside many presumptions while we learn. (p. 1)

Therefore, it is appropriate and necessary to use interviews in this study to determine how target Chinese students experienced cognitive dissonance when they were exposed to Christianity and how cognitive dissonance was reduced, increased, or changed after they were exposed to Christianity in the United States.

### **Interview Procedures**

**Settings.** Twelve face-to-face interviews were conducted in the computer lab of a large southeast university in the United States. The reason the computer lab was chosen as the interview site is that the participants studied there often, and they had already gotten used to the atmosphere there, which was probably helpful to ease the participants' nervous tensions caused by the interview.

**Participants.** The participants in this study were twelve Chinese undergraduate students at a large southeast university in the United States. Those participants were selected by the researcher based on the requirements that they were still studying in that university when the current study was conducted, and they were not Christians before they came to the United States. There were two reasons why the researcher interviewed only twelve students. First, according to Patton (1990), the interview process is time-consuming. Second, the researcher did not have access to all the Chinese students in that university (Patton, 1990). In addition, the reason why the researcher set up that requirement was to analyze more closely whether they have changed their perceptions of Christianity before and after they came to the United States, and how they dealt with those two different perceptions.

**Processes.** The researcher followed the interview protocol (see appendix 2) to conduct all the interviews. This interview protocol contained three sections: planning the interview, conducting the interview, and analyzing the interview. The researcher asked the twelve participants eight major questions and approximately five follow-up questions. These open-ended questions covered their demographic information, their religious background information, their perceptions of Christianity both in China and in the United States, their psychological and behavioral changes regarding Christianity after they came to the United States, and how they dealt with these changes. The eight major questions were as follows:

(1) Had you ever heard of Christianity before you came to the United States? When and where?

(2) What did you think about Christianity or Christians when you were in China? Have you ever considered why you have those perceptions of Christianity?

(3) What do you think about Christianity or Christians now since you have been living in the United States? Have you ever considered why you have those perceptions of Christianity or Christians?

(4) What are some differences you have experienced regarding Christianity between China and the United States?

(5) In your opinion, what are some cultural aspects between China and the United States that influence people to have different perceptions of Christianity?

(6) Do you feel that you are willing to change your thinking or behaviors regarding Christianity? Do you feel that you have been forced to change your thinking or behaviors regarding Christianity? Why?

(7) What are some barriers that keep you from changing your perception and behavior regarding Christianity? Why?

(8) Has anything happened that caused you to change your perception and behavior regarding Christianity? Why?

The five follow-up questions were as follows:

(1) How many years have you been living in the United States and how old are you? What is your gender and which year are you in the university?

(2) Are you a Christian? Is anyone in your family a Christian?

(3) Has anyone talked to you about becoming a Christian?

(4) If you have become a Christian, what was your perception of Christianity before you became a Christian and what is your perception of Christianity after you became a Christian?

(5) Please give more detail.

All the semi-structured interviews were conducted in the computer lab of the large southeast university, and each interview lasted thirty minutes to one hour. During the interviews, the researcher took interview notes and audiotaped the interviews for later evaluation. In order to facilitate communication without language barriers and let the interviewees express their feelings more freely, the researcher used the Chinese language during interviews when it was necessary. Furthermore, participants were reminded that breaks were allowed if they felt the need during the interview. The participants were informed that numbers were used instead of their real names to protect their identities. Each participant was provided with a consent form (see appendix 1), and they were told that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point in the interview process.

**Ethical Considerations.** Research permission was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the sponsoring school to protect the rights of all the interview participants. Before each interview, the researcher provided a clear description of the study to all

the participants in the study. In addition, consent forms (see appendix 1) were required from all the interview participants before each interview.

### **Interview Analysis**

Before the interview responses were analyzed, the researcher listened to all of the taped interviews three times and took notes when she was listening to each interview. After that, the researcher compared the notes she took by listening to the taped interviews to the notes she had taken during each interview to decide on the final notes for each interview. This process allowed the researcher not only to become better acquainted with the interview responses but also to ensure the validity of the responses. The researcher created Microsoft Word files for the final interview notes. Moreover, these files were saved in the researcher's laptop with a password set to protect confidentiality.

The researcher followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) step-by-step guidelines to analyze the interview responses. These guidelines include (1) familiarizing oneself with the data, (2) generating initial codes, which means "coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code", (3) searching for themes, which means "collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential themes", (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, (6) producing the report (p. 87). These guidelines assisted the researcher in making generalizations about the interview responses and in identifying the themes.

### **Validation Procedures**

According to Creswell and Miller (2000), qualitative researchers need to utilize various validation strategies to make their studies credible. Those validation strategies include "triangulation, member checking, the audit trail, disconfirming evidence, prolonged engagement

in the field, thick, rich description, collaboration, and peer debriefing”(p. 126). Credibility for this study was achieved by using the validation strategies of member checking and peer debriefing.

As for the member checking, the researcher kept an ongoing dialogue with all the participants regarding her interpretations of all the interview responses to ensure reliability. As for the peer debriefing, the researcher chose one of her classmates as the peer debriefer, who was a graduate student, had conducted many qualitative studies, and was familiar with qualitative data analysis. This peer debriefer was asked to listen to the videotaped interviews and review the researcher's interpretations of these interviews to enhance the accuracy of the interpretations and the report made by the researcher.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the interview responses that the researcher collected, she explored two research questions. Those two questions are (1) Do Chinese students experience cognitive dissonance when they are studying in the United States and are exposed to Christianity? (2) How was the cognitive dissonance reduced, increased or changed after the Chinese students were exposed to Christians in the United States? Based on the studies reviewed in the literature review, it was predicted that those target Chinese students would experience cognitive dissonance. In addition, those students might eliminate the cognitive dissonance by ignoring Christianity, supporting their prior beliefs and opposing Christianity, or accepting Christianity.

## **Chapter Four – Results and Discussion**

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first section discusses the interview responses by looking at the twelve participants' demographic information, while the second section focuses on the theoretical perspective on results. The third section explains the cultural influence on participants' adaptation to the Christian environment in the United States, and the final section deals with the motivations and barriers to participants' adaptation to the Christian environment in the United States.

### **Demographic Information**

The twelve participants' demographic information included their age, gender, length of residency in the United States, and religion background. Table 1, which was provided at the end of the study, demonstrated the demographic information of the twelve participants and their adaptation to the Christian environment in the United States. The age range of the twelve participants' was from 18 years old to 22 years old. Among those participants, four of them were males, and the other eight were females. The length of residency in the United States ranged from two months to five years. All of the participants came from an atheistic background, but three of them had either Christian relatives or friends in China. Due to their atheistic background, all the participants experienced cognitive dissonance after they came to the United States.

Among the twelve participants, six of them were willing to think critically about their previous perceptions of Christianity and their new perceptions of Christianity. Besides, four of the twelve participants gave up their previous perceptions of Christianity and accepted new perceptions of Christianity. Specifically, those four participants became Christians after they were exposed to Christianity in the United States. Six participants chose to keep their previous perceptions of Christianity, which meant that they still regarded Christianity as a religious

superstition. The final participant was partially willing to accept the new perceptions of Christianity after she came to the United States, which meant that she partially denied atheism and partially accepted Christianity.

Based on all of the demographic information of the twelve participants, it is evident that female interviewees were more willing to change their previous beliefs and behavior regarding Christianity than male participants since the four participants who became Christians were all females. In addition, participants who had either Christian relatives or friends were more willing to change their previous beliefs and behavior regarding new beliefs since three of the participants who became Christians had either Christian relatives or friends in China. However, there was no clear relationship between length of residency in the United States and participants' willingness to change their previous beliefs. Also, there was no clear relationship between gender and age and participants' willingness to change their previous beliefs. These may be due to the small sample size.

### **Theoretical Perspective on Results**

According to Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory, an individual can experience psychological tension or dissonance when new knowledge or information is incongruent with previously acquired knowledge. In the current study, the twelve interview responses revealed three major themes: (1) awareness, (2) uncertainty, and (3) denial. Each response was labeled according to one of these themes.

**Awareness.** Awareness was indicated by statements suggesting that the participants became aware or more aware of Christianity and gained new understandings of Christianity due to being exposed to a Christian environment in the United States. Specifically, those participants might not pay much attention to Christianity while in China, and they only had little

understanding of Christianity since China is an atheism-dominated country. Thus, they thought Christianity was neither related to nor affected their lives in China. However, they became more aware of the relationship between Christianity and their lives, and they gained many new understandings of Christianity after they came to the United States since they were studying at a Christian university and living in a Christian environment. Christianity affected their daily lives in the United States. Besides, the new understandings that they got after they came to the United States were different from their previous understanding of Christianity in China. The following statements are examples of this theme:

I haven't heard of Christianity before I came to the United States. Besides, since it did not affect my life, I was unwilling to pay attention to it. However, I know that it is a religion that leads human beings to do good things after I came here. (Interviewee 1)

I have some understanding of Christianity before I came here. At that time, I thought Christians were similar to monks, and they did not eat meat. I did not pay attention to it since I was not interested in it at all. However, I found that there might be something valuable in the Bible after I came here since Christianity has been spread for a long time in western countries, and it might be one of the reasons why those western countries were developed so rapidly. (Interviewee 2)

I gained some knowledge of Christianity from the textbooks in high school. At that time, I regarded Christianity as one of the third religions in the world, and it was a religious superstition. Also, I got the perception that all Americans were Christians and God was an American because of the Hollywood movies. After I came to the United States, I knew that not all of the Americans were Christians and not all of them were true Christians. God has no nationality. In addition, I knew that Christianity is more related to human

beings real lives than Buddhism since it taught human being to escape the realities in the world. (Interviewee 8)

Based on the response of Interviewee 1, it could be asserted that this interviewee became more aware of Christianity and changed from being a person who had never heard of Christianity and did not want to pay attention to Christianity before coming to the United States to a person who knew that Christianity is a religion that leads human beings to do good things. The responses of Interviewee 2 and Interviewee 8 also showed that they gained new understanding of Christianity due to being exposing to the Christian environment in the United States. The new understanding of Christianity that Interviewee 2 gained was that Christianity might have been one of the stimulative factors for the rapid development of the United States. The first new understanding of Christianity that Interviewee 8 gained after she came to the United States was that not all Americans are Christians, which was different from her previous understanding of Christianity. Also, she learned that Christianity was more related to human beings' real lives, compared to Buddhism.

**Uncertainty.** The uncertainty theme included responses that indicated participants were not sure what they thought about their new understandings of Christianity or information about Christianity they got after they came to the United States and were exposed to Christianity. Specifically, it revealed that participants started to doubt their previous understandings or information of Christianity after they were exposed to Christianity in the United States. Besides, the new understandings or information of Christianity that the participants got after they came to the United States might contradict the previous understandings or information of Christianity they had in China. Therefore, they started to compare the previous understandings they had in China to the new perceptions they had in the United States by exploring Christianity more.

However, they were still not sure which religion they should accept. The following statements are examples of this theme:

I considered Christianity as a religious superstition before I came here since the textbook told us that there is no God in the world. After I came here, I thought that there might be a God in the world and He is the guider for human beings' daily lives as Christianity expresses. However, I still cannot make the decision to accept or reject Christianity since Christianity is totally different from what I have been learned in China for ten years.

(Interviewee 8)

Because I did not need God before I came here, I only consider Christianity as a religions superstition. However, I met lots of difficulties after I came to the United States. The Christians around me helped me deal with those difficulties. When I cannot solve some problems, I am always trying to believe in God as He can help me out as what other Christians told me. I am not a Christian yet, but I think I will be one sometime later.

(Interviewee 10)

I have no belief before I came here, but Christians around me treat me very well. This leads me to think the question that what the motivation is for them to treat other like themselves. I want to learn more about Christianity before I make the choice to either believe or reject. (Interviewee 12)

Based on the response of Interviewee 8, it indicated that the interviewee started to wonder whether she should believe there is a God in the world after she was exposed to Christianity in the United States. The reason was that she found Christianity was different from what she had learned in China. She had learned in China that there is no God in the world in China. As for Interviewee 10, her interview response indicated that she started to think about

whether Christianity was true rather than a religious superstition. The reason she began to think about this was that she encountered lots of difficulties after she came to the United States and Christians around her helped her to overcome them. Besides, she was told by Christians that she could always seek for God's help when she met difficulties in the future. As for Interviewee 12, her interview response showed that she started to think about whether she should accept Christianity since she doubted whether Christianity was the reason people treated others kindly after she came to the United States. However, she wanted to learn more about Christianity before she made a decision since she had no religious beliefs before she came to the United States.

**Denial.** Denial was used as a label for responses that clearly articulated rejection of Christianity. Specifically, it meant that participants refused to accept Christianity and kept their previous understandings of Christianity after they were exposed to Christians in the United States. The following statements are examples of this theme:

Though I respect Christianity and will not laugh at people who are Christians, I still consider it as a religious superstition and do not believe it. (Interviewee 3)

I only believe science and things that I can see and touch. However, I cannot see God and touch him, so I do not believe it. (Interviewee 6)

I do not believe Christianity since it said that only one true God in the world and He created the world and human beings. I doubt why the Bible denies that other gods can create the world, and I cannot understand why the God allows good person die before the bad person if He loves all His creations. Therefore, I only believe in evolution and science. (Interviewee 7)

I believe that Christianity is spiritual ballast for human beings. I do not believe in things that I cannot experience personally. Since I have not experienced God in person, I do not accept Christianity. I do not believe that there is a God in the world. (Interviewee 11)

The response of Interviewee 3 indicated that she chose to deny Christianity since she still thought of Christianity as a religious superstition. Interviewee 6 denied Christianity since he thought Christianity was against science and he could not touch or see God. Interviewee 7 denied Christianity since she did not believe that there was only one true God in the world and she thought God was not altogether righteousness. Additionally, Interviewee 11 did not accept Christianity and still thought it was spiritual ballast for human beings since she could not experience God in person.

Since China is an atheism-dominated country, many of the Chinese people interviewed thought Christianity was a religious superstition. They also thought Christianity was not related to people's real lives, and it was against science and evolution. Three of the interviewees stated that they were often exposed to Christianity before they came to the United States. The reason they said that was because they had Christian relatives or friends in China. Interviewee 5 said that "I went to church several times with my friends and her parents before I came here. I felt peaceful when I was in the church." Also, Interviewee 9 said that "I used to go to church several times with my grandma when I was young." Though Interviewee 5 had thought about whether atheism was wrong before she came to the United States, all of those twelve participants were atheists when they were in China.

However, all twelve participants became more aware of Christianity and gained new understanding of Christianity after they came to the United States and were exposed to Christians. These new ideas about Christianity might have been inconsistent with their prior understanding

of Christianity and might have triggered cognitive dissonance and discomfort since they all came from China, an atheism-dominated country. Uncertainty emerged as an important theme in all of the interview responses. Though all of the interviewees said that they felt stressed and annoyed when Christians tried to turn them to Christianity by talking about Christianity with them, only six of those twelve participants started to doubt their previous understandings of Christianity and think about whether they needed to replace them with the new understandings they got after they were exposed to Christianity in the United States. Those six participants needed to deal with not only the cognitive dissonance that was derived from themselves, but also cognitive dissonance that was caused by Christians around them. As for the other six participants, they needed to deal with the cognitive dissonance that was derived from Christians around them.

According to Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory, an individual may deal with cognitive dissonance in three ways. The first way that an individual may use to reduce dissonance is to reduce the importance of the dissonant belief. The second way that an individual may use to reduce dissonance is to add more consonant beliefs to outweigh the dissonant beliefs. The third way that an individual may use to reduce dissonance is to change his or her dissonant beliefs so that his or her beliefs are no longer inconsistent. Thus, participants were engaging in ways to reduce cognitive dissonance. The results were that seven of those twelve participants chose to reduce the importance of their dissonant beliefs, which meant that they chose to deny the new understandings of Christianity that they came to have after they came to the United States and still regarded Christianity as a religious superstition. They tended to avoid Christians who talked about Christianity. However, four participants chose to change their dissonant beliefs to maintain consistency by accepting the new perceptions of Christianity after they came to the United States. Those four participants became Christians. One participant partially accepted

Christianity. Table 2, which was provided at the end of this study, described number of participants categorized under each theme regarding before and after they came to the United States.

### **Cultural Influence**

Chinese culture has been constructed by three philosophies, which are Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. Buddhism involves the rituals of the spiritual life (Penson, 2004). Among those three philosophies, Confucianism is such a prevalent worldview in China that it influences all aspects of life. In Littlejohn and Foss' (2009) book, they state that "Confucianism is a worldview, a political ideology, a social ethic, a scholarly tradition, and a way of life. [It] has lasting and profound bearings on social, political, and value systems in East Asia, [which includes China]" (p. 170). The three cardinal principles of Confucianism are *ren* (humanness), *yi* (righteousness), and *li* (propriety, rite, and ritual). A person of *ren* is one who loves others and aims to nourish both himself or herself and others. The person does not do to others what he or she does not wish done to oneself. *Yi* promotes the duties or moral obligations associated with people as they are located within networks of social relations. The last Confucian doctrine is *li*. It is the social norm that regulates human actions. It prescribes the appropriate human conduct with a keen awareness of the principle of *ren* and genuine concern for others (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009).

All of these principles teach that people should be dedicated to building a harmonious environment in the universe. In China, people believe that the universe is in a process of constant change and transformation. Harmony is the key to bringing continuity into this cycle of transformations. Thus, the pursuit of harmony has been spread into all the fields and aspects of the society, and has become the ultimate desire of the Chinese traditional culture. Specifically,

Chinese consider harmony as the end of human communication, in which communicators try to adapt to each other in order to reach a state of interdependence and cooperation. Also, Chinese “actively adjust to the harmonious and hierarchical order of society, avoid embarrassing confrontations, and handle socially ambiguous situations to uphold the group control over ego-centric tendencies” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009, p. 95). Thus, negotiation, mediation and compromise are viewed as the ideal process to resolve conflict with others (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009).

Since the Chinese government requires people to be atheists, most Chinese people adapt this social norm and believe in atheism to maintain harmony. As for individuals who are not atheists, they are mocked by other people and are regarded as destroyers of the harmony and the hierarchical order of society. Interviewee 3 complained that “If everyone around me is against Christianity, it is not harmonious, and others may think I am a destroyer of the harmonious society.” Interviewee 5 added, “When I was not a Christian in China, I laughed at Christians with others because all of us believe in atheism.”

Moreover, filial piety is another integral part of Chinese culture and is embraced by Confucianism. It was considered the most fundamental of the Confucian values. The term *filial piety* refers to the extreme respect that Chinese children are supposed to show their parents. It includes taking care of the parents, bringing honor to the family, obeying the parents, and burying them after death. Those elements of filial piety have been shared for many generations and are reflected in the daily ritual and norms of Chinese people (Sung, 1998). In China, obedience is regarded as one of the most important elements of filial piety. Interviewee 4 said that “I was supposed to claim to be a Christian last year, but I did not since I did not want to disobey their will to hurt our relationship and being a person that not filial piety.”

Though filial piety and Confucianism are two big elements of Chinese culture, ancestor worship is regarded as the underpinning of Chinese culture. It was a philosophy that was interconnected with filial piety as parts of a single concept. From ancient China, Chinese people have considered the family to be the basic unit of worship, economic activity, emotional support, and prestige (Lee, 2003). Also, Chinese culture like other cultures has a particular perspective on dying and death. The meaning of death was developed throughout history, in relation to religious belief, philosophical beliefs, and cultural practices, by Chinese society and its people. In China, family members are not allowed to discuss issues of death since they fear invoking bad luck (Yick & Gupta, 2002).

Based on the Confucian ethic of filial piety, a man's greatest responsibility is to care for his parents during their lifetime and render them a proper funeral and burial after death. Thus, filial piety has to be continued in the same spirit as before but in a different form after their parents' death. The traditional practice of ancestor worship fosters the concept that the spirits of the dead continue to remain on earth, and the ancestors play a role in a family's wealth, health, and success. They also believe that the ancestors' displeasure will bring bad luck to the immediate family and the entire family clan (Yick & Gupta, 2002). That is why there is a Tomb-sweeping Day in China. On that day, Chinese people sacrifice food and burn spirit money before the tombs of their ancestors to keep them happy and they believe that their families will bless them with good luck. This traditional celebration of Tomb-sweeping Day influenced Chinese perceptions of other religions. Based on the collected interviewees' responses, it was indicated that some interviewees' beliefs and behaviors regarding perceptions of Christianity were influenced by the idea of ancestor worship. Interviewee 6 said that "I think Christianity is the same as China's traditional ancestor worship. Both of them are fake beliefs and they are religious

superstitions. Human beings deceive themselves by believing that these religious superstitions can bring them fortune and inner peace, but these perceptions are not true.” Interviewee 7 said, “I think the dominant religion in China is Buddhism, which is similar as the ancestor worship. Christianity is not common in China. Before I came to the United States, some perceptions of Christianity that I perceived were came from the understanding of Buddhism and ancestor worship. The Buddhists worship Buddha. The Christians worship God. All of these are similar as my relatives worship our ancestors. However, all of these are religious superstitions and fake.”

However, it was interesting that all the interviewees said that the reason that they are not against Christianity fiercely when they are exposed to Christians in the United States is because they find that some doctrines of Christianity are consistent with Confucianism. They believe that Christianity sets high moral standards for human beings like Confucianism, which stimulates human beings to build good character. Interviewee 1 said that “I agree with what the Bible said that people need to love others like love them, which is similar as Confucian’s teaching that people need to aim to nourish others.”

Since Confucianism, filial piety, and ancestor worship, a practical implication influence Chinese people’s daily lives, it is impossible to completely change Chinese people’s understanding of life by teaching Christianity to them. Also, it is impossible to change their perceptions in a short time. Change happens when the students are placed in a Christian environment and surrounded them with Christians. Change is slow and gradual.

### **Motivations and Barriers**

**Motivations.** According to the interview responses, there were two motivations that caused interviewees to change their existing beliefs and behavior. These two motivations were related to the environment and the experience of living in America. Interviewee 1 said, “If I did

not have the chance to come here, I will not know that much about Christianity since there is no place in China has Christian environment like here.” Interview 2 also mentioned, “After I came to the United States, the Christian environment aroused my curiosity about Christians. I do not know why they treat me well and trust me even at the first sight. They are moral models for my daily life. I want to learn from them.” The second motivation is the experience of living in America. As the time went by, through witnessing Christians’ lives and being challenged, confronted, or even annoyed by Christianity, four interviewees admitted that their beliefs were changed, and they became Christians. Interviewee 10 said that her beliefs have been partially changed and she is on the way to becoming completely changed. She said, “After I came to the United States, by observing Christians around me, my prior perceptions of Christianity was completely changed. Now, I believe that there is a God in the world and that is Jesus.”

**Barriers.** These were barriers that stopped interviewees from changing their previous beliefs and behaviors. These barriers were environment, peer pressure, government control, Chinese philosophy of religion, and education. Most interviewees complained that the environment in China hinders them from getting more understanding of Christianity. Interviewee 3 concluded that “[i]n China, people are seldom heard of Christianity.” Interviewee 7 also shares the same opinion: “I learned Christianity from our history book, but it only describes where and when it came to Chinese.” Moreover, Interviewee 8 complained that “I got to know Christianity from the Hollywood movies and I have never heard Christianity in my daily life until I came to the United States.”

The second barrier is peer pressure. Since Chinese people are devoted to seeking the harmony, an individual will suffer lots of pressure if he or she destroys the harmony. Interviewee 1 complained that “[i]f everyone around me is against Christianity, it is not harmonious, and

others may think I am a destroyer of the harmonious society.” Interviewee 5 added that “[w]hen I was not a Christian in China, I laughed at Christians with others because all of us believe in atheism. Also, we believed that Christianity is a religious superstition and people who believe it stupid and less educated. The reason is that lots of Christians that we meet in the government church are kind of old, poor and have lower education.”

The third barrier is government control. Since Chinese government requires all Chinese schools to teach evolution, this indicates that they do not agree with other religions. Interviewee 3 complained that “I heard that Christianity is forbidden in China and people can only buy Bibles in the government church.” Interviewee 5 also complained that “[t]here is not real freedom of religion in China. The pastors in the government church are supervised by the government.” In addition, the Interviewee 8 said that “[t]he persecution of the underground church in China is severe and I am afraid to be arrested if I became a Christian. I have a friend whose father is a leader of an underground church. He was sent to prison for three years because of preaching gospel.”

The fourth barrier is religion. Pfister (2003) reviewed the formation of Chinese philosophy of religion in his article. He said that the first “modern” universities were established in Beijing in 1911, and courses taught at that time reflected multilateral interests to preserve “traditional teachings” as well as “western civilization” in the form of Christian missionary education. The advancements of science and technology were stimulated by military and mercantile encounters, and “modern” political institutions. In 1920s and 1930s, the polarization of ideologies stimulated “dialectically driven and discursive justifications for a ‘distinctively Chinese’ form of philosophy, many times putting it into stark contrast with Christian theistic worldviews and their concomitant value systems” (Pfister, 2003, p. 542). People argued that

philosophy should replace religion. During the balance of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the arguments of atheistic communist ideologists impacted Chinese intellectual traditions greatly. As for the history of “Chinese atheism,” a good amount of historical materials showed Chinese’ intellectual rejections of “ghosts” (gui) and “spirits” (guishen) rather than with arguments related to a “supreme being” of some sort (Pfister, 2003).

However, philosophical atheism became a doctrinaire standard for any discussion of metaphysics or religious experience when Maoist Marxism became the state ideology. Consequently, any intellectual approach to the philosophy of religion in Chinese contexts must regularly deal with questions raised by philosophical atheism and its attendant problems. In addition, as Pfister (2003) stated,

[T]he politically supported critique of religions has prompted Chinese intellectuals to categorize many traditional Chinese teachings as “non-theistic” (fei you shen lun), despite many historical counter examples and philosophical reasons to argue otherwise, promoted apparently to avoid confrontation with the state ideology. When one compiles all these factors within early 20th century Chinese philosophical traditions, shaped by polarities in opposition to Christian apologetics and dialectical developments in facing a broader and more complex modern world, as well as the Chinese Marxist philosophical traditions and their ideological extension throughout the balance of the century, it is much easier to understand why there has been no explicit specialization of alternatives in the philosophy of religion reflecting traditions not already addressed and ideologically suppressed by the prevailing discursive trends shaped by Chinese political culture. (p.543)

The dominant religion in China is atheism. This validates all of the interviewees’ responses as they commented that China is an atheism-dominated country, which hinders their

belief that there is a God in the world. Interviewee 1 said that “I still believe that there is no God in the world, though I have been in the United States for five years.” Interviewee 6 and 7 responded that “All the religions in the world are not realistic, and they are created by human being’s imaginations. It is ridiculous to say that there is a God in the world.” Interviewee 11 added that “I believe that Bible is a story book, which was written by human beings. Therefore, there is no God in the world at all.” Interviewee 12 said that “Other beliefs than atheism is religious superstition.”

The last barrier is education. The Chinese philosophy of education as a discipline was established around 100 years ago. In 1920s and 1930s, the first philosophy of education with the ingredient of western philosophy of education occurred. In 1928, Fan Shoukang published a book, which was regarded as a milestone in the rise of modern philosophy of education in China. The four approaches identified by Fan to advance modern Chinese philosophy of education are “(1) establish education ideas from philosophical discourses, (2) tackle educational issues via different schools of philosophy, (3) apply Marxism to studies of education, especially viewing educational issues through the eyes of dialectic materialism, and (4) discuss education on the background of Catholic philosophy” (Hong & Dan, 2004, p. 572) Those four approaches shaped the destiny of contemporary philosophy of education in China.

After 1949, the philosophy of education in China went into decline. From the 1950s to the early 1960s, China borrowed and imported educational theories from the Soviet Union, and the Marxist approach prevailed in China. During the Cultural Revolution, there was only “one kind of educational theory available, grounded in the ideology of ‘class struggle’” (Hong & Dan, 2004, p. 573). In addition, during that time, which began in 1966, religion became the target of suppression. With the end of the Cultural Revolution, the Open Door policy was pursued because

the primary political focus shifted to economic development. The long-term role of religion was recognized and cooperation between socialism and religion was desired with this shift.

In 1982, the Chinese government revised Article 36 of the Constitution as "Article 36 of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of religious belief" (Nanbu, 2008, p. 225). However, this right was not recognized for members of the Communist Party. In 1991, the Original Department of the CCPCC stated that members of the Communist Party should be atheists and they may only believe in Marxism, Leninism and the thought of Mao Zedong. They told they may not believe in religion nor may they take part in religious activities. In addition, the Chinese government also sought to prohibit any interference from foreign forces using religion (Nanbu, 2008).

As for the philosophy of education in China, the Chinese law states, "No one may make use of religion to engage in activities that interfere with the implementation of compulsory education" and "Education activities shall benefit the public interests of the state and society. The state shall separate education from religion" (Nanbu, 2008, p. 226). That is why in the PRC schools are teaching atheism and that is why some interviewees in this study said that they do not believe that there is a God in the world.

All of the interviewees of this study indicated that they only believed in science and things that can be proven to be true before they came to the United States. They were told that they can only believe things that can be felt, touched, and tested. Interviewee 1 said that "I only believe the things that I can see in my life." Interviewee 6 said "I only believe the thing that can be proved by the scientific tests." Moreover, Interviewee 7 said that "I am not sure whether God exists or not. If he want me to believe that his existence, he should I see him, touch him and feel him. Also, I do not believe that the world and human being were

created by God since the book told us we came from apes and the world follows the rule of evolution.”

By analyzing the twelve interview responses through demographic information, a theoretical perspective, cultural influence, motivations and barriers to their adaptation to the Christian environment in the United States, two practical implications are evident. First, this study provides practical information for Christians who work with Chinese students. Second, because Chinese students do not understand Christian beliefs, if they were taught Christian doctrine they would have a better understanding of what Christianity is. Specifically, since Chinese students only learn atheism in Chinese schools, they do not know other worldviews. In order to help them to develop a true understanding of Christianity and enable them with a genuine understanding of Christianity, it is imperative to teach them Christian doctrine.

### **Chapter Five – Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

The present study is subject to several limitations that call for careful interpretation and further research. First, the objectivity and validity of this study may be affected by the researcher's own background. Since the researcher is a Chinese student who personally experienced cognitive dissonance when coming to the United States, this experience might create a bias for the researcher. This bias and personal experience could tend to make generalizations that all the Chinese students have a certain kind of cognitive dissonance such as she experienced.

Second, the researcher site might affect the accuracy of the data provided by the participants. This study was conducted in a Christian university and the university requires all the students to attend several activities related to Christianity, which may create discomfort for the non-Christian Chinese students. Those activities might increase the cognitive dissonance of the Chinese students and affect the validity of the results.

Third, in the current study, a convenience sampling was used to recruit Chinese students from one university to explore their responses to Christianity in the United States. Therefore, the sample was not representative of the general population. Though the researcher collected the demographic information on participants' age, gender, length of residency in the United States, these demographic variables were not compared to the Chinese students' responses to Christianity. These results might be restricted by the small size of the sample or the uneven distribution of age and gender among those twelve participants. Among the twelve participants in this study, only three of them were males; the other nine participants were females. Besides, the age range of those twelve participants was from 18 years old to 22 years old, which is too narrow to explore the influence of age on participants' adaptations. The future research should recruit participants from a wide variety of regions and universities in the United States to expand the

representativeness. Also, a large sample size with demographic diversity should be considered in future studies. More Chinese students from different age groups, school years, religious background, gender, and length of residency in the United States need to be involved.

Specifically, future studies could use focus groups to explore whether participants' gender, age, and length of residency in the United States affect overseas Chinese students' adaptation to Christianity in the United States. For example, future research could compare a group of participants in the age range from 18 years old to 20 years old to another group of participants in other age ranges to explore age as a factor to influence Chinese students' adaptation to Christianity in the United States.

Fourth, the current study adopted a qualitative method as its strategy of inquiry and twelve interviewees were interviewed. Although valuable, this single research method restrained the representativeness of the research results. In addition, the research did not adopt a credible data processing tool to analyze the interview responses and report the results. Future research could use more research methods to study this issue and use a credible data processing tool to analyze the data.

Fifth, this study is conducted through the lens of cognitive dissonance theory to determine Chinese students' cognitive dissonance and their changes in beliefs. The future research could use other theories to explore this topic.

Sixth, this current study did not consider a person's personality as a factor to influence Chinese students' adaptation to Christianity in the United States. It might be much more difficult for an introvert to adapt to Christianity than an extrovert since extroverts tend to be more open-minded than introverts. Therefore, a future study could explore how a person's personality influences his or her adaptation to Christianity in the United States.

Lastly, this current study only explored Chinese students' adaptation to Christianity. The future studies could explore students from other countries that came to the United States to see whether they experience cognitive dissonance when they are exposed to Christianity in the United States. Or students from other countries to other countries who go to locations other than United States could be evaluated to see how they adapt to other religions. Besides, a future study could explore cognitive dissonance in American students who go to China or other countries and study are influenced by the host countries' religion.

### **Conclusion**

Because of globalization, the rapid development of the economy, and the convenience of transportation, people are traveling across cultural boundaries more often than ever before. In China, many parents choose to send their children to the United States to get a better education. Since China is an atheism-dominated country and the United States is a Christianity-dominated country, Chinese students may experience cognitive dissonance in the United States. The purpose of this study is to explore if the Chinese students experience cognitive dissonance when they are exposed to Christianity at a large southeast Christian university in the United States, and their reactions regarding the reduction, increase or change of the cognitive dissonance after they were exposed to Christianity in the United States.

The results of the current study indicated that Chinese students experienced cognitive dissonance when they were exposed to Christianity in the United States. Since China was an atheism-dominated country, most Chinese people thought Christianity was a religious superstition and spiritual ballast. Besides, they thought Christianity was not related to people's real lives, and that it was against science and evolution. Therefore, Christianity did not arouse Chinese people's attentions and interests in China. However, all twelve participants became more

aware of Christianity and gained new understanding of Christianity after they came to the United States and were exposed to Christians. These new ideas about Christianity triggered cognitive dissonance and discomfort since they all came from atheism-dominated countries. In order to reduce the cognitive dissonance, seven of those twelve participants chose to deny the new perceptions of Christianity that they got after they came to the United States and still regarded Christianity as a religious superstition. Besides, they tended to avoid Christians who talked about Christianity to them. However, four participants chose to change their dissonant beliefs to maintain consistency by accepting the new perceptions of Christianity that they got after they came to the United States. Besides, those four participants became Christians. One participant partially accepted Christianity.

An analysis of the demographic variables' influence of those twelve participants' adaptation to Christianity indicated that female interviewees were more willing to change their previous beliefs and behavior regarding Christianity than male participants since the four participants who became Christians were females. In addition, participants who had either Christian relatives or friends were more willing to change their previous beliefs and behavior regarding new beliefs since three of the participants who became Christians had either Christian relatives or friends in China. However, there was no clear relationship between length of residency in the United States and participants' willingness to change their previous beliefs. Also, there was no clear relationship among gender and age and participants' willingness to change their previous beliefs. These may be due to the small sample size.

By analyzing the culture influence and the motivations and barriers of participants' adaptation to Christianity, it was found that Chinese people tended to have unrealistic perceptions of Christianity before they came to the United States because of the influence of

Confucianism, filial piety, ancestor worship. Other barriers for Chinese students to adapt to Christianity in the United States were environment, peer pressure, government control, religion, and education.

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**Appendix 1 - Interview Consent Form****CONSENT FORM**

Chinese Students' Experience of Cognitive Dissonance Regarding Christianity  
in the United States

Ying Li

Liberty University

School of Communication

You are invited to be in a research study about the Chinese Students' perception of Christianity in the United States. You were selected as a possible participant because both the length of you living in the United States and the belief category of yours fit the demand of this study. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Ying Li, a graduate student at Liberty University School of Communication.

**Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to determine if Chinese students experience cognitive dissonance when they are exposed to Christianity in the United States, and what are their reactions regarding reduction, increase or change of the cognitive dissonance after they are exposed to Christianity in the United States.

**Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, you would be asked to do the following things:

1. You will be asked to answer approximately ten questions;
2. The whole interview process will be audio-recorded;
3. The length of time for your participation will be 30 minutes to 1 hour;

**Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:**

The study has two risks: first, you will be asked questions regarding your belief and your perception of other beliefs; second, your responses will be audio-recorded.

There are no benefits to participate in this study.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify your identity. Research records, including notes and digital recordings, will be stored in a locked drawer and digital recordings will be in password-protected files. Furthermore, only researchers will have access to the notes and digital recordings. All the notes will be erased once they are typed into the computer. All recording files and notes files will be deleted after the completion of this thesis.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the university that you are studying at and Christian friends you have. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**Contacts and Questions:**

The researcher of this study is *Ying Li*. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact *Ying Li*, Liberty University School of Communication, (434) 851-2478, or via email at [yli2@liberty.edu](mailto:yli2@liberty.edu).

*You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.*

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix 2 - Interview Protocols (DeWine, 2001)**

- I. Planning the interview
  - A. Arranging the setting
    1. Eliminate surrounding distractions.
    2. Position the furniture/seats to allow a lower power distance.
  - B. Arranging the time
    1. Arrange the duration of the interview: 30 minutes.
    2. Get to know the surrounding events of the interviewee.
      - a. Avoid having interview immediately after a meal.
      - b. Avoid having interview between two major events.
- II. Conducting the interview
  - A. Opening
    1. Greeting
      - a. Give a brief self-introduction.
      - b. Set emotional tone and establish common ground.
      - c. Use positive, open nonverbal gestures.
    2. Orientation
      - a. State the purposes of the interview
      - b. Tell what information is needed and how it will be used.
      - c. Ask for the permission to interview, and the permission to tape.
  - B. Body
    1. Responsibilities of the interviewer
      - a. Control and focus the conversation.
      - b. Listen actively.
      - c. Use secondary questions and silence.
      - d. Take notes.
    2. List of topics to cover
      - a. Perceptions regarding Christianity both in China and in the United States
      - b. Changes of perceptions and barriers to change
    3. List of major questions

- a. Had you ever heard of Christianity before you came to the United States? When and where?
  - b. What did you think about Christianity/Christians when you were in China? Have you ever considered why you have those perceptions of Christianity?
  - c. What do you think about Christianity/Christians now since you have been living in the United States? Have you ever considered why you have those perceptions of Christianity?
  - d. What are some differences you have experienced regarding Christianity between China and the United States?
  - e. In your opinion, what are some cultural aspects between China and the United States that influence people to have different perceptions of Christianity?
  - f. Do you feel that you are willing to change your thinking or behaviors regarding Christianity? Do you feel that you have been forced to change your thinking or behaviors regarding Christianity? Why?
  - g. What are some barriers that keep you from changing your perception and behavior regarding Christianity? Why?
  - h. Has anything happened that caused you to change your perception and behavior regarding Christianity? Why?
4. List of follow-up questions
    - a. Gender, age, year of student, and years of living in the United States.
    - b. Are you a Christian? Is anyone in your family a Christian?
    - c. Has anyone talked to you about becoming a Christian?
    - d. If you have become a Christian, what was your perception of Christianity before you became a Christian and what is your perception of Christianity after you became a Christian?
    - e. Please give more detail.
  5. Closing
    - a. Ask if the interviewee wants to add more comments.
    - b. Give a brief review of all the answers and clarify the results.
    - c. Ask if future results are needed by the interviewee, and leave contact information.

d. Conclude with pleasantries and "thank-you".

III. Analyzing the interview

- A. Listen to recording 3 times and take notes for each interview.
- B. Keep a word-for-word written record of notes.
- C. Verify notes with recording.
- D. Keep correct date for each interview.

**Table 1 - Demographic information of participants and their adaptation**

Interviewee Number	Demographic information (Age, Gender, Length of residency in U. S., religion background)	Issues			
		Having Christian relatives or friends in China	Experiencing dissonance	Being willing to critically think about the existing belief and new belief	Being willing to change existing belief
# 1	21 Male 5 years Atheism	No	Yes	No	No
# 2	20 Female 9 months Atheism	No	Yes	No	Yes
# 3	19 Female 1.5 years Atheism	No	Yes	No	No
# 4	20 Female 3 years Atheism	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
# 5	22 Female 3 years Atheism	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
# 6	18 Male 2 months Atheism	No	Yes	No	No

## Continued

Interviewee Number	Issues				
	Demographic information (Age, Gender, Length of residency in U. S., religion background)	Having Christian relatives or friends in China	Experiencing dissonance	Being willing to critically think about the existing belief and new belief	Being willing to change existing belief
# 7	21 Female 9 months Atheism	No	Yes	No	No
# 8	18 Female 9 months Atheism	No	Yes	Yes	No
# 9	20 Female 1 year Atheism	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
# 10	21 Female 3 years Atheism	No	Yes	Yes	Partially
# 11	19 Male 1.5 years Atheism	No	Yes	Yes	No
# 12	22 Female 3 years Atheism	No	Yes	No	No

**Table 2 – Number of participants categorized under each theme regarding before and after they came to U.S. (N=12)**

