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# Interview with Lisa M. Hoff of Gateway Seminary

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*How has interaction with Chinese Christians rejuvenated your faith?*

Chinese Christians have long embraced a theology of suffering and sacrifice. Centuries of war, famine, persecution, and pain have built a church of resilient faith with roots that grow deep through the adversity of life. There are many Christians who equate the blessings of God with financial prosperity or physical well-being. For the Chinese Church in East Asia, however, God's blessing manifests through his ever-present faithfulness in the midst of suffering. This theological perspective reflects a church that keeps its eyes focused on Christ, recognizing the brevity of this life and the eternal glory that is to come (Rom 8:18).

Living in East Asia as an educator, intercultural trainer, and business entrepreneur has taught me important lessons about the value of a Christ-centered life. Lessons that undoubtedly would have been harder to learn in the comfort of my own cultural context. The life and testimony of Chinese Christians has challenged me for almost thirty years to see Jesus as my sufficiency and his glory as my goal. These men and women, on both sides of the Pacific, have modeled lives of sacrifice, grace, and humility for me.

One of my first Chinese friends in East Asia was a single woman in her late twenties. As the only follower of Christ in her household, her parents reluctantly agreed to allow her to be a Christian if it did not create too many problems for the family. She was an impassioned educator and evangelist who shared the gospel with any college student who would listen. Family bonds form the strongest social ties in Chinese society and so her parents became increasingly concerned as she grew older and was not yet married. In traditional culture, choosing not to marry carries social stigma and brings deep shame upon a family. Although outsiders may



minimize these issues, honor and shame are foundational to the worldview of most Chinese. Though my friend desired marriage, she knew that choosing to follow Christ meant it was unlikely to ever happen. There were few Christian men in her community and as a devoted follower she was unwilling to marry a non-believer. She weighed the potential cost of following Jesus long before making that commitment. In her culture she knew the price of discipleship may mean a loss of respect, honor, social standing, and potentially even her employment or freedom. Yet when asked how she could resist the pressure from her family to conform, her reply was simply "Jesus is worth it. Whatever the cost, he is worth it."

That theme of "Christ being worth it" was planted deep within my heart as a young twenty-something-year-old woman in East Asia. In the years that followed, countless Chinese Christians have reminded me of this truth. At one point in time, God brought an older Chinese sister into my life as both a treasured friend and mentor. Her obedience and faithfulness to follow Christ in the midst of persecution and imprisonment prepared her for an important discipleship role at her church. When the ministry team would identify men and women called to Christian service they would place them in a church training program. After completing several years of Bible study and missionary service it came time to select individuals who would take the next step into ministry leadership. In this final stage, my friend and her ministry colleagues would take these young Christians to a graveyard several hours away. In this place were the remains of Chinese believers and foreign missionaries who had given their lives for the sake of the gospel. During their visit, a challenge was offered to these young adults. Essentially they were asked one simple question. "These men and women sacrificed their lives so that you would have an opportunity to hear the gospel. They paid a price so that you could know the joy of walking with Christ today. Are you willing to give your life so that others may have that same opportunity? If you are not sure, then you are not prepared for ministry leadership." Even writing these words today convicts my heart of the sacrifice that is necessary for those of us who desire to follow Jesus. How differently would men and women consider a call to ministry service if they had to wrestle with this same question. Is Jesus worth it?

In an American context, the Chinese church has also exhibited a strong focus on making Christ known. Although the circumstances are different than in East Asia, the challenge to reaching the Chinese diaspora across the world is no less daunting. Is Jesus enough when faced with immigration or language issues? Is the sacrifice required to follow Christ as a minority in a new country worth the price? What about the loneliness

of living in a foreign culture? Once again, Chinese leaders have repeatedly affirmed for me that he is worth it even then.

My relationship with Chinese Christians has proven to be transformative over the years both in East Asia and the United States. These friendships have provided invaluable coaching and mentoring, particularly in the area of contextualized ministry and spiritual growth. Even when I fail to exhibit cultural competence in a given ministry situation, they extend grace and patience. In their service and support, Chinese Christians have consistently pointed me back to Jesus though their unique cultural experience and insights.

*What biblical texts helped form your understanding of Christ and the Christian faith from an East Asian perspective?*

A few years ago, I sat down to study the parable of the good shepherd (John 10) with brothers and sisters from a semi-nomadic people group in East Asia. After reading the text together, I quickly realized that these individuals had a deeper and more culturally connected understanding of Jesus as the Good Shepherd than I did. Mostly because they had family members who were shepherds! As an American woman, I had an intellectual grasp of the passage but not an experiential one. My semi-nomadic friends resonated with Jesus's role as our shepherd and had immediate insights into that passage that I had missed. On numerous occasions I have been reminded that each individual reads Scripture through a unique set of cultural lenses.

### *Evangelizing the Lost*

Certain Bible passages elicit different applications according to a person's cultural perspective. In Luke 16:19–31, Jesus tells the parable of The Rich Man and Lazarus. In this story, the rich man was clothed in purple and fine linen during his life, while Lazarus was a beggar sitting at the gate. When they both died, the rich man went to Hades and Lazarus to Abraham's side. The rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus to his family to warn them against following in his footsteps. Abraham refuses. Typically, this passage is a reminder for me to not get caught up in valuing the things of this world, like the Pharisees, but to instead follow hard after God. When friends and I studied this text in East Asia, however, they often interpreted this passage as a call to evangelism. In a collectivistic culture that deeply values family, this idea of an ancestor begging them to tell others the gospel resonated with their sense of familial responsibility.



### *Household Salvation*

Evangelism and discipleship in the West is heavily influenced by individualism. Christians are taught to share the gospel, teach the Bible, and even do accountability one-on-one. Yet in the New Testament there are also examples of household conversions. The Philippian jailer and Lydia in Acts 16 are good examples of an individual and their entire household accepting the gospel and being baptized. Yet practically speaking, this is a foreign concept to many Western Christians. In a collectivistic and hierarchical society, however, this is not an alien idea. When the father or the head of a household makes a decision, other family members generally trust and accept their conclusion on behalf of the group. When applying this cultural difference to gospel proclamation, I like to refer to it as apple vs. grape evangelism. An individualistic society shares the gospel the way people pick apples, one at a time. In a collectivistic society, however, sharing the good news is often done in clusters of friends or family members. A person would not dream of going into a grocery store and requesting one grape, just as many people in a collectivistic society would not limit their gospel sharing to just one-on-one.

### *Prodigal Son*

The Prodigal Son is one of the most engaging stories to view through an East Asian cultural perspective. Although it is a powerful example of redemption in any context, when viewed through a shame-honor lens it is unfathomable. In Luke 15:11–32 the story unfolds of a man's youngest son who essentially curses his father and wishes him dead. In a Confucian society that values filial piety, obedience, and social hierarchy, this kind of behavior would be unforgiveable. Nothing could be worse than for the son to disrespect his father and leave the family.

When friends would hear this story I would ask if they thought the relationship between the father and son could ever be restored. They always said no, absolutely not. Then I would tell them the end of the story, where the father runs out to greet the youngest son and places his robe, sandals, and a ring on his finger. They repeat, that could never happen. The acceptance of the father and reconnection to the family identity is such a powerful illustration of love and restoration in that context that it frequently led to deeper spiritual conversations.

*Describe the importance of identifying between first- and second-generation Chinese American believers as a minister of the gospel in the States.*

The United States is home to more immigrants than any other nation. People have historically been drawn to this country in order to better their

future and provide greater opportunities for their children. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 led to national and ethnic diversification of immigrants to the US and increased their number fourfold.[1] The US foreign-born population reached a record 44.4 million people in 2017, which accounts for 13.6 percent of the US population.[2] According to Pew Research, by 2065 modern-era immigrants and their descendants will account for 88 percent of US population growth.[3] California has the largest immigrant population of any state, followed by Texas and New York.[4]

Although much attention in the national dialogue has focused on immigration from the southern border, over the past ten years more Asian immigrants than Hispanics have actually migrated to the US.[5] By 2055, Asians are projected to become the largest immigrant group and by 2065 they will comprise an estimated 38 percent of all immigrants.[6] Asian immigrants are typically well-educated and comprise the majority of international students in the United States.

Distinguishing unique traits of first, 1.5, and second-generation immigrants is essential for ministry. First generation, or foreign born, refers to persons born outside of the United States to parents who are not US citizens. If a child or adolescent immigrates, he or she is referred to as 1.5 generation. Second generation denotes those who are born in the United States and who have at least one parent who is first generation. Individuals in each category have been uniquely influenced by the immigration experience.

### *Chinese Immigration*

In 2017, China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong peoples comprised the second largest group of immigrants to the United States (2.9 percent).[7] Although many Americans categorize Chinese immigrants as a homogenous

[1] https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/17/key-findings-about-u-s-immigrants/.

[2] https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/17/key-findings-about-u-s-immigrants/.

[3] https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/17/key-findings-about-u-s-immigrants/.

[4] https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/17/key-findings-about-u-s-immigrants/.

[5] https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/17/key-findings-about-u-s-immigrants/.

[6] https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/17/key-findings-about-u-s-immigrants/.

[7] https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/17/key-findings-about-u-s-immigrants/.



block, they actually come from diverse backgrounds with unique historical, cultural, political, and linguistic variation. They speak a variety of languages such as Cantonese, Mandarin, Taishanese, and Taiwanese. Although most have a high level of English proficiency, an estimated 6 percent of Chinese immigrants speak Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese) as their primary language in the home.[8]

Migration reflects dynamic push-pull factors that motivate a person to leave the comfort of home for a foreign country. Most immigrants from East Asia come to the United States for economic or educational reasons, but there are also those who immigrate due to religious persecution. The experiences of immigrants in their country of origin deeply affects who they are and what they pass along to their children.

Most first-generation Chinese place a strong value on hard work and education as a means to success. East Asian immigrants are more likely that US-born residents to have a bachelor's or advanced degree and pass this value for education along to their children.[9] According to one Pew Research study, second-generation Asian Americans place more importance on hard work and career success than the general public.[10] This drive to succeed also translates to the Chinese American experience in the church, affecting everything from time usage to financial resources. Many Chinese American youth, for example, may face pressure to commit more time to schoolwork than to youth group activities.

### *Second Generation*

Chinese Americans who are 1.5 or second generation have a very different experience than their parents, both in society and the church. Depending upon their level of cultural assimilation, they will maintain some level of connection to their cultural heritage or home country while also putting down roots in the US. These individuals internally navigate their two cultural identities to formulate a greater whole.

Cultural assimilation is affected by various factors such as education, family stability, ties to the country of origin, and the type of community environment found in the US. The Segmented Assimilation Theory asserts there are three distinct kinds of assimilation by immigrants: consonant, dissonant, and selective.[11] Consonant acculturation happens when

[8] https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/17/key-findings-about-u-s-immigrants/.

[9] https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/06/17/key-findings-about-u-s-immigrants/.

[10] https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/02/07/second-generation-americans/.

[11] https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2882294/.

children and parents learn American culture together and gradually leave behind language and cultural practices from the country of origin at about the same pace. Dissonant acculturation occurs when children learn English and adopt American ways faster than their immigrant parents which can lead to family pressure and a potential "downward assimilation" of second-generation kids. One example of this is when there is linguistic isolation in the home and children take on additional responsibilities for their parents when they lack the necessary English skills to engage in day-to-day activities. Selective acculturation and biculturalism occur when both the parents and children gradually learn American ways together while remaining embedded to some degree in their own ethnic community.[12]

Most second-generation Chinese Americans have a strong sense of identity with both their ancestral heritage and their American culture. They tend to live in multigenerational households until they are married and maintain strong family connections. Linguistically they may be bilingual, have limited written or verbal skills in their parent's language, or be monolingual in English. Conversations in the household may involve a parent speaking to their child in his or her mother tongue with the child responding in English. In this kind of ministry context, it is important to help individuals and families cross both the linguistic and cultural divides between generations.

### *The Chinese Church*

First-generation Chinese churches often reflect the cultural traditions, music, and leadership patterns from their country of origin. Even when individuals are fluent in English, they often prefer worshipping in their heart language. With the number of Chinese immigrants and their responsiveness to the gospel, it is no wonder that there are an estimated 1,679 Chinese churches in the United States (2016).[13] These churches generally have both a Chinese language congregation for first-generation immigrants and an English congregation for 1.5- or second-generation Chinese Americans. Although there are many cultural similarities between the two congregations, there are also many dissimilarities that can cause friction. English congregations often resemble other American churches in practice, while maintaining many Chinese traditions.

A 2005 Duke Divinity School study found that "tensions in Asian American churches revolved around clashes between the generations over cultural differences in the styles and philosophies of church leadership

[12] Alejandro Portes and Ruben G. Rumbaut, *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001).

[13] https://multiasian.church/data/number-of-churches/#c.



and control."[14] Because Chinese society is hierarchical in nature, the leadership of a Chinese congregation will often reflect this trait. English congregations, however, will typically have a more Americanized or flat organizational system of leadership and communication. First-generation Chinese pastors, for example, may be more steeped in Confucian tradition and view expressed disagreement as a personal attack. Second-generation pastors, however, may be more culturally accustomed to openly expressing opposing views.[15] These kinds of communication issues between first- and second-generation Chinese Americans can often lead to cultural misunderstanding within the church.

*How has your experience in East Asia influenced how you conduct ministry and discipleship with Asian Americans?*

Ministry effectiveness in the twenty-first century requires leaders to grow in cultural competence and have the ability to form lasting partnerships with Christians from diverse cultural backgrounds. It is always challenging to step beyond personal comfort and engage with people who are different. However, changing demographics and the growth of a culturally diverse Christian church in America necessitates taking these steps. Christianity is growing most rapidly outside of the West and many of these believers are coming to the United States as students, professionals, and ministry leaders. This generation has an opportunity to build strong networks within the global church right in our own backyard. These relationships are not just important for better understanding, but indeed for the expansion of God's Kingdom around the world.

My work in East Asia provided opportunity on a daily basis for me to engage individuals from various national, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. This interaction nurtured my personal spiritual growth and helped me better understand the ways God is moving among people in different cultural contexts. Working in an intercultural setting overseas also highlighted personal blind spots and shortcomings in my own life, including pride and cultural arrogance. When surrounded by people who share a similar identity, it is easy to assume that there is only one way, or at least only one best ways to approach a situation. Engaging spiritually mature Christians from different parts of the world has a way of sowing humility into our hearts by holding up a mirror to our cultural biases and assumptions.

[14] https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2007-sep-29-me-beliefs29-story.html.

[15] https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2007-sep-29-me-beliefs29-story.html.

Diverse contexts in Asia challenged me to develop a deeper level of cultural competence and grow my understanding of basic research skills. Early on I realized that any knowledge or insights I had were essentially useless if I could not communicate them clearly to people from different cultural and worldview backgrounds. Learning how to ask good questions and assess cultural clues resulted in stronger bridges of communication, relationship, and gospel sharing. It also helped me better understand nuances of culture that are affected by historical context, sociological change, language, and generational differences.

The experiences and relationships I had in East Asia have had a profound impact on my life and ministry in the United States. Living in Southern California brings daily opportunities to interact with diverse people from all around the world. This unique environment reflects a fusion of cultures that serves as a learning laboratory for ministry leaders, particularly those who intend to work overseas or in multicultural contexts. In this cauldron of diversity, individuals have to become more culturally adept to engage society and minister to the practical needs of people.

Nearly one-third of Asian Americans live in California.[16] Los Angeles county has the largest Asian population of any county in the United States and is also home to the largest population of ethnic Chinese, Taiwanese, Filipino, Korean, Cambodian, Thai, Indonesian, Sri Lankan, Mongolian, and Malaysian peoples.[17] My understanding of Chinese culture, religion, and worldview has enabled me to specifically connect with many first-generation Chinese immigrants. Yet my embrace of both American and Chinese culture has helped me understand second-generation Americans who also hold these two cultures in tandem. One of the keys to discipling both first- and second-generation Chinese Americans is finding out how much of their worldview is rooted in Asian or Western culture. This affects a person's expectation of leadership within the church (power distance), how they read Scripture, and even their concept of Christian family dynamics. It also reveals how collectivistic or individualistic they are in their approach to decision making or even speaking up in Bible study.

Southern California has a rich Asian American Christian legacy, particularly in the Chinese community. Many churches maintain strong ties to their cultural heritage through language, tradition, worship styles, and ongoing relationships with individuals in their country of origin. These churches are growing numerically and in spiritual depth, frequently sending out mission teams to serve the Chinese diaspora around the world and

[16] https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/08/key-facts-about-asian-americans/.

[17] http://www.laalmanac.com/population/po16.php.



reaching the lost at home. There is much to learn from highly qualified leaders in these Chinese congregations. Experiencing the value of partnership and learning to serve under non-Western leadership has helped me to embrace the value of mutual learning within the global body of Christ. It has also expanded my understanding of God's divine movement in bringing the nations to himself in culturally unique ways.

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