

Developing Chinese International Students as Evangelists: An Australian Case Study

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Abstract

This case study explores how Chinese international students (CIS) may be empowered to become active gospel bearers. Based on semi-structured interviews and ministry records from ministry on one Australian campus, findings reveal that embedding CIS within a community that models and expects evangelism—through peer imitation, warm discipleship, clearly-defined, simple and repeatable evangelistic tools, and a degree of “pushiness”—catalyzed gospel-sharing. Notably, a blend of “attractional” entry points (e.g., fellowship events) and “missional” practices (e.g., Discovery Bible Studies) enabled discipleship multiplication. Results suggest that embodied evangelistic culture and accessible evangelistic methods may be more important than highly contextualized gospel presentations in developing CIS as reproducing evangelists.

Keywords: *Chinese international students, student evangelism, disciple multiplication, Discovery Bible Study, evangelistic community model*

July 2015: After taking the bullet train together, my wife and I walked with Lina¹ to her apartment in a large Chinese city. Lina had graduated from an Australian university several years earlier as a fairly new, but dedicated follower of Christ. Amidst our long-awaited catch-up, I asked, “Have you shared about Jesus with anyone here?” She shook her head. “No, people here wouldn’t understand about Jesus. But I pray by myself most days.”

For decades, international student (IS) ministry has been identified as “mission on our doorstep” for the church in traditional “sending” nations (McCleary 1989). Evangelism to international students has been recognized as a strategic initiative, as

¹ All names of people and institutions in this study have been changed to protect the anonymity of research participants.

overseas students can be trained as evangelists themselves to reach their home nations (Im, Yong, and Chinn 2014, 236–43). In Australia, Chinese international students (CIS; in this study, nationals of mainland China holding student visas) form a large proportion of students on many campuses. After a decline during the COVID-19 pandemic, 153,000 CIS were enrolled in Australian universities in 2024, representing 16% growth year-on-year and 21% of all IS enrolments (Department of Education 2023).

The present author is a cross-cultural ministry practitioner to CIS at a large secular Australian university. In Australia and in other popular CIS destination countries, focused efforts exist to evangelize and disciple international students, and many Australian campuses host student groups dedicated to this cause. However, there are few cases where CIS themselves are effectively raised up to share the gospel on campus.

Holistic Cross-cultural Discipling for Evangelism

Developing insider-culture evangelists is considered a crucial aspect of intercultural missions. Roland Allen highlights the danger that “converts...taught to depend on the missionary... rest passively upon [the missionary],” (Allen 1912, 109) including in the practice of evangelism. Zo claims that early and contemporary mission amongst Chinese people has had a “condescending” mode with foreign missionaries using positions of technological or social superiority (including the use of English language) for missional aims (Zo 2004). This further highlights the importance of focused efforts to “develop, empower and release local workers” (Ott and Wilson 2011, 87) in the Chinese context.

At least three elements can be identified as crucial to in raising up disciples to themselves evangelize: personal relationship building, vision casting, and training in reproducing evangelistic tools. Close holistic relationships, engaging metaphors such as “spiritual parenthood” (Fernando 2019, 21), or “walking alongside disciples” (Hibbert and Hibbert 2018, chap. 1) are seen as primary in discipleship outcomes and in multiplying in particular. “Disciple-making movement” (DMM) and “Church planting movement” (CPM) works advocate that vision casting - clear expression of desired ministry outcomes resulting in others’ passionate engagement - mobilizes believers to engage in missional activities (Smith and Kai 2011, chap. 11,; Garrison 2004, chap. 14). The immediate provision of simple and effective evangelistic tools allows new believers to imitate and share the gospel (Smith and Kai 2011, chap. 13; Ott and Wilson 2011, 88; Addison 2011, 111). Maintaining a balance between consistency (Smith and Kai 2011, 190) and adaptability (Addison 2011, chap. 5) in evangelistic tools taught to disciples is

essential. In one Australian campus group following such principles, new believers began to share the gospel within weeks (Milne and Cronshaw 2021).

Furthermore, DMM/CPM proponents have found what may be termed as “missional” methods of evangelism to be more conducive to raising up reproducing disciples, as opposed to “attractional” methods. Smith and Kai (2011, 40, 263) state that the Great Commission promotes a “go, not come” stance to evangelism, warning against approaches that “invite people to come to us”. Similarly, David and Paul Watson (2014, chap. 13) advise against relying on “extractional” approaches delivered to individuals by highly qualified outsiders. Rather, they recommend evangelism strategies that engage people with the gospel in their own community environment, which may lead to conversion of groups as a whole.

Understanding the cultural context of CIS is crucial in equipping and motivating them for evangelism. InterVarsity’s 150-page practitioners’ booklet (InterVarsity Christian Fellowship USA 2021, chap. 5) and other works characterize Chinese culture as collectivist (Chhokar, Brodbeck, and House 2013; Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010, chaps. 2, 4), emphasizing group membership and conformity to group norms. Thus, developing evangelists among CIS may involve fostering relationships and group culture (Moon and Moreau 2017, chap. 1, “Widening the Community” and ‘Individual versus Collective Identity’; Hibbert and Hibbert 2018, 122). High-context communication, which relies on unspoken cues and indirect messaging (Hall 1989, 91, 93, 113; Plueddemann 2012, 79), is prevalent among Chinese students (X. Yang 2016; Kim, Pan, and Park 1998). As Danny Hsu notes (2017), even modern “hybridized” Chinese culture maintains strong elements of collective ties and “practice-oriented” spirituality. Evangelism trainers of CIS must attend to non-verbal messages and create a conducive learning environment that includes shared meals, warm relationships (Wan 2019, chap. 2), and implicit permission for lay believers to teach others (Hibbert and Hibbert 2018, “Create a warm learning environment” in chap. 12).

Several challenges hinder the development of CIS evangelists, including low levels of previous religious participation - according to one survey, 90-95 per cent of CIS had rarely or never participated in church activities before studying overseas (F. G. Yang et al. 2016) - and the transitory nature of their life-stage (Cocanower and Mordomo 2021). Anecdotally, relatively small relational networks and time pressures also limit their engagement in relational evangelism and time-intensive training.

Mission bodies such as the Lausanne Movement, OMF and Intervarsity have published research regarding the already challenging work of evangelism towards and

pastoral care for CIS (Toit 2019; Hartwell 2004) and their retention in Christian communities after returning to China (Phillip 2018). However, there is limited evidence-based research specifically focused on the formation of evangelists among CIS. It should be added that CIS's participation in evangelistic mission may be a practical step towards long-term maturity and retention (InterVarsity Christian Fellowship USA 2021, chap. 15).

So, the crucial work of developing CIS evangelists will likely include a holistic approach emphasizing personal relationship, vision casting and imparting "missional" evangelistic tools. Attention to elements of Chinese culture such as the importance of group norms and unspoken cues may be useful. While the challenges have been documented, there is a paucity of research on evidence-based practices in this area.

Research Question and Methodology

The present study addresses the research question: *How may CIS best be equipped and motivated to effectively share the gospel with other CIS?* Related sub-questions touch on the relationship between evangelism trainers and CIS, methods of vision casting, and training in evangelistic tools.

Methodology and Data Sources

Initially planned as a comparative case study (Johnson 2018), the research shifted to a single case study due to limited available cases fitting the criterion of groups who had observed multiple CIS engaged in evangelism over a period of several years. The group in focus was "Joy in Jesus Fellowship" (JJF) at "Australian University" (AU), located in an urban center in Australia. Semi-structured interviews between September and December 2021 formed the primary data source (Shaw 2011, 144–56). These online interviews (in Mandarin and English; COVID restrictions prevented face-to-face interviews) involved 4 CIS evangelists, 3 JJF ministry staff or ministry affiliates, 2 non-CIS students, one local church pastor, and one ministry worker and former CIS from another group on the same campus as a comparative case. Five participants were female and six were male. Secondary data included ministry records, reports and photos, training materials, and public-access resources about the campus. Interview questions focused on CIS evangelism to other students, excluding off-campus or post-graduation evangelistic activities.

After transcription of the interviews, inductive data analysis (c.f. Yin 2018, chap. 5) using NVivo software included three stages: initial coding according to interview questions, review of responses to identify factors aiding in CIS evangelist development (Gray 2003), and grouping and sub-coding of relevant factors, including mapping relationships and influence within the group. Triangulation between interviews and additional data sources facilitated a comprehensive analysis (Baxter and Jack 2008). A summary of the findings was provided to participants for member checking, after which feedback from three respondents was used to verify, modify, and interpret the findings (Baxter and Jack 2008).

As a case study, this study does not claim representativeness but aims to stimulate reflection and experimentation in other contexts.

Findings

I. General Observations

AU's main campus hosted around 40,000 students with an international community of 12,000 - 17,000 students. Chinese International Students (CIS) reported enjoying various green spaces on campus, but also faced challenges connecting with non-Christian local peers, as well as high study pressures leading to stress and depression in some.

"Joy in Jesus" Fellowship (JJF)

JJF, the international student arm of a global mission organization at AU's main campus, exhibited growth between 2015 and 2019 in staff, evangelism training attendees, and conversions. Reported conversions increased from 30 in 2014, to 95 in 2016 and 112 in 2018, as shown in figure 1. JJF's activities included a weekly public meeting ("Spark"), small groups meeting for discovery Bible study (DBS) and student leader (SL) meetings. Several respondents reported one chain of five generations of conversions and discipleship amongst CIS, where CIS A evangelized CIS B, who subsequently evangelized student C and so on. Aaron supplied a diagram of this set of relationships which he had used in training presentations, shown in figure 2. This evidences gospel sharing by multiple CIS over a number of years. However, post-2019 transitions, including staff relocation and the COVID pandemic, disrupted JJF's ministry, impacting CIS evangelist training.

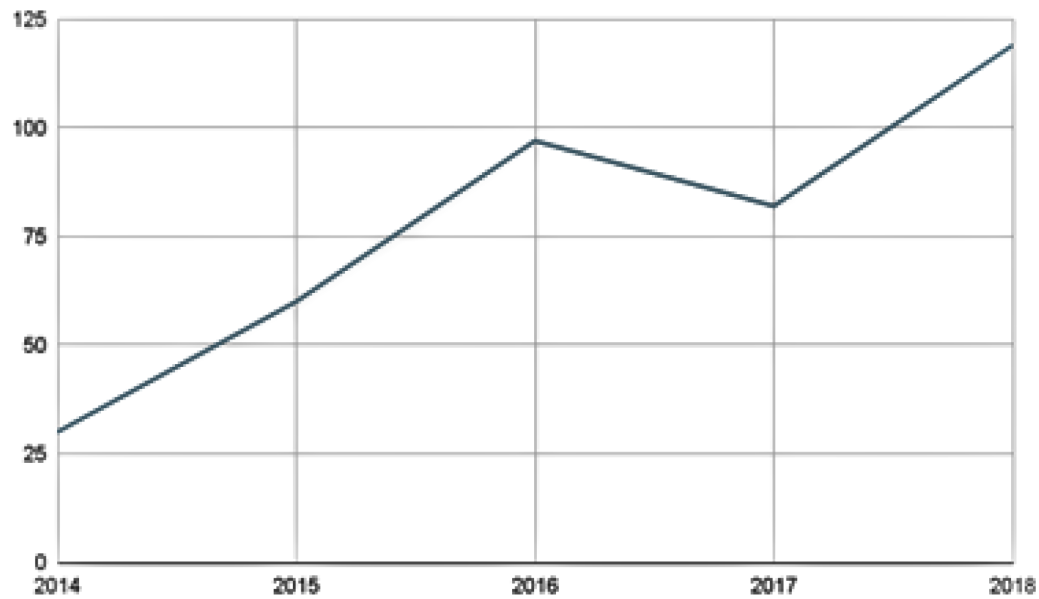


Figure 1. Reported conversions by year in JJF

A current example of Generational Growth G1->G4

Being intentional in sharing Jesus

G1 Sharon
shared Christ
w Edith
Sem 2 2016

Sharon +

G2 Edith
Shared w
Flora Mar
2018

Edith +

G3 Flora was
Trained to share
Christ. Shared w Eddy
July 2018

Flora +

Eddy G4 is presently
Being discipled to
Follow Jesus & share
Christ. Oct, 2018.....

Eddy +

Figure 2.

A diagram depicting an example of generations of evangelism in JJF (also employing pseudonyms, differing to the ones used in this study), used by Aaron to train JJF staff workers.

II. Persistently and Graciously Encouraging and Expecting All Disciples to Make Disciples

According to staff and students alike, JJF's evangelistic "culture" explains the prevalence of CIS evangelists. Evangelism trainers intentionally created, and CIS appreciated, an environment of expectation to evangelize through highlighting student evangelists for imitation, consistent and frequent encouragement to share the gospel, orientation of all community activities towards evangelism, clarifying students' commitment to evangelism and supporting evangelists in warm relationships.

Firstly, highlighting student evangelists for imitation proved effective in raising up a body of CIS evangelists, as CIS evangelists and trainers in JJF frequently cited the influence of observing the evangelistic activities of their peers. SL meetings and Spark both regularly included "testimony times" where students reported on their evangelistic activities. CIS Cyrus credited much of his development as an evangelist to his observations of CIS Elly and Nadine:

From [Elly] I learned, what is obedience, what is prayer, what is waiting... she had many testimonies that moved me... From [Nadine], you can see an example who can encourage you, [that] believing and serving the Lord can be so beautiful. How joyful you can be.

One CIS identified that this tapped into Chinese culture, where learning by imitation is particularly important.

Secondly, several JJF students and staff mentioned that "pushiness", mostly from staff members, to take specific evangelistic steps, was influential in their own or others' evangelism. Staff team leader Aaron was known for pulling students aside during social dinners and asking, "Can you please share the gospel with that person?" He would also persistently invite believers to evangelism training activities or conferences.

Although some ISs found this "pushiness" overbearing, respondents benefited from and appreciated it. For example, CIS Elly reflected, "If he is pushy, he is pushy for God, he isn't pushy for himself... [So,] I don't mind experiencing this pushiness". Non-Chinese international SL Otille similarly said,

A bit of pushiness helps, actually. [CIS] can be a bit shy.... [Aaron] doesn't do it in an authoritarian way, but he encourages us...very consistently.

Thirdly, almost every activity of JFF was either evangelistic in nature or involved training or encouragement in evangelism. Weekly Spark fellowship meetings were primarily evangelistic. Bible study groups and discipleship curricula included both evangelism training and dedicated time to prepare for upcoming evangelism opportunities. Summer and Winter conferences all featured evangelism training, vision-casting sessions and evangelism practicum sessions. SL meetings included "God Stories" where students reported their evangelistic activity.

Fourthly, disciplers clarified and prioritized students' commitment to evangelism. At the end of the annual start-of-year conference, JFF leaders called for a formal commitment to evangelism called the "SL Agreement". Those who signed up as SLs formed the majority of evangelists. The SL Agreement focused student activity on two areas: (1) meeting regularly one-to-one with JFF staff or senior students (including evangelism training) and (2) forming and/or co-leading an evangelistic Discovery Bible Study (DBS) group.² Other activities within JFF were portrayed as secondary. Local SL Andy reflects that some students could not commit to many activities but:

I guess the minimum, the basic thing that they wanted an SL to be involved in, was Discovery Bible study. That was the crux or the basis of the movement.

Even for students who did not sign the SL Agreement, negotiating commitments around this "core" encouraged time-poor students to prioritize evangelism.

Finally, a sense of community helped in various stages of CIS taking evangelistic action. CIS evangelists often reflected on their relationship with their discipler as influential in their motivation to share the gospel. Also, the bonds between SLs made community events more attractive, making invitation, frequently the first step in evangelism, much easier. Andy (local SL) said: "I think it helped that our student leadership team... became good friends ourselves. It became a fun thing to be at, we had a lot of fun running it."

Similarly, CIS evangelist Elly said: "Life in this fellowship was very beautiful ... Everyone together, it was like having God's wings on our back. ... The passion you have for sharing the gospel, it's pure, that feeling, in the fellowship, bringing people to believe in Christ."

² Other possible commitments for SLs were attendance at Spark weekly fellowship meetings, and attendance at SL Fellowship meetings, and a Summer or Winter conference.

III. Clear, Consistent Steps for Evangelists

As well as persistent encouragement and expectation to evangelize, respondents in JJF recurrently referred to several clear steps that CIS could take to share the gospel, and that discipler-trainers would take to assist them. The "how to" of evangelism was not left to the individual, but explicitly taught in a standardized way. This "evangelistic pathway" was explicitly present in JJF staff documents, and consistently practiced by CIS evangelists. In addition, the process of training evangelists was also clear for disciplers.

Consistency was key for CIS learning to evangelize. Students in JJF had repeated opportunities to learn and implement a "set method of evangelism" (Elly, CIS evangelist). The steps of this process were frequently rehearsed, giving CIS clarity on how to share their faith. CIS Nadine said that, in her first years as a believer,

I was leading [evangelistic Bible studies] *over and over...* There are only 7 stories [in the evangelistic DBS curriculum], and I read these stories maybe hundreds of times... They trained me *over and over again to use the same thing*, and also they encouraged me to share my testimony... they say, Nadine, can you share your testimony here, can you share your testimony [there]? But they reminded me... what is most important to share.

The first step by which CIS could participate as beginner evangelists was helpfully easy: invitation to events that met felt needs of CIS. These included regular fellowship meetings and social outings. CIS evangelist Elly shares how these events made this first step easier for believers:

It's kind of like it's in the middle... Sometimes it's very hard for you to personally invite someone [to believe in Jesus]... but every week we have Spark. ... At uni it's really hard to make friends. And Spark is a place ... where you find your friends in uni.

The intermediate steps in evangelism were equally clear: personal testimony and a succinct gospel presentation. Lesson 1 of JJF's post-conversion discipleship curriculum includes training in telling a personal testimony and short gospel presentation (a standard gospel presentation used globally by JJF's parent organization). CIS Nadine recalled,

Straight after believing they asked me to share my testimony in their regular meeting. I was nervous... but they just told me to share about why

I decided to believe in Jesus. I felt excited and free to do it. It helped me to be more sure of my faith.

Afterwards, Nadine regularly used her personal story to share with others.

While more experienced evangelists eventually did improvise in how they shared the gospel, all CIS evangelists began with these same methods of sharing the gospel.

The crucial step in the evangelistic process was an interactive Discovery Bible Study. Once students had shared the gospel, they invited friends to read the Bible with them. As noted in Nadine's comments above, evangelists went through an established curriculum of Bible studies, used widely throughout the world. Local student evangelist Andy described DBS groups as "the crux... of the movement". CIS evangelist Ace's journey to believing in Jesus involved first attending Spark, and from there joining a DBS group. He summarizes, "the weekly JJF meeting [Spark], this is where everyone invites each other to do Bible study - it's mainly through this way."

Thus, both staff and students appeared to have a clear picture of the evangelistic process, from initial invitation, to the intermediate step of sharing gospel content in daily life, to Bible study groups.

In addition, while CIS had clarity on their own evangelistic steps, evangelism trainers in JJF were also clearly aware of their pathway towards developing evangelists. This included semi-formal instruction through discipleship relationships and practical demonstration and experience .

One key tool for evangelist trainer-disciplers was semi-formal instruction in evangelism. When a student professed faith in Jesus, evangelism trainers invited them to a discipleship relationship involving instruction in Biblical foundation, character formation and skills for evangelism. Similar training was also provided in annual Summer and Winter conferences.

Even more important for evangelist trainers was modeling and practical experience in evangelism. Aaron (JJF staff team leader) indicated that MAWL (Model, Assist, Watch, Leave) was important in his approach. Olivia (JJF staff, former non-Chinese IS) also adopted this practice:

We would try and put them at ease by saying, "Your first time going out [in first-contact evangelism], don't worry, you don't have to say anything,

you can just watch..." Usually students, once they get to learn, "Oh, it's not actually that bad, we can find students to chat with," they will be chatting too.

Most CIS evangelists referred to first-contact evangelism times (SOW hour, Summer Conference) where they witnessed more experienced believers modeling evangelism, and then through imitation finding motivation to practice evangelism themselves.

Nadine (CIS evangelist) said,

Every time there was a time to go out [to] share, I just listened... then [one time the JJF staff member I was accompanying], just asked me to read out the [gospel presentation] booklet. It felt very awkward - I really didn't even know what I was sharing! But it helped me to understand a bit more.

CIS evangelist Elly recounts,

When you do this "sharing gospel", you will certainly have that kind of... happiness, to see people changing. Not just coming from [others' teaching] ... when you go to do it yourself, you will taste this happiness.

Cyrus (CIS evangelist) similarly says,

I remember the first time that I did SOW, I was like, nervous... I didn't know what to do! ...but I kept going ... You will realize that when you do SOW, you have a strange enjoyment... I put importance on this feeling, I think it comes from God.

This "MAWL" principle was also employed in helping CIS to begin leading DBS groups. CIS first assisted more experienced believers in leading. Once they could lead independently, trainers continued to support them. Elly (CIS evangelist) said of one JJF staff:

When I would go and ask him and say, "I have a problem with this student [in a DBS group]," he would say, "I'll go with you..." I felt this was very supportive. He didn't have to tell me anything, he would go with me.

Discussion

Feasibility of a Disciple-multiplying Vision Amongst Chinese International Students

This study suggests that despite the presence of common obstacles in international student work, cultivating CIS evangelists is achievable. For JJF, early and intentional involvement in evangelism helps combat student transience. Intensive training and extensive modeling addressed deficiencies in biblical background. Clear prioritization of evangelism mitigated the effect of study pressures and time-poverty amongst CIS by subordinating other commitments within the community to evangelism.

Embody evangelistic vision to create an evangelistic group culture amongst collectivistic and high-context communicators

As hypothesized, a sense of belonging to a community that was driven towards evangelism, matching the high-context communication (Hall 1989, 91, 93, 113; Plueddemann 2012, 79) and collective orientation of CIS (Chhokar, Brodbeck, and House 2013; Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010, chaps. 2, 4), appeared to lead to the development of evangelistic behaviors and beliefs (Hibbert and Hibbert 2018, 122).

More important than explicit teaching, evangelistic vision was embodied through "every aspect [of the community being] aligned with its overarching purpose" (Addison 2011, 61), as expected in high-context cultural settings. Evangelism was ubiquitous throughout JJF activities, from public testimonies of students' evangelism experiences, to evangelism training included in basic discipleship material, and the seeker-oriented atmosphere in weekly meetings. As indicated by Ott and Wilson (2011, 87, 351) and Fernando (2019, 21), warm relationships signified to CIS that evangelism training and even "pushiness" to evangelize was part of a more holistic vision of personal growth.

JJF's leadership structure similarly embodied and encouraged evangelistic vision. The SLs constituted a leadership "in-group" similar to those Rupp describes (2021), but characterized by lay leadership (making it more accessible to CIS) (Watson and Watson 2014, 178–79) and selected with a distinct focus on evangelistic practice. In keeping with broader findings regarding written contracts in high-context cultures (Moreau et al. 2014, 133–38), while the written contract of the SL Agreement was not strongly influential, the discussions around it clearly indicated the priority of evangelism in the community.

In contrast to the impact of implicit embodiment of evangelistic vision on CIS, explicit vision casting seems more effective for the deployment of non-Chinese

evangelism trainers (both staff and SLs). While there was not unanimous or immediate acceptance of Aaron's vision amongst students and staff, this frequent vision casting does seem to have mobilized and unified the team (Smith and Kai 2011, chap. 8).

Clarity and User-friendliness Over Contextualized Content in Gospel Tools

Given the strong calls in cross-cultural discipleship literature to seek a specifically contextualized gospel presentation (Hibbert and Hibbert 2018; Georges 2016), it was surprising that CIS evangelists embraced evangelistic methods (e.g. the gospel presentation and DBS Scripture curriculum) developed for non-Chinese audiences. Apparently, more important than contextualized content was the clarity arising from consistent promotion of a single gospel sharing tool (Smith and Kai 2011, 190). In addition, user-friendly steps that made it easy for novice evangelists aided their development. These included providing the presentation in a booklet format, and supporting the gospel presentation with other methods of gospel sharing, such as invitation to events and DBS.

Integrating "Attractional" and "Missional" Methods of Evangelism

Despite the overall adoption of a CPM approach, JJF's practice did not appear to follow some CPM literature's advice against reliance on invitation to "attractional" events. In contrast to Smith and Kai's (2011, 40, 263) and Watson and Watson's (2014, chap. 13) assessments, inviting others to such events became a simple and natural way in which CIS started as evangelists, and created a sense of community where it was felt to be lacking amongst the wider community of CIS on campus. This integration of "attractional" and "missional" approaches brought its own limitations, for example a degree of reliance on these events and the people who organized them was exhibited by some CIS discontinuing evangelism if invitation was unsuccessful.

However, JJF largely overcame the temptation for students to take a passive role by giving ministry roles such as Bible talks and event planning organization to students. The staff had their own role - constantly "pushing" students to evangelism through word and example, within the MAWL framework. Contextual factors, perhaps related to the diaspora nature of CIS ministry, such as distance from family and low hostility to the gospel (compared to the contexts of other CPM literature) may also allow "attractional" activities to play a more successful role. So, while not every CIS became an evangelist, "enough of them [were] doing it, there's that culture that it becomes normal" (Olivia, evangelism trainer).

Conclusions

Embedding CIS in a community that both nurtured and embodied an intensely evangelistic vision moved CIS to observe, attempt and eventually lead in evangelism themselves. This vision was embodied in elements such as persistent encouragement to evangelize, forming a leadership team focused on evangelism, and exposing students to evangelism in every type of community activity. This appeared to speak more clearly to CIS than the explicit vision casting required for the non-Chinese evangelism training team.

In addition, evangelistic steps that are accessible, clear and taught consistently seem to aid CIS in beginning and then confidently progressing in evangelism. Beginning with simple steps such as inviting friends to events, this may progress to a simple gospel presentation and eventually evangelistic Bible study sets, a progression which may provide the structure required to induct CIS into evangelistic practice. The observations of this study challenge the notion that precise contextualization of evangelism presentations is necessary for effective outreach, suggesting rather that CIS are more sensitive to unambiguous instruction and community support than to verbal cultural appropriateness.

This study also somewhat challenges the dichotomy between "attractional" and "missional" styles of evangelism, showing that invitation to attractive events can be a helpful entry-point for CIS into greater levels of evangelistic responsibility.

This study calls for the development of further research. COVID-19 restrictions prevented in-situ observation of evangelism training efforts. These findings may be tested in other contexts both amongst CIS and other groups. Also, studies into the maintenance of evangelistic practice in the long term amongst CIS post-graduation would further sharpen discipleship efforts.

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