

Chinese students find faith and a home in a foreign land

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BOULDER, Colo.—The baptistry at Boulder Chinese Baptist Church was filled with water as a small woman dressed in a white robe inched down the stairs.

“This is Sister Wang Shuang,” Pastor William Fu, a Taiwan native, said in Mandarin to his mostly mainland congregation. “She came to our church last September from Chicago. Thanks for God’s grace, she is willing to become his child.”

Zhu Min, a member of Boulder Chinese Baptist Church, sings during services. The immigrant church has adopted several Chinese students at the nearby University of Colorado.

As the pastor immersed Wang, the congregation applauded and sang.

It was a moment Wang had never anticipated when she first arrived in the United States six years ago from her native Guangxi province, where generations had been immersed in the official government gospel of atheism.

“In two days, I will have my 29th birthday,” she said in her testimony. “But I got reborn today.”

In the three decades since the end of the Cultural Revolution, during which

houses of worship were destroyed and missionary workers expelled, there has been a surge in Chinese students and scholars like Wang adopting Christianity in the United States, Purdue University Professor Fenggang Yang said.

Wang's Boulder Chinese Baptist Church is one of about 1,000 Chinese churches scattered across the United States by Yang's estimate. The Southern Baptist-affiliated congregation only has about 50 members, and nearly all came from mainland China. Most are computer engineers in their 30s and 40s, and Pastor Fu notes 11 have doctorates and 29 have master's degrees.

To be sure, Christian groups have been seeking to share their faith with all varieties of international students on college campuses, but according to Yang, Chinese students are some of the most receptive.

At the University of Colorado's Boulder campus, incoming students have their first contact with Christianity the moment they land at Denver International Airport.

Fu's church acquires a list of the students—with names, flight schedules, e-mails, phone numbers and home addresses—from the university's Chinese Students and Scholars Association. After picking them up at the airport, church members take them grocery shopping, buy them their first meal, and sometimes lend them their cell phones so students may call families in China.



Members of Boulder Chinese Baptist Church in Boulder, Colo., have taken in several Chinese students at the nearby University of Colorado, which has introduced them to Christianity.

After they settle down, church members invite students to their houses for welcome parties, and ferry them to a Friday night fellowship, which entails a free dinner, hymn singing and Bible studies.

Some observers say many Chinese conversion stories typically involve some sort of personal crisis—a failed marriage, domestic conflict, self doubt or fear of death. But Yang attributes the spiritual realignment to Christianity to the modernization in China that is pushing many Chinese toward seeking a new system of meaning.

“China is undergoing rapid and dramatic social changes that have brought (social unrest), and Christianity provides a spiritual and moral framework to put things in personal life and larger society in order,” Yang said.

Some observers conclude the main reason students are drawn to Christianity is the same one that has attracted immigrants of all stripes for generations—a place where they can find company and speak their native language.

Church members, meanwhile, admit they don’t always see the fruit of their

labors, but like every missionary effort, they're content simply to live with the effort.

"A lot of the time we are just sowing seeds," said Zhan Min, a member of Boulder Chinese Baptist Church. "We planted the seeds in their heart, and you never know when they might sprout."