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## Editorial

### Facing Transitions

By Brent Fulton, Editor

Life transitions—whether coming to China for the first time, leaving after a lifetime of ministry, moving to a new city or taking on a new assignment—can be a gateway to discovery or the death of a dream. Often they are both.

In this issue we take a 360-degree look at transitions, viewing them through the eyes of those experiencing change as well as those around them who are affected.

While transitions can have many causes, BJ Arthur reminds us in her lead article that the one constant throughout is God’s sovereignty. As he has led providentially in the unfolding of events in China, so we can trust him to lead in our lives when “the pillar moves.”

Drawing on the experience of his own family as they transitioned from China back to their home country, Jason Ingle shares personal lessons and offers valuable advice to those who find themselves on the welcoming end for those returning from overseas. Dr. Mark Strand, whose family experienced a similar transition, continues this theme from the standpoint of the sending church, providing practical guidance on how to integrate returning families and individuals into the faith community.

As *Looming Transitions* author Amy Young points out in her article, sending organizations can play a significant role in helping to facilitate effective transitions by providing the time and space for intentional debriefing.

Personal transitions have a ripple effect, impacting others in ways we might not anticipate. In “Kids in Transition,” Stephen Sark looks at how TCKs (third culture kids) respond when families are uprooted, and how parents and others can walk with them through the process. Rachel, a believer in China, offers an on-the-ground view of how the departure of foreign workers affects the local Christians they leave behind. By thinking through the implications of this transition ahead of time, both foreign workers and indigenous colleagues can take measures to head off some of the negative consequences Rachel mentions.

Transitions can be lonely, but they do not need to be faced alone. A wealth of resources is available for those who find themselves facing change. Amy Young’s *Looming Transitions: Starting and Finishing Well in Cross-Cultural Service* is accompanied by an activity book for families and a workbook for those in transition. In her review, Cassie Cahill echoes the sentiments of many who have found Young’s book helpful when she says, “I wish I would have had this book in my hand prior to arriving on the field. It serves as a practical handbook for considering all the changes that occur when one has decided to serve overseas.” Additional books and other programs are listed in the Resource Corner.

We trust this issue of *ChinaSource Quarterly* will provide a useful starting point for navigating the transition you or those around you may be experiencing.

*Brent Fulton is the president of ChinaSource, the editor of the ChinaSource Quarterly and the author of China’s Urban Christians: A Light that Cannot be Hidden.*



## When the Pillar Moves: Transition and Providential Grace

By BJ Arthur

*By a pillar of cloud you led them in the day, and by a pillar of fire in the night to light for them the way in which they should go.* Nehemiah 9:12

From the moment God filled the void with time and reality, he brought order in the midst of chaos—and used even chaos for his perfect purposes. He has used chaos and order in the great land of China over the last 100 years to bring about perhaps the greatest Christian revival in history. Fenggang Yang, author of *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule*, commented that: "By my calculations, China is destined to become the largest Christian country in the world very soon."<sup>1</sup> This is occurring some 50 years after Mao Zedong set out to replace God with himself, and *Time* magazine's cover posed the question "Is God Dead?"



[Fire on the Mountain by Tom and Lauren via Flickr.](#)

As his spirit moved, God led a veritable army of men and women from various nations to take the Word into this inscrutable land; their testimonies abound of his faithfulness and mercy in times good and very bad. However, today it seems that the pillar of cloud and fire is moving for many foreign Christian workers in the Middle Kingdom. These movements or transitions are taking several different forms: some are leaving full-time ministry for professional positions in China; some are returning to home countries to minister; some are changing locations within the country; others are walking away from China and ministry to follow a new path. Why are the transitions occurring now, when church growth is so encouraging, discipleship opportunities so plentiful and, with increased prosperity, daily life so much more comfortable than in the China of the past?

Each individual decision is by nature personal and unique; however, there are trends and circumstances that are contributing to this transitioning of career ministry personnel from current postings to something new.

God led his people by a pillar of fire through the night, and it is often at night that he makes his marching orders clear. It was so for Richard.<sup>2</sup> He had wearily climbed out of bed to help his wife care for their newborn daughter a day after her birth in the city hospital. Richard and his wife had both committed to work in China before they were married. She was passionate about adoption and he saw business as a way to connect with locals. After ministering on a US campus for a time, they felt God opening the door to their heart's desire; they packed up their two children and headed for China. After settling in, they began the process of adopting their third child. Richard worked with his team in meeting and sharing with local businessmen while running his own cleaning business which provided him a visa and platform to be in China. Victoria cared for the children, worked at a local school, and learned all she could about foreign adoptions in China to equip her to become an advocate for Chinese children languishing in orphanages.

The couple were called and committed to ministering in China; when the "pillar" moved, it came as a shock. Yes, both had been feeling more and more anxious about providing for the future needs of their growing family. Yes, it was becoming more and more difficult to find the time to do business, care for the family, help couples wanting to adopt, and foster meaningful relationships with friends and acquaintances. Now, there was a new baby. When Richard's feet hit the cold floor that night, he knew that the "pillar of fire" was moving. As he walked the baby, there were tears. Transitions are hard. As he shared with Victoria over breakfast, there were tears. However, together they followed the "pillar." Richard has begun a new job that pays double the salary in the same megacity and provides housing as well; now he has more time for his ministry relationships with local businessmen. Victoria runs the house with the help of a cook/housekeeper, continues to minister and advise adopting parents, and does home studies for an international adoption agency. They are resting in God's provision and path for the future, still in their beloved China.

Financial pressures, like those experienced by Richard and Victoria, have become a concern for many serving in China. The cost of living in first tier cities—where church growth and discipleship needs are currently the greatest—has skyrocketed. In 2012, the *South China Morning Post* was already reporting on the rising prices. "The fast rising cost of living in the mainland's international cities like Beijing and Shanghai is making it increasingly hard for expats to justify the decision to live and work on the mainland. Perhaps in no area is this clearer than in the soaring price of groceries. In the capital, the prices of most items on the supermarket shelves now far exceed the prices of similar items in Hong Kong and London, which have long been among the world's most costly cities."<sup>3</sup> This increase in prices has continued to accelerate in the past five years. Christian workers are no longer the "haves" in urban China, but rather find themselves riding bicycles, buses, and subways while Chinese neighbors buzz about in their Peugeots and BMWs.

Yet, God's timing is perfect—even with regard to the cost of living. For the past 20 years, a key goal of many mission agencies has been for foreign missionaries to "work themselves out of a job," that is, to train up national Christians to become the leaders, teachers, and trainers in Christian churches, schools, and business enterprises. Nationals can do evangelism much more efficiently and often more effectively than outsiders and, as the church in China matures, more national pastors are receiving seminary training

abroad and more lay leaders have been trained to disciple new believers. Consequently, some ministry transitions are occurring because long-time workers have poured their lives into their charges, have done a good job of training them up, and feel comfortable stepping aside for their former students.

“Maturing” of charges also sometimes precipitates a transition back to home cultures. The Word teaches us that caring for spouse and family comes before ministry; pressures on families in China and living the cross-cultural life are perhaps greater than ever. Twenty years ago, foreign parents easily controlled the total environment for their children: travel was inconvenient and rigorous; there was no place fun to go, no foreign movies to watch, certainly no discos to visit. Now travel is convenient and cheap, and there are all kinds of thrills and trouble available. Foreign teens do not need a car or gas money, just subway fare and a cell phone to enable a night out with foreign and Chinese friends who are always ready to play! God has on occasion brought families out of temptation and back to their home culture for help by moving the “pillar.” Sadly, it is not only teens, but sometimes a parent that needs to be rescued; moral failure has cut short many a term on the field—especially in Asia.

Then there are times when the “pillar of fire” moves in the dark of night with a knock on the door. Victor, the head of an educational training company, was working late when a friend who had been tasked with renewing Victor’s visa appeared at his door with a warning. “Pack up and leave tomorrow. They have decided not to renew your visa and if we continue to ask, they will revoke your current one and you will have a very difficult time ever returning to China.” Even though Victor had lived and worked for over a decade in China and had developed many influential friends and important contacts along the way, someone—perhaps an up-and-coming local party official seeking to curry favor—had decided it was time for him to go.

Likewise, Arthur received a visit after dark as he was helping his wife get their three young children ready for bed. It was the vice principal from the Uygher school where Arthur and his wife taught English to middle school students. An hour of tea, nuts, and chatty conversation ended with a terse announcement: “I am sorry to inform you that the school no longer has need of your services. The students have progressed so well that our own teachers can complete their instruction. We have a fine, farewell send-off planned this weekend for all of our foreign staff. Let me know how I can help arrange your transportation.” With a warm handshake he departed and, within two weeks, so did the ten foreign Christian teachers that had planned to stay indefinitely in that poor dusty village—their work cut short by officials angry with ethnic unrest in a neighboring city and seeking a way to hurt minority families.

Only in the last decade has the nighttime visit, always terrifying to Chinese Christians, become so to some foreigners as well. The political climate in China is changing, and so it seems is the privileged status that formerly accompanied the foreign passport. The *Houston Chronicle* reported last year that the case of a detained Houston businesswoman “. . . raises questions about the safety of Americans doing business in China.” The current government “. . . has arrested at least nine foreigners on allegations of spying in the past two years and oversaw the passage of a sweeping national security law last summer that grants authorities broad discretion about what constitutes espionage.”<sup>4</sup> Foreigners with Asian faces are feeling particularly vulnerable and, though only those ministering to politically sensitive groups have been detained, that line can be easily and unknowingly crossed. A Chinese-Korean pastor was killed in 2016, probably by North Korean agents, for aiding North Korean refugees<sup>5</sup> and many long-time Asian workers have been deported in the past 18 months.<sup>6</sup>

A foreign resident with years of service in China and currently ministering in private, Christian education for nationals shared that harassment in his circle is at an all-time high. Private Christian schools and house churches are frequently visited, the same questions asked repeatedly, documents requested by this bureau and then a different bureau, by local police and then district police. “The constant threat of closure makes it difficult to plan for the future and to assure parents that we will be open when the school term begins. They are taking a big risk by withdrawing their children from the national system and placing them in our school, but they are learning to trust God to protect and provide . . . and that’s why he has us here. We are to model that trust in his faithfulness and power.”<sup>7</sup>

Will the “pillar of fire” move for that educator with a knock on the door some dark night? Will it become too expensive for his family to live on the small salary provided by his school? Will he have just a few days to pack up and leave his family’s home of many years at the whim of an ambitious local official or by fiat of a national policy? Perhaps, perhaps, and perhaps. As in years past, only God in his sovereignty can open and close the door for foreign Christian work in China, and only he knows what lies ahead. However, when God moves the “pillar,” as he lights for them “*the way in which they should go*,” his people will follow.

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Phillips, “China on Course to Become the World’s Most Christian Nation within 15 Years,” *The Telegraph*, 2014, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/10776023/China-on-course-to-become-worlds-most-Christian-nation-within-15-years.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Names of individual Christian workers mentioned have been changed; only the Uygher school story is a composite of several families who worked there.

<sup>3</sup> Cary Huang, “Cost of living on the up in China,” *South China Morning Post*, 2012, at <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1091651/cost-living-china>.

<sup>4</sup> Lomi Kriel, “Husband: Houston businesswoman detained in China suffered ‘mental torture,’” *Houston Chronicle*, 2016, at <http://www.chron.com/news/houston-texas/article/Husband-Houston-businesswoman-detained-in-China-9186811.php>.

<sup>5</sup> CBN News, “Murdered by North Korea? Martyred Chinese Pastor Served Refugees,” 2016, at <http://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/world/2016/may/murdered-by-north-korea-martyred-chinese-pastor-served-refugees>.

<sup>6</sup> Information of recent deportations of Asian workers and high levels of anxiety was obtained in private conversations occurring at a 2017 ministry conference.

<sup>7</sup> Quote obtained from an interview with a foreign educator in Shanghai.

## Of Returns and Runways

By Jason Ingle

What does it look like when a family transitions from a life of long-term service in China to full-time living back in their passport country?

For years, in my leadership roles in China, I was challenged and challenged others with three simple, fundamental questions on leadership, vision, and direction:

- Where are we now?
- Where are we going?
- What's next?



In our particular case, we had to throw those questions out the window! Life is seldom that simple, especially when moving six people and all their belongings 8000 miles and expecting everything to go perfectly. For us, the Chinese saying is true: 计划没有变化快! (Plans can't keep up with changes.)

After close to twenty years of service in China, our transition to the US has been anything but linear, and I'm not sure you could call it normative. Over the years we have had many friends who left China and went straight into new or somewhat familiar locations and familiar aspects of new careers: ministry leadership in different parachurch organizations, campus ministries, local church leadership, missionary member care, or teaching and research in some higher education context. While each family or single moved through their transition and reentry at a different pace and with different challenges, having defined roles to move into seemed to help these co-laborers gain a sense of stability in the midst of their transition. Our situation has been much different. We returned from China and entered a time of what I have been describing as "wandering in the wilderness" without a clear direction for what was next for us. But I'm getting ahead of myself....

Why did we leave China in the first place? That is a difficult question to answer. As I wrote in the following excerpts from my hopefully, soon-to-be published memoir:

*A variety of factors necessitated our return to the States in July 2015. Neither Lisa nor I could really pinpoint any one thing as the reason we needed to come back. One factor was the failing health of our aging parents. . . . [A second aspect we realized was that our] own family had reached a place where living in China was becoming more problematic. . . . We began to recognize that our children were not thriving in China. . . . [Third] Lisa and I started to recognize that our vision for service and the organization's culture were diverging to such a degree that we could no longer pursue God's vision for our service to Chinese people and remain with our organization. This was and still is a painful revelation, yet with hindsight we can see how God redirected us through this painful process.*

Transition, and the rationale behind the need for and timing of transition, is seldom explained in 140 characters or less. The depths and complexities are often very difficult to put into words, especially trying to explain them to those who have never made such moves.

Thankfully, early on in our transition back to the US we were able to spend a focused time of debriefing through Mission Training International's Debrief and Renewal (DAR). At DAR we met with others returning from fields of service and beginning transitions either back to their passport country or on to different parts of the harvest field. We gained tools to be able to put into words what we were all experiencing. Once again from my memoir:

*At DAR we were asked to draw a picture that summarized our current life. The picture I drew was of my family sitting in an airplane flying in a holding pattern around a city in America. Three runways at an airport stood open, and the fuel gauge was on empty as we waited for air traffic control to tell us on which runway to land. These three runways represented three distinct ministry opportunities we believe God had placed before us in the United States.*

*The first potential "runway" we perceived was one of shepherding other missionaries. Every year thousands of part- and full-time missionaries leave the harvest fields of the world broken, discouraged, and depressed, and Lisa and I wondered whether walking with these missionaries through their struggles and helping them get back to a healthy place in order to return to their work either stateside or overseas might be something we could do. DAR helped us recognize once again a connection to other missionaries as "our tribe," and our hearts certainly resonated with the need for this kind of help. . . .*

*The second potential "runway" we identified was for me to pursue serving as a missions pastor in a local church. Lisa and I reasoned that we could still shepherd missionaries in this role and also provide vision and perspective in order to mobilize other believers to join the work within the global harvest field. I would be able to use my passions for shepherding and equipping and hopefully inspire and launch local church members into local and global contexts to make a difference with the gospel and their transformed lives.*

*The third potential “runway” we considered was continuing to work with Chinese people right here in the United States. We had heard that as of 2015 more than 300,000 Chinese students were studying in American universities and thousands more visiting scholars, as well as middle and high school students, were coming to our shores. Could it be that the Lord was calling our family to continue the work we had started doing in China?*

*So where did the Ingles fit . . . most importantly, on which of the three “runways” was our Lord, the all-powerful, all-wise “air traffic controller” calling us to land?*

DAR helped us normalize the transition process and also helped us recognize that even as a family we would transition back into life in North America at different rates. One thing DAR could not do was tell us what we should pursue next, so we began exploring each of the “runways” we saw ahead of us.

People who knew us well affirmed that any of the runways were valid pursuits for us, but the member care route closed very quickly with our original sending organization as well as with other member care groups. Runway number one was closed.

Talking to the missions pastor at our sending church as well as other leaders in several denominations was honestly, very discouraging. Many of these leaders told us that “missions pastors are a dying breed, so don’t pursue that.” So we listened, and runway number two seemed to close.

Runway number three seemed to have great potential, so we eagerly jumped into full-time campus ministry with Chinese students and scholars at the University of Alabama through a local non-profit organization we were hired to help develop. While the ministry itself was fruitful, few of our supporting churches knew what to do with us. We were not really “foreign missions” because we were not overseas, but we were not really “home missions” or truly “traditional campus ministry.” Other churches and individuals decided to stop supporting us because we were no longer in China, and our ministry was therefore “less strategic” in their eyes than before, or we went with the “wrong organization.” Over the course of a year we tried to raise financial support while doing campus ministry, and although we had several faithful individuals and churches, we could not raise enough to justify continuing down this runway long term.

Our transition back into life in North America is progressing in different stages in different portions of our lives. We have found fellowship in a loving church home and are developing friendships and putting down roots in our community. The kids are enjoying activities they never had the chance to pursue while we were in China, such as participating in a home school coop, taking ballet lessons, or playing sports. In these areas, life is feeling more “normal” every day. The bigger question for me personally remains, “*Who is God calling me to become, and, how does that work itself out in provision for my family?*”

One thing we keep running into is that no one here (including us!) really knows what to do with a former missionary to China. I applied for multiple positions with the University of Alabama to no avail. Breaking into work in the church world has also been challenging. One denominational leader told me point blank: “Churches in our denomination are wary of missionaries.” Applying for other positions have shown me that in some cases churches and denominations view credentials as more important than experience. I discovered that even the smallest churches in remote locations preferred someone with a Master of Divinity from the “right” seminary over twenty years of shepherding experience in China. This truth hurts, but at the same time, these responses have been painfully sweet gifts from God. Painful in that they highlight the disconnect between being sent by churches to serve in China and serving in the States, yet sweet in that God’s pruning has drawn us near to him, brought clarity on who he is calling us to become and how we are to serve him, and challenged us to continue following by faith even when what lies before us looks “impossible” to man.

Another thing I have come to realize is that our transition remains unfinished because our home is in heaven. Even so, I would like to close with three encouragements for those currently transitioning from China back to their passport countries, and three encouragements for those welcoming people back from China.

#### **For those transitioning back:**

1. *Remember that God is faithful and sovereign*, even when it doesn't feel like it.
2. *Find your tribe*. There are more people than you think who will understand, care and walk through this transition with you. Look for them!
3. *It takes time*. It took time for you to learn the language and settle in China, and it will take at least as much (if not more!) time for you to reenter a home culture that is now different from the one you left!

#### **For those welcoming people back from China:**

1. *Be patient*. Life is chaotic for your friend or loved one now, but God is at work.
2. *Ask good questions* and really listen to the answers. Invest in time with your friend.
3. *Be proactive and practical*. Do not assume your church or their organization is taking care of your friend or loved one. Ask how you can help with housing, transportation, job search, or even some downtime at the beach! Do not let your friend fall through the cracks of North American busyness.

It has now been more than two years since we “landed” in the US, but we are by no means settled yet! In the midst of our ongoing transition, I have been trying to tell myself and anyone else who asks, “What’s next for you?” that “God knows what he’s doing—he just hasn’t told us yet!”

Over the last twenty-one years, we have walked through many transitions—some much more difficult than others. Our underlying

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## The Church's Role with Returnees from China

By Mark A. Strand

It takes time for a Westerner to adapt to living in China. Learning the language is an arduous task. Chinese food is fantastic, but it takes time to appreciate the breadth of Chinese cuisine. The crowdedness of Chinese public spaces and the complexity of China's collective society challenge the individualized culture the Westerner is accustomed to. But for those who choose to live in China for a significant period of time, adaptation happens, and what is more, one frequently grows deeply attached to the Chinese culture and people.

What often catches people off guard is that, after returning to resettle in their passport country having lived in China for an extended period of time, the degree of difficulty in readapting can be as great as the original transition to China. Adapting to China was difficult, but the enthusiasm and novelty of the country provided energy and focus that made adaptation tolerable. Every day was a challenge and an opportunity to grow in understanding and cultural competence.

Returning to one's original country, on the other hand, seems like it should be easy. After all, one is returning to a place where one once thrived. How can it be so difficult? The language and culture are familiar. One is often returning to a location where family and friends reside. It seems as if after unpacking and taking a few weeks to settle in, one should be "home," and able to resume life. Why is this experience actually quite rare? This paper will reflect on the role the sending church plays in helping the worker transition back to their "home" country. Attention will also be given to some of the issues that make transitioning back difficult, with some advice on how to make it go smoother.

By living extensively in another country, a person has the opportunity to become multicultural. Cross-cultural workers become comfortable living in culturally diverse settings and grow to prefer it. Then, upon returning to one's home country, it is frequently a return to a culturally monolithic community with a relatively small number of multicultural people. This is particularly true within the church. It is distressing to find friends and family in one's home country to be more provincial in their thinking than most of the friends one had in China. This is one of the sources of stress upon returning to one's passport country.

Ideally, transitioning back and adjusting to life again is overseen by the sending organization and supporting churches. Unfortunately, the local church lacks the capacity and the cross-cultural skills to oversee repatriation of the returned worker. Supporting churches do not necessarily understand what the returning missionary is experiencing, or what they need, so they do not know how to help. From their perspective, "You're home," so other than helping to find a place to live or a vehicle, they do not realize these individuals and families have other needs. Having said that, for those churches who want to better support their returning workers, there are things they can do to help with the transition.

The first priority for the returning worker is finding a job. This is extremely important in order to provide for one's own or the family's financial needs. Equally so, finding a job helps to reestablish one's sense of belonging in the country. Finding work should happen prior to leaving China. The sending church can help look for job opportunities. The returning worker may not have a resume that looks impressive to potential employers, so church friends can help to strengthen the resume or offer to write recommendation letters. Once back, the ease of finding work will also depend on the type of work the person was doing in China. Some of the roles the individual filled in China may not easily translate to the types of jobs available back in their passport country, so church members and friends can help bridge the gaps that might exist. Finding work, whether in a secular job or ministry, is important in transitioning back to one's home country, and there are many things the church can do to help with this.

A second priority is arranging for basic life needs. Housing will be needed. Church members can help identify an affordable place to live and stock the place with food prior to the worker's return. The family will need a vehicle. Again, lending a vehicle for a period of time could tide these individuals or families over until they are in a position to purchase an appropriate vehicle of their own. If they have school-age children, they will need help to determine where to educate them. Arranging for a parent with children of a similar age to talk through the process of identifying a school and enrolling the children would be a big help. These procedures are not obvious to a parent who is doing it for the first time—especially when the children are already in upper grades. The local church can do many things to help the returning family meet their basic life needs.

A third area of support for these "returnees" is emotional and spiritual. There are excellent reentry camps available for children. These can help them develop concepts and terms that allow them to understand what they are experiencing as "third-culture kids." If they grew up in China, their passport country will be unfamiliar to them. The sending church can help pay for the children to attend as the cost may be prohibitive for the family during the time of transition. Having members of the church offer to go along with the family the first time they send their children to Sunday School or youth group will provide a source of support and an easy source of answers to their questions.

It is difficult for the supporting church to know what the returning family needs. The pastors of the church should meet with the returning individual or couple for a debriefing. At that time, they should identify any special needs the family might have so they will know how to support them. It is common for the cross-cultural worker to keep a stiff upper lip and report to be just fine, so it will be necessary to have several such times of pastoral care and counseling in order to allow space and time for genuine needs and issues to come out. Knowing local resources, the church can then facilitate meeting the needs that have been identified. Some of the negative aspects that might emerge include feelings of grief, loss, a sense of failure, regret over interpersonal conflict, and uncertainty about



[Stephens City United Methodist Church by Josh via Flickr.](#)

the decision to leave China. Other issues that might come up are difficulty integrating one's spiritual experiences from China with life in the church back in their passport country, loss of professional expertise while overseas, and the nagging desire to return to China. The latter issue can delay healthy reacclimation if one languishes in a state of limbo regarding whether or not there will be a return to China.

Depending on how supportive the home church is, the spiritual and emotional health of the family will likely depend primarily on the family members themselves. Like the process of adapting to life in China, they will need to be patient, knowing that reacclimating to their passport country will also take years. There are habits that should be built into the family to nurture a healthy, on-going processing of this cultural adjustment. Family times can be used to initiate conversations that help process some of the things family members are experiencing. Memories of China need to be revisited. Current positive and negative experiences need to be debriefed. For children, their third-culture identity needs to be nurtured and guided to ensure healthy self identify and positive interpersonal relationship experiences. There are many good resources available to help with this, such as the books *Third Culture Kids* and *Returning Well* (see Resource Corner for more resources).

An important part of the transition is integrating the best of what was gained from the time in China with elements of one's passport country and culture. To help with this process, it is important to find others who have lived extensively in China and talk with them occasionally. However, this needs to be kept in balance. It is not healthy to create an exclusive network of friends who are all "China hands," as this may stymie the reacclimation process. Nevertheless, being with these people occasionally to relish China experiences and discuss challenges one is facing is invaluable. To that end, be careful not to focus on the negative experiences or fall into excessive complaining. Likewise, beware of an idealized view of China that leads to unfair comparisons between China and one's home country. Both places have strengths and weakness, and the goal is weaving the best of both into one's sense of self and one's worldview so as to develop into a healthy, multicultural, well-adjusted person.

Finally, while in China, a person develops unique skills in serving and ministry. These should not be quenched upon returning, and one should look for opportunities to use these gifts. At the same time, since these gifts were nurtured in China, they will need to be adapted to a new setting. It is important to show commitment to one's local church by diving in and serving according to their needs.

Likewise, the church should invite returnees to use their spiritual gifts in ministry. One returned China worker volunteered to wash the toys in the church nursery on Saturday mornings, and three years later, that was still the extent of his ministry in that church. Being a servant is a virtue, but this was probably underutilization of that person's gifts. Returning cross-cultural workers want to reclaim normalcy and feel that their gifts are being used, so it is important to give them opportunities appropriate to their gifts and experiences. Their time in China has given them a lot of unique perspectives and skills that can be a distinctive blessing in the church. For example, the returning person or family can use their China-acquired skills to help the church reach international students or New Americans. One will also want to seek opportunities to leverage one's hard-earned global skills in a variety of ways. If one looks for opportunities, one might be able to volunteer or join the board of an organization serving Chinese people, or serving in China. After having invested substantial time and effort to master the language and culture of China, a person will want to maintain that skill and use it in various ways.

Adapting to life in China was an exciting journey of growth and learning. Over time, the cross-cultural worker became successful and enjoyed his or her life and work in China. Returning to the home country requires the same perspective. If one is able to navigate this transition well, the process can similarly be a time of growth and learning and a continuing of the ministry that was started while in China. The local church has a large role to play in this transition and can be the critical factor in whether the process is a healthy one.

*Mark A. Strand, PhD, professor in public health at North Dakota State University, lived in China with his wife and three children for nearly twenty years. While in China he was involved in medical research and development with a non-profit organization in collaboration with the Chinese government.*

## Of Returns and Runways

Continued from page 6

constant has been God: the one who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. No purpose of his can be thwarted in his work in China, our passport countries, and our own lives. Throughout Scripture, we see him take people through various transitions so that their faith might grow and he might be glorified. May we be found faithful as he glorifies himself!

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<sup>1</sup> Jason Ingle, *I'll Go until You Stop Me*. Soon to be published. Chapter 21: "Transition is Chaos," pp 141-143.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 22: "What I Want to Be When I Grow Up," pp 154-155.

*Jason Ingle left a career as a city planner to teach English in China as a single in 1996; he left China in 2015 with a wife, four children, a masters in Christian education, and a wide variety of teaching, cultural, and leadership experience. Stops in Henan, Guangdong, Jilin, Sichuan, and Shanxi across those years provided many growth opportunities for all the Ingles.*

*Since returning to the States Jason did campus ministry with Chinese students and scholars for more than a year at the University of Alabama, but is currently transitioning into a pastor position at a Chinese church in Tucson, Arizona.*

## Debriefing before the Final Goodbye

By Amy Young

If a woman is pregnant and I encourage her to receive prenatal care, you would not give me much pushback. In fact, you are probably in favor of prenatal care and would do all you could to encourage a friend who is reluctant to go to a doctor to schedule an appointment. Why? Because you believe something is wrong with the mom or baby? Of course not. Instead, your motivation is prevention and monitoring so that a doctor can catch changes or distress to either the mother or baby. We know that in China prenatal care is not available to all, but we wish it were because we have come to see the value of preventative and on-going care during this season in a woman's life.



Recently, I was in a meeting with others who are interested in member care for people living and serving around the world. One of the participants was Mission Training International's (MTI) director of their debriefing and renewal program or [DAR](#). A recent trend they have noticed is that people come for debriefings primarily at the end of their service time instead of at the end of a term. Unlike prenatal care, debriefing is not seen as a wellness check; rather, it is viewed more like an appendectomy—appropriate and necessary but only under specific conditions.

Stop and ask yourself about the annual transitions you experience working and serving in China, do you debrief them? If not, is it because you view debriefing like an appendectomy rather than as prenatal care? However, here is where the analogy falls apart when it comes to transitions: transitions in life are common; pregnancies and appendectomies are not.

This article advocates for debriefing to become a part of your wellness routine regarding transitions. As with other parts of healthcare, sometimes a professional is needed; other times a bit of common sense and knowledge is sufficient. In your annual budget, build in attendance at a debriefing week every four or five years. If you save for this monthly or annually, then you will have the money available when you need it. In addition, incorporate annual personal and team (or group) debriefings.

Why is this so important? Debriefing creates space to reflect, remember, and name both gains and losses. It allows time to acknowledge and grieve the end of a year in your life.

The following is adapted from material I used every year when I worked with over 200 people in China who served on about 50 teams. We were on an academic calendar so the “end of the year” was in June. Early in the spring we would email a “Year End Packet” to all team members and ask them to schedule a time during their last month when they would debrief. Just like going to the doctor needs to be a priority and scheduled, so does debriefing. A few of the teams even planned a time away in a nearby city to go over the packet.

The material was divided into three parts: personal reflections (that would not be shared), team/group experiences, (most of which would be shared), and team/group experiences related to work and culture.

### Personal: Questions to Ask Yourself

The following list can be overwhelming if done all at once. You may want to tackle a few questions at a time. If talking to someone helps you to actually answer them (not all of us like to journal!), set up a video chat appointment with a friend and talk out your answers.

- What were my expectations coming into this year?
- What happened that I really didn't expect to happen?
- How was this year different than other years? (If not your first year in China.)
- In retrospect, what were some of the funny things that happened this year?
- How did I succeed? What were the ways I failed this year? How have I responded to my successes and failures? What lessons have I learned through them?
- What were my first impressions of my teammate(s)?
- How has each team member changed/developed over the course of the year? How have they developed positively because of their experiences?
- Who are the people I know now that I value the most? Why?
- Did I hurt someone this year? Have I asked their forgiveness, and made restitution? Was I faithful in serving my teammates? My students? If not, what should I do?

- Was I hurt this year by someone else? Have I found a way to forgive that person, and apply grace to the hurts I have received? If not, what should I do? Do I need help from someone else in order to resolve this? Can I/should I leave the country with the situation as it stands now? (The answer can be “yes.”)
- How have I changed—physically, socially, emotionally, etc.? Will any of these changes be difficult for my friends and family to accept?
- In light of these changes, how should I adjust my former goals—or how have my goals changed? Will this be difficult for my family and friends to accept? What can I/should I do in order to present these changes to my loved ones in the wisest manner?
- What has changed at home that I know of from the news I have received from home?
- What lessons have I been learning this year?
- What will I gain with this upcoming transition?
- What will I lose in this upcoming transition?
- As I reflect over my gains and losses, this is what I notice:

### **Team Experience: What Happened to Us This Year?**

This section is to be done as a team/group. If you have children on your team, find times for them to be a part of the debriefing and other times for the adults to debrief.

- Take a few minutes to write at least three positive things about each member of your team. Share them with each other, concentrating on each member of the team in turn.
- What is the funniest thing your teammate(s) has done or said this year?
- What is a personal favorite memory of a team experience?
- What was the worst experience you had as a team together?
- Take five minutes to write down some of what you learned because of your team relationships. Discuss these things.
- What would you—or will you—do differently because of what you have learned this year?
- Take five minutes to write down those things you are thankful for about your team, things that reflect both the individuals and the unit. Discuss together your various thanksgivings. Express to each person one or two things for which you are thankful.

### **Team Experience: Work, Culture, Relationships**

#### **Work**

- Identify a few of your most satisfying work moments.
- Identify a few of your most frustrating work moments.
- What were favorable aspects of your job this year?
- What were difficult aspects of your job this year?
- What have you learned about yourself from working here? About the people you serve?

#### **Culture**

- How did Chinese culture influence you this year?
- What has been the hardest part of adjusting to the culture this year?
- How do you see Chinese culture changing?
- What has Chinese culture taught you this year about your home culture?

## Relationships

1) Your relationship with God.

- In what ways has this relationship been nurtured?
- What has hindered your relationship with God?
  - \* In what ways have you received mercy, love, grace, and his presence?
  - \* In what ways have you felt neglected, overlooked, and abandoned by God?

2) What have your relationships with locals been like?

- What has been rewarding in your relationships with them?
- What has been difficult?

3) How have your relationships been with people at home?

- Communication *to* family and friends.
- Communication *from* them.

## Ministry

- How would you describe your ministry context this year?
- Share a few highlights.
- Share a few challenges.
- What changes or adjustments might be made for future ministry?

Now that you have had a taste of what debriefing could look like, what do you think? Does it sound like a lot of work for you or your team? My goal was not to overwhelm you with list upon list; it was, however, to equip you. Debriefing does not happen without intention and scheduling.

Change is coming. Again. The question is, are you going to approach it like a woman who knows she is getting ready to give birth to new life? Or, do you see it as someone who hopes the appendix pain will go away? Whether labor pains or stabbing pains on the right side of your body, something is coming out soon. You may be tired of the “T” word (transition), you may be eager about what is around the corner, or you may not like all this mumbo jumbo, touchy-feely approach to life.

Here is what I know for sure: there comes a point where your feelings about change do not matter. But I also know this: finishing reading this article and moving on to the next one will not make change and transition go away. Instead, this year, and over time, many years, will build up. If you do not process your experiences through debriefing, at some point, like an appendectomy, the choice to deal with them on your own time will be taken from you.

Debriefing individually and as a team allows you to process without too much cumulative damage. It is a way to mark, remember, validate, and release the year you have just lived. Through debriefing, space is created for you to be ready for the next season that God has for you.

While prenatal care may not be available to all, debriefing is. Use this article and other resources to build wellness checks into your life and ministry.

*When Amy Young first moved to China she knew three Chinese words: hello, thank you, and watermelon. Today she blogs regularly at [The Messy Middle](#) and is the director of global operations for [Velvet Ashes](#). She has also authored two books written to help those who live and serve in China: [Looming Transitions: Starting and Finishing Well in Cross-Cultural Service](#) and [Love, Amy: An Accidental Memoir Told in Newsletters from China](#).*

## View from the Wall

### Opportunities and Challenges When Foreign Workers Leave China

By Rachel

The reflections of any writer are based on the circumstances and experiences of his or her own life. In my case, my contact with overseas cross-cultural workers has been relatively limited, so my reflections may be quite individual. I have chosen to divide this topic into four different aspects. While they are different, they are also interrelated. The divisions are simply for convenience in presenting my thoughts.

#### NGOs Established and Led by Cross-Cultural Workers

Some cross-cultural workers are in favor of having local people lead their organizations, so they look for locals with leadership potential to assume leadership roles. This creates opportunities to introduce various overseas networks to the local leaders and helps them get to know and understand their supporting organizations. Should the cross-cultural workers have to leave, these local leaders can continue to maintain good relationships with their supporting organizations. At the same time, the local leaders are given opportunities to learn and grasp the basic concepts and methods of fundraising so the organization can continue to develop.

To facilitate the growth of local leaders, cross-cultural workers also provide a variety of leadership training to adequately nurture them both in theory and practice. Workers from overseas also lead the local leaders in developing partnerships with both local churches and those overseas and most certainly in establishing relationships with the local government. Besides being responsible for the local employees' salaries, overseas organizations also need to provide their benefits such as social security, medical care, housing, and so on.

However, overseas organizations and charitable agencies often run into unpredictable situations. When these circumstances lead to the departure of the worker or changes in organizational structure, the outcome can be either positive or negative. A positive scenario would be that the local leaders quickly and successfully assume the worker's leadership role and help sustain and develop their organization. There are several possibilities for a negative scenario: supporting organizations overseas have not developed a trusting relationship with the local leadership so fundraising becomes very challenging; local leaders do not have support from the local government so the work cannot continue; unlike the cross-cultural workers, the local leaders cannot establish partnerships with both the domestic churches and churches overseas; local leaders lack resources to develop workers. The departure of a cross-cultural worker presents both opportunity and crisis.

#### Seminaries Established and Led by Cross-cultural Workers

Seminaries established and led by cross-cultural workers have the following characteristics:

1. Supported and influenced by a single overseas denomination.
2. Limited contacts with local churches due to security concerns.
3. Students mostly from rural areas.
4. Primarily funded from overseas.
5. Generally lacking a team of teachers.

If the workers leave, opportunities and challenges arise. Local leaders may seek support from multiple resources domestically and abroad which broadens their perspective as well as builds a local leadership team. As they broaden their perspective, they have the opportunity to formulate their own training model suitable to their own situation without being limited by the worker's thinking. Since they are no longer under the control of an overseas denomination, these seminaries may suffer in spirit and resources temporarily. However, this may also prompt the local workers to actively keep in contact with local churches and increase the likelihood of their partnership with them.

If funding from overseas stops, student enrollment most likely will decline, and the number of teaching staff will be further reduced. Seminaries could consider establishing a governing board made up of locals and have local church leaders be responsible for institutional development. On the other hand, local churches also carry responsibilities in growing the seminaries.

#### Fellowships and Churches Established and Led by Overseas Workers

Because cross-cultural workers have their supporting system overseas and are relatively well trained in knowledge, experience, spiritual maturity, and leadership, they have many advantages when building and leading local churches. Many of them need to provide ministry reports to their supporting individuals and organizations, so they are more prone to strive for "ministry performance" when leading local churches. As a result, besides constantly being physically and mentally under pressure, they find investing themselves in training local leaders a challenging task because, unlike the production on an assembly line, personal growth takes time—much like a tree takes years to grow and mature.



[The lonely woman by Johan via Flickr](#)

When overseas workers lead local churches, the churches typically start off well, but they easily become accustomed to having foreign leaders and their abundant resources which often help meet the various ministry needs of the church. Cross-cultural workers are relatively more skilled and experienced in leadership which often helps to avoid mistakes the locals might frequently make. Gradually, the local congregations develop a trusting relationship with these leaders who also establish their leadership authority in the church.

Both sides enjoy this relationship, but if for any reason the worker has to leave, the local church leaders are faced with a temporary lack of pastoral resources. They will certainly have difficulties adjusting at first, but they will experience growth in their Christian faith and will also actively seek help from around them. Their Christian life and leadership will grow in the midst of challenges and responsibilities. Even though local church congregations will miss their overseas leaders and may not have sufficient trust in the authority of the local leadership, local church leaders and congregations, facing the challenges, are more likely to have a spirit of humility and mutual support for one another. Through working together, both the local leaders and the congregations have the opportunity to get to know each other and develop closer relationships. Furthermore, the local leadership teams have the advantage of knowing the local language, culture, economy, politics, and other living conditions that will allow them to lead their churches on a new path of development.

### **Deep Relationships between Cross-cultural Workers and Local Christians**

Cross-cultural workers often become friends with local Christians, and they become good friends with and spiritual mentors to some of the local Christian leaders. Many local Christian leaders have been involved in various long-term positions within their churches. However, not only do they have very heavy workloads, they are also under intense pressure from family, society, and even politics. During the Cultural Revolution, church growth was greatly interrupted and today older Christian leaders are few. Currently most local Christians are first-generation Christians, and their examples of Christian leadership come primarily from the overseas workers. There is also a lack of collaboration among local churches resulting in a lack of Christian fellowship among Christian leaders. Most of these leaders feel very alone. Not only is their theological, pastoral, spiritual, and leadership training insufficient, but they are also financially strapped. All this, coupled with the rapid pace of social change in China, is overwhelming and challenges their Christian faith.

Christian leaders are in need of various kinds of support. Many cross-cultural workers provide them with the strong backing they need: they meet with them regularly; they listen as they share life experiences including their work situations, parent-child relationships, their spiritual lives, their church lives, personal struggles, successes and failures, dreams and hopes, and so on. This provides vital encouragement for their Christian faith. In addition, cross-cultural workers also provide practical help to Christian leaders in many areas such as devotions, leadership, theological training, finances, and even meeting specific needs in their work. They connect the local Christian leaders with domestic and foreign resources such as marriage counseling, childhood education, pastoral skills training, as well as other types of skill training that help Christians grow as individuals, families, and organizations. Help of this nature is very useful for Christian leaders.

However, when the workers leave, the already lonely local Christian leaders will lose their long-term spiritual friends. Even though they need to learn to face the challenges of life and to work on their own as well as to deepen their relationship with God, they will certainly have a difficult time adjusting. Furthermore, they must now take the initiative to establish new relationships and strengthen their own support system. When the workers and the practical support they have provided are no longer available, the local churches must learn to support their local leaders. The gradually maturing Chinese churches should consider establishing support systems for their own leaders: theological education as well as instruction in family life, finances, and welfare should all be included in the scope of support.

Leaders should also have faith in God that while the departure of cross-cultural workers will bring temporary difficulties, these obstacles can also contribute to the local leaders' and churches' increasing sense of responsibility.

*Rachel (pseudonym) has spent the past 20 years working for different foreign NGOs in China, helping to set up programs serving China in the areas of: counseling, mentoring, and village doctor training. Most recently she has been helping home school co-ops and helping to establish bilingual schools. Throughout all of this she has been active in multiple leadership roles within the urban church.*

*Translated by Ping Ng*

## Peoples of China

### Kids in Transition

By Stephen Sark

I still remember my freshman year at a Christian college on the east coast. I was assigned to a freshman dorm, and the first few weeks were occupied with getting to know the other guys on the hall.

We almost all came from different states and our parents represented a wide range of professions. And then there was “Buck.”\* Buck was the first real missionary kid I had ever met other than seeing the typical “parade” of missionary families during our church’s annual missions conference. All the missionaries would introduce themselves and walk across the platform.



Buck was different. Very different. None of us in the freshman dorm were ultra-hip; after all, we were wide-eyed freshmen in a conservative Christian college in the 1980s. Nevertheless, Buck could not relate.

Buck lived in the dorm room next to mine. The conversations we all had in the dorm in the evening before the RA would enforce our 11 o’clock lights out revolved around sports, music, and movies. Buck would always confess that he had no idea who that athlete or that celebrity was. We would stare back in disbelief and laugh nervously. Then he would make a comment that seemed to be straight out of a “Leave it to Beaver” episode. Again, more awkward stares and uncomfortable laughter.

During this period of my life, God was moving me in the direction of missions. I wanted to understand Buck and be his friend—I really did. Rightly or wrongly, I felt sorry for him. But I also wanted to fit in. I wanted to be liked and accepted like other insecure, freshmen guys. So, would I risk sitting with Buck in the cafeteria when he was wearing clothes that screamed “missionary closet”? Would I defend him when he made his strange comments when we were hanging out in the dorm? Would I help him navigate this new culture that he found himself immersed in, a culture that was supposed to be his own?

I did. Sometimes. But not always. I occasionally joined in the laughter that came at Buck’s expense.

Buck lasted exactly one semester at my college. I don’t know where he went after Christmas break. All we knew was he didn’t come back. Someone else moved into that dorm room and Buck was largely forgotten except for the occasional ridiculing reference to the missionary kid.

If God was calling me to missions, how could I have been so callous to his struggles? In hindsight, I realize that I didn’t have the knowledge or tools to understand what Buck was experiencing—not to mention help him work through these issues. Thirty-two years later, however, I still remember Buck and the struggles he faced.

As God moved me through my college and seminary years and closer to cross-cultural service, I determined to find a way for my future children to be “normal.” On a cold January morning in 1993, I boarded a flight from Columbus, Ohio, on my way to a new life in East Asia. I had no idea how I would help my future kids deal with reentering their “home” culture. I didn’t even have a wife at that point! What could I possibly know? I had not heard terms like “third culture kid (TCK),” “reentry,” or “member care.”

Fast forward to 2015. I am now a husband of 20 years with three teenagers and one younger child. My 22 years of service in Asia were coming to a close. God had gently, graciously, and clearly shown our family that the “going” part of our mission’s involvement was finished. Our family began building our R.A.F.T., the now well-known acronym for Reconciliation, Affirmation, Farewells, and Think Destination.

My wife and I attempted to do our best to prepare our kids for making America our home rather than just our temporary home leave assignment. For our family, 2015 was much different than 1985 was for Buck.

There are tools that make reentry and transition potentially much smoother for kids who have grown up physically absent from their passport culture. Of course, there are still pitfalls and struggles, but can you imagine how much the missionary kids of the 1980s would have appreciated the fact that “holey” jeans were cool?! Or the fact that the really hip millennials shop at Goodwill and thrift shops because they want to, not because they have to?

The Internet, mobile phone technology, Skype, global satellite TV, the proliferation of DVDs and the relative affordability of international airfare have all contributed to the ability of missionary families to stay connected, at least to some degree, to their home culture. The North American church and mission agencies have all recognized the need for enhanced member care in the area of reentry.

All that to say, the situation for third-culture kids in 2017 is generally much better than it has ever been. We thank God for his provision in these things; nevertheless, transition can still be perilous. Here are a few things that our family has learned in our transition back to the United States.

**Connect to a church.** Without a doubt, connecting to the right local church has been the single most important decision for our family since returning from Asia. As parents, we chose to give our kids a voice—much voice—in the choice of a church home.

Because of employment opportunities or the lack thereof, our family did not return to the area where our sending church is located. We started from scratch in a new city looking for a church that would provide a place for us to worship, fellowship and, most importantly in our opinion, to give our kids a chance to grow in their relationship with Christ.

Your family might be returning to the same neighborhood where your sending church is located. You may want to consider that your sending church may not be the ideal, long-term, home church for your family. Many of us, especially those who served in restricted access countries, have spent many years involved in churches or local fellowships that would best be described as “house churches” and were often very international in nature. Talk to your kids about what they are looking for in a church. Maybe they want a new experience that is vastly different from what they have been used to. On the other hand, they might want something that shares some similarities to what has been familiar.

By God’s grace, we listened to our kids. In the process of visiting new churches, we found several that evoked a highly negative reaction from our kids. They were not accustomed to certain styles or degrees of formality or what they observed to be the marriage of patriotism and church. However, one Sunday when we walked out of morning service and all three of our teenagers asked if we could bring them back that evening for the youth service, my wife and I shared a glance with each other while trying to maintain a calm exterior and replied, “Sure. I think we can do that.”

**Connect to mentors.** Quite possibly your choice of a home church will also address the issue of mentors for your kids. As parents, it hurt our pride a little bit to realize that our kids needed other mature, trusted adults in whom they could confide. But after we recovered from our self pity, we have been so thankful for the provision of mature (but still much younger than us!) Christians to meet consistently and regularly, one-on-one, with each of our teenagers.

Here’s the kicker: these meetings and relationships are the things that our kids value above everything else in their schedule. They will sacrifice almost anything they can in order to keep their weekly times with their mentors. These times of discipleship have undoubtedly been the key to a healthy and happy transition to America for our kids. We didn’t arrange for these times. We didn’t ask these individuals to do this. God designed these appointments.

**Make wise education choices.** Our kids had a variety of educational settings during our time overseas including national schools, home school, online school, and some hybrids or combinations of those. When we returned from Asia, we involved our kids in this decision process as we did with the choice of a church, and we concluded that a private, Christian school would be the best option. In our particular situation, our school choice provided the most intercultural and TCK opportunities. Those are the kids with whom our kids have found common experiences to build friendships.

Our school choice has been a struggle for us financially because we no longer have the option of sending out a newsletter with an “urgent need” for which our supporters were always so ready and willing to assist us. It’s up to us now. Some people probably think we are being unwise with our resources, but the struggle has been worth it. Your decision may lead you to a public school, an online school, or home school. At the risk of stating the obvious, choose the best option for your family no matter what others may think.

**Connect to their TCK friends.** There may be opportunities for your kids to connect with friends, especially other TCKs that they know from your host culture. Since we returned to the US we have made opportunities for our kids to travel to spend time with friends from their “previous life.” In a couple of instances, it involved flights from one coast of the US to the opposite coast. We do not take this travel casually, nor do we take these opportunities for granted, but for the sake of our child’s transition, we have made the effort and counted the cost. It has proven to be worth it. Help your kids make healthy connections.

**Laugh.** Finally, be intentional about reminding your kids about the laughter you shared in your host culture when you were overseas. My kids laugh harder at my recounting my goofy mistakes or cultural missteps than anything else. Remind them of the things that made you laugh as a family. There have been enough stressful times during our reentry and transition; laughter is truly good for our family’s soul. Laughter draws us together as a family.

By God’s grace, we know much more and have access to much more in 2017 than my college dorm mate, Buck, and his parents had in 1985. May God bless your family as you navigate the ups and downs of reentry!

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\*Name changed.

*Stephen Sark received his bachelor's degree in cross-cultural studies from Liberty University and a master's degree in TEFL from Columbia International University. He and his wife, Patty, spent 22 years serving in China with about half of their years spent in the northeastern city of Shenyang and the other half in less-developed areas in the southwestern part of the country. They raised four children in China and appreciated the slower pace and flexibility of life in the Middle Kingdom. In 2015 Steve and Patty returned to the US where they currently work with international high school students.*

## Book Review

### Transitions Made Easier

*Looming Transitions: Starting and Finishing Well in Cross-Cultural Service*, Amy Young, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016, 166 pp. ISBN-13: 978-1519622341, paperback, \$10.99 at [Amazon](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B01LW00000).

*Looming Transitions: Starting and Finishing Well in Cross-Cultural Service; 22 Activities for Families in Transition*, \$2.99 at [Amazon](https://www.amazon.com/dp/B01LW00000).

*Looming Transitions: Starting and Finishing Well in Cross-Cultural Service; Workbook Prepare for and Process through your Transition*, \$5 at [www.gumroad.com/amyyoung](http://www.gumroad.com/amyyoung).

Reviewed by Cassie Cahill

Transitions are not easy for anyone; for those living and moving from place to place while serving cross-culturally the changes seem even deeper. Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes 3:1 and 4, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven . . . a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.” In the book *Looming Transitions: Starting and Finishing Well in Cross-Cultural Service*, Amy Young writes about these transitions from her experience having lived in Asia for over 20 years.

Having served cross-culturally for over 14 years now, I wish I would have had this book in my hand prior to arriving on the field. It serves as a practical handbook for considering all the changes that occur when one has decided to serve overseas. It is not for someone planning to come for a one- to four-week trip but is for all who are considering establishing themselves to live and serve cross-culturally for the long-term. I appreciate that Young writes in a light-hearted, humorous manner sharing her own stories as well as her observations of others moving overseas.

It is obvious that a key factor in this transition is to keep Christ number one (chapter titled “Stay Grounded in Christ”). However, in the midst of many changes, one can become disoriented. Young says:

*In all of life, but especially when we are cultivating a fertile soul, staying grounded in Christ is a big rock and worth guarding. Part of guarding your relationship with God is knowing yourself and what may or may not work for you; it also involves getting creative and throwing some should out the window.*

She gives practical advice as to how to identify one of seven spiritual pathways (intellectual, relational, serving, worship, activist, contemplative, creation) that would help to connect with God on a more personal level (John Ortberg in *God Is Closer Than You Think*). This is helpful information especially for couples (or a family or team) who may not realize which pathway is most useful and can help one another find the best pathway for each person. When moving overseas, the usual traditions are removed, and overseas workers will need to evaluate which pathways will help them grow spiritually.

The information in this book helps one to consider the relational aspects of leaving, keeping a good sense of humor (chapter titled, “Laughter Revives the Soul”), realizing that not everything will go smoothly (chapter titled, “Accept That’s It’s Going to Be Messy”), and to consider how one adapts to change (chapter titled, “Know Yourself”).

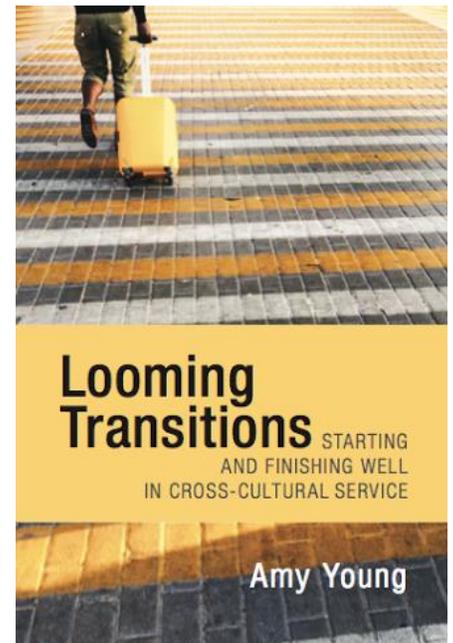
The chapter on messiness was very helpful. Often in moving overseas, we have an idealistic view of what serving overseas will look like, but one does not realize the many changes that are happening at the same time. There are expectations—sometimes they are unmet or may be too high. Discussing these matters with a spouse or teammate can be quite helpful. In the chapter about knowing yourself, it is very beneficial to recognize if you are a “pre-griever” or a “post-griever” since each person processes grief in different ways. For example, one person could be crying months before leaving, and another person could grieve after he moves to the new location.

Another topic Young broaches is “identity” which is quite significant. When one moves to another location, often his or her role or job may be different than what it was previously. Young warns:

*While this part of you—this role, job, location—certainly can be a significant part of you, it must not become the only part. If this concept doesn’t stay in the forefront of your thoughts and conversations, it can leave you on the other side of the transition wondering who am I when this defining aspect is now gone or profoundly changed.*

Young helps one to understand not only the person moving, but how the move can impact others. There are many things to consider—it is not only about selling the car or house, changing your job, and geographical location. There will be questions such as who will take care of my parents, how do I help my child say goodbye to “Fluffy,” and what will my new role be overseas? How one says “goodbye” to others can leave an indelible mark on others’ lives.

Along with working through the relational issues, there is also a valuable chapter about the logistics of moving (chapter titled “Start Early”). This chapter deals with the benefits of both those who are more task-oriented and those who are more people-focused. Each has advantages and disadvantages. In terms of the “big move,” it gives a good picture of the benefits or cautions for each personality.



In addition to those who are starting on the field, this book would be helpful for those returning to China following home assignment. In the chapter “Your Unique Path,” Young has poignant questions to consider when going back to China. One of the stories Young shares is about making pillowcases for her nieces as an expression of her love when she was leaving to return to Asia. She realized that making the gift was not just about giving a gift and seeing the reaction on the faces of her nieces, but it was her way of processing her grief. She shared:

*Working out your grief does not mean you can or even should avoid the pain; instead, it means you face the pain and walk into it. You feel it. And it is real. And it comes in waves. And some days are easier than others. But you also cling to the truth that we do not mourn as those who have no hope.*

It is important for those who relocate to make time to grieve in such a way that they can leave their passport country in a healthy manner.

This book is also valuable for those transitioning back to their home country following their time in China. Its practical advice will serve well all those who find themselves in various kinds of transitions.

Young has written a companion workbook; it comes in a PDF file that can be printed or written in digitally. While it takes time, this can be an effective tool for processing the transition experience. Additionally, a workbook for families is available with 22 activities that include discussion questions, interactive activities for younger and older children, and recommended resources. When using the workbook(s), it would be important to have read the book and then to implement the activities; otherwise some of the activities will not be very clear.

Having lived overseas for a length of time, I have seen how people come and go. Obviously, the desire is for a follower of Christ to transition in a healthy fashion so he or she will glorify God in that process. Young has written a handbook that can assist cross-cultural workers as they proceed through these significant changes in a godly manner.

*Cassie Cahill (pseudonym) has lived overseas in Asia with her family of four. She home-schooled her children through elementary school and has ministered to women and families.*

## Intercessory Notes

### *Please pray*

1. That cross-cultural workers in China will discern when God is making a change in their ministry and follow his leading.
2. For workers and their families returning to their passport countries as they again make cultural adjustments after years of living in China.
3. For churches to be wise, discerning, and helpful as they seek to assist returnees and their families as they readjust to their home culture.
4. For parents as they help their children move from one culture to another in a healthy manner.
5. That children who have spent much of their lives in China and must now learn another culture will do so in a positive, healthy manner, and experience God’s protection.
6. That debriefing of China experiences will be used by cross-cultural workers and aid them in understanding daily experiences and relationships.



## Resource Corner

### Resources to Help You with Transitions

#### Reentry and General Retreats

**Abide Reentry Retreat, TRAIN International**, Joplin, MO. For details about retreats and dates visit <http://traininternational.org/Abide.html>.

**Potter's Inn, Aspen Ridge Retreat Center**, Divide, CO. For details on retreats or reservations, visit [www.pottersinn.com](http://www.pottersinn.com).

**Sonscape Retreats**, near Colorado Springs, CO. Retreats also available at Whitestone Country Inn in Tennessee and in upstate New York. For details on retreats, locations and available dates visit <http://sonscaperetreats.org>.

#### Debriefings, Seminars and Trainings

**DAR (Debrief and Renewal), MTI** in Colorado Springs, CO. For more details and available program dates, visit [www.mti.org/dar](http://www.mti.org/dar)

**Emmaus Encounter Debriefing**, Montana. For details on debriefings see <https://emmausencounter.org/>.

**Narramore Christian Foundation, Seminars and Trainings**, various locations. For available programs, dates, and locations, visit [http://ncfliving.org/what\\_we\\_do/seminars-training.html](http://ncfliving.org/what_we_do/seminars-training.html).

**Piringa Charitable Trust**, Algies Bay, New Zealand. Piringa provides a residential setting where people can come stay for a week for a personal debrief. For more information see [www.piringa.org.nz](http://www.piringa.org.nz).

**Barnabas International, MK Transition Seminars**, for teens who have finished secondary school overseas and are transitioning to life and college in North America. For dates and locations visit [www.barnabas.org/member-care/events/mk-transitional-seminar](http://www.barnabas.org/member-care/events/mk-transitional-seminar).

#### Books for Transitioning

*Looming Transitions: Starting and Finishing Well in Cross-Cultural Service*, Amy Young, available on [Amazon](http://Amazon).

*Looming Transitions: Starting and Finishing Well in Cross-Cultural Service; 22 Activities for Families in Transition*, Amy Young, available on [Amazon](http://Amazon).

*Looming Transitions: Starting and Finishing Well in Cross-Cultural Service; Workbook Prepare for and Process through your Transition*, Amy Young, available at [www.gumroad.com/amyyoung](http://www.gumroad.com/amyyoung).

*Re-entry: Making the Transition from Missions to Life at Home* by Peter Jordan available on [Amazon](http://Amazon).

*Returning Well: Your Guide to Thriving Back "Home" after Serving Cross-Culturally*, by Melissa Chaplin, available on [Amazon](http://Amazon).

*The Art of Coming Home*, by Craig Storti, available on [Amazon](http://Amazon).

#### Books for Third Culture Kids

*Misunderstood: The Impact of Growing up Overseas in the 21st Century*, by Tanya Crossman, available on [Amazon](http://Amazon).

*Third Culture Kids: Growing up among Worlds*, by Ruth Van Reken and David Pollock, available on [Amazon](http://Amazon).

