

## “Intellectual Vomiting” and an “Unexpected Journey”

Li Jing (Sociology class of 2000)

In 2012, the film *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey* hit cinemas around the world. As a prequel to *The Lord of the Rings*, it continued the cinematic glory of the trilogy. Bilbo Baggins, like the other hobbits in the story, passed his days in leisurely tranquility. Yet, when a wizard and some dwarves paid a visit, Bilbo’s long-hidden passion was awakened. After some struggle, Bilbo joined the party on its expedition. At that point, he veered completely off the expected life path, and set off on a danger-filled, but ultimately legendary, unexpected journey.

As a young adult raised in an atheistic education system, I would, time and again, puzzle over life. To “believe in God” was the most ridiculous, most impossible option. Yet, the creator God has a sense of humor and makes choices we cannot fathom. Indeed, that was, against all odds, exactly what happened. I not only became a Christian believer, I also was called to be a preacher. This, then, is my unexpected journey.

### **Peking University: I Got In**

I was born in an old revolutionary area of China in the early 1980s; my grandfather was a loyal party member, a loyal revolutionary. As for my hometown, it had long been known as a “land of milk and honey” that had produced its share of illustrious sons, a place where enchanting scenery was paired with ages-old cultural history.

Perhaps I was influenced by the beauty of the scenery, but since I was young, I’d always loved reading books and reflecting. I felt that life was more than eating and drinking, that it was about intellectual and spiritual pursuits. However, because of my hometown’s geographical isolation, my intellectual pursuit could feed only on communist atheism and nothing else.

Thus, the Confucian ideals of “improving self, bringing order to the family, governing the nation, and bringing peace to all,” as well as the communist ideal of “serving the people” became my religion, and the way to realize my personal worth. As a humanities student, my highest goal was to attend the legendary institution—the best in the country—Peking University.

In the summer of 2000, I had the great fortune to test into Peking

University's sociology department and I became a "native" of the Yan Yuan campus. I was off to a bright start on the journey of life.

### **Becoming A Prodigal Son**

However, I was only half right.

One of the beliefs of Peking University was "All rivers run into the sea; and acceptance allows greatness." In the rich environment of the Yan Yuan campus, my horizons widened exponentially. I'd never thought that my long-held communist and atheistic beliefs would encounter a fatal blow.

As I came to a truer understanding of modern China's history, I was startled to discover that the ideological education I had received since childhood was packed with absurdities and lies. To get closer to the truth, I had no choice but to experience what the scholar Liu Xiaofeng called "intellectual vomiting." That is similar to what happens in martial arts novels when the hero relinquishes his existing martial arts and experiences a process of death and then life.

I remember one time in class when a student asked: "How is it truly possible to completely fix, to resolve, the problems in society?" The professor was silent for a moment and then responded: "There is no real way to fix social problems such as corruption and crime." Such a candid response astonished us; the frankness of it left me even more shaken.

Later, I slowly started to grasp that while sociology could help in understanding and expounding upon societal problems, it could not solve them. There are at least two reasons for this. First, the current situation in China dictates that the views and opinions of sociologists mean little, while the likes and dislikes of the authorities squash all other factors. Second, all societal problems come from the deep-seated, incurable corruption and ugliness of human nature. If human pride, selfishness, greed, and jealousy are not dealt with at root level, how can societal problems be solved?

Thus, for the first time I turned my mind towards the subject of human nature. But human nature took poorly to being scrutinized. Even in Peking University (which I so admired), in the midst of the cream of the crop, from time to time I would see disgraceful actions, actions running counter to moral philosophy and the law. I must confess that often I also had thoughts that were not good. To this day, I still feel ashamed when I think of some of the things I have said and done.

When I first entered Peking University, I felt as if everyone there wore a halo and walked with integrity and confidence. After a while, however, I had no choice but to extinguish my own halo and silently remove it. Not only did the state of human nature leave many questions unresolved, but it also left humanity deeply mired in an enslavement of frustration and powerlessness, and caught in the strange cycles of history.

This being so, how could people possibly establish a paradise-like communism?

Another time in class, the teacher said that the health and progress of society necessitated moral philosophical resources; that such resources would drive people to build up society, instead of destroying it. Since time immemorial China has possessed traditional moral philosophy. But in the past several decades, communism and the heroic spirit of Lei Feng have been popular and considered a type of moral resource. I asked the teacher: "What effective, moral philosophical resources does China currently have?" The teacher shook his head helplessly. I once again felt a feeling of emptiness.

Experiencing all this, my seemingly indestructible faith gradually fell to pieces. It was pitiful that at Peking University's library, purportedly the best in Asia, I could not find truth or hope that could endure testing. My thoughts could not cope with the burden; my heart became unsettled. Day after day in my diary, I would agonize: "So where, after all, can my spirit rest?"

My dream of Peking University was an ideal that had been smashed. Thus, life is full of unexpected drama. I was at Peking University, the temple of intellect, a holy ground gilded in gold. Yet, I had become a wandering prodigal.

### **An Uninvited Guest**

Alone, wretched, and bewildered, I was unaware that God was softening my hard heart in this time of darkness, and he was quietly opening a door to eternal happiness. Like Bilbo, I also experienced an uninvited guest barging into my life.

In the spring of 2002, I took an elective that would fulfill general requirements. The class was particularly appealing, with a lot of material that prompted new thought. The teacher for the course was extremely kind; she would take two afternoons every week just to talk with students. Curious, I signed up to meet with her. To my surprise, we quickly became friends, and we both benefitted greatly from one another.

One day, the teacher said that she was a Christian and invited me to church to broaden my perspective. I was completely stupefied. Was not religion merely intellectual opium and the product of ignorance and backwardness? She was such a good teacher — how could she be religious? Due to my previous “intellectual vomiting,” I realized that perhaps I had preconceived biases against religion. In any case, Christianity was a social phenomenon, and it would be worth observing and examining it.

After much deliberation, I finally agreed to go.

That April, I stepped into a church for the first time and experienced a type of holiness and universal love that the world does not have. The people at the church were joyful and friendly, without any of the safeguards or self-defensiveness commonly seen in society. My heart felt a peculiar warmth. The songs that the Christians sang and the Bible which the pastor preached caused me to marvel. Christianity was a world about which I knew nothing.

After that initial favorable impression, I began to investigate this faith and I was what people call a “seeker.” Previously, I naturally had thought that religion was an obstacle and an enemy to science. When I learned that many top modern scientists believed in God, my jaw dropped! Ultimately, was I the ignorant one, or were they? Was I the more scientific one, or were they? The answer went without saying.

Later, I came to understand that although the church was not perfect, and had committed many errors throughout history, the Christian faith had also made unsurpassable contributions to humanity in fields of natural sciences, democracy and rule of law, culture and education, medicine, charity, and more. In fact, China has benefitted greatly from Christianity. But for one reason or another, these historical facts had deliberately been twisted or covered up. All the while, the church has had the courage to face its errors and apologize, to confess to its wrongs—something so few of earth’s proud people can do.

There are people who ask: “How can we prove that God truly exists?” During my time as a seeker, I gradually came to understand that logic, reason, and concrete evidence have limitations. There are things in the world that cannot be fully proven and that require a certain degree of faith. For example, getting married to someone, or deciding to board an airplane for a flight require faith. God does not contradict logic and reason; but he surpasses mankind’s limited abilities of logic and reason. We cannot prove one hundred percent that God exists, but, on the other hand, disproving God is even more difficult, indeed impossible.

When I first went to church, I wondered why the Christian faith is referred to as the “Good News.” To my surprise, the Bible, from the

opening chapter of the book of Genesis to the end of the book of Revelation, points out the fundamental problem of the sinfulness of humanity. I had never read a book that described human nature in as profound, accurate, and comprehensive a way as the Bible did. Humanity could not overcome human nature's sinfulness. Even Peking University and Tsinghua University, with their excellent quality of education, could not overcome it. Only a transcendent external power could help people overcome sin and obtain freedom and help human society escape sin's vicious loop and turn towards a cycle of good. This is no other power than the Creator and God revealed by the Bible. This is why Christianity is called the "Good News."

In the process of my seeking, the previous bewilderment and distress that cloaked me turned into crystalline clarity and solace. The joy of suddenly seeing the truth was probably one of the "peak experiences" psychologist Maslow talks of. As C.S. Lewis said: "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen, not only because I see it but because by it, I see everything else".

### **The Prodigal Returns Home**

In addition to pondering the theoretical aspects, I, on a personal level, came to know that God is the "word of life" (I John 1:1) that can be heard, can be seen, can be touched.

In the early days of encountering the gospel, I would often turn on my flashlight and read the Bible late at night in the dormitory. In the darkness of the night, my roommates already deep asleep, the Bible would shine forth the light of truth and revelation, illuminating my perplexed and exhausted heart.

Reading the books of Genesis and Revelation, I looked back through the past and forward to the future; I found a wholly new perspective on history. Reading the Song of Songs, I experienced holy, selfless love, and my heart was moved. Reading the four gospels, God made flesh seemingly come to life before my eyes. Reading about Jesus being nailed to the cross, it was almost as if I, myself, were there, experiencing the strangest, most monumental moment in the history of heaven and earth. The Spirit greatly moved my soul. At times I would close the book to ponder; at other times, tears ran down my face; at still other times, I would exclaim in surprise.

Before, I had been a student who always had a worried look. But as a seeker, due to the experiences of faith and of God's repeated miraculous responses to prayers, I began to live a new life of joy and peace.

It was during the Christmas season of 2002 that I was baptized into the Lord Jesus. Through the church, through the Bible, and through the Holy Spirit, God embraced me, a prodigal son, and I became his beloved.

Every time I think about these things, I marvel at God’s wisdom and power. If I had encountered Christianity a little earlier in my life, before I had experienced my “intellectual vomiting,” I certainly would have turned up my nose at the gospel and resolutely refused it all. If it had been a little later in life, my heart most likely would have been closed shut again, and I would have drifted along with the crowd, pursuing the world—and what would I care for truth and faith at that point? Yet, when a miniscule crack appeared in the armor of my life, God graciously and accurately pierced me through the crack, taking hold of my weak soul.

“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?’” (Romans 11:33–34, ESV). When the train car of my life entered the pivotal hub of university, God suddenly extended his hand and pulled the lever to change my tracks.

### **Unexpected Journey**

Seventeen years have passed in the blink of an eye. God guided me through graduating from university, establishing a family, and successively throwing myself into ministry organizations and serving in pastoral ministry. Ten years ago, the Lord called me to leave China and to come to the United States to study theology and receive training. Seven years ago, he led me back to be rooted in China and pastor churches.

This past summer, he again called my wife, children, and me to return to the States for further theological research and training.

This type of experience is quite rare among my classmates. In a way, I was like Bilbo Baggins, leaving the set path of life for an unexpected journey. The Bible, too, is full of unexpected journeys. Abraham and Joseph in the book of Genesis, Moses and the Israelites in the book of Exodus, Paul’s ocean voyages in Acts—from the human perspective, these are all unexpected journeys. And these unexpected journeys ultimately became legends. I believe that this is the hidden message in *The Hobbit*.

On this unexpected journey, arduous risks were unavoidable, and there has been no lack of attacks by man-eating goblins and orcs. But I have deeply experienced what the apostle publicly proclaimed: “[F]or I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard until that day what has been entrusted to me” (2 Timothy 1: 12b).

Dear friend, there is only one life. I deeply hope that you, too, can grab hold of the opportunity to know the marvelous God, to set out on the unexpected journey that he has set for you. Please give yourself the chance and let him bestow life and legend on you!

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### **More about the Author**

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Li came to Christ and was baptized in Beijing in 2002. He has served many years in ministry organizations and in fulltime ministry. He received an MA from Talbot School of Theology in California and is in the process of obtaining a Master of Theology from Logos Evangelical Seminary in El Monte, CA.

His favorite Bible verse is Galatians 2:20: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (ESV).

*This testimony is found on pages 12–19 of 《从未名湖到生命泉（一）：百名北大学子的信仰之旅》 (Peking University Testimonies I) available from ReFrame Ministries.*