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Chinese American Christianity: How the Ethnic-Specific Church Interacts with the Processes of Migration and Americanization

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CHINESE AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY:

HOW THE ETHNIC-SPECIFIC CHURCH INTERACTS WITH THE
PROCESSES OF MIGRATION AND AMERICANIZATION

By

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Thesis submitted to the Department of Religious Studies, Pitzer College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

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Also, a special thanks to my parents for raising this Chinese American Christian.

INTRODUCTION

32% of the Chinese in the metropolitan areas of Los Angeles and Chicago identified as being Christian.¹ This number should surprise you. After all, of the Chinese home countries in this study, only 7% (91,535,367) of those in China, 10% (700,000) of those in Hong Kong, and 6% (1,357,501) of those in Taiwan are Christian as well (Johnstone 2001, 160, 182, 186).² The figures reported by Johnstone are actually very generous as other studies on the Mainland Chinese, Cantonese, and Taiwanese have reported smaller percentages of Christians than the ones put forth by Johnstone.³ In any case, that the estimated percentage of Christians could jump from under 10% – as low as 4% – in Asia to as high as 20-32% in certain parts of the country is a significant change.

One possible explanation, that takes into account the drastic shift in percentages, could be if many of the immigrants were Christian to begin with. In this theory, although they would be drawn from a small pool of Christians to begin with, if a greater portion of immigrants were made up by Christian then the percentage of Chinese Christians in America would be greater. In contrast to this theory, some scholars are asserting that the majority of Chinese American Christians converted to Christianity following their

¹ John Dart, *LA Times*, July 5, 1997, articles.latimes.com/1997/jul/05/local/me-9921 (accessed April 1, 2009). Fenggang Yang, *Chinese Christians in America* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).

² According to Ameredia, in 2000 there was an estimated 2,422,970 Chinese living in America. Ameredia, *Ameredia: Chinese American Demographics, 2000*, <http://www.ameredia.com/resources/demographics/chinese.html> (accessed April 1, 2009). 32% of that number would give us approximately 775,351 Chinese American Christians.

³ David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2003). Edward Cody, "Poll Finds Surge of Religion Among Chinese," *Washington Post*, 2007. Carolyn Chen, *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008).

immigration to the United States. From his interviews with leaders of Chinese churches in the greater Washington area, Yang concludes that converts typically account for 33-66% of all church members.⁴ Kenneth Guest, in his study on immigrants from the Fuzhou region of China, was told, “I wasn’t a very serious Christian in China. But I’m very involved here.”⁵ Chen, too, reports how according to pastors and religious leaders, 50-70% of the members of Taiwanese churches are also those who converted in America.⁶ Although the actual numbers of converts in the United States is uncertain, the change in the percentages of Christians seems strong enough to assert that many Chinese immigrants are indeed becoming Christian after going to the United States. It is due to this significant change in percentages that leads Min to conclude, while “only a small proportion of Chinese immigrants are Christian when they enter the United States... many Chinese immigrants have become born-again Christians since immigration.”⁷

Yet in spite of Christianity’s influence in the lives of many Chinese Americans, relatively little research has been conducted on the affects of Christianity on the lives of the Chinese immigrants. While much effort has been devoted to studying Chinese immigration and to the Chinese and Asian American experiences, little has been published addressing the role of religion among these Chinese American immigrants.⁸

Part of the reason for why relatively little is known about religion and immigration is due

⁴ Fenggang Yang, *Chinese Christians in America* (University Park, PN: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).

⁵ Kenneth J. Guest, *God in Chinatown: Religion and Survival in New York's Evolving Immigrant Community* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

⁶ Carolyn Chen, *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁷ Pyong Gap Min, "Introduction," in *Religions in Asian America: Building Faith Communities*, 1-14 (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002).

⁸ Kenneth J. Guest, *God in Chinatown: Religion and Survival in New York's Evolving Immigrant Community* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

to a lack of access to information. Immigration researchers have generally used survey data that has been collected by government agencies; government agencies, however, are barred from asking questions about religion.⁹ Thus whatever numerical estimates scholars can present are derived from either the public records of religious organizations, sample surveys, or their own research.¹⁰ Another reason could be the result of a lack of Chinese American social scientists that are interested in religion. Much of the information on specific groups is usually gained through the work of insiders who have studied their own communities; thus a lack of Chinese American Christians interested in study Chinese American Christianity could explain the shortage of knowledge for these people.¹¹ This does not seem to be too farfetched a theory since none of the immigrants in this study would have had the time to devote towards observing their community; the immigrants are too busy with their jobs, raising their kids, and serving in the church to be able to conduct such studies.

This study, then, enters into this relatively un-researched field in the hopes of contributing to the work on Chinese American Christianity that such scholars as Carolyn Chen, Russell Jeung, and Fenggang Yang have begun to do. Generally, this study will examine the lives and experiences of the Chinese American Christian, although it will

⁹ Helen Rose Ebaugh and Janet Saltzman Chafetz, *Religion and the New Immigrants: Continuities and Adaptations in Immigrant Congregations* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2000). R. Stephen Warner, "Immigration and Religious Communities in the United States," in *Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigration*, 3-34 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

¹⁰ R. Stephen Warner, "Immigration and Religious Communities in the United States," in *Gatherings in Diaspora: Religious Communities and the New Immigration*, 3-34 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).

¹¹ Helen Rose Ebaugh and Janet Saltzman Chafetz, *Religion and the New Immigrants: Continuities and Adaptations in Immigrant Congregations* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2000).

have a particular focus on the ways in which the church has affected the lives of the Chinese immigrants. Chapter 1 will examine the journey of the Chinese immigrants to the United States. This chapter will establish certain issues that will then be addressed in the next two chapters. Chapter 2 will examine the reasons for why many of the Chinese immigrants converted to Christianity. To do so, this chapter will look at the ways in which the church was able to attract immigrants through providing for the needs of the immigrants that had arisen during the migration process. Chapter 3 will directly examine the ethnic-specific Chinese church and demonstrate how the Chinese church has preserved Chinese culture for many of the Chinese immigrants. The conclusion discusses what the role of the church has been in the lives of the immigrants and where the Chinese church seems to be headed as time moves forward.

METHODS

Part of being able to contributing to the existing body of knowledge on Chinese American Christians meant submitting new data. To gather this information, I interviewed members from the First Evangelical Church (FEC) of Arcadia, the church I have attended for the last eight years. The Pitzer College Institutional Review Board (IRB#2009-101) granted me permission to conduct this study on February 11, 2009. Between February 22, 2009 and March 8, 2009, I spent approximately 18 hours interviewing 16 participants. Each of the interview sessions lasted at least one full hour with a few of them coming closer to an hour and a half. In soliciting participants, I promised the interviews would not go longer than an hour, and I did my best to keep my word. In many interviews I had to skip certain questions as time began to run out. There

was a lot more that I wanted to learn about and that my participants could have talked about that we simply did not have enough time to address.¹² I obtained consent from all the interviewees to record our conversations. As a precautionary measure, I also took notes in the off chance that my recordings would become corrupted. About half of the interviews were conducted in a private room at the church, while the other half were held at the houses of the interviewees. I have protected the identities of all participants by giving them pseudonyms. In addition, only I have access to the recordings and any notes I took. All participants were given a consent form to sign prior to beginning the interviews.¹³

I personally recruited the 16 individuals with the intention of obtaining a good mixture of those from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.¹⁴ In the end, I was able to acquire a sample that included eight from Hong Kong, six from Taiwan, and two from China. Although eight were originally from Hong Kong, only six of these individuals belong to the Cantonese congregation; the other two belong to the Mandarin congregation. One of these also lived in Taiwan for a number of years before immigrating to the United States, so he could be considered to be from both places. All of the respondents from Hong Kong and Taiwan were individuals I had already known; most of them were actually the parents of my peers. At the outset of this project I had considered comparing the experiences of the first-generation with that of the second-generation, so I thought it would be highly interesting to be able to specifically compare the responses of children and their parents. Unfortunately, I decided not to include the findings from the

¹² For a copy of the Interview Guide, see Appendix A.

¹³ For a copy of the Consent Form, see Appendix B.

¹⁴ The significance of trying to get respondents from each of these three homelands will be addressed in the Backgrounds section.

interviews with those of the second-generation. Because all of these respondents had known me for years, both due to my relationship with their children as well as through their relationship with my parents, they were all very eager to help me with this project. The respondents from China were the only ones I had not known prior to this study. I was introduced to these individuals by other participants who learned I wanted to interview the Mainland Chinese as well.

As the result of working with a pool of Chinese immigrants, one issue that did serve to restrict my sample population was language. Although my parents taught me to speak Chinese when I was younger, so I can generally understand people when they speak it, I often have trouble trying to find the words to express my thoughts. Furthermore, I am almost completely illiterate when it comes to the Chinese variations of Christian terminology. (I once attempted to pray in Chinese – the only thing I knew how to say was the closing sentence that almost everyone who speaks in Chinese uses.) This language inability on my part meant that, at the very least, I needed individuals who could understand English because I only knew how to ask my questions in English. Once they could comprehend the question, if they wished to respond in Chinese they could. For those who did, indeed, respond using some Chinese, I took the liberty of translating their thoughts into English for them. Language was a non-issue with the Cantonese as all of them were fully capable of speaking in English. Language was not much of a problem for the Taiwanese either since I could understand Mandarin if they ever needed to utilize it. Where language became a barrier to my study, however, was in regards to the Mainland Chinese. The majority of the immigrants from China had come more recently than those from Hong Kong and Taiwan; as a result, for most of them, their English was

not at a level where I could have effectively communicated with them. This is the reason why I was limited to interviewing only two individuals from China – they were the only one I knew about who could speak English well enough for me to interact with.

Of the 16 respondents, which included six married couples, nine were women and seven were men.¹⁵ The oldest was born in 1951, while the youngest was born in 1970. The mean of the current ages is 52.5 – although if we exclude Esther, who at 39 is 8 years younger than the second-youngest respondent, the mean would increase one year to 53.6; the median is 54; and the mode is 56. Aside from the two girls who immigrated with their entire families, all of the respondents went to the United States to study. Excluding these two girls and Valerie, who immigrated when she was 32, six years later than the second oldest individual at the time of immigration, the average age at immigration was 22.¹⁶ All of the respondents received an undergraduate degree in the United States with a number of them going on to earn graduate degrees.¹⁷

¹⁵ For a table with the respondents' basic information, see Figure 1.

¹⁶ See Figure 1d.

¹⁷ For a further discussion on the role of education in the lives of these Chinese immigrants, refer to the section "The Role of Education."

Respondent	Home Country	Year of Birth	Age at Immigration
Amy	Hong Kong	1952	20
Anna	Hong Kong	1961	11
Anthony	Hong Kong*	1953	19
Benjamin	China	1962	22
Caleb	Hong Kong	1952	19
Christina	Hong Kong	1956	17
Esther	China	1970	22
Gideon	Taiwan	n/a	26
Grace	Taiwan	1953	26
Jonathan	Hong Kong	1960	19
Lisa	Taiwan	1955	23
Mary	Taiwan	1957	23
Sarah	Taiwan	1951	23
Simon	Hong Kong	1955	20
Valerie	Taiwan	1953	32
Victor	Hong Kong**	n/a	n/a

Figure 1a. Basic information of respondents.

*Anthony moved to Hong Kong at age 3 but was born in China.

**Victor grew up mainly in Hong Kong but was born in China and also moved to Taiwan after high school.

Respondent	Home Country	Year of Birth	Age at Immigration
Benjamin	China	1962	22
Esther	China	1970	22
Caleb	Hong Kong	1952	19
Amy	Hong Kong	1952	20
Anthony	Hong Kong*	1953	19
Simon	Hong Kong	1955	20
Christina	Hong Kong	1956	17
Jonathan	Hong Kong	1960	19
Anna	Hong Kong	1961	11
Victor	Hong Kong**	n/a	n/a
Sarah	Taiwan	1951	23
Grace	Taiwan	1953	26
Valerie	Taiwan	1953	32
Lisa	Taiwan	1955	23
Mary	Taiwan	1957	23
Gideon	Taiwan	n/a	26

Figure 1b. Sorted by Home Country.

Respondent	Home Country	Year of Birth	Age at Immigration
Sarah	Taiwan	1951	23
Caleb	Hong Kong	1952	19
Amy	Hong Kong	1952	20
Anthony	Hong Kong	1953	19
Grace	Taiwan	1953	26
Valerie	Taiwan	1953	32
Simon	Hong Kong	1955	20
Lisa	Taiwan	1955	23
Christina	Hong Kong	1956	17
Mary	Taiwan	1957	23
Jonathan	Hong Kong	1960	19
Anna	Hong Kong	1961	11
Benjamin	China	1962	22
Esther	China	1970	22
Gideon	Taiwan	n/a	26
Victor	Hong Kong	n/a	n/a

Figure 1c. Sorted by Year of Birth.

Respondent	Home Country	Year of Birth	Age at Immigration
Anna	Hong Kong	1961	11
Christina	Hong Kong	1956	17
Caleb	Hong Kong	1952	19
Anthony	Hong Kong	1953	19
Jonathan	Hong Kong	1960	19
Amy	Hong Kong	1952	20
Simon	Hong Kong	1955	20
Benjamin	China	1962	22
Esther	China	1970	22
Sarah	Taiwan	1951	23
Lisa	Taiwan	1955	23
Mary	Taiwan	1957	23
Grace	Taiwan	1953	26
Gideon	Taiwan	n/a	26
Valerie	Taiwan	1953	32
Victor	Hong Kong	n/a	n/a

Figure 1d. Sorted by Age at Immigration.

BACKGROUND

The First Evangelical Church was founded by Reverend George S.C. Chua in 1965.¹⁸ Reverend Chua started the church to be a place that would focus on minister to foreign students. Chua's original fellowship began with 22 adults and was held in his home. Two years later the fellowship purchased its first church building. Six years after that they would move to Glendale where FEC Glendale has remained ever since. From out of the Glendale church, four other FEC branches were planted – in Arcadia, Cerritos, Diamond Bar, and San Gabriel. FEC Arcadia was commissioned eight years ago in 2001. As a result of being a church plant by the Glendale branch, a major portion of the current members at FEC Arcadia came from Glendale. Thus, many of my respondents have been going to FEC churches for longer than the eight years that FEC Arcadia has existed. For only Esther was FEC Arcadia the first FEC church she had attended. The reason why Arcadia was chosen as the location for this FEC branch was due to the large numbers of Chinese immigrants who live in the city. The church members thought putting the church in such a Chinese-populated city would allow them to attract a lot of un-churched Chinese people.

FEC Arcadia was a good church to draw participants from because it has two Chinese-speaking congregations: the Cantonese congregation, which is comprised of those from Hong Kong, and the Mandarin congregation, which is comprised mainly of those from Taiwan but with some from Hong Kong and a growing population of individuals from China as well. The reason for why the Mandarin congregation is so diverse is due to the ability of most individuals from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan to

¹⁸ First Evangelical Church Association, *Life in the Body of Christ*, (Alhambra: First Evangelical Church Association).

speak the Mandarin dialect, which is the most commonly spoken form of Chinese. Access to these three groups of people is important because although they are all Chinese, their experiences from their respective homelands have been very unique. Therefore if one is to address a general Chinese Christianity, one will have to examine each of these three groups.¹⁹ A fourth Chinese group exists as well – these are the Chinese who have relocated to other Southeast Asian countries – however, these individuals will not be addressed in this study. Studying the experiences of these three groups together will be important since most scholars have not yet done that. Carolyn Chen, for example, focuses solely on the Taiwanese, while Kenneth Guest restricts his study to only those from one specific region in China. Fenggang Yang seems to present his research as if it were representative of all Chinese people, however he possesses a very narrow perception as well. Although Yang is the only one of the major Chinese religious scholars to study Cantonese congregations, he neglects to include their experiences from growing up in Hong Kong; he neglects the experiences of the Taiwanese in Taiwan as well. Instead, when he discusses the history of Christianity among the Chinese, he only addresses events occurring in China. Therefore, the opportunity to study, and then to present information on, all three people groups is very important for gaining a more complete understanding of Chinese Christians.

The Mainland Chinese, the Cantonese, and the Taiwanese

This study focuses on the Chinese immigrants who are originally from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Although all the people from these three places are considered

¹⁹ A more detailed look at these three groups will be provided in the next section.

Chinese, due to their various countries of origin, major differences – of language, identity, political ideology, and socioeconomic background – exist among them.²⁰ In any case, it can be argued that, regardless of which specific home country they are from, all these Chinese people share the same history when it comes to their relationship with Christianity. The reason for this is that almost all of my respondents' family histories were linked with China. Apart from the two respondents who did not indicate where their parents were originally from, the families of the remaining 14 were all originally from China. Of the 12 eligible respondents who grew up in Taiwan and Hong Kong, 10 reported that their parents were originally from China. Of the remaining two, one was abandoned as a child in China while the second was born in China but went to Hong Kong at 3.

The history of the respondents in this study all began in the same place – China. Although this point is certainly true for this study since all of the eligible respondents could draw their family histories to China, not all of the individuals from Hong Kong or Taiwan will be connected to China as well; depending on when their ancestors left China will determine to what extent the histories can be considered shared. The Communist takeover in China in 1949 was a pivotal moment in the history of the Chinese.²¹ This period in time is especially important for this study since this was right around when the majority of the respondents were born (the oldest of the respondents, Sarah, was born in

²⁰ Nazli Kibria, *Becoming Asian American: Second-Generation Chinese and Korean American Identities* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

²¹ Kenneth J. Guest, *God in Chinatown: Religion and Survival in New York's Evolving Immigrant Community* (New York: New York University Press, 2003). Fenggang Yang, *Chinese Christians in America* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).

1951). This was when the majority of the parents of my respondents left China for Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Life in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan was vastly different. Those who remained in China lived through a period where the government heavily regulated every aspect of their lives; they are only recently beginning to gain back more control over their own lives.²² Those who went to Hong Kong, a British colony at the time, also underwent a drastic change. Not only was there an ever-present British influence but there seems to have existed a greater Christian presence as well – e.g., some of the first schools in Hong Kong were opened by Christian missionary organizations.²³ Although there was not a dominating cultural force in Taiwan, such as China’s Communist influence or Hong Kong’s British influence, those who ended up going to Taiwan also underwent changes of their own. The Taiwanese are a mixture of those who migrated from Mainland China and the “ethnic Taiwanese” who were already living there. Chen writes, “Taiwan’s unique history over the last century has formed a Taiwanese population whose economic, political, and cultural experiences are distinct from other Chinese immigrants.”²⁴ Although they all are Chinese, and share a common history, those from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan definitely have their own specific histories as well. These differences among the three people groups will be further addressed in Chapter 3. It will not be until they enter into the migration process and journey towards the United States that they will

²² Kenneth J. Guest, *God in Chinatown: Religion and Survival in New York's Evolving Immigrant Community* (New York: New York University Press, 2003). Fenggang Yang, *Chinese Christians in America* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).

²³ John Mark Carroll, *A Concise History of Hong Kong* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

²⁴ Carolyn Chen, *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008).

begin to have shared experiences. It is to this voyage towards America that this study will now begin.

1. GOING TO AMERICA

THE CREATION OF NEEDS AS THE RESULT OF THE MIGRATION AND AMERICANIZATION PROCESSES

Going to the United States would lead to many of the Chinese immigrants becoming Christian. To explain this trend, this chapter will examine two experiences that were vital in leading many to join the Christian church. The first was the migration process. Although the people from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan originated from three different home countries, they all had a very similar experience as immigrants. In leaving their homes, needs would be created that would later be fulfilled by the church. It is, then, this ability of the church to satisfy many of the needs of the immigrants that attracted many of them to the church. The ways in which the church was able to satisfy the needs of the immigrants is the topic of Chapter 2. The second experience that ultimately led many of the immigrants to join the Christian church was in their encounters with American society. As foreigners, the Chinese encountered a great deal of discrimination that would prevent them from feeling fully accepted into American society. Partly as a result of this discrimination, but also due to other factors, the Chinese did not fully assimilate to American culture. Instead, they held on to many components of their Chinese culture, which led to the creation of a new Chinese American identity. To be Chinese American was to be neither fully Chinese nor fully American, rather, it was a distinct identity that gave space for both cultures to be asserted. How the church was a place where the Chinese could satisfy their ethnic needs continue practicing their Chinese culture, while, at the same time, being a place for these new Chinese Americans is the topic of Chapter 3. This chapter examines the experiences of the migration process

as well as the Americanization, or the learning to navigate American society, process that would ultimately lead many of the immigrants to join churches.

THE MIGRATION PROCESS

The term “Chinese American” can be viewed in two ways. It is first of all a term of designation: a Chinese American is someone who is ethnically both Chinese and American. This would include Chinese immigrants who now live in the United States as well as American-born descendants of the Chinese immigrants. The second conception of “Chinese American” is as a distinct category of identity. Chinese American in this sense signals a new group of people who are neither fully Chinese nor fully American, yet is a mixture of the two. How Chinese or how American the Chinese American might be is dependent upon the individual – some Chinese Americans could be more Chinese while others could be more American. Where this identification becomes useful, though, is in thinking about the shared experiences that all Chinese have as a result of living in America. Chinese American as a category of identity will be further addressed in the section, “The Americanization Process.”

In 2000, there were over 2.4 million Chinese Americans – as used in the designation sense – living in the United States today, which means that the number today would likely be closer to 3 million.¹ This is a sizeable amount considering there were only 236,084 Chinese in the United States according to a census in 1960.² From when

¹ Ameredia, *Ameredia: Chinese American Demographics*, 2000, <http://www.ameredia.com/resources/demographics/chinese.html> (accessed April 1, 2009).

² Iris Chang, *The Chinese in America: A Narrative History* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2003).

the Chinese first began going to the United States, in the 1800s, until 1960, there were less than 300,000 Chinese Americans. This means that in the last half century since 1960, the Chinese American population has increased by over 2 million. This dramatic growth essentially signifies that the Chinese presence in the United States is a fairly recent occurrence. Part of the reason for why there was such a small population of Chinese Americans up to the 1960s was due to American immigration laws.

Immigrating to the United States

When discussing Chinese immigration to the United States, one has to mention the Chinese-Exclusion Act of 1882. For 61 years, from 1882 to 1943, this blatant form of racial discrimination barred the Chinese from entering the United States.³ In 1943, the Magnuson Act was the first act to redress the inequalities as dictated by the Exclusion Act; even so, the Magnuson Act still maintained a cap of 105 as the annual quota of Chinese immigrants allowed into the United States.⁴ It would not be until 1965 that the Immigration and Nationality Act, also known as the Hart-Celler Act, would finally put an end to the racial discrimination that had been present in the immigration laws.⁵ Under this new act, all countries in the Eastern Hemisphere were granted an annual allocation of 20,000.⁶ The passage of this act had a dramatic effect on Chinese immigration, as the

³ Sucheng Chan, "Preface," in *Entry Denied: Exclusion and the Chinese Community in America, 1882-1943*, vii-xv (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991). Iris Chang, *The Chinese in America: A Narrative History* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2003).

⁴ Carolyn Chen, *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁵ Iris Chang, *The Chinese in America: A Narrative History* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2003).

⁶ Carolyn Chen, *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008).

population of Chinese immigrants in the United States would almost double in size every decade.⁷

None of the respondents in this study had immigrated to the United States prior to 1965. Thus, it was the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 that had opened America's doors to them. There are two factors that help explain why none of my respondents were pre-1965 immigrants. The first is that if the number of Chinese immigrants had, in fact, doubled every decade, the amount of post-1965 immigrants would have greatly outnumbered the pre-1965 immigrants. Thus, the percentage of pre-1965 immigrants in this study is probably close to being proportionate to the percentage of all pre-1965 immigrants in the United States. Though there were no pre-1965 immigrants in this study, it seems that had this sample been expanded, the presence of pre-1965 immigrants would have been more likely. The second factor is that the First Evangelical Church was founded in 1965 with the intention of targeting new immigrants; the new immigrants in 1965 would have all been post-1965 immigrants. These two factors combined make it seem reasonable to assume that the majority of the members at FEC would fall into this category of post-1965 immigrants.

Though they were all post-1965 immigrants, the individuals from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan immigrated during different life phases. The individuals from Hong Kong generally went to the United States at a younger age, with those from China next, and then with those from Taiwan coming when they were older. The time period in which these people groups came was different as well: the Cantonese came the earliest,

⁷ Iris Chang, *The Chinese in America: A Narrative History* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2003).

between the years of 1971-1979; the Taiwanese in the middle, between 1974-1985; and the mainland Chinese came last, between 1984-1992.

Aside from the two individuals who immigrated to the United States with their families, the Cantonese all came when they were between the ages of 19 and 20. This age range corresponds with the period following the completion of high school, which means that all of the individuals from Hong Kong came to the United States to attend college. The general reason for why the Cantonese all came after college was because there were not many opportunities to pursue higher education in Hong Kong. According to a number of the respondents, testing into the good colleges was so difficult that most people ended up getting jobs after finishing high school. Anna's mother, a single parent, had actually already been anticipating Anna getting a job soon. According to Anna, "you can get a full-time job at 13." Leaving Hong Kong for the United States gave these respondents access to more education that would give them more job opportunities. Simon, for example, commented that he would not have been able to become the successful doctor that he is today if he had remained in Hong Kong. Many others had similar perceptions as well, attributing their successful careers to the decision of moving to the United States. In contrast, the Taiwanese all came to the United States after they had finished college; this accounts for how the Cantonese, although the two people groups were born virtually in the same periods, came earlier than the Taiwanese.

The Taiwanese all came to the United States in their early- to mid- 20s, with the one exception, Valerie, who came when she was 32. Although the Cantonese and the Taiwanese were essentially from the same generation, the Taiwanese were actually a little bit older. If we exclude Mary, who was born in 1957, all the Taiwanese were born

between 1951 and 1955; the Cantonese, on the other hand, were all born between 1952 and 1961. The reason that the Taiwanese went to the United States later than the Cantonese was due to the school system in Taiwan. Whereas the Cantonese had all been forced, in a sense, to the United States for the purpose of attending college, the Taiwanese all went to colleges in Taiwan. As a result, many of the Taiwanese had actually begun to work prior to immigrating to the United States. When the Taiwanese finally went to the United States, some of them went straight to graduate schools while others had to start over and attend undergraduate schools first. Why some had to re-earn their undergraduate degrees is uncertain. It could be that they had changed fields or that their Taiwanese credentials did not translate in the United States. At least a couple of the respondents left Taiwan because they wanted to enter into new job fields. Grace, one such individual, explained why she decided to leave, “I didn’t like the life over there and I wanted a change.” Like the Cantonese and the Taiwanese, the Mainland Chinese also went to the United States to pursue education.

Those from China were the last of the three people groups to immigrate to the United States. This can be explained by the fact that they were younger than the Cantonese and Taiwanese: Benjamin, the older of the two Mainland Chinese respondents, was born in 1962, which meant he was one year younger than the youngest out of those from Hong Kong and Taiwan. Although both Benjamin and Esther went to the United States when they were 22, due to an eight-year age-gap between them, the contexts surrounding the times of their migrations were vastly different. Following the Cultural Revolution in China, all the schools had been shut down. At this time, Benjamin related, “The only thing that I could do according to the government was to go to the countryside,

to be a peasant.” But to be a peasant was something Benjamin, who was from a highly educated family, could not bring himself to do. It would be three years before the schools were reopened and he was finally allowed to enter into college. In the early years of when the schools were reopened, Benjamin estimates that out of all the eligible individuals between the ages of 17-35, only 3% went to college. Benjamin would later immigrate to the United States because China did not have any graduate schools at that time. Esther, on the other hand, grew up in a very different time period. Esther was born in 1970, so by the time she went to elementary the harsh situation of Benjamin’s time had already passed. About her early years, she says, “Even though other people talk about it as being such a hard time, to me it’s all just happy memories.” Esther did not experience the same obstacles to her education that Benjamin had endured only eight years before.

Though the respondents from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan all immigrated during different stages in their lives, they all left their home countries in order to pursue education. Thus, the pursuit of education can be considered a main factor in leading to their eventual conversions. Had it not been for education, many of the respondents in this study would have remained in their home countries where it is uncertain they would have ever accepted Christianity; it is actually extremely unlikely since, as established, less than 10% of the populations in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan are Christian. In the United States, on the other hand, these respondents would end up converting. Thus, if pursuing education led many Chinese to immigrate then it also contributed to many converting to Christianity. The act of immigrating was also integral to the conversions in that the migration process created certain needs that would be satisfied by Christianity. How these needs arose is the topic of the next section.

Turning to God

The physical act of leaving one's homeland can be viewed as the most important factor in contributing towards the immigrants becoming Christian. Not only does immigration turn the sojourners into foreigners and racial minorities, it is also greatly disruptive and forces immigrants to have to seek new order in their lives.⁸ In becoming separated from existing networks of community, many of the traditions that had been practiced in and sustained by that old environment were called into question.⁹ Therefore, all immigrant groups must recreate their personal and group identities.¹⁰ The search for such things as community, meaning, social services, and even ethnic opportunities, then, are all attempts at reestablishing order and identity.

The migration process leads to great fear and uncertainty for the sojourner. To help overcome this stress many immigrants turned to Christianity. "Because of the hardship of settling down anywhere in the world, most sojourners have a deep sense of homelessness, and consequently they seek permanence or eternity in the heavenly world promised by Christianity."¹¹ For Yang, the "absoluteness and certainty" offered by Christianity were things that immigrants had a great need for.¹² While in theory this seems to make a lot of sense, none of my respondents pointed towards the consistency of

⁸ Tony Carnes and Fenggang Yang, "Introduction," in *Asian American Religions: The Making and Remaking of Borders and Boundaries*, 1-37 (New York, NY: New York University, 2004). Carolyn Chen, *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁹ Carolyn Chen, *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Harold Coward, *The South Asian Religious Diaspora in Britain, Canada, and the United States* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000).

¹¹ Fenggang Yang, *Chinese Christians in America* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).

¹² Fenggang Yang, "Chinese Conversion to Evangelical Christianity: The Importance of Social and Cultural Contexts," *Sociology of Religion* 59, no. 3 (1998): 237-257.

Christianity as the reason why they converted. Instead of finding satisfaction in an unwavering religion, my respondents talked about other ways in which their worries were calmed.

Many of the immigrants turned to God when they needed help. Esther likens her migration experience to a plant being uprooted from the ground and placed somewhere else. She relates, “In China things were very taken care of for me.” So when she arrived all by herself in the United States she began to feel very alone. It was in the midst of this loneliness that she found God. For Esther, God stepped into that role that her family once fulfilled – God became her new provider: “I think being a Christian is very fortunate. If you have God, you can depend on him for everything.” Amy also talked a little about loneliness, even going as far as to say, “I think God gave me that loneliness to go look for him.” She loneliness she talked about was the result of having left her hometown and then living by herself during her second year in the United States. Like Esther, Simon noted how at home there was always a lot of help. He came to realize it was “when you’re alone, when you’re facing difficulty, that’s the time when you want to draw close to God.” For Simon, and surely for others as well, making phone calls home at \$12 per minute every time he felt homesick, lonely, or afraid was not a feasible possibility. Talking to God, on the other hand, was free. Sarah, who had gone to church prior to immigrating, also echoed this sentiment, saying it is “only when there’s difficulty and stress will I come to God.” When Sarah encountered difficulties in her schoolwork and with feelings of loneliness, the words from the scriptures she had studied in Taiwan became real to her. Before, she had her parents to take care of her so she never had to depend on God; now God was all that she had. Another reason that Sarah gives for why

she did not call home is that she did not want her parents to worry for her. She knew her parents could not practically do anything to help her so she did not wish to make them worry anymore than they were already.

Victor used to see himself as a pretty capable and resourceful individual. After all, as he states, “I grew up by myself.” Victor had been abandoned as a child in China. He, therefore, was unable to say when he was born or how old he was when he moved to the United States, although he estimates that he is currently 55 years old. Although he did not go into the details of how he survived, he portrayed it as he had taken care of himself. In talking about his journeys from Hong Kong to Taiwan to the United States, he relates, “In Hong Kong I didn’t have any money. Then I got \$500 and I went to Taiwan. With less than \$100 I came to the US.”¹³ It seemed Victor really did only have himself to depend on. So as the result of having lived a pretty successful life – he had gotten into the best college in Taiwan – he did not think immigrating to the United States would be a challenge he could not handle. He would soon learn he had been wrong: “When I came here, because of the cultural differences, I found out I was limited.” When he realized he could no longer depend on himself, Victor began to look elsewhere for help. In the end he believes God would step into his life and be his answer. With God, he believed he could overcome those issues he had previously been unable to conquer.

As seen in this section, many of the immigrants turned to God for help when life in the United States became difficult for them. For many of these individuals, the people they could rely on in the home countries were no longer people they could continue to

¹³ Although abandoned as a child in China, Victor would somehow move to Hong Kong where he spent most of his childhood until he moved to Taiwan for college and then to the United States.

depend on after they had moved to the United States. In addition to pushing many to turn to God, the migration process also created other needs in the lives of the immigrants. For those for whom God was not the immediate solution, the church was. As newcomers in an unfamiliar land, the desire for friendships and a community network would lead many to join the church. Furthermore, as newcomers there was a lot the immigrants did not know; the church would step into this situation and provide help for the immigrants in a multitude of ways. Lastly, essentially leaving their old lives behind meant that the immigrants now had to recreate their identities in the United States and to find new meaning for their lives. These are some of the needs that would arise as a result of migrating that the immigrants would have answered by the church. The ways in which the church provided for these issues will be addressed in the next chapter. As if the process of leaving their homes and trying to recreate new lives was not challenging enough, the Chinese immigrants also struggled in their interactions with American culture and society.

THE AMERICANIZATION PROCESS

“Immigration is a catastrophe for the Asian immigrant and the receptor society,” Carnes and Yang assert.¹⁴ As we began to see in the section on “The Migration Process,” the lives of the immigrants would forever be changed when they decided to leave their home countries to journey to the United States. This section will address the second part of Carnes and Yang’s observation – the interactions between the immigrants and the new societies they have now joined. Carnes and Yang further write, “migrants are intruders in a relatively settled U.S. society and its neighborhoods.”¹⁵ Through attempting to engage with their new neighborhoods, the immigrants would eventually realize their difference. Their difference was first signaled in the struggles they personally faced and then through their encounters with others – because of discrimination – as well. Due to their comfortability with their own culture as well as the discrimination they faced, the Chinese did not assimilate to American culture like many of the previous immigrants had. Rather, through a process of selective assimilation, a new Chinese American identity would be birthed.

Becoming American

If we take “Americanization” to mean learning how to survive in America, as opposed to sacrificing all of one’s homeland cultural practices in favor of American ones, then we can see how the Chinese immigrants did, in fact, become “Americanized.” It is

¹⁴ Tony Carnes and Fenggang Yang, "Introduction," in *Asian American Religions: The Making and Remaking of Borders and Boundaries*, 1-37 (New York, NY: New York University, 2004).

¹⁵ Tony Carnes and Fenggang Yang, "Introduction," in *Asian American Religions: The Making and Remaking of Borders and Boundaries*, 1-37 (New York, NY: New York University, 2004).

not possible for one culture to completely overpower and suppress the other; rather, it seems more likely for the two to blend and to form a new identity. Vijay Prashad, a graduate from Pomona College actually, provides us with a good way for approaching this issue; he gives this quote: “my being here is already assimilation, but I refuse to conform to some of your mores.”¹⁶ What the man in this quote is saying is that by being in the United States, for example, he is already on a process of assimilation; after all, it would be impossible for anyone living in the United States to be completely immune to American culture. Furthermore, he suggests that the process of assimilating does not have to mean taking on the whole of American culture. In other words, the man feels he has the liberty to pick and choose which cultural traditions to adopt and which to reject. It is in this framework that I come to define the terms “Chinese American” and “Asian American.” These terms designate two brand new identities that would not exist had the two (or more) culture come into contact with one another.

Assimilation, to American culture, often began prior to immigration for the Chinese. Yang writes that most Chinese immigrants came from urban areas where, in addition to learning English in schools, they had been exposed to American culture (i.e. through the mass media, Hollywood movies, contact with foreigners living in Asia, etc.).¹⁷ Aspects of American culture – such as using knives and forks as opposed to chopsticks, drinking coffee and cola instead of tea, eating hamburgers, playing

¹⁶ Vijay Prashad, *Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).

¹⁷ Fenggang Yang, *Chinese Christians in America* (University Park, PN: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).

basketball, and even wearing jeans or suits and ties – permeated Chinese society.¹⁸ Furthermore, Yang believes that certain American values – such as individual freedom, equal opportunity, and democracy – had served as an inspiration to the pursuit of modernization among the Chinese.¹⁹ Thus in many ways, the Chinese were already becoming Americanized even before ever reaching America.

In order to survive in the United States, then, means to become American. Again, this does not mean fully becoming just like the other Americans, but instead it means picking up the behaviors that will allow one to succeed in the United States. Learning how to survive in the United States was no easy task. The two greatest difficulties they faced when they first arrived in the United States were in regards to language and culture. In fact 14 of the 15 respondents cited language as one of the major early hardships; Esther did not mention language as a major difficulty, although she did answer most of the questions in Chinese so it seems that she is definitely more comfortable speaking in Chinese. The Chinese's struggle with English was not that they did not know it. Benjamin was the only one to say that he did not know English when he came, stating, "I cannot even talk." Aside from Benjamin, many of the Chinese immigrants had begun learning English in schools before coming to the United States.²⁰ Their struggle was in not being able to speak or understand English as well as those who had been living in America for a while. "In Hong Kong we start early in our English training, but my listening and vocabulary skills were poor" (Anthon). Anthony further recanted, "During

¹⁸ Fenggang Yang, *Chinese Christians in America* (University Park, PN: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).

¹⁹ Fenggang Yang, *Chinese Christians in America* (University Park, PN: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).

²⁰ Fenggang Yang, *Chinese Christians in America* (University Park, PN: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).

lectures [after coming to the United States], I could probably understand about 50%. And then I'd just have to read the textbook." Similar to Anthony, Jonathan remembers, "reading was okay but as far as communicating, that was hard for me." Christina, too, recalled, "I was afraid to talk." Mary remembers how her poor English-speaking ability had even hindered her in the workplace: although she had her MBA, because of the difficulty she faced in expressing herself in English, she still had to start at an entry-level position. She states, "It was never an ability issue." For Anna, struggling to speak the English language was "the first thing that made me feel like I didn't belong." Being unable to communicate in English, the language of Americans, would surely make anyone feel like they did not belong in the United States.

The second major difficulty was in regards to culture. Here, too, the immigrants demonstrated their desire and willingness to become Americanized. Not only so, but many of them believed strongly in adopting certain American customs. Victor declared, "You come to America, you have a lot of things to learn... If you come to this country you have to get used to it." Throughout the years, many of the Chinese immigrants have diligently worked at becoming more American. Christina demonstrates this by asserting, "I would vote. I try to fulfill my American citizen's responsibility." In another example, both to practice his English as well as to learn about American popular culture, Jonathan spent his first six months to one year in the United States watching Johnny Carson. Thinking back on that period when he used to watch the show he states, "I had no idea what the heck he was talking about." Although Jonathan was probably confused for the majority of time that he spent watching Johnny Carson, he was motivated to continue doing so because it was a way for him to learn how to be American. He said, "To me, I

see this as home, so I fully adapted to American culture.” Although Jonathan says he “fully adapted to American culture,” this does not mean he is no longer Chinese, nor does it mean that he fully became American. Rather, what he means is that he fully opened himself to experience American culture.

There was never a question about the immigrants being unwilling to become Americanized. As demonstrated here, all of them learned the language and many went to great lengths to learn about American culture – see Jonathan’s early devotion to the Johnny Carson show. Although they tried to pick up aspects of American culture, they were constantly reminded of their difference. All of them struggled with and continue to struggle with the English language and many still do not fully understand American culture. These are examples of how the difficulties they personally faced could demonstrate their difference. While their personal struggles were one indicator of difference, so was the discrimination they endured from others.

Discrimination

The most obvious way by which immigrants are reminded of their difference is in being told so by others. Although blatant acts of racism have become rare, racism does still exist.²¹ Many scholars have pointed to a general perception of all Asian Americans, irrespective of generational status, as perpetual foreigners who are unassimilable as a form of discrimination that Asians have not been able to escape.²² The reason I have

²¹ Fenggang Yang, *Chinese Christians in America* (University Park, PN: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).

²² Pyong Gap Min and Rose Kim, "Formation of Ethnic and Racial Identities: Narratives by Asian American Professionals," in *The Second Generation: Ethnic Identity among Asian Americans*, 153-181 (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2002). Mia Tuan, "Second-

switched from “Chinese American” to “Asian American” in this section is because all Asian Americans have had a similar experience in the United States. The inability of Americans to differentiate between the various Asian American groups has led to a common treatment of the Asian Americans. A man named Tony Lam chooses to assert his American identity first, referring to himself as “American Asian.” Although part of why he chooses to identify himself like this is because he personally identifies more with being American than being Asian, he also says he must call himself an “American Asian” because white Americans would not allow him to identify solely as an American.²³ Jeung claims that if there were any reason for why Asian Americans might seem unassimilable, it would be the fault of Americans: after all, how could they be loyal to the United States when legislation, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, were such obvious methods of discrimination?²⁴

Some scholars believe that, in the same way that ethnicity for white immigrants has become something they can choose to assert, “something that is enjoyed and will not cause problems,” Asian immigrants will also become “white” in time.²⁵ Supporters of such a theory point out that the assimilation of European Americans took place over

Generation Asian American Identity: Clues from the Asian Ethnic Experience," in *The Second Generation: Ethnic Identity among Asian Americans*, 209-237 (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2002). Nazli Kibria, *Becoming Asian American: Second-Generation Chinese and Korean American Identities* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

²³ Mia Tuan, "Second-Generation Asian American Identity: Clues from the Asian Ethnic Experience," in *The Second Generation: Ethnic Identity among Asian Americans*, 209-237 (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2002).

²⁴ Russell Jeung, *Faithful Generations: Race and New Asian American Churches* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

²⁵ Russell Jeung, *Faithful Generations: Race and New Asian American Churches* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

several generations.²⁶ That by the third generation, at the latest, the ethnic identities of the white immigrants had become more symbolic and optional – a symbolic and optional ethnicity refers to one that can be utilized as the immigrants wish.²⁷ . Although these white immigrants, who once upon a time had been excluded from the mainstream, now “have become a part of what is quintessentially American,” for such a shift to happen for the Asian immigrant seems a lot less possible.²⁸ A major reason for why a similar acceptance of the Asian immigrant does not seem possible is due to physical appearance: “While immigrants from South, Central, and Eastern Europe were perhaps initially seen as physically different from the dominant group, their white skin gave them the potential eventually to become invisible, to meld into the mainstream.”²⁹ According to Min and Kim, “Even U.S.-born Asian American students who are fluent in English cannot avoid rejection, prejudice, and racial violence from white peers because of their color.”³⁰ Because they do not fit the image of what a real American looks like, Asian Americans will not have the same experience that white immigrants have had and will continue to have.

²⁶ Nazli Kibria, *Becoming Asian American: Second-Generation Chinese and Korean American Identities* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

²⁷ Russell Jeung, *Faithful Generations: Race and New Asian American Churches* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005). Mia Tuan, "Second-Generation Asian American Identity: Clues from the Asian Ethnic Experience," in *The Second Generation: Ethnic Identity among Asian Americans*, 209-237 (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2002).

²⁸ Nazli Kibria, *Becoming Asian American: Second-Generation Chinese and Korean American Identities* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

²⁹ Nazli Kibria, *Becoming Asian American: Second-Generation Chinese and Korean American Identities* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

³⁰ Pyong Gap Min and Rose Kim, "Formation of Ethnic and Racial Identities: Narratives by Asian American Professionals," in *The Second Generation: Ethnic Identity among Asian Americans*, 153-181 (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2002).

The majority of the respondents could recall moments of discrimination. Victor relates, "It's not easy [to be Chinese in America]." Victor tells a story of discrimination: "When I lined up to fix my car, some guy tried to cut me and when I told him I was here first, he yelled at me, 'go back to your own country!'" Gideon also remembers hearing strangers yell at him when he was walking on the street, "Go back to where you belong." Grace says, "When you don't get along with people, they'll curse you for being Chinese." She further remarks, "If you go somewhere where there are a lot of Americans you will probably experience discrimination... I try to avoid those situations." What a sad situation. As a result of the discrimination she has received, Grace no longer has the freedom to go wherever she chooses. The amount of discrimination one faces is also dependent on the community one is in. That is, the experience living in a heavily Chinese populated city would be very different than in a place where there are almost no Chinese. "Depending on where you live, there is a difference there: When you're in a small town, and you are a foreigner, it is more difficult" (Jonathan). For example, Simon mentions, "It was hard to fit in, in the South." One of the reasons Gideon points out for why he has not experienced discrimination in the last 7-8 years could be because "Where we live there's a lot of Chinese." Likewise, Anthony does not see discrimination as being obvious in the Los Angeles area because there are so many Orientals that live there.

While Jonathan cannot recall having directly experienced discrimination, he believes he has been the victim of indirect discrimination. The example he cites is how he believes there is definitely a glass ceiling in the workplace. The "glass ceiling" refers to how, despite their large numbers in professional occupations, Asian Americans are

relatively absent from top executive positions.³¹ Indeed, the workplace does seem like an arena where much discrimination still exists. Studies have demonstrated that even with comparable educational levels, Asian immigrants are disadvantaged when it comes to income and job status in comparison to U.S.-born white American counterparts.³² Min and Kim report that while the earnings of second-generation Asian Americans are actually fairly close to that of white Americans, “they are underrepresented in managerial positions and encounter “the glass ceiling” problem when they try to move up to high-ranking, well-paid positions.”³³ Although the discrimination of Asian Americans in the workforce has been well document, Jonathan was the only one in this study to mention having experienced the glass ceiling. In fact, Christina has actually been able to break through this so-called glass ceiling. Christina had been promoted to a nursing supervisor position, where she became the first Chinese individual ever to hold that position in the hospital. It was probably the result of such experiences that led Christina to say, “I don’t really feel any discrimination; actually people were always trying to help me.”

Discrimination could also arise as the result of issues in the homelands of the immigrants. In other words, the international context can often inform the ways in which American society will treat foreigners. Tuan writes, “their status in this society is

³¹ Fenggang Yang, *Chinese Christians in America* (University Park, PN: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999). Nazli Kibria, *Becoming Asian American: Second-Generation Chinese and Korean American Identities* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

³² Pyong Gap Min and Rose Kim, "Formation of Ethnic and Racial Identities: Narratives by Asian American Professionals," in *The Second Generation: Ethnic Identity among Asian Americans*, 153-181 (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2002). Nazli Kibria, *Becoming Asian American: Second-Generation Chinese and Korean American Identities* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

³³ Pyong Gap Min and Rose Kim, "Formation of Ethnic and Racial Identities: Narratives by Asian American Professionals," in *The Second Generation: Ethnic Identity among Asian Americans*, 153-181 (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2002).

vulnerable to changing social, political, and economic conditions beyond their personal control.”³⁴ Perhaps the cruelest example of this theory was what happened to the Japanese Americans during World War II. Even though many had lived in America for generations and were no longer really tied to Japan, they were all still treated as if they were new immigrants who loved Japan more than the United States. During that time, the Chinese even took to wearing “I am Chinese” buttons to protect themselves from being mistaken as Japanese and sent to internment camps as well.³⁵ That the Chinese could be mistaken for the Japanese demonstrates the inability of many Americans to differentiate between Asian Americans. It is this inability to distinguish the Asian groups that leads American society to categorize them all as Asian Americans. It is also for this very reason that many Asian Americans share a common experience in American society.

This section has been harsh on American society, but it is important to remember that Americans are not the only people who are guilty of discrimination. Gideon feels that discrimination is simply unavoidable: “I think you can’t escape it. People are just like this.” He also goes on to point out, “If these Americans went to Taiwan they would feel the same thing.” Indeed, discrimination does seem to be inescapable. Likewise, its affect on the lives of the Chinese has also been undeniable. The question one must ask is, how would the situation have been different had the Chinese immigrants been fully embraced when they had first tried to come to the United States? Alas, we may never

³⁴ Mia Tuan, "Second-Generation Asian American Identity: Clues from the Asian Ethnic Experience," in *The Second Generation: Ethnic Identity among Asian Americans*, 209-237 (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2002).

³⁵ Russell Jeung, *Faithful Generations: Race and New Asian American Churches* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

know the answer to this question. Instead of assimilating fully, the Chinese have practiced a method of selective assimilation.

Selective Assimilation

On the topic of assimilation, Ebaugh and Chafetz write, “assimilation is not necessarily a one-way, relatively uniform process, but rather that adaptation can take varied forms.”³⁶ Indeed, for the Chinese, assimilation means the birthing of a new culture: “Instead of choosing either American or ethnic identities, immigrants may construct adhesive identities that integrate both together.”³⁷ This process of both assimilating to American culture while at the same time preserving Chinese culture is known as “selective assimilation,” or “segmental assimilation” as Ebaugh and Chafetz refer to it.³⁸ In selective assimilation, the Chinese will pick and choose which aspects of American and Chinese culture to adopt and which to reject: “they feel free to choose those aspects of Chinese... culture that fit into their lifestyle and discard what does not.”³⁹

Carnes and Yang present one selective assimilation theory that might help us when we begin to consider the ethnic functions of the church (Chapter 3), claiming that

³⁶ Helen Rose Ebaugh and Janet Saltzman Chafetz, *Religion and the New Immigrants: Continuities and Adaptations in Immigrant Congregations* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2000).

³⁷ Fenggang Yang, *Chinese Christians in America* (University Park, PN: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).

³⁸ Fenggang Yang, "ABC and XYZ: Religious, Ethnic and Racial Identities of the New Second Generation Chinese in Christian Churches," *Amerasia Journal* 25, no. 1 (1999): 89-114. Helen Rose Ebaugh and Janet Saltzman Chafetz, *Religion and the New Immigrants: Continuities and Adaptations in Immigrant Congregations* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2000).

³⁹ Russell Jeung, *Faithful Generations: Race and New Asian American Churches* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

Chinese immigrants would “adjust to American ways of thinking, feeling, and acting in the public sphere while bounding off the religious sphere.”⁴⁰ Although they believed this was a possibility for the first-generation, they assert that it “gets upset by the arrival of an Americanized second generation.”⁴¹ They are correct in their perception of the public sphere, which includes the workplace and school, as a place where cultural assimilation occurs: “through working or studying among non-Chinese and through daily encounters and interactions with non-Chinese, immigrants become aware of American ways and social norms. To survive and succeed, they adjust and adapt to American ways of seeing and doing things.”⁴² Certainly there must have been many ways in which the Chinese did adopt American ways of doing things, but to claim that the Chinese completely suppressed their cultural traditions in the public sphere seems a little too farfetched.

Although complete assimilation to American culture was one option that the Chinese immigrants could have chosen, it was not necessary. As Min and Kim concluded in their study, “acculturation, in the sense of replacing their ethnic culture with American culture, is not a precondition for social assimilation.”⁴³ Their conclusion was based on the findings that, the three female respondents who had the strongest bicultural experiences were married to white men. This discovery was extremely significant as it

⁴⁰ Tony Carnes and Fenggang Yang, "Introduction," in *Asian American Religions: The Making and Remaking of Borders and Boundaries*, 1-37 (New York, NY: New York University, 2004).

⁴¹ Tony Carnes and Fenggang Yang, "Introduction," in *Asian American Religions: The Making and Remaking of Borders and Boundaries*, 1-37 (New York, NY: New York University, 2004).

⁴² Fenggang Yang, *Chinese Christians in America* (University Park, PN: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).

⁴³ Pyong Gap Min and Rose Kim, "Formation of Ethnic and Racial Identities: Narratives by Asian American Professionals," in *The Second Generation: Ethnic Identity among Asian Americans*, 153-181 (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2002).

contradicted the sentiment of viewing “minority members’ intermarriage with white partners as a sign of their one-sided assimilation into a white culture and white society.”⁴⁴ This conclusion supports the idea that one does not have to fully adhere to American culture in order to *be* “American.”

Deciding which cultural traditions to follow was simple for Grace: “we should adopt whatever is good.” Given this ideology, Grace says, “Some American values are better so I try to adopt them.” She goes on to assert, “It is not my intention to preserve Chinese culture.” Jonathan believes, “Both old and new have their merit. It’s really both have to respect each other.” When he talks about old and new, Jonathan is referring specifically to the ideological differences between himself – which could also be taken to represent the Chinese way of thinking – and his children – or the Americanized way of thinking. He concludes, “it’s about how we can bring the two together and to make something better.” Through the ways in which the Chinese immigrants define themselves one can see how American and Chinese culture has been merged together.

Of the 11 individuals who responded to the question of how they see themselves, six people identified as “Chinese American,” four as more Chinese than American, and one as “Chinese.” Gideon, the lone person to call himself Chinese, does not consider himself to be Chinese American because he does not view this as his home. He said, “I feel that I don’t belong here” and “I still have thoughts about going back to Taiwan after I retire.” He attributes these sentiments to the fact that he was not born or raised here and that when he came he was already 26. He states, “So even though I’ve been here for a

⁴⁴ Pyong Gap Min and Rose Kim, "Formation of Ethnic and Racial Identities: Narratives by Asian American Professionals," in *The Second Generation: Ethnic Identity among Asian Americans*, 153-181 (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2002).

long time, it still doesn't feel like home... Maybe if I had come earlier it would be different." Although he points to age as an explanation, it is hard to determine whether that really was the reason or not. Along with Gideon, Valerie, who came at 32, and Grace, who came at 26, were the oldest when they migrated yet both Valerie and Grace considered themselves to be at least somewhat American. Age further does not seem to have a strong correlation with identity when we consider the case of Anna. Anna came to the United States at the young age of 11, which was six years younger than anyone else. One would think that, out of all the respondents, Anna would have been the most American. Yet she sees herself as more Chinese than American, commenting, "I'm not that Americanized." Like Gideon, Anna is also thinking about "going back one day to serve [her] country." Grace, Valerie, and Anna all pointed to feeling more comfortable with Chinese culture as the reason for why they view themselves as being more Chinese than American.

Aside from Esther, who was from China, the other five individuals who identified themselves as Chinese American were all from Hong Kong. This seems to suggest the possibility that those from Hong Kong were somehow better able to integrate with American culture. Furthermore, because those from Hong Kong came at younger ages, it could also be theorized that their being younger when they came also had some sort of impact on how they now view themselves. However, as mentioned, Anna, almost single-handedly destroys these theories, since she was the youngest by far when she came yet she still considers herself to be more Chinese than American and even wants to go back to Asia at some point. It is possible that Anna is an exception. In any case, the data does not seem strong enough to claim the existence of any sort of identity pattern here.

Among those who called themselves Chinese American, most identified as being American because of the things they enjoyed about American society, while they simultaneously identified as being Chinese because they cannot forget about their roots. For example, Anthony relates, “America, now, is my country. There are a lot of values in the United States that I like, in terms of the political system, the values of the society. But my root is Chinese. I have a lot of links with China.” Simon mentions the greater emphasis for freedom and justice, and not being as submissive, as aspects of American culture that he values, whereas his value system and the way he handles things are still based on his upbringing in a Chinese environment – he states, “as first generation, we still retain a lot of culture.” Victor declares, “My life is right here now. But I’m Chinese. I cannot forget my culture.” It is this struggle of trying to be the bridge between two separated points that demonstrates the uniqueness of the Chinese American identity. Esther acutely observes, “As first generation, I struggle with the two different cultures. I’m not fully Chinese but I’m not American.” As such, being Chinese American does indeed seem to suggest an entirely new identity, one that is not fully Chinese or fully American.

The Transnational Relationship

One major factor that has allowed the Chinese to continue being Chinese is the transnational relationship. “Due to continuous Chinese immigration and increasing transnational ties with Chinese societies... further acculturation or greater

Americanization is hard to achieve at this time, and is unlikely in the near future.”⁴⁵ Technological advances in communication, air transportation, and the media are modes by which the Chinese have been able to maintain transnational networks with their home countries.⁴⁶ Furthermore, viewing the home countries as potential mission fields has also led many churches to support sending their members overseas on short-term missions.⁴⁷ To further illustrate this focus of the Chinese churches on overseas missions, Yang writes, the church has had relatively little interest in reaching out to the members—the non-Chinese at least—in their immediate communities.⁴⁸ As a result of such trips, even those from the second-generation have been able to experience life in those Chinese societies.⁴⁹

In today’s high-tech world it is much easier to stay in touch with cultures halfway across the world. When Simon first came to the United States he remembers phone calls costing \$12 per minute. Back then, to travel between the Asian countries and the United States was a huge ordeal. If the exorbitant phone call rate is any indication, it was probably also extremely expensive to fly in those days. Therefore, many of the Chinese

⁴⁵ Fenggang Yang, "ABC and XYZ: Religious, Ethnic and Racial Identities of the New Second Generation Chinese in Christian Churches," *Amerasia Journal* 25, no. 1 (1999): 89-114.

⁴⁶ Pyong Gap Min and Rose Kim, "Formation of Ethnic and Racial Identities: Narratives by Asian American Professionals," in *The Second Generation: Ethnic Identity among Asian Americans*, 153-181 (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2002). Nazli Kibria, *Becoming Asian American: Second-Generation Chinese and Korean American Identities* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

⁴⁷ Fenggang Yang, *Chinese Christians in America* (University Park, PN: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).

⁴⁸ Fenggang Yang, *Chinese Christians in America* (University Park, PN: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).

⁴⁹ Fenggang Yang, "ABC and XYZ: Religious, Ethnic and Racial Identities of the New Second Generation Chinese in Christian Churches," *Amerasia Journal* 25, no. 1 (1999): 89-114.

probably came to the United States under the impression that they might never return to their homelands again. Gideon was the only one to mention having left Taiwan thinking he would soon return, recanting, “I wasn’t planning to stay here. I thought I was going back to Taiwan after I graduated.” As we saw, it was also probably due to this mindset that Gideon was the only respondent to identify himself solely as “Chinese.”

To fly back to Asia is no longer as difficult as it once was. Many of the respondents have periodically gone back and many still have family in those places. Four of the respondents – Anna, Amy, Christina, and Gideon – even discussed their hopes of returning to Asia at some point. While two simply stated their desires to return were based on the fact that they saw Asia as their home, the other two had additional reasons as well. When Anna talked about serving her country, she meant that in a spiritual sense. The reason Anna wants to go back is because she believes that is what God wants her to do. The first time she visited China, 20-something years ago, she says she heard a voice from God telling her, “Somebody you’re going to be back for me.” Ever since then she has had this desire to return. Christina also desires to return to Asia to do God’s work, stating, “My long-term goal is actually to go to China to become a long-term missionary there.” What is interesting about both Anna and Christina’s desires is that even though they both grew up in Hong Kong they both wish to go to China. If they wanted to go back to Hong Kong to serve the Chinese there, that would not have been much of a shock. However, their wanting to go to China makes it seem like this is indeed what they believe God wants them to do. What other explanation could there be for why two Cantonese girls, who are members of the Cantonese congregation, would desire to spend the rest of their lives in China?

In any case, the recently emerging transnational relationship between the Asian countries and the United States is something the earliest immigrants could not have imagined that they could have done. Becoming American in today's world seems to be even less important than it might once have been.

CONCLUSION

Immigrating to the United States changed the lives of the Chinese in ways they could not have anticipated when they first set off for America. As a result of the migration process, many of the immigrants fell into a situation where they began to become open to God. The migration process was especially important to leading many of the Chinese to become Christian as it created certain needs that could then be met by the church. How the Chinese became Christian is the topic of the next chapter. In addition to the migration process, the Americanization process also has religious implications. Through the Chinese immigrants' encounters with American culture, their difference was established. Instead of fully assimilating to American culture then, the immigrants entered into a process of selective assimilation by which an entirely new identity, that of Chinese American, was created. This new identity will turn out to be very important in leading many of the Chinese to join Chinese churches, the topic of Chapter 3.

2. BECOMING CHRISTIAN

HOW THE CHURCH MEETS THE NEEDS THAT ARISE AS A RESULT OF THE MIGRATION PROCESS

Why are so many of the Chinese converting to Christianity after immigrating to the United States? Scholars of immigration, those specifically studying the journey of the Chinese as well as those looking at other migrant groups, have pinpointed many reasons for why newcomers to the United States will first begin going to church and then later convert to Christianity. This distinction between going to a Christian church and actually believing in the teachings of the Christian religion is very important. To assume that all churchgoers are Christian would be inaccurate. Children, for example, might go to church only because their parents take them; in regards to children, it could also be argued that many of them who believe they are Christians are too young to really understand what they are claiming they believe in. Newcomers and others who are still deciding about whether Christianity is the right belief system for them are another group of people who might attend a church but cannot be considered to be Christians. Mere attendance at a church does not make one a Christian; rather there must exist a spiritual component as well. Although it is this discussion on the spiritual element of churchgoing that essentially distinguishes Christianity from what could be any other non-religious, social institution, examining not-necessarily-religious factors is just as vital to this study as the more religious ones. This is because most immigrants are drawn to the church for non-religious reasons and it is often not until later, after they have been exposed to the

religious message, that they become religious seekers.¹ In other words, non-religious factors can be viewed as being more important than religious ones because they are what initially attract the Chinese immigrants. Corresponding to the percentage of immigrants who converted after going to the United States, most Chinese Christians did not go looking for churches because they were religious seekers; rather, it was after they had been drawn to the church for other reasons that they, then, accepted the Christian religion. In this way, the migration process and the needs that were created as a result of it are a key component of why many immigrants convert to Christianity.

Many scholars have addressed the reasons for why immigrants turn to religious communities. David Yoo, a professor at Claremont McKenna College, for example, in his book on Japanese Americans, highlights three things that religious institutions provide: places of meaning and identity making, community networks, and social services.² These three concepts are all factors that many scholars will point to as being the reasons for why individuals – not just immigrants – become religious. The social services that a church provides includes assistance with practical issues such as finding jobs, housing, schooling, and immigration papers.³ In addition to these reasons for why immigrants would attend a church, the church might also be a place where the Chinese Christians can gather to practice their religion. Spiritual reasons thus comprise a fourth category in this exploration. Included in this category is anything that would lead the

¹ Carolyn Chen, *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008).

² David Yoo, *Growing Up Nisei: race, generation, and culture among Japanese Americans of California, 1924-49* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

³ Helen Rose Ebaugh and Janet Saltzman Chafetz, *Religion and the New Immigrants: Continuities and Adaptations in Immigrant Congregations* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2000).

respondent to believe in the existence of the Christian God. As experiences of God, these are not dependent upon the migration process, although the migration experiences could certainly push the immigrant to a place where he/she would be ready to receive a spiritual experience.

PLACES OF MEANING AND IDENTITY MAKING

As a result of migration, the individual's life has been greatly disrupted. Having left the home country and entered into an unfamiliar place, the immigrant is now faced with questions about belonging, identity, self, and community.⁴ Although the search for identity and meaning in the United States was related to the migration process, it was a weak connection. The struggle for identity and meaning is not particular to immigrants but is something all individuals face. Thus, while reasons of identity and meaning can point individuals toward becoming Christian, they do not have to be directly related to the immigrant experience.

Both Grace and Mary began to wonder about the meaning of life, not because of the migration process, but because they were both dissatisfied with their current lives. Grace had grown unhappy with her life in Taiwan and decided to leave it behind: "I didn't like the life over there and I wanted a change." One day, someone on a television special asked, "If you feel like your life doesn't have purpose, are you willing to change?" Grace wanted a change and was about to make a huge change by going to the United States. So when the person went on to ask, "Do you want Jesus to guide you?" Grace said yes. She reflects that "until that point I felt like life was kind of meaningless."

⁴ Carolyn Chen, *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008).

In Christianity, Grace took comfort in knowing that not only could she begin to have purpose in life, but that there was also someone there that would guide her along that path as well. Although Grace's search for meaning really began when she recognized her dissatisfaction with her current life, thinking about leaving behind everything she had ever known to journey to a foreign country also became a stress for her. As such, Grace was affected, even if it was just a little bit, by the migration process.

Mary, who had been raised in a Christian household in Taiwan and had been baptized when she was 12, had considered herself a Christian. However, when she was about to finish graduate school, recalled thinking, "I had studied my entire life, for 15-20 years probably, and now I had reached the masters degree. I was done studying and it was time to move on. But I began to feel like something was missing in my life." She began to think that she would never be satisfied, that life would just be like "an unending pursuit of the next something." This was when she began to remember all she had been taught growing up. This would lead her on a search to discover God: "If there was a God, I wanted to know." Eventually, at 3:30 one morning, all by herself, she would accept God and confess her sins for the first time. Mary's experience with finding meaning did not seem to be related to the migration process at all. As such, her experience would support the conception of the search for meaning as something that can lead individuals towards religion.

One way in which the church was able to offer meaning and an identity to its members was by making leadership positions available. Chen writes that for those immigrants who came "with expectations of upward mobility, the reality of struggling

and possibly giving up a career is a blow to their sense of self.”⁵ In the church these immigrants were allowed to achieve high status levels that they otherwise were missing; these positions were believed to boost their holders’ self-confidence and self-worth.⁶ Simon was the only respondent to talk about the idea of coveting titles. According to Simon, the Cantonese congregation always has a hard time finding people who want to serve as deacon board members, while in contrast the Mandarin congregation always has people who volunteer themselves. To Simon this suggests that the titles mean a lot to the Taiwanese. The reason Simon says “Taiwanese” here as opposed to the Mandarin speakers, since those from China are also included in the Mandarin congregation, is because there has yet to be an individual from mainland China who has been elected to a high leadership position at this church. Simon’s interpretation would sync well with Chen’s statements because Chen’s study is specifically focused on the Taiwanese as well. Chen further claims that these leadership positions were more important to the men, however the women hold just as many positions in the church as the men.⁷ Included among the six men were 4 fellowship leaders, 3 worship leaders, 2 deacons, 2 elders, 2 small group leaders, 3 Bible study teachers, and 2 missions’ leaders.⁸ Included among the eight women were 5 worship leaders, 4 fellowship leaders, 4 Bible study teachers, 2 small group leaders, and 1 prayer ministry coordinator. A comparison of the two groups shows that there were a lot of overlapping positions between the two genders, although

⁵ Carolyn Chen, *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁶ Carolyn Chen, *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁷ Carolyn Chen, *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁸ This is a total of all the positions that the respondents have held throughout their time at FEC.

none of the women interviewed had ever served either as a deacon or as an elder; that none of the women had been elected as deacons or elders would not be a shock to Chen, who also observed that it is usually the men who occupy such positions (one of the deacons at FEC Arcadia is actually a woman).⁹

If we were to assume that taking on leadership positions in the church was a form of identity/meaning making, then it would not be surprising that the respondents held so many positions at the church. However, as Simon pointed out, finding volunteers for leadership positions was not always an easy task. It seems much more like that while for some, these positions could have been a source of identity and meaning, for others, taking these positions was probably seen more as a way of serving at the church. Furthermore, the fact that so many of the respondents had held so many leadership positions in the church seems to suggest that FEC Arcadia gives its members a lot of opportunities to take on such roles. Can the leadership positions really be that coveted if they are so freely available to so many people? Rather than finding meaning in the titles, it seems much more likely that the churchgoers are finding meaning in simple being Christians. In any case, the positions alone could not lead an individual to become Christian; rather, the person would have to first be Christian before he/she would want to take on the responsibilities of being a leader to others.

For Mary and Grace, the search for meaning was a major factor that led them to convert to Christianity. However, they were the only two for which this concept of meaning had been vital. Thus it seems that while the ability of Christianity and the Christian church to provide a sense of identity and meaning might have been important

⁹ Carolyn Chen, *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008).

for some, this was not a major influence on the lives of the majority of the immigrants. Very few of the respondents articulated the need to create their identity or meaning after immigrating to the United States; however, all of them needed to reestablish a social network.

COMMUNITY NETWORKS

Migration creates a social void that the immigrants will seek to satisfy. As such, community networks, or for friendship purposes, seems to be one of the essential factors for leading the immigrants to convert. The appeal of the church is that it offers opportunities for friendship, recreation, and social belonging; “Some started going to church because they wanted to know more people.”¹⁰ Through the church, individuals are presented with numerous social events, including going camping, hiking, skiing, to concerts, to movies, to play sports, and even simply to eat.¹¹ Mary remembers having a lot of fun at church – they used to play tennis every Saturday and would travel together, to the Grand Canyon for example. Although friendship with another individual would not be enough to persuade someone to convert, it was for friendships that most of the immigrants first began attending religious communities. Chen indicates, “most converts are initially attracted to Christianity for nonreligious reasons.”¹² For social purposes would certainly be a major nonreligious reason for why an immigrant might begin to

¹⁰ Carolyn Chen, *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008).

¹¹ Carolyn Chen, *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008). Russell Jeung, "New Asian American Churches and Symbolic Racial Identity," in *Revealing the Sacred in Asian and Pacific America*, 225-240 (New York: Routledge Press, 2003).

¹² Carolyn Chen, *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008).

attend a church. Thus, while community networks were not the ultimate reason, they did play a key role in leading many immigrants to convert.

Most people are invited to attend Christian functions by friends. This should come as no surprise; after all, how could an individual know about such associations unless another invites him/her. Certainly some probably could have stumbled upon one on their own, but that percentage cannot be very large. As a result of immigrating, most of the Chinese ended up in foreign places where they knew not one other person. Some were fortunate to have some family members around as well, but most became extremely lonely. Christian or not, most of the immigrants jumped at the opportunity to meet more people. Some received their invitation early on – his first day on campus, Anthony met some Christians and began attending their fellowship right away – while it took a little longer for others – it was not until Christmas vacation that Esther was invited to a function. Esther recalls, “It was during Christmas, when most people had gone home. This girl asked me if I wanted to do bible study and I said ‘sure.’”

Victor is an example of an individual who went to church even though he was not interested in religion at the time. He recants, “I went to church by accident, actually.” It was not an accident in the sense that he somehow stumbled into a church, but rather the “accident” refers more to the process that would eventually lead him to become a Christian. “I was by myself so I felt lonely.” When a friend invited him to church he saw it as a way to get over that loneliness. “But I wasn’t a Christian yet. I was trying to have friendship.” His going to church to make friends was a conscious decision that he had made on purpose. At the time he had no idea how that decision would affect his life.

His later conversion to Christianity, then, was the “accident” that he could not have predicted happening at the time.

When they arrived at the schools in the United States, a good percentage of my respondents found that they had actually been placed with Christian roommates; these Christian roommates were then often the to invite them into Christian communities. Amy’s roommate introduced her to the Christian group at school and she began attending their Friday meetings: “I had nothing else to do. I was a foreign student. It was a good activity to go to.” Sarah’s roommate brought her to a Bible study the first Friday they met. Sarah would even go on to meet her future husband in that group. Mary’s roommate, whom Mary refers to as “a good Christian,” brought her to a Bible study as well and influenced Mary to begin reading the Bible every day.” Jonathan’s story was the most interesting. Jonathan had left Hong Kong less than half a year after accepting Christ. Thus when he arrived in the United States he reflects, “I’m still a young Christian at that time.” By luck, “it wasn’t intentional,” he claims, both of his roommates were Christian. Both of them were second-generation students, one of German descent and the other of Korean descent.

Still others had family members, including future family, introduce them to church. Grace’s sister was a Christian and took her to church. Valerie, who had already converted before migrating, went to church because she knew it was a place where she could meet people: “I just came here, I had no friends, so I just went to church.” It also helped that her sister, who had arrived a decade earlier, had already going to church. Both Simon and Gideon ended up marrying the women who had brought them to church. Simon reflects, “That was one of the things that attracted me – my wife was Christian.”

Gideon remembers thinking, “The people I knew were good Christians,” including his girlfriend at the time, “so I thought why not.”

In leaving their families behind, many immigrants discovered a new family in the church. Mary remarks, “The church has become a family to us.” Some were fortunate to have family members – e.g. both Grace and Valerie had sisters here – in the United States, but most did not. Lee writes, “The church is the home, or at least a home away from home, for many Asian immigrants and their succeeding generations.”¹³ “Most of our family was in Taiwan, so we looked for community” (Mary). Chen found in her study on Taiwanese immigrants that 18 out of her 50 respondents did not have any extended family in the area.¹⁴ This percentage of immigrants in Chen’s study who did have family here (64%) was significantly larger than the percentage for those in mine (13%). Even though 64% of those in Chen’s study had family nearby, Chen nevertheless writes, “Immigrants frequently claimed that they were reluctant to “bother” their relatives for help. These relatives may have come only a few years earlier and are still struggling themselves.”¹⁵ Fittingly, Grace, one of only two in my study who had family here, said, “we don’t have a family here, but when you went to church you feel like you have one.” What her comment seems to suggest was that having a few family members here did not replicate what the “family” used to feel like. The reasons for this could have been that

¹³ Sang Hyun Lee, "Pilgrimage and Home in the Wilderness of Marginality: Symbols and Context in Asian American Theology," in *New Spiritual Homes: Religion and Asian Americans*, 218-231 (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999).

¹⁴ Carolyn Chen, *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008).

¹⁵ Carolyn Chen, *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008).

there simply were not many other members here, as in Grace's case, or that opportunities to see one's family were limited.

For many immigrants, the church helped them to create new social networks – something that all immigrants needed to do as the result of the migration process. Community networks explain what initially attracted many of the non-Christian Chinese immigrants to the church. As such, community networks are an integral step along the way towards conversion. Participation in these community networks often also granted the immigrants access to social services.

SOCIAL SERVICES

Christian congregations offer both formal and informal social services “that facilitate the material, social and psychological adjustment of their members to American society.”¹⁶ In other words, anything that helps its members gain “ideas about how to survive in this alien and exploitative environment” can be considered a “social service.”¹⁷ Some formal services might include language, citizenship, taxes, and employment classes.¹⁸ In addition, the church resembles a self-sufficient community in that amongst its members are often included all different types of professionals and specialists,

¹⁶ Carolyn Chen, *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008).

¹⁷ Kenneth J. Guest, *God in Chinatown: Religion and Survival in New York's Evolving Immigrant Community* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

¹⁸ Carolyn Chen, *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008). Russell Jeung, *Faithful Generations: Race and New Asian American Churches* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

including doctors, mechanics, piano teachers, handymen, and gardeners, to name a few.¹⁹ Included in my specific sample population were doctors, nurses, scientists, accountants, businessmen, professors, and real estate agents. In that way, the church can even become a marketing arena for one's business. It can also be a place where "under the table work" is performed, which can be providing personal services or selling food.²⁰ Grace, too, indicated, "There's a person who sells things to people at the church in order to make a living. So we all try to help her."

Although both Chen and Yang talk about social services, both point out that the churches they studied did not offer formal social services – both indicated their populations were largely of the middle-class and therefore did not need any.²¹ What this seems to suggest is that, generally, informal services were enough to satisfy the needs of the new immigrants. More informal services include the passing on of any sort of knowledge – e.g. where to buy phone cards, how to enroll children in schools, how to register cars, or with any information on jobs or housing.²² When someone is in need, an individual in Kenneth Guest's study remarked, "We do what we can."²³ Immigrants are

¹⁹ Carolyn Chen, *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008).

²⁰ Carolyn Chen, *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008).

²¹ Carolyn Chen, *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008). Fenggang Yang, "Chinese Conversion to Evangelical Christianity: The Importance of Social and Cultural Contexts," *Sociology of Religion* 59, no. 3 (1998): 237-257.

²² Carolyn Chen, *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008). Kenneth J. Guest, *God in Chinatown: Religion and Survival in New York's Evolving Immigrant Community* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

²³ Kenneth J. Guest, *God in Chinatown: Religion and Survival in New York's Evolving Immigrant Community* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

thus drawn to the church because of all the practical solutions it offers to the problems they face as new immigrants in an unfamiliar place.²⁴

Due to the presence of all these potential benefits, the term “rice Christians” arose to designate those who join the church to gain material advantages but do so without ever truly believing in Christianity.²⁵ Christina was the only one of my respondents touched upon this concept and it was more just something she had heard others say as opposed to something she herself had witnessed. She heard from elsewhere, “Once they get settled, they leave the church.” Yang is very critical of this theory, arguing that “rice Christians” do not exist. As proof he points to the fact that formal social services are in fact missing from the churches that he studied. However, just because a church is not offering formal social services does not mean that new immigrants are not still receiving some sort of material benefit by attending church. In the same way that many immigrants first began going to church because they were looking for friends, I believe that many of them might also have stayed because of the informal services they gained access to; also, just because they are now religious does not mean that they had not been “rice Christians” at one point in time. These services seem to go hand-in-hand with community networks: part of being a friend is to help one another in times of need. Thus, in the same way that community networks drew immigrants to the church and led many to accept Christianity, so to do social services. In addition to the need to make friends and to find help, many scholars also assert that immigrants have some sort of ethnic need.

²⁴ Carolyn Chen, *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008).

²⁵ Fenggang Yang, "Chinese Conversion to Evangelical Christianity: The Importance of Social and Cultural Contexts," *Sociology of Religion* 59, no. 3 (1998): 237-257.

SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES

The spiritual experiences of the respondents might be the most important factor in them converting to Christianity. Spiritual experiences include anything that would lean an individual to believe in the existence of God. Take away the spiritual or religious components from a church and you would end up with a non-religious, social institution. At some point, it seems, the spiritual aspects of Christianity must arise. In countering the arguments that the Chinese only went to church for reasons such as for community networks, social services, and meaning, Yang remarks, “it would be hard to gain integration without religious conversion.”²⁶ According to Yang, to fully join a religious community, an individual has to, at some point, become religious. Belief in God is the only thing, then, that transforms the church from just another social entity into a religious place. The post-migration factors only serve to demonstrate why a Chinese immigrant might be attracted to the Christian church; they do not account for why the immigrant would go forth and actually convert to Christianity. Genuine conversion would require believing in God, which would seem to be dependent upon having experienced God in some way. While the other factors can explain how an individual might come to a point where he/she would be open to the Christian message, spiritual experiences are the only thing that could actually lead the individual to believe in it.

In recanting why they converted to Christianity, many of the respondents pointed to these spiritual experiences. Mary, for example, whose story was briefly touched upon before, had been wondering whether God existed when at 3:30 one morning she says, “I was touched by the spirit and believed there was a God.” Alone by herself, Mary

²⁶ Fenggang Yang, "Chinese Conversion to Evangelical Christianity: The Importance of Social and Cultural Contexts," *Sociology of Religion* 59, no. 3 (1998): 237-257.

accepted God and confessed her sins for the first time. She states, “I didn’t connect with God in a personal way before.” Caleb had also been by himself when it all made sense to him. Caleb, like Mary, had been pondering over the existence of God: “Religion is an important issue, I thought I needed to be serious about it.” Then, “one night after I finished reading the Bible I just prayed and accepted on my own.” Valerie, though she converted while still in Taiwan, also talked about believing in God because of an experience with him: she says at a retreat, “We had a prayer and I felt touched so I said I would do whatever I could to be a follower.”

For others the spiritual experience came in the form of a feeling of peace. Earlier I mentioned Victor, who, when he began to face difficulties after immigrating to the United States, turned to God for help. God’s existence was confirmed for him in how things changed for him following his conversion. Thinking back on that time he remembers, “My heart is more peaceful. Even though I face the difficulty, I just do my best, and the rest I hand it to God. He can do it for me if I work with him” (Victor). Grace was another individual, as mentioned, who turned to God in her moment of uncertainty and began to believe that he was there, guiding her path. Of course a change in perspective or having a feeling does not directly point to the existence of God, but the point is that for all of these individuals, their experiences were confirmations of God’s existence. The important thing is that all of these individuals came to believe that there was a God and that, for them, Christianity was the right religion to follow. In order to determine how the respondents viewed God, and the spiritual component of Christianity, I asked them three open-ended questions: (1) why do you go to church, (2) what does the

church mean to you, and (3) what does being a Christian mean to you?²⁷ From their responses it was clear how their conceptions of going to church and being a Christian included spiritual components. Many of the answers to the different questions overlapped, which was a product of the open-endedness of the questions.

The most popular answers to the first question – why do you go to church – included fulfilling one of the responsibilities of being a Christian, to worship God, and for fellowship with other believers. Going to church for many of the respondents was definitely viewed as part of their duty as Christians. Their responses actually made going to church appear extremely legalistic. Valerie, for example, declared that because she was a Christian she has to go to church in order to worship God. Grace, too, pointed out how going to church was something that the Bible had instructed them to do. The general consensus, though, is that part of being a Christian meant going to church. If we were to turn that statement around, the fact that these respondents all go to church means that they view themselves as Christians. Being Christian to these respondents represents more than simple participation in a group. The reason I say this is because, in addition to viewing going to church as part of their duty, they also saw it as a chance to worship God. If someone desires to worship God it seems safe to assume that they believe in the existence of God.

For the second question – what does the church mean to you – the most common responses were it is a place where believers can meet together to support one another, where people can worship God together, and to learn more about God. The same logic that was applied to the first question can be applied here as well. Most of the respondents

²⁷ To see some of the unaltered responses to these three questions, refer to Figure 2.

included spiritual reasons for going to church – Jonathan talks about praising God, Gideon talks about learning more about God, and Benjamin talks about being loved by God. All of these responses refer to God in a way that suggests that these individuals believe God exists. The responses to the last question – what does being a Christian mean to you – included the most spiritual language. Again, many of the respondents talked about being in a relationship with a real God: Anna says without Christ she would not be content while Amy asserts that God is in her life. Both Grace and Christian call themselves a “child of God.”

While some not-necessarily-religious answers were given, the overwhelming majority of the responses were shrouded in spiritual matters. The respondents talked about following God’s commands, worshiping God, learning more about God, being in a relationship with God, and supporting each other on their journeys as believers of God. From these responses it seems pretty clear that these individuals had truly converted to Christianity: they all believed in God, otherwise they would not have talked about him as if he were real. The fact that all of the respondents discussed spiritual issues is no coincidence – experiencing God and the pursuit of God are integral components of the Chinese American Christian experience.

CONCLUSION

The Christian church satisfied some of the needs that arose as a result of the migration process. In so doing, the church has been able to both attract and keep many Chinese immigrants. Many of the initial reasons for why the immigrants would attend church were not necessarily very spiritual. Yet these non-religious factors played a

pivotal role it getting the immigrants to continue attending the church. Going to church, then, created opportunities for spiritual experiences to occur. Although this study did not explore, in much depth, the spiritual experiences for why the Chinese converted to Christianity, it is clear that this shift had occurred for all the participants. Though many had not started out as Christians, by the time of this study, all of them had already converted. Thus, it was the church's ability to satisfy those initial needs that then led to many of the Chinese immigrants converting to Christianity. The four factors mentioned in this chapter were not the only ones in which the church satisfied some need of the immigrants. Providing for the ethnic needs, another category of needs, of the Chinese immigrants is the topic of the next chapter.

Figure 2. Responses to the Open-Ended Questions.

Why do you go to church?

- *“I’m a Christian, it’s part of my life to go to church... Going to church is part of the duty of being a Christian” (Victor).*
- *“I’m a Christian, I have to go to church to worship God” (Valerie).*
- *“To worship God... God never takes time off from us, so we shouldn’t take time off from God” (Christina).*
- *“Initially it was very simple, after my conversion, if God is the Almighty God, then this is his command so I should go to church. This is part of my commitment to God” (Jonathan).*
- *“It is also for fellowship, because there is a group of people who can worship together, which is a very beautiful picture there” (Jonathan).*
- *“It’s a place where I can be with other believers and worship God and really share our experience in Christ” (Anna).*
- *“The Lord says this, to worship him”; “also to meet with other people is important too” (Esther).*
- *“I know I have to go to church because that’s what the Bible teaches... you have to have fellowship” (Grace).*
- *“I like the people here. I wanted to be a Christian. I wanted to be a good person. I am looking for eternal life” (Benjamin).*
- *“To worship, to hear God’s word, to have my community” (Amy).*

What does the church mean to you?

- *“The church is a group of believers who come together to praise God, for prayer, to support each other, to grow together” (Jonathan).*
- *“It’s a body of Christ where we can all worship together, where we can support each other, and work through the difficult parts of life” (Simon).*
- *“It’s your spiritual family. When you’re together it’s easier to grow spiritually. You all learn from each other” (Grace).*

- *“Going to church you can learn more about the Bible and more about God. If you’re doing it on your own at home, you probably won’t learn as much” (Gideon).*
- *“I used to not think that church was important. I thought faith was the most important. Slowly I have learned that walking down the path on your own is difficult – you will eventually walk off the path. The church helps you to stay on that path” (Esther).*
- *“It should be a place that supports believers – spiritual support; through teaching, through prayer, through fellowship, through Bible study. It’s a community where we can really share our lives, to share our experience” (Anna).*
- *“The church is a family to me. It’s the place where I can share and serve” (Amy).*
- *“A church means a big family. That people can help and take care of each other. They can love each other and love God and be loved by God” (Benjamin).*

What does being a Christian mean to you?

- *“Without knowing Christ, I don’t think I would be content. I may have a good job. I may have a good family, a good husband and good kids. But it’s different. It is something that I do for myself” (Anna).*
- *“Being a Christian means having God in my life, having him be my Lord. Being a Christian is everything – there’s always someone to go to, no matter what happens. It is living my life here in preparation for my eternal life. It is having a purpose in my life” (Amy).*
- *“It just means a Christ-follower to me, that’s all” (Jonathan).*
- *“It means that I am the child of God. It means that I have eternal life” (Grace).*
- *“I’m a child of God. I’m saved by the grace of God. I have hope for eternity” (Christina).*
- *“You know if you have a problem you know who you can go to” (Victor).*
- *“To be saved” (Benjamin).*
- *“It means you must have a personal relationship with God” (Esther).*

3. THE ETHNIC-SPECIFIC CHURCH

HOW THE CHURCH PRESERVED CHINESE ETHNIC CULTURE

It would not be too farfetched to assume that a mono-ethnic, Chinese church could serve some sort of ethnic function. Jeung claims that the church “is the community’s primary social institution in maintaining ethnic solidarity and promoting ethnic identity.”¹ As a place that is specifically designed for Chinese Americans, the church becomes an ethnic haven where immigrants can turn to in order to escape from the stresses of trying to navigate American society; Yang hypothesizes that “social integration into the public spheres of work and school provokes a desire to congregate with fellow Chinese on the weekend.”² Indeed, the majority of Chinese American Christians do attend ethnic-specific Chinese churches. Why this is the case is the focus of this chapter. All of the respondents were introduced to the First Evangelical Church either through friends or family, which all happened to be Chinese as well. This fact that Chinese immigrants are befriending other Chinese immigrants seems to suggest that there must be something that draws them together. Two of the main factors that seem to unify the respondents are language and comfortability. The importance of language could first be seen in Chapter 1, where the inability to fluently speak English served, in part, to establish the Chinese as apart from American society. Language and comfortability are interrelated, as part of feeling comfortable is dependent upon being able to effectively

¹ Russell Jeung, "New Asian American Churches and Symbolic Racial Identity," in *Revealing the Sacred in Asian and Pacific America*, 225-240 (New York: Routledge Press, 2003).

² Fenggang Yang, "ABC and XYZ: Religious, Ethnic and Racial Identities of the New Second Generation Chinese in Christian Churches," *Amerasia Journal* 25, no. 1 (1999): 89-114.

communicate one's thoughts into speech. The concept of being comfortable is also extremely important, as the immigrants would not attend any organization or be around any people they did not feel comfortable with. Catering to these Chinese immigrants means that the ethnic-specific church will specifically be a place where Chinese American identity can be asserted and enjoyed – a place where Chinese Americans can be Chinese Americans. For as many commonalities that the Chinese immigrants have, differences exist as well. The second half of this chapter will examine the differences that do exist and the church's potential for helping these immigrants overcome those differences.

LANGUAGE & COMFORTABILITY

As a direct result of immigration, language plays a key role. New immigrants would be more likely to seek out communities that speak their native tongue.³ In fact, as Yang points out, it seems that continuous Chinese immigration is a main reason for the continuous use of Chinese dialects.⁴ Likewise, as long as Chinese immigrants continue to come to the United States, the ethnic-specific Chinese church will continue to have a place in American society. In the same way that the majority of respondents pointed to language as one of their major struggles in coming to the United States, as seen in Chapter 1, almost all of them again cited language the main reason for why they attend a Chinese church.

³ Russell Jeung, *Faithful Generations: Race and New Asian American Churches* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

⁴ Fenggang Yang, *Chinese Christians in America* (University Park, PN: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).

For many of the respondents, the First Evangelical Church was not the first church they had ever attended. Most of the individuals had first been invited into other Christian communities – where many subsequently had their religious conversions. Those first communities were also Chinese communities, though. This is evident in how many of the respondents said the Christianity they had first been exposed to had been a “Chinese” form of Christianity; that is to say, they talked about Christianity using Chinese phrases and read the Bible in Chinese. Grace stated: “If you ask me to pray in English, I cannot do it... I communicate to God in Chinese.” Both Christina and Simon related how they were brought up reading Chinese Bibles, so switching to an English one would be too difficult. This familiarity with Chinese Christianity is one of the major reasons that then led many of the respondents to continue to attend Chinese churches. Likewise, their inability to effectively communicate in English often prevented them from joining American organizations.

Language played a major role in determining how comfortable the Chinese immigrants would feel around others. When asked to explain why he feels more comfortable being around other Chinese, Gideon responds, “We speak the same language.” Likewise Victor commented, “If you speak the same language you feel more comfortable... You feel like you can really know each other better.” The inability to communicate actually divides people and can keep them from pursuing a relationship with each other. “If you don’t speak the same language then it’s natural to separate” (Sarah). Many of the respondents pointed to their struggles with speaking the English language as their reason for seeking out a Chinese church. Jonathan related, “English is still my second language, so sometimes it is still hard for me.” Sarah finds speaking in

English to be too much trouble because she has to translate her thoughts that are in Chinese into English. According to Victor, “using your mother-language feels better.” In addition, both Caleb and Jonathan talked about being more useful in a Chinese-speaking church than in an English-speaking one: “Even though I could go to a Caucasian church, no problem, I think it is more effective for me to reach out to the Chinese people.” Here, Jonathan is alluding to the concept of being best able to reach those with whom he can best relate.⁵ According to this principle, as a Chinese individual, Jonathan should find getting to know other Chinese people easier than getting to know people of other cultures. Caleb also indicated, “I won’t be as effective in English, as opposed to in Chinese.” Although, like Jonathan, Caleb uses the word “effective,” he is referring more to the language issue than to the cultural issue that Jonathan had been talking about. As a native Chinese speaker, Jonathan would be more fully able to express himself in Chinese than in English; thus, he would best be able to communicate his thoughts in Chinese as opposed to having to translate his thoughts into English. As we can see, language is very important when it comes to feeling comfortable around certain individuals.

As a result of having so many religious organizations to choose from, where the individuals feels the most comfortable has to become a major factor in determining to which church that person will ultimately choose to attend: “Individuals will choose to participate in [ministries] with which they are the most culturally familiar, where they can be a part of the majority group, and where they are likely to have the easiest access... People want to participate in a religious organization where they can be with others who

⁵ Russell Jeung, *Faithful Generations: Race and New Asian American Churches* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

can best share and understand their cultural background, norms, and beliefs.”⁶ The reason why ethnic-specific congregations, in particular, have been so effective is because they unify their members around a common ethnic heritage; as a result, many members begin to see the people of the church as their extended family.⁷ In addition to choosing churches because they feel the most comfortable, the Chinese can also choose to go to certain churches in the hopes of satisfying certain ethnic needs.

ETHNIC PURPOSES

Although all of the respondents had experienced discrimination in some way, as seen in Chapter 1, none of them said that the discrimination had pushed them to congregate with co-ethnics. Rather, it seemed that all of them naturally befriended other Chinese people who then invited them to join a religious community. The decision my respondents made to go to a Chinese church was not a direct result of discrimination – the more important factors seem to be those that have already been mentioned, for reasons such as being invited by friends, language, and comfortability. Where discrimination could have played a major role, was in leading directly to the creation of ethnic-specific churches that could be spaces where the Chinese Americans could gather. Although none of my respondents could have asserted how discrimination would have led to the creation of the Chinese church, I believe this was the case.

⁶ Rebecca Y. Kim, "Negotiation of Ethnic and Religious Boundaries by Asian American Campus Evangelicals," in *Asian American Religions: The Making and Remaking of Borders and Boundaries*, 141-159 (New York: New York University Press, 2004).

⁷ Russell Jeung, "New Asian American Churches and Symbolic Racial Identity," in *Revealing the Sacred in Asian and Pacific America*, 225-240 (New York: Routledge Press, 2003).

Jeung writes that although the Chinese “adopted Christian cultural values... they could not socially assimilate into the United States because of racial discrimination against Asians.”⁸ This theory seems to suggest that even if the Chinese had sought to join American churches, they would not have felt welcomed due to the discrimination that existed. As Yoo points out, “individuals and communities have consciously forged religious identities in opposition to the discrimination they have encountered despite shared faith with the majority of their fellow Americans.”⁹ The common bond of being Christian evidently was not enough to overpower the divisions based on ethnicity. Given that the Chinese were excluded from mainstream American society it makes sense that they would elect to establish their own religious institutions that were specifically intended to serve the Chinese people. Jeung actually theorizes that Chinese Christians might have established their own, independent, churches out of a resentment of “white denominational control.”¹⁰ One of the purposes of the ethnic-specific church would be to create a safe and comfortable environment in which minorities did not have to feel like they were different, marginalized, or discriminated against.¹¹ Though it is not certain whether or not the ethnic-specific church was started in reaction to discrimination, Chinese churches do create a space where immigrants can escape from racial hostility.

⁸ Russell Jeung, *Faithful Generations: Race and New Asian American Churches* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

⁹ David K. Yoo, "Introduction: Reframing the U.S. Religious Landscape," in *New Spiritual Homes: Religion and Asian Americans*, 1-15 (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999).

¹⁰ Russell Jeung, *Faithful Generations: Race and New Asian American Churches* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

¹¹ Russell Jeung, *Faithful Generations: Race and New Asian American Churches* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

For some of the immigrants, going to an ethnic-specific church was a way to keep their children in contact with Chinese culture.¹² Caleb, for example, preferred that his children would continue to go to a Chinese church because then that way “the Chinese culture is still in them.” This concept is based on the belief that interacting with other Chinese could continue to maintain an element of Chineseness in the individuals. Many Chinese churches do in fact try to pass on elements of Chinese culture through such things as Chinese language instruction and the celebrating of traditional Chinese festivals.¹³ Though for many individuals, like Caleb, they would have preferred their children to attend Chinese churches, they did not demand this of their children. Anthony comments, “There was a time when I did worry that our children would lose the culture. It is kind of sad that we will eventually lose our uniqueness. But I think at some point I just let that go.” Certainly, many of the parents would rather have their children continue attending Chinese churches, but, as seen in Chapter 1, many of them were also quite open to other cultures. Because they recognized certain strengths in other cultures, most of the respondents said they could not just hold onto their Chinese culture and just be Chinese. As Anna said, “Preserving the culture is good, but only to a point where you are open minded to accept the good side of other cultures as well.”

Many of these Chinese immigrants chose to attend ethnic-specific churches because that was what felt the most comfortable to them. It is not so much trying to preserve culture as it is going to a place where one feels comfortable. When asked how

¹² Pyong Gap Min, "Introduction," in *Religions in Asian America: Building Faith Communities*, 1-14 (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002).

¹³ Russell Jeung, "New Asian American Churches and Symbolic Racial Identity," in *Revealing the Sacred in Asian and Pacific America*, 225-240 (New York: Routledge Press, 2003).

important it was to go to a Chinese church Victor responded, “Not that important. I go more looking for the comfortable place.” This suggests that Victor would be open to attending an English-speaking congregation. For many others, however, being around other Chinese Americans was what put them most at ease. Mary, for example, remembers seeking out other Chinese immigrants when she first arrived in the United States as a foreign student. Still for others, being around Chinese people was not absolutely necessary. Amy’s comments on the issue seemed to demonstrate the unimportance of going to a Chinese church: “If I don’t go to a Chinese church I would probably be a lot more Americanized.” The reason this statement is important is because Amy had, once upon a time, attended a non-Chinese specific church that was comprised mostly of white-Americans. Thus, due to her experiences she sees how going to an American church would lead one to become more Americanized, whereas going to a Chinese church would lead one to be more Chinese. I will end this section with this quote from Esther: “People have said that the church is the most segregated place. Which was very surprising, so it made me think about it. I think people just want to be where they feel comfortable.”

MAINLAND CHINESE vs. CANTONESE vs. TAIWANESE

If language and comfortability were so important then it does not seem to make sense why individuals from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan would all choose to attend the same church (FEC Arcadia). Not only are the languages they speak different, but there exist many cultural differences as well. This means there have to be other factors involved than just language and comfortability, otherwise why would these three

different people groups all attend the same church? FEC Arcadia has two Chinese-speaking congregations: the Cantonese one, attended by those from Hong Kong, and a Mandarin one, attended mostly by those from China and Taiwan but with some from Hong Kong as well.

There are many perceived differences that exist among the three people groups. Sarah was the only respondent to say that there was “not so much difference” amongst the groups. Some of these differences were minor ones – for example, during the Autumn Festival, Mary noticed that the Cantonese were singing the songs in a way that was much more emotional than what she had been used to; she says, “I didn’t know what they were doing.” It also seems that the Cantonese and Taiwanese have a negative perception of the Mainland Chinese. Sarah talks about the sanitary habits and the ways in which the Mainland Chinese handle things in the kitchen as being inferior to her own habits. Mary, who has a negative view of the Communist government in China, believes that “people in China have a hard time trusting others” because, according to her, “trust was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution.” Victor also talks about this lack of trust, claiming that this is the result of people from China being “not that open.” On the topic of money, Gideon says, “People from China think that others should contribute more because they think that we have more money.”¹⁴ Grace, likewise, points out that, unlike the Mainland Chinese, the Taiwanese “don’t try to get benefits from you.”

This difference on the perception of money could indeed be a real difference. Most of the Taiwanese came to the United States much earlier than did the Mainland

¹⁴ Gideon was also the only individual to have a negative perception of the Cantonese, claiming that because Hong Kong was under English control, their environment was better. He says, “I don’t know if we really saw them as Chinese” (2/28/09).

Chinese, which means they would have had more time to achieve financial success. For my sample, the first individual to come to the United States from Mainland China came one year before the last person from Taiwan came. The gap between when the first Taiwanese immigrant and the first Mainland Chinese immigrant came was 10 years (1974-1984). Grace, too, suggests about the Mainland Chinese, “only maybe ten years ago, did they start to come.” She recalls, “When I first came here there were hardly any people from China.” The reason, then, that the Taiwanese do not seem to require as much from the Mainland Chinese is because “they are financially well off” (Grace). While the Cantonese and Taiwanese certainly saw the Mainland Chinese as very different from themselves, they did not point out too many differences between themselves. Sure they asserted that they do have some cultural differences, but they were unable to give as concrete of examples as the ones they gave regarding the Mainland Chinese.

Although the Cantonese and Taiwanese were unable to point out many differences between them, a separation between the Cantonese and Mandarin congregations certainly exists. When asked what their thoughts on the relationship between the different congregations were, nine responded, little to no interaction existed. Although some of the respondents talked about knowing some people from the other congregations, interactions were still extremely limited: as Gideon demonstrates, “I only talk to them when I see them at church or at fellowship meetings.” Many were quick to point out how there was no relationship between the two congregations. “I don’t think there is a relationship. They are all in their own group.” “We don’t have any relationship. Everybody has their own thing” (Christina). “The church structure makes each congregation independent” (Caleb). Aside from a handful of combined services, these

two congregations are in little contact with one another. As a result, as Anna concludes, “They serve like three little churches within the big church.”

Language does not only separate the Chinese-speakers from the English-speakers, it also creates divisions within the Chinese community: an inability to communicate divides them and prevents them from pursuing a relationship with each other. Esther remarks, “Even though we are all Chinese, if you can’t speak the same language, then you cannot communicate.” Communication is an integral component of relationship building: if you are unable to communicate how will you be able to get to know someone? Because Grace cannot speak Cantonese, she is unable to talk to anyone at the church who is only able to speak Cantonese, she states, “Because they speak Cantonese, we don’t understand them so we can’t get close to them.” Very few individuals from China or Taiwan were able to speak Cantonese, which explains why the Cantonese congregation did not include any of these individuals. In contrast, many of the individuals from Hong Kong are able to speak Mandarin as well. Thus in the Mandarin congregation exist at least a handful of individuals who grew up in Hong Kong but have, for one reason or another, decided to attend the Mandarin congregation. Victor is one such individual, who although he grew up in Taiwan, attends the Mandarin congregation; his decision is likely to somehow be connected to the fact that his wife grew up in Taiwan. As a result of being divided by language, Anna comments, “each congregation began to do it’s own thing, so we were never able to come together.” Sarah, too, observes that, “If you don’t speak the same language then it’s natural to separate.” Christina has simply accepted the differences and remarks, “I feel okay with that.” Amy also articulates being okay with the congregational divisions: “Unity would be ideal” but

“it’s okay if we are not together all the time. I think it takes too much effort to do that.” That FEC Arcadia, and this is true of all the FEC churches, could even offer services in Mandarin and Cantonese is very unique. Most churches offer either one or the other. For example, Carolyn Chen conducted her entire study on just Taiwanese churches whereas Kenneth Guest conducted his entire study on just Chinese—that is to say, those from Mainland China—churches.

UNITY IN THE MIDST OF DIFFERENCE

The more time these people spend with each other, the more they realize how their perceptions of the other people were unsubstantiated. Sarah, for example, had a very negative viewpoint towards the Communist government in China and as a result she thought that all Mainland Chinese were evil. But then, “After getting in touch with them I see that they are also good people.” It is pretty clear that to judge a people based on the leaders of their country would not portray a complete picture of who those people are. Victor points out how it takes time before people can become open and real with another. Through her encounters at work, Christina relays how in working with those other people groups, “I think I can understand them better and then it’s easier to work with them.” Jonathan also points out that the particularly negative views toward the Mainland China will likely change as more people from China come to the United States.

In addition to the migration process, the Chinese immigrants also share similar experiences when it comes to navigating American society as Chinese immigrants and learning to become American. No matter where they have come from, the Chinese immigrants eventually become pretty similar to one another. When Gideon was talking

about the differences regarding the Mainland Chinese, he also pointed out that these differences could only be seen in the beginning, but that, over time, they would adapt. He goes on, “When I look at them I think that everyone is about the same... We’re all here in America.” Esther, too, comments, “The longer you stay in America, because we have so many similarities – similar schooling, lifestyle – there really aren’t too many differences.”

The Chinese American Christians are also united for religious reasons. That they attended the same church led many to be willing to work through the barriers and to learn how to become united. Mary believes that it is through being in the same church that the church members have gotten to know each other and learned how to accept one another. Even where there may have been differences, a shared belief in God could overcome those. Gideon observes, “As Christians, we have more things in common.” Benjamin felt the same way, declaring, “No matter [where they are from] as long as you are Christian they should be in the same family, with no difference.” Benjamin is not necessarily claiming that becoming Christian means becoming all the same with no differences, but rather he is saying that as Christians, they should accept people and to not let those differences become barriers. To use the family analogy that Benjamin introduces, no matter how strange your relatives might be, because they are your family, you are forever connected to them. Being a member of a family is a strong unifying force that very few differences would be able to destroy.

CONCLUSION

It is hard to determine just how important ethnic needs are. On the one hand, time and time again, respondents reported how being around other Chinese people and speaking in Chinese was so much more “comfortable” to them. Although I could make up theories on the existing data, the fact remains that very few of the respondents spent much time attending non-Chinese churches. Christina and Lisa were the only ones to have attended non-Chinese churches. Lisa attended a predominantly white church for over year, and although she loved their sermons and the worship time, she never felt like she was a part of the church. Why Lisa did not feel connected to the church is hard to say. Part of it could have been the result of some cultural barrier, though many other factors are likely to exist as well. A year also might not have been long enough to really build deep relationships. Christina, on the other hand, attended her predominantly white church for three to four years. Yet at the end of that time she still stated, “I never felt comfortable.” Up to four years in the same congregation is a pretty significant amount of time. Although the data is inconclusive, it seems that attending a Chinese church did have a major role in keeping the respondents in this study at the church. Even though some of them claim that going to a Chinese-specific church is not important, none of their personal experiences would support this assertion. Furthermore, the ease with which the Chinese have been able to build community networks in the church could be directly related to ethnicity; take away the ethnic unifying factor and developing friendships might become that much more difficult. And again, language could play a huge role in determining whom immigrants would communicate with and prevent many of the Chinese from attending non-Chinese speaking churches.

Although growing up in different home countries was responsible for creating cultural and linguistic barriers, the three Chinese groups do have much in common as well. Even though some differences do exist, as a result of certain shared experiences in the United States, their common religious beliefs, and their presence in the same church, the different Chinese people groups are willing to look past whatever points of separation may have existed and to care for each other. It is their willingness to understand each other that allows them to continue attending the same church. The fact that they are all still Chinese means they are still likely to share more similarities with one another than with other cultural groups. The separation that had emerged due to the differences in the home countries will not withstand against the unifying force of the experiences in the new country – the United States.

That these different Chinese people can become somewhat united also has implications for the future of the Chinese church. As this section has demonstrated, there are some major differences among those from Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. While each people group may be most comfortable with their own specific group, the three Chinese peoples are able to coexist in the same church. This suggests that Christian congregations must not remain ethnic-specific. FEC Arcadia is a Chinese church that essentially serves three different people. Yet because of their shared experiences in the United States and their presence in the same church, they can become somewhat unified. Their relationship demonstrates the possibility of breaking out of the ethnic-specific model. In the conclusion, I will address the emerging presence and potential of non-ethnic-specific churches.

CONCLUSION

Leaving their countries of origin forever changed the lives of the Chinese. In coming to the United States they became American, then they became Chinese American, and then, at some point, they also became Christian. Through their struggles with speaking the English language and understanding American culture, the Chinese discovered that they were different. This difference would only be reasserted in the discrimination that they all faced. This difference signaled that the Chinese were not accepted by American society. Yet because the Chinese wanted to learn how to be American, they did, ultimately, become American. Well, not American in the sense that white Americans were American, but American in the sense that they were living and surviving in America. Through bringing their Chinese histories into contact with their new American ways of living a new cultural identity emerged – that of the Chinese American. The Chinese American is neither fully Chinese nor fully American. Rather, it is a blending of the two that incorporates aspects of the culture that each individual finds important. As the result of each individual getting to pick and choose which cultural elements to adopt, the degree of *Chineseness* or *Americanness* that each individual varies. Although there are different ways of being Chinese American, all Chinese Americans do have some shared experiences.

The first-generation Chinese Americans all experienced a similar migration process. By coming to the United States the immigrants forfeited their existing identities, community networks, and relationships in which they found help. As such, the physical act of leaving their homes meant they would have to recreate all three of these things. This is when the church entered into their lives. Through their responsibilities in the

church, through finding meaning because of God, and through discovering a new identity in God the immigrants' need to recreate their identities had been solved by the church and Christianity. The members of the church became the immigrants' new friends and social networks. The members of the church also became the new family, or safety net, for the immigrants that provided the new immigrants with services to help them survive in the United States. Furthermore, attending churches would lead many of the Chinese to convert to Christianity as well. The reason many of the Chinese converted was because of their spiritual experiences, however these spiritual experiences went hand-in-hand with their other migration experiences. Leaving their homes was a very dramatic process that would see many immigrants, who had no one to turn to, look to God for help. Although this study did not fully examine the spiritual experiences, it is clear that, at some point, the churchgoers did convert to Christianity. Their conversion could be seen in the way they thought about and approached God and Christianity. As a result of a shared immigration experience as well as being treated similarly by American society, Chinese Americans discovered a level of comfort amongst each other. The Chinese church, then, became a place that these new Chinese American individuals could gather. This ethnic role is very important. Because the Chinese Americans were comfortable around each other, this would have kept them going to the Chinese church. Had they attended other, non-Chinese churches, where they did not feel as comfortable, it is unlikely that they would have remained; which, in turn, means they also would not have converted to Christianity.

Although the Chinese American Christians did share a lot in common as far as their experiences after they entered into the migration process, there were many

differences that continued to exist. The cultural differences that they had grown up in while still in the home countries persisted. Language differences also existed. Yet in spite of language and cultural differences, the Mainland Chinese, Cantonese, and Taiwanese were all able to continue being members at the First Evangelical Church of Arcadia. This demonstrates that because of their shared experiences in the United States and due to their attending the same church, that these different people could be willing to bridge the gap that had been created by their differences. This suggests that all Americans, due to a shared experience living in the United States, should be able to achieve such harmony as well. The main difference, though, is that the members of the church consciously decided to work towards creating unity. This desire to become united is not something that permeates American society. If it did, though, it seems that the unity that can be seen in FEC Arcadia could also be experienced throughout all of America. What this means for the ethnic-specific Chinese church specifically, is that it will be unlikely to remain as it is in the years to come. As more individuals begin to discover their similarities they will be able to break through the barriers and to begin worshipping God at the same churches together. It is for this reason that pan-ethnic churches have begun to multiply. In the same way that Chinese Americans have had a similar experience, so have Asian Americans. It is that commonality that the Asian Americans assert when they attend pan-ethnic churches together. If pan-ethnic churches are possible, then it would only be a matter of time before multi-ethnic churches become popular as well.

The ethnic-specific church had been very important for this generation of post-1965 immigrants. It created a safe space for them to assert their ethnic identities. It

allowed them to continue speaking in Chinese and to practice their cultural traditions. As the Chinese continue to live in the United States, the ethnic-specific church will no longer be necessary – except for the new immigrants, that is. For the second-generation, who already attend their own English-speaking services, it does not seem that the ethnic-specific church will be very important to them. So while, for the first-generation, the church had served as a place where Chinese culture was maintained, in the future the church will likely become a place where different people groups will come into contact with one another and learn how to work with and to love one another just as the Mainland Chinese, Cantonese, and Taiwanese had been able to do.

As scholars in the field of Chinese/Asian American Christianity move forward I hope they will examine the specific reasons for why the Chinese have converted to Christianity. Although this study tried to address that, there was a lot more on the issue of spiritual experiences that needs to be explored. It was also be very important to examine the experiences of the second-generation with Christianity. In a few years, the second-generation will comprise the majority of members of these Chinese churches so understanding their experiences will be as important as understanding their parents' experiences has been. It will be interesting to see what path Chinese American Christianity follow in the years to come.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Becoming Christian
 - a. Where and when were you born?
 - b. What was the religious environment of the community where you grew up like?
 - i. Was your family religious?
 - c. When were you first exposed to Christianity?
 - d. When would you say you accepted Christianity?
 - i. What were some of the things happening in your life during the time of conversion?
 - ii. What made you want to believe in Christianity?
 - iii. What attracted you to Christianity and to the church?
 - e. How did your friends and family react to your conversion? (Was there a lot of support? Did you face any negativity?)
2. Life in America
 - a. Why did you come to the US? Under what circumstances?
 - b. What were some of the early difficulties you faced?
 - i. Was there anyone/anything you could turn to for help?
 - c. What problems do you struggle with now?
 - d. Have you encountered discrimination?
 - e. How is your life different now then it would be had you never come?
 - f. Are you glad that you came to the US?
 - g. How is Christianity different in America?
 - h. Would you say that you became more religious after coming to America?
 - i. What do you think it is like to be a Christian in the US? (Hard? Easy?)
 - j. How would you identify yourself? (Chinese, Chinese American, Asian American, etc...) Why?
 - k. Have you ever thought about returning to live in Asia?
 - l. Parenting
 - i. What are your main worries as a parent in the US?
 - ii. How is being a parent in the US different from being a parent in Asia?
 - iii. What are your hopes for your children's future?
 - iv. How do you view religion when it comes to your children?
3. At FEC
 - a. Why do you go to church?
 - b. What does the church mean to you?
 - c. What does being a Christian mean to you?
 - d. How long have you been going to FEC?
 - i. Why did you first start coming to FEC? What attracted you?
 - e. Have you ever held any positions in the church?

- f. How much time do you spend in a given week engaging in church-related activities?
- g. How important is it to you to go to a specifically Chinese church?
- h. Do you think going to a Chinese church helps to preserve Chinese culture?
- i. How might going to church expose you to American culture?
- j. Do you see the church community as family?
- k. Would you say that you are close to the church community?
- l. Do church members make to up the majority of your close friends?
- m. What are your thoughts on the relationship between the different congregations?
- n. What about on the relationship between people from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan?
 - i. Do you see people from these areas as distinct groups – each with its own customs, culture, and history?
 - ii. What are the differences?
 - iii. What are the similarities?
 - iv. How do you think they view each other?
- o. What are your thoughts on the future for an ethnic-specific church like FEC Arcadia?
 - i. Will it continue to exist as an ethnic-specific church or will it maybe turn into a pan-ethnic or even multi-ethnic institution?
 - ii. How important is it to focus on the second-generation?
- p. How do you view other Asian Americans? Similarities or differences?
- q. Do you have much experience in non-Chinese Christian congregations? (Such as multi-ethnic or white churches)

APPENDIX B

Chinese American Christianity Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study of Chinese American Christianity. You were selected as a possible participant because of your relationship with the First Evangelical Church of Arcadia. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to better understand Chinese American Christianity. This study will focus particularly on exploring what Christianity and the Christian church has meant to Chinese Americans, the reasons and the circumstances behind Christian conversion, and the cultural differences among those who call themselves Chinese (including the Cantonese, Mainland Chinese, and Taiwanese).

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following: To participate in an interview for approximately 45 minutes to one hour.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

I do not anticipate any risks for you participating in this study, other than those encountered in day-to-day life. Indirect benefits to participation are contributing to knowledge on the Chinese American Christianity experience.

Voluntary Nature of Participation: Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the First Evangelical Church of Arcadia. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw or to skip any question at any time without affecting those relationships.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a locked file; only the researchers will have access to the records.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Joshua Lo. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me either by phone at (626) 298-1912 or by email at Joshua.Lo09@pitzer.edu. You may also contact my adviser, Phil Zuckerman, at (909) 607-4495. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Pitzer College Institutional Review Board through Pitzer College's Dean of Faculty, Fletcher Hall room 204 (909-621-8217).

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read the above information, and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature of Participant _____ Date _____
(*signing further indicates that the participant is at least eighteen years old)

Signature of Principal Investigator: _____ Date _____

This consent form will be kept by the researcher for at least three years beyond the end of the study and was approved by the IRB on February 11, 2009.

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