

Introduction

Becoming Religious by Becoming American

What is it about going to the United States that
makes people religious?

—*Question posed to me by Mrs. Chou,*
a woman in Taiwan

THIS BOOK TELLS A STORY of how people become religious by becoming American. The idea for this study developed several years ago during a conversation that I had in Taipei, Taiwan with a lively middle-aged woman named Mrs. Chou.¹ Seeing that I was from the United States, she asked me a question about her neighbor, Mr. Ting, who had immigrated with his family to the United States five years ago, but returned to Taiwan for prolonged visits. After immigrating to the United States, Mr. Ting converted to evangelical Christianity, much to the chagrin of his extended family. With much animation, Mrs. Chou recounted to me how after returning to Taiwan, Mr. Ting promptly went through his entire house and cleared it of any remnants of what he called “idolatry.” The first thing he did was to dismantle the family altar, remove the ancestral tablet, and replace it with a plaque that reads, “Christ is the Lord of this house.” He also removed popular Taiwanese religious icons from his home, such as statues of Kuan Yin Bodhisattva, Ma-tsu, and Maitreya Buddha, as well as books on Chinese astrology and martial arts. He then had a Christian pastor come and exorcise the house of evil spirits. Whenever Mr. Ting returns from the United States, Mrs. Chou hears people who are gathered in his home singing hymns. Mr. Ting frequently talks to Mrs. Chou about Christianity and invites her to attend church. Mrs. Chou knows a few Christians in Taiwan but according to her they are not like Mr. Ting. They keep their religion to themselves. “Mr. Ting has become a totally different man,” Mrs. Chou told me and then asked, “What is it about going to the United States that makes people become religious?”

A look at the number of Taiwanese Christians in the United States clearly shows that Mr. Ting is not an isolated case. In Taiwan, Christians

¹ I have given pseudonyms to protect the identity of the institutions and individuals that participated in my research.

are a mere 3.9 percent of the population,² where the majority practices a religion that is a mixture of Buddhism, Taoism, and folk religion. In comparison, Christians are approximately 20–25 percent of the Taiwanese population in the United States.³ Most Taiwanese convert to Christianity in the United States. Pastors of Taiwanese churches in the United States estimate that over 60 percent of their congregations are converts to Christianity. Other studies of Chinese churches also report a high number of converts (Guest 2003; Ng 2002; Yang 1999a; Yang and Tamney 2006). In Chinese-concentrated areas of Southern California, Chinese churches are common fixtures in the suburban landscape. The overwhelming majority of these Chinese Christian churches are denominationally independent, evangelical, and theologically conservative (Yang 2002a).

But Taiwanese immigrants converting to evangelical Christianity only tells part of the story of Taiwanese immigrant religious experience. No less fervent than Christians are Buddhists, who also experience religious transformation after migrating to the United States. An example of this is Mrs. Lee, a woman who converted to Buddhism after migrating to the United States in 1991.⁴ In Taiwan Mrs. Lee grew up thinking that Buddhism was old-fashioned and backward, “the religion of my grandparents” as she put it. She associated Buddhism with images of elderly women in the back of temples chanting “meaningless mantras.” It was only after migrating to the United States that she encountered what she calls “true Buddhism.” It is a “pure Buddhism” that she claims is untainted by the superstitions of Chinese traditions—a religion that she finds compatible and resonant with her reality as an educated and scientific person. At one time a self-claimed “society lady,” she now lives a simple life where she devotes several hours a day to Buddhist practice, and keeps her social engagements to a minimum. Like Mr. Ting’s conversion to Christianity, Mrs. Lee’s conversion to Buddhism has caused concern among her family and friends. They wonder whether she has abandoned them for her religious practice that now occupies so much of her time and energy.

Like Mrs. Lee, the majority of Taiwanese Buddhists distinguish their current practice of Buddhism from their religion in Taiwan, claiming that

² “Christians” include Protestants and Catholics. Protestants are 2.6 percent and Catholics are 1.3 percent, of the Taiwanese population. These are the official statistics published as of 2005 by Taiwan’s Government Information Office (see *Taiwan Yearbook 2005*).

³ There are no precise data on the religious affiliation of Taiwanese immigrants. A more thorough discussion of how I arrive at this number is in chapter 1.

⁴ I use the word “convert” here because Mrs. Lee and other Taiwanese Buddhists like her claim that they were not Buddhist in Taiwan but became Buddhists only after immigrating to the United States.

they have become practicing Buddhists after coming to the United States (Chandler 2004; Denton Jones 2003). For example, at Dharma Light Temple, a Taiwanese Buddhist temple where I conducted my fieldwork, an estimated 70 percent of the devotees participated in the practice of “taking refuge” (*guiyi san bao*), the Buddhist counterpart of Christian baptism, only after migrating to the United States. What is most remarkable is that Taiwanese immigrants are becoming practicing Buddhists in the United States, despite a popular revival of Buddhism in Taiwan for the past thirty years.⁵

The religious conversions of Taiwanese immigrants like Mr. Ting and Mrs. Lee are part of a broader immigrant experience of revitalized religiosity in the United States. Historians of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have observed the increasing salience of religion to largely European immigrants to the United States (e.g., Bodnar 1985; Dolan 1975, 1985; Smith 1971, 1978). Historian Marcus Lee Hansen (1940) labeled this tendency toward devout piety in earlier immigrants as “immigrant Puritanism.” Immigrants, for example, were among the most avid supporters of nineteenth-century abstinence movements (Dolan 1975, Brady 1976). Studies by sociologists show how religion plays a more vital role in some of the lives of more recent non-European immigrant groups, for example, Dominicans (Levitt 2001), Indians (Williams 1988; Fenton 1988), Koreans (Hurh and Kim 1990; Min 1992), Chinese (Yang 1999a), Thais (Cadge 2005; Numrich 1996), and Cubans (Tweed 1997). And like the Taiwanese, several groups are converting to evangelical Christianity in significant numbers, such as Koreans (Min 2005), Chinese (Abel 2006; Hall 2006; Yang 1999a), Haitians (Richman 2005), Cambodians (Douglas 2005), and Latinos (Espinosa, Elizondo, and Miranda 2003). Religion is so significant to American life that Will Herberg (1960) claimed that while later generations would eventually shed their ethnic and cultural identities, they would continue to maintain their religions. Religion has been, and continues to be, integral to the immigrant experience in the United States.

On one level this study asks the specific question of why and how do middle-class immigrants like the Taiwanese become religious in the United States. On a more general level, this study asks, how do immigrants become Americans? From the outset, I was interested in what dif-

⁵ Taiwanese Christians mark their conversion as the moment that they commit their lives to Jesus Christ. Because conversion for evangelical Christians is designated by the prayer to Jesus Christ to be one’s personal lord and savior, they can often identify the time and place that they became Christian. To Buddhists, on the other hand, this is less clear. Rather than a precise moment in which they started to believe, Buddhists describe the beginning of their Buddhist faith as a time that they started to “study” or “practice” Buddhism.

ferent religions offer to people who have been uprooted and are recreating their lives anew in the United States. In particular, when Taiwanese immigrant evangelical Christians spoke of being saved, or Taiwanese immigrant Buddhists spoke of awakening the Buddha-self, I was interested in how these profound existential experiences manifested themselves sociologically in the reconstruction of themselves as individuals and as communities in the United States. My sense was that if a significant number of Taiwanese immigrants were converting to Buddhism and Christianity in the United States, then certainly these profound experiences of religious transformation—accepting Jesus Christ or awakening the Buddha-self—were as much about otherworldly concerns as they were about making sense of their new lives in the world they inhabited in the here and now—the United States.

Two main themes emerged in my research: How do immigrants reconstruct new communities in the United States? And how do immigrants reconstruct new selves in the United States? For immigrants, migration to the United States disrupts existing networks of community and challenges the moral traditions that once sustained them. In particular, for Taiwanese, migration to the United States severs critical structures of community, kinship, and ritual upon which Confucian moral traditions are based. In this book I explore how immigrants establish new sources of community and moral traditions in the United States in the face of these challenges.

Communities and traditions from Taiwan not only sustained social relations, but created a particular kind of self. The individual-oriented culture of the United States frequently clashes with more collective traditions of selfhood from non-European societies. Furthermore, Taiwanese who enjoyed a particular level of status in Taiwan must now adjust to being foreigners and racial minorities in the United States. Faced with these new American social realities, immigrants must reconstruct coherent selves. When structures and traditions that sustained a particular sense of self are now challenged by competing traditions and different structural realities, immigrants must find the resources to build new narratives, identities, and practices of selfhood.

This book argues that for Taiwanese immigrants these are the challenges of becoming American and that religion—especially religious conversion—plays a pivotal role in the way they understand, define, and address those challenges. Scholars have examined the ways that immigrants become incorporated into American society through key social institutions, such as the economy (Waldinger 1986, 1990), education (Rumbaut and Cornelius 1995; Portes and Rumbaut 2006), and the political system (Gerstle and Mollenkopf 2001; Jones-Correa 2001; Portes and Rumbaut 2006). Scholars are able to measure this process by looking at rates of political participation, test scores, income levels, and employment

INTRODUCTION

5

records. What is often overlooked is how immigrants become Americans in ways that are not so quantifiable or easily observed on the outside—the conversions that occur on the level of habit and the unconscious. For example: the changes in the taken-for-granted and unconscious rules that regulate social relations; the transformations in the moral sensibilities that tell us who we are and who we ought to be; the shifts in daily habits and practices that sustain new ways of being in the United States. An examination of religion and particularly religious conversion gets at these processes of deep transformation. Here I use William James' poetic definition of conversion (1961, 165) as a transformation in one's *habitual center of energy*. To James, conversion is not merely a change in consciousness—beliefs, practices, or identity—but also a change in habit, the grounded unconsciousness of a person.

This book argues that religion remakes Taiwanese immigrants into Americans. Religious conversion to Buddhism and evangelical Christianity offers new moral vocabularies, institutional structures, and ethical traditions that reconstruct community, identity, and self in the United States. Men and women encounter different challenges to their selfhood in the United States and use religion to reconstruct different gendered selves more consonant with their lived realities in the United States. Religious practices oriented toward transforming the self instill techniques of moral self-discipline that, I argue, ground individuals during migration's "unsettling" times. Christianity and Buddhism provide Taiwanese immigrants with new narratives, practices, and habits for remaking themselves as Americans in the United States.⁶ In important, but often overlooked ways, Taiwanese immigrants become American by becoming religious.

RELIGION AND IMMIGRATION

Scholars have long observed the significance of religion to immigrants and explained it by focusing on two functions of immigrant religion in the United States—facilitating adaptation and preserving ethnicity. Religions often play a seminal organizational role in immigrant communities (e.g., Chen and Jeung 2000; Levitt 2001). Whereas religious institutions may be solely centers of worship in the home country, religious institutions serve a multifunctional purpose for immigrants in the United States (Yang and Ebaugh 2001a; Warner 2000). Religious institutions are centers of

⁶ This is not to say that Christianity or Buddhism by nature are American. Indeed the point of comparing the two religions is to show that these are two very different religions and yet they produce similar results. What Christianity and Buddhism do share is that as religions they hold the potential for profound transformations in infinite contexts. What is

religious worship and educational, cultural, social, political, and social service activities. Immigrant religious congregations offer a wide array of formal and informal social services that facilitate the material, social and psychological adjustment of their members to American society (e.g., Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000; Hurh and Kim 1990; Warner and Wittner 1998; Yang 1999a). For example, immigrant religious institutions may offer English classes and information on citizenship, taxes, employment, and the like. Informal networks link immigrants to social and health services and job opportunities. More established immigrants in the congregation inform newer immigrants about local practical knowledge, such as where to buy a phone card, how to enroll children in school or how to register a car.

Second, sociologists explain the attraction of religion to immigrants by pointing to the ethnic function that religion plays in American society. Because religion is voluntarily organized (as opposed to state-organized) in the United States, it is a structurally conducive way for Americans to form groups and build communities. In a multicultural American society, religion has always been a natural way for immigrants to mediate their differences and stake out their identities. R. Stephen Warner (1993, 1060) argues that “religion is a refuge for cultural particularity” in the United States because the constitution has always protected the freedom and autonomy of religious association. In this pluralistic religious landscape, groups use religion to build solidarities and identities (Greeley 1972; Smith 1978; Smith 1998; Warner 1993; Williams 1988). Immigrants use religious institutions to collectively reproduce their traditions and customs among those within and signify their difference to those without. This ethnic concern is all the more heightened for immigrants who wish to preserve their inherited traditions in the new land.

Immigrants are attracted to the ethnic fellowship and belonging that their religions provide. Immigrant religious congregations are spaces where people of shared ethnicity gather to speak their own language, eat their native foods, celebrate their customs, and holidays (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000). The buildings of immigrant congregations often resemble the architecture from their homeland and are a physical reminder of their ethnicity. Furthermore, immigrants use religion to pass on their language, traditions, and values to the second-generation (Chen 2006; Joshi 2006; Kurien 1998; Yang 1999a). A growing literature on transnational religion also points out how religions connect immigrants to their countries of origin (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2002; Guest 2005; Levitt 2001, 2003; Menjivar 1999).

interesting in this particular case is how immigrants capitalize upon these potentialities in the unique social location of the United States.

Religion as Transformation

These studies are very important in explaining why immigrants are drawn to religion in the United States, but they still did not fully answer Mrs. Chou's question "What is it about going to the United States that makes people religious?" Immigrants were attracted to religion in the United States for instrumental reasons to build networks, make friends, find support, and preserve traditions. But religion (even inherited religions) did something else in the process—it transformed immigrants. Immigrants used religion to recreate themselves and their communities anew in the United States. Quite literally, the Buddhists and Christians that I studied were "born again" and "awakened" to new selves and new communities through their religious experiences.

Immigrants may gravitate toward immigrant religions because of the ethnic fellowship, but from what I observed, being religious was also not easy, and required sacrifice and commitment. As Mrs. Chou printed out, "awakening" to a new self and new community could mean casting off old ones. Becoming Christian or Buddhist was not the same as joining another ethnic organization. For several Buddhists and Christians, their religion created tension between them and their spouses, parents, and in-laws. Because Protestant Christianity prohibits ancestral veneration, Taiwanese converts to evangelical Christianity risked severing family relationships through conversion. And indeed, many suffered these consequences in the act of conversion. Buddhists, who were rediscovering an inherited tradition, similarly expressed feelings of social ostracism from family and friends who considered Buddhism backward and superstitious.

Religions may help immigrants maintain some ethnic traditions, but they also radically transform others. As a result of their religious commitments, Christians and Buddhists changed their daily habits—what they did, what they read, what they ate, who they interacted with, who and what they obeyed. Religion made demands on these immigrants, and often quite rigorous ones. Half of the Buddhists I interviewed gave up meat and became vegetarian. Some respondents spent less time developing their careers to cultivate their religious practice. Buddhists now spent free time volunteering at the temple. Others engaged in rigorous and time-consuming daily practices of sutra study, chanting, bowing, and meditation. Several had taken the Bodhisattva vow, where they were scarred on the head or forearm with three incense burns. Christianity also made demands on its faithful. Protestant Christians could no longer participate in "sinful" rituals of ancestral veneration that are so fundamental in Taiwanese tradition. Church members now spent their free time

serving the church. Not only demanding of their time, the church encouraged members to tithe—give 10 percent of their income to the church.

When Taiwanese immigrants talked about “renouncing the self” or “submitting the self,” they described a force that moved them to do things beyond their ordinary habits, inherited traditions, and self-interests. When Christians sang hymns and Buddhists chanted in unison they ritually embodied this force. In their presence, I, too, felt its palpable tangibility. As practicing Christians and Buddhists, they became different persons—new persons. They acted out the directives of something much larger than themselves, an experience with what Emile Durkheim calls the *sacred*, those things that are “set apart and forbidden.”

The Sacred as a Sociological Concept

For both Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, it is the quality of the sacred that makes religion particularly “religious.” For example, magic may also involve supernatural powers or concern the afterlife. The relationship between magician and client, however, is strictly business, based upon the exchange of a service or product between the two. Religion is different because it involves a moral community. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Emile Durkheim writes that religion “binds men who believe in them (religion) to one another and unites them into the same group” (42). Similarly for Max Weber, religion creates a “cosmos of obligation” among individuals that magic does not.

From a sociological perspective, it is easier to apprehend the sacred when we turn around the functional question that sociologists of religion ask—“what does religion do for individuals?”—to ask instead, “what do individuals do for religion?” Religious institutions do many things that secular institutions can do, for example, serve as voluntary associations that facilitate communal life, strengthen cultural bonds, assimilate newcomers, and demarcate ethnic boundaries. However, few secular organizations possess the moral authority to command the level of commitment and sacrifice that religion does from individuals. Religion, because of its sacred power, makes ethical demands that other organizations cannot. For example, the Rotary Club cannot ask people to sell their possessions and live in poverty. Most secular institutions lack the legitimate authority to make the demands that religions do. Taiwanese immigrants will not risk severing their relationships with their families to join an ethnic association like the Taiwanese American Citizens League. But, they will do it to become Christian. It is the sacred that makes people sacrifice their personal interests and utterly reorganize their lives for something outside of themselves. It is this power of the sacred that makes religion particularly “religious.”

Migration and Religious Experience

There are certain moments when people experience the sacred more intensely, or put differently, when religion becomes more powerful. For example, religion was taken for granted in Taiwan as the Taiwanese immigrants themselves pointed out. They practiced their religion as habit, without consciousness or deliberation. But in the United States, the Taiwanese I studied took great pains to be “practicing” Buddhists and Christians. They consciously reorganized their lives around religion. The sacred, I argue, becomes more powerful during periods of transition, or what Ann Swidler (2001) calls “unsettled” times. During such times, the sacred gains the power to transform individuals and societies. As Swidler puts it, “When people are learning new ways of organizing individual and collective life, practicing unfamiliar habits until they become familiar, then doctrine, symbol, and ritual directly shape their action” (99).

Migration, no doubt, is one of these moments. It is no coincidence that the experience of migration is critical to the spiritual practice of several religious traditions. The Buddha’s first step to enlightenment was the renunciation of domesticity and the embracement of a permanent state of homelessness. In the Hebrew scriptures, God calls Abraham (then Abram) to leave the land of his kin, and to build a great nation in a new and strange land. In all of the great world religions, the spiritual practice of pilgrimage invokes the sacred by deliberately inducing the experience of migration.

Migration, or leaving what is familiar, draws religious questions to the forefront and elicits an openness for change that may not exist in the normal course of life. By disrupting the ordinary patterns of life, migration challenges people’s assumptions about who they are and how they fit into their social worlds. Migration calls into question the very core of one’s being, questions about belonging and identity, self and community. During these times of flux, taken-for-granted traditions and vague definitions will not suffice. Conversion is one human response to disruption and transition.

All pilgrims may be “migrants,” but not all migrants are pilgrims. Migration, however, makes some people pilgrims. This book is about this group of people—migrants who become pilgrims. These are, so to speak, the lost that are found. They are people, who, through their migration experiences, encountered the power of the sacred and, in the parlance of evangelical Christians, become “saved.”

Salvation

If migration is on the one hand an experience of *losing* a given reality, it is also an experience of *finding* a new reality. If migration is the experience

of destroying one mode of existence, it is also the experience of building a new one. Salvation offers something particularly compelling to the immigrant, who, either by choice or by force, now faces a new world. If the experience of migration brings immigrants to question their former ways of being, then the experience of religious salvation offers a *transformative program* to become new beings.

Max Weber categorized Buddhism and Christianity, along with Islam and Judaism among others, as “salvation religions.” These are *salvation* religions because they pose an alternative transcendent and perfect reality to save humans from the fallen and imperfect world that they inhabit. Unlike magic, salvation *religions* approach salvation in a systematic and organized fashion. Not only do salvation religions envision a radically different world order, but they also possess the level of systematic coherence to rationally reorganize individuals and institutions around a single ethical principle. Weber saw that salvation religions have a potential for *conversion*, the transformation of habits, which other ideological and symbolic systems may not. In the words of historian Timothy Smith, “systems of religious thought . . . can help break the chains of custom by making new and revolutionary demands, dissolving myths, and declaring a transcendent ethic not identifiable with any existing society or social institution” (1978, 1157).

Migration and salvation alike embody the dialectical forces of dying and birthing, destructing and reconstructing. Only after rejecting his worldly family, wealth, and identity, did the Buddha awaken to a new form of community, the Sangha, and a new form of selfhood, the Buddha, based on an otherworldly reality. In a similar spirit, Christ commanded the faithful to discard their old selves and bonds of kinship when he declared, “For I have come to ‘set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man’s enemies will be those of his own household’” (Matthew 10:35–39). In place of the old, Christ offered a new “born-again” self, and a new kinship of the church based on an ethic of love. Both Buddha and Christ rejected this world for another, yet the new terms of salvation would have monumental consequences for how the faithful live their lives in this world.

THE STUDY

In this book I ask how religious salvation transforms Taiwanese immigrants in the United States. Most often, the quest for otherworldly salvation begins as a search for solutions to the problems that individuals en-

counter in this world. As Weber writes, “the idea of ‘salvation,’ pregnant with consequences, still has the elementary rational meaning of liberation from concrete ills” (1978, 437). The Buddha’s search for enlightenment was a response to the problems of human suffering that he observed once he left the sheltered walls of his privileged life. Christ attracted the masses through his ministry of physical healing. No doubt his promise of establishing the kingdom of heaven on earth also addressed the concerns of his fellow Jews as peoples dominated by the Roman Empire. Similarly for Taiwanese immigrants, the religious world of signs and symbols are grounded in the mundane world of surviving and thriving in America. The particular shape that salvation takes depends upon the social contexts of the saved.

Methods and Sample

To understand the social context of Taiwanese immigrant religious transformation, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the San Gabriel Valley of Southern California from January 1999 to March 2001. Due to the high influx of Taiwanese immigration in the 1980s and 1990s, Southern California, and in particular the San Gabriel Valley, has become the largest and most vibrant Taiwanese community in the United States. The United States Citizenship and Immigration Services reports that 22 percent of all Taiwanese immigrants arrive intending to reside in Los Angeles County alone, not to mention the surrounding areas such as Orange County where a fair number of Taiwanese settle. I conducted participant-observation in two Taiwanese immigrant religious institutions.⁷ What I call “Grace Evangelical Church,” is a Taiwanese church that is evangelical and denominationally independent, like most Chinese churches (Yang 2002a). “Dharma Light Temple,” is a Mahayana Buddhist temple that incorporates both Pure Land and Chan traditions, similar to most Chinese Buddhist organizations. I also observed the services of other local Taiwanese and Chinese immigrant churches and temples. I discuss Dharma Light Temple, Grace Evangelical Church, and the larger context of Southern California’s Taiwanese immigrant community in more detail in chapter 1.

I also conducted in-depth interviews among fifty Taiwanese immigrants—twenty-five Christian converts and twenty-five Buddhists (see

⁷ At Dharma Light Temple and Grace Evangelical Church, I participated in a variety of capacities. I attended religious services, religious education classes, and retreats. I was a volunteer at the temple and helped in the kitchen, the office, and in various other places where they needed me. At the church, I participated in weekly visitations to members’ homes. Because I speak English fluently, both the temple and church recruited me in their religious education programs for the youth, where I served as a youth camp counselor.

appendix for interview questions). Each interview was two to three hours in length. I collected my sample through snowball sampling. The interview respondents were members of different Chinese churches and temples in Southern California, however, many attended Grace Evangelical Church and Dharma Light Temple.

Although some came as early as 1965 and others as late as 1997, the majority of immigrants in my sample came in the 1980s and early 1990s, when they were in their twenties and thirties. This is representative of the larger Taiwanese immigration pattern to the United States. Respondents ranged in age from thirty-five to fifty-five. All but two were married. One woman was single, the other divorced. Over 50 percent of the women were college educated and 27 percent had advanced degrees. Over 80 percent of the men were college educated and 55 percent had advanced degrees. My sample is slightly more educated than the general Taiwanese immigrant population. All men in my sample were employed. Half were skilled professionals who work outside of the mainstream economy, and the other half work in small businesses within the ethnic economy. Half of the women in my sample worked outside of the home. Among these, half were professionals working in the mainstream economy and the other half within the ethnic economy.

In addition to the fifty in-depth interviews, I interviewed monastics, pastors, and religious lay leaders from Dharma Light Temple, Grace Church, and other Chinese religious congregations in the Southern California area. I also interviewed Taiwanese immigrants with no religious affiliation whatsoever. In the fall of 1999, I made a brief visit to Taiwan, where I observed religious practice and interviewed religious clergy and laypeople.

The Taiwanese

“Taiwanese” refers to all persons from Taiwan, and includes “Mainlanders” (*waishengren*) who immigrated to Taiwan from China after 1949 as well as “ethnic Taiwanese” (*benshengren*), the Han Chinese who came to Taiwan before 1949. Many studies lump Taiwanese with Chinese. I distinguish the two, however, because 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. As I discuss in chapter 1, Taiwanese immigrants in the United States tend to be more educated, affluent, and suburban than other Chinese. Furthermore, Taiwanese can be more traditionally Confucian than Chinese from China for a multitude of reasons, including the distinct political and economic systems of Taiwan and China (Whyte 2004). At times I include

Taiwanese among “Chinese.” Unless I specify their country of origin, this refers to all Han Chinese, including persons from Taiwan, Hong Kong, China, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, and so on. Taiwanese immigrants, while having their own institutions and ethnic economy, also participate in organizations, institutions, economies, and cultural practices that are based on a shared ethnicity with other Chinese. In these instances, I use the term Chinese rather than Taiwanese.

Studying the Religion of New Immigrants through the Taiwanese

The case of Taiwanese immigrant religious conversion is a lens to understand the experiences of contemporary immigrants that have entered the United States since the Immigration Act of 1965.⁸ As an immigrant group from Asia that is largely middle-class, educated, and non-Christian, Taiwanese immigrants represent a new and increasing type of immigration that differs in region, class, and religion from earlier immigration to the United States (Chang 2006; Chee 2005; Chen 1992; Ng 1998). Whereas earlier free immigrant groups came from Europe, contemporary immigration draws largely from countries in Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, the Middle East, and Africa. Past European immigrants were largely working-class and built their ethnic enclaves in urban areas. Today’s immigrants represent a far more heterogeneous class population that includes low-skilled workers, but also educated professionals (e.g., Espiritu 2003; George 2005; Kanjanapan 1995; Liu and Cheng 1994) who tend to reside in suburban settings (Fong 1994; Yang 1999a). Unlike nineteenth- and early twentieth-century immigrants, who came from Christian backgrounds, contemporary post-1965 immigrants are religiously diverse and come introducing their Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam to the American religious landscape (Eck 2001; Wuthnow 2005).

In sum, contemporary immigration is a different experience than immigration in the nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries. The immigrant population itself is different, and so is the United States they enter. If religion is a way that humans work out the problems that they face in daily life, as I claim it is, then the shape of religion varies significantly according to context. While all immigrants may face similar challenges of uprooting, migration, and settlement, *how* they experience these is necessarily shaped by their particular social locations and the resources they can bring to bear.

⁸ The 1965 amendments to American immigration policy abolished the national origins quota system. In place of nationality and ethnic considerations, immigration policies substituted a system based primarily on reunification of families and needed skills.

More recently scholars have devoted attention to the topic of religion among contemporary immigrant groups (e.g., Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000; Haddad, Smith, and Esposito 2003; Leonard et al. 2005; Warner and Wittner 1998). With rare exceptions (Kwon 2003), book-length studies do not compare different religious traditions within the same immigrant group. Using Christian and Buddhist Taiwanese immigrants as a case study, this book systematically compares how migration shapes religious experiences and how different religions shape migration experiences within the same group. A study of Taiwanese immigrants' religious lives is well-situated to compare how contemporary immigrants use Christianity, the American majority religion, and Buddhism, a minority Asian religion, to work out the challenges of adjusting to middle-class life in the United States. This book also demonstrates how immigrants of Western and Asian religious traditions face different issues in the processes of becoming American and staying Taiwanese. And finally, a study of Christians and Buddhists in the same Taiwanese community reveals the religious diversity within ethnic groups and shows how intragroup dynamics influence immigrant religious experience.

ORGANIZATION OF BOOK

The book begins in chapter 1 by examining the social, political, economic, and religious contexts that shape Taiwanese immigration and religious experience in Southern California. I describe my fieldsites, Grace Evangelical Church and Dharma Light Temple, in more detail and situate them within these larger contexts.

Chapter 2 illustrates how conversion to Christianity provides a moral and institutional basis for the formation of communities in the United States. A confluence of factors, including immigrant needs and church marketing strategies, make Christianity a compelling choice for Taiwanese immigrants. The practical need for community leads to a transformation in the symbols that Taiwanese immigrants use to make sense of their new realities.

Chapter 3 examines how religious meanings, identities, and practices of inherited religious traditions are transformed in the United States. I claim that Buddhism shifts from embedded religion to explicit religion in the United States. This chapter shows the growing presence of Christianity in the ethnic community challenges Buddhist identity and practice. Buddhist religious experience transforms from practice to belief and from tradition to choice as Buddhists interact with Christians within the immigrant community. The Buddhist case shows how religious pluralism

within the ethnic community drives the revitalization and redefinition of an inherited religious tradition.

Chapter 4 addresses how men and women use religious models of authentic selfhood to reconstruct new selves in the United States. Gendered immigration experiences profoundly shape how men and women experience and articulate their new, true selves. Conversion narratives are ways, I argue, for men and women to work out the contradictions between traditional gender expectations and the realities of their lives in the United States. Distinct understandings of salvation and religious community among Buddhists and Christians shape how Taiwanese immigrants situate their “true selves” in the world.

Chapter 5 shows how Chinese Buddhism and evangelical Christianity offer “salvation ethics” that reorganize the lives of religious converts. Religious practices are techniques of moral self-discipline that replace the governing structures of Confucian tradition, community, and family that have been weakened in the “morally disordering” experience of immigration.

The conclusion discusses how Taiwanese immigrants become American by becoming religious. I show how distinct religious traditions, immigration experiences, and class interact to shape immigrant religion. Furthermore, I illustrate how the religious experiences of Taiwanese immigrants in Southern California reflect more general patterns in American religion.