

Article

Geopolitics and Identity-Making in US Diasporic Chinese Churches

Shirley Lung

The Department of Sociology, The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD 21218, USA; slung1@jhu.edu

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Abstract: Using ethnographic and interview data, my paper analyzes how geopolitical relationship manifest at the community level in Chinese America Responding to Lien Pei-Te's call to meaningfully disaggregate among the commonly "lumped together Chinese Americans", I draw upon the experiences of specific groups of Chinese immigrants to the US, post-1949 migrants to Taiwan, pre-1949 migrants to Taiwan, and the People's Republic of China (PRC) Chinese, in order to understand how boundary drawing occurs in their various communities but also consider how the act of being "lumped together" itself in the US context complicates identity formation. The year 1949 marks the communist victory in the PRC as well as the inaugural year of the Kuomintang (KMT)-led Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan. Carved out of these historical events, the contemporary social relations among these groups persist after their migration to the US, but they manifest differently in various domains of practice, including religious ones. As political relationships among states reorganizes their social relations, the religious site offers what Carolyn Chen calls a "moral vocabulary" to articulate, contemplate, and, in some cases, justify these divides. Even within a Christian context, messages of inclusivity are not universal but redefined according to the political and social contexts. By not assigning a singular definition to Christian thought, my paper makes way for a theorization of an intersectional Christian identity.

Keywords: Chinese Diaspora; Sinophone; geopolitics; Christianity

1. Introduction

With China's rise in the global order combined with the continuing push for Taiwanese independence,¹ questions of who counts as Taiwanese and who counts as Chinese have come to the forefront, even affecting areas outside of distinct political arenas. As these fraught geopolitical relationships evolve, the meanings attached to these subethnic identifications not only retain their historical saliency but also continue to manifest in present-day forms. In other words, being Chinese today builds upon its historical meanings but simultaneously changes as new meanings seeking precedence are circulated according to various political agendas. While scholars of Asian American Studies have highlighted these groups previously (e.g., [Chen 2008](#); [Lien 2010](#); [Hsu 2000](#); [Yang 1999](#)), few have identified how they have structured different aspects of social and political life in the years since their emergence, demonstrating that they do more than simply mark moments of migration. In other words, the politics of Chineseness do not only encompass political views or positions but also engage the broader historical question of how individuals came to be and continue to become Chinese itself. Nonetheless, many works primarily rely upon the broader Chinese label within their analytical frameworks and fail to attend to what [Wang \(2013\)](#) calls "less obvious" forms of segmentation within

¹ Recent 2018 elections have brought the Kuomintang (KMT) back into power, so it is uncertain how Taiwan's position on independence will change in the future.

Chinese America that would highlight these historical dimensions, like clan divides, geographic and linguistic origins, and political party affiliations in China or Taiwan. Often originating from China and Taiwan, these forms of segmentation tend to be neglected in Asian American Studies in favor of ones that are more legible in North American academia like gender, nativity status, and social class (Wang 2013). Other scholars of the Chinese diaspora have not only identified the significance of these types of social organizations in Southeast Asia and mostly other non-US locations but also established some kind of commonality or linkage, however contested, among diasporic Chinese (Amrith 2011; Duara 1997; Kuo 2014; Wang 2000, 2013a; Zhou and Liu 2016). Similarly, my paper envisions Chinese America as a part of the greater Chinese diaspora and, thus, highlights this transnational dimension of being Chinese American.

Observing these less-visible segments and their intersections not only forward the Asian American scholarship but also reveal how the process of meaning-making changes over time within Chinese America. As a result, my study examines the Chinese American community in terms of identities produced after 1949 and how combinations of emergent and residual meanings² attached to these identities continue to redefine relationships within the community. Specifically, I explore the Taiwanese (American) identity internally as well as relative to that of the People's Republic of China (PRC) Chinese. Within the North American sociological literature as well as the public forum, the Taiwanese people and Taiwanese Americans are commonly associated with a definition of Chineseness that centers the PRC Chinese while viewing Taiwan, Hong Kong, and sometimes Singapore, as added-on satellites or "ethnic supplements" (Chow 2013; Tu 2013; Wang 2013a). By not exploring these places individually, we not only overlook how domestic and international forces shape these groups but also how they engage with dominant renderings that they institutionally encounter in their daily lives.

As such, my paper analyzes the politics of identity formation at the intersection of geopolitics, religion, and US immigration among Taiwanese and PRC Chinese Christians. Building upon Wang (2013) "structure of dual domination", my paper examines how "domestic politics and bilateral relations between the US and China" (p. 176) as well as Taiwan shape these post-1949 identities and manifest at the community level after migration to the US. Taiwan or the Republic of China's (ROC) status remains increasingly precarious today as China's President Xi takes a hardline stance toward Taipei. Furthermore, President Trump's America continues to be unpredictable and drastic in policymaking toward both the PRC and the ROC. These external and internal social processes affect identity-making within these Christian communities and, thus, the contested contours of being Taiwanese, Chinese, American, and Christian. As these boundaries are fluid, immigrant communities will be affected in both large and small ways by these geopolitical relationships, making my study a timely topic.

My research questions are twofold. First, what is the relationship between geopolitics and the ways in which diasporic Chinese Christian communities organize themselves in the US? Implicit within this first question is a second one: what is the role of the US and broader American Evangelical culture in fashioning these narratives of ethnic or cultural identity?

Responding to Lien Pei-Te's (Lien 2010) call to meaningfully disaggregate among the commonly "lumped together Chinese Americans", I argue that disaggregation by post-1949 identities can contribute new theoretical and conceptual frameworks for understanding contemporary Chinese America. Post-1949 identities refers to those forged after the 1949 victory of the Communist Party of China and the subsequent establishment of the PRC as well as the inaugural year of the Kuomintang

² Originating from Williams (1977) seminal work *Marxism and Literature*, concepts of dominant, residual, and emergent nuance what he calls an "epochal" representation of history in which periods transition from one to another without attention to the "determinate dominant features" at play (p. 121). By highlighting the interrelations and the internal dynamics of new stages or periods, the residual and the emergent can offer insight into the workings of the dominant.

(KMT)-led ROC.³ Specifically, I look at the diasporic Chinese of three subethnic groups: those of *waishengren* (those who fled to Taiwan after the communist victory and are sometimes known as second-generation mainlanders), *benshengren* (those who migrated to Taiwan prior to the communist victory), and PRC Chinese (those who remained in mainland China after the communist victory).⁴ As noted, my paper emphasizes the complexity of the Taiwanese American experience, relative to that of PRC Chinese Americans who take a secondary role. Like that of Shih (2013a) Sinophone Studies among other critics of the Chinese diaspora, my project aims to “decouple Chineseness and China [in order to bring] to the fore a critical perspectivalism and an interpretive positionality that are essential in our reconceptualization of ‘diaspora’ in the twenty first century” (Tsai 2013). However, unlike Shih, I do not do away with diaspora altogether. Instead, my rendering of diaspora attempts to recuperate the concept by centering the *huaren* identity rather than any kind of Chinese state, a framework akin to Tu (1994, 2013) notion of “cultural China”.

I conducted approximately ten months of ethnography and in-depth interviews at a majority Taiwanese Christian church, now known as Maryland Evangelical Church (MEC), and a majority mainland Chinese Christian church, now known as Maryland Baptist Church (MBC),⁵ as well as interviewed other diasporic Chinese whom MEC and MBC congregants introduced me to. Through ethnography at relatively homogenous churches, I understand why some groups worship together while others worship apart, building on the literature on cosmopolitan or diverse immigrant churches⁶. Interrogating both the experiences of those minority and majority members of both churches gives insight not only into who congregants choose to worship with but, more importantly, which communities they experience what Peggy Levitt and Levitt and Schiller (2004) call “ways of belonging” with as opposed to merely “ways of being”.

Based on my ethnography and interview data, I find that Christian messages from the leadership are overwhelmingly inclusive and encourage members to pattern themselves after God’s irrational and “reckless” love, to embrace all members of the Chinese diaspora and not fragment along subethnic lines.⁷ However, interviews and informal conversations with churchgoers show that both subethnic groups of Taiwanese construct their identity against a PRC Chinese other as well as a broader white American or “foreigner” other.⁸ Using what Chen (2008) calls their “moral vocabularies” to articulate these differences, Taiwanese congregants complicate and redefine what it means to be “inclusive” and “decent” Christians. Their anxieties about a strong China manifest through their fear of “hordes” of PRC Chinese immigrants “taking over” their church and changing worship practices. Pointing to commonly circulated stereotypes of materialism and desires for social status, Taiwanese congregants simultaneously sympathize with, but also distance themselves from, PRC Chinese immigrants. As a result, I argue that contemporary and historical geopolitical relationships among Taiwan, China, and the US inform the ongoing construction of self and other and that at the site of religion, the language of the Gospel provides a way to make sense of and justify those boundaries. In other words,

³ 1949 represents the Communist victory in mainland China, setting in motion the emergence of these identifications of interest, while 1965 marks not only the establishment of Immigration Act and Nationality Act but also the time period when multiculturalism becomes a political aspiration for many immigrants.

⁴ In 1949, Chiang Kai-Shek, the leader of the KMT, fled to Taiwan with approximately two million soldiers, bureaucrats, their families, as well as art from the imperial palace as a result of losing the Chinese Civil War with the communists (Hsu 2015; Lien 2010). As a result, 1949 is commonly noted as the date of arrival in Taiwan, but people were fleeing during the entirety of the Chinese Civil War (1946–1949).

⁵ Names of churches and individuals are pseudonyms. While MBC is Baptist in name and history, its current practices as well as identification by leadership remain non-denominational, independent, and Evangelical in nature like most Chinese churches. For more information on characteristics of Chinese churches, see Yang (1999).

⁶ Both MEC and MBC are short distances from several other diasporic Chinese churches, demonstrating the existence of an array of choices.

⁷ Sermon, 12 November 2017, 3 June 2018.

⁸ Here, I employ the language used by my informants when describing predominantly white, middle-class Americans. Typically, my informants characterize them as either *meiguoren* or *waiguoren*, “Americans” or “foreigners” respectively. They perceive this group as representing America at large as well as the one in which they compare and contrast themselves with.

messages of inclusivity and transcendence of worldly relations are neither universal nor fixed but redefined according to political and social contexts. By not assigning a singular definition to Christian thought, my paper makes way for multiple interpretations and more importantly, a theorization of an intersectional Christian identity.

2. Theory

2.1. Labeling the Chinese Diaspora

While Asian American Studies in the social sciences have disaggregated Asian American communities by nativity status, gender, educational attainment, and to some extent, social class (e.g., [Hirshman and Wong 1984](#); [Sakamoto and Furuichi 2002](#); [Zeng and Xie 2004](#)), less obvious forms of segmentation like by clan divides and linguistic groups have been neglected. Moreover, when analyzing the Chinese diaspora in the US, it is important to interrogate presentist assumptions about China or Asia at large instead of drawing conclusions based upon generally unpacked concepts of “American”, “Asian”, or “Chinese”. Indeed, historian [McKeown \(2001\)](#) notes that the process of unpacking these labels is an integral part of “conceptualizing a diaspora” itself. Similarly, commenting on Chinese literary studies, [Chow \(2013\)](#) notes that the label of Chinese is “untheorized and taken for granted” so when analyses are built upon “this unproblematized, because assumed, notion of Chineseness”, “an entire theory of ethnicity becomes embedded (without ever being articulated as such) in the putative claims” (pp. 42, 51). Indeed, US scholarship on immigration and, in particular, assimilation build sophisticated theories on the process without questioning notions of Asianness or Chineseness and how these categories have been constructed across time (e.g., [Alba and Nee 2003](#); [Kao and Tienda 1995](#); [Kasinitz 2008](#); [Portes and Rumbaut 2001](#); [Zhou and Portes 1993](#); [Lee and Zhou 2015](#)). While probing the multiple meanings of being Chinese or Asian may be beyond the scope of their studies, observing and analyzing how Chinese Americans identify may answer or deepen answers to general questions of gender relations, social class status, among other stratifications. As [Chow \(2013\)](#) notes, unpacking “what constitutes the ethnic label itself” remains the last frontier.

Scholars of diaspora have long debated the intricacies of Chineseness, contributing transnational frameworks. By bringing this perspective to bear on the Asian American experience, we can discover new “ways of being and belonging” within these communities and move beyond what [Ang \(2001\)](#) calls “American centered” approaches. [Chow \(2013\)](#) asserts that, until recently, what are commonly known as Chinese communities oftentimes referred to themselves by their “subprovincial identities” as opposed to a broader Chinese label, demonstrating that being Chinese is a relatively modern notion that is deceptively straightforward. Being Chinese in America implicitly centers the PRC while tacking on Taiwan, Hong Kong, and sometimes Singapore as other majority Han Chinese societies. As such, this definition smooths over various inconsistencies under a guise of objectivity. Studying the Chinese and overseas Chinese or *Huaqiao* in San Francisco, Shanghai, Singapore, and Hong Kong, [Wang \(2013a\)](#) questions the meaningfulness of distinguishing between Chinese in Shanghai, for instance, compared to their overseas counterparts in Singapore. By pointing to the degree of accuracy and implicit racism in counting Chinese by blood and descent, his research casts doubt on neat delineations between Chinese and their diaspora.

Concepts of the Chinese diaspora or overseas Chinese are diverse and range from more *zhongguo*-based models like that of [Chan \(2018\)](#) who describes diaspora as serving “to unify a fragmented time and space, a means through which the homeland-nation can be constituted and reconstituted” (p. 11) to those that reject the notion of diaspora altogether like Shih Shu-Mei. Contrasting the approaches of many recent works, Chan brings the center back to China, forwarding a one-China thesis that emphasizes the contested Chinese identity as a result of postwar geopolitics. On the other side is Shih Shu-Mei ([Shih 2013a](#)), who decries diaspora as “a euphemism that covers up the systematic and widespread violence against native peoples that accompanied the settlement of imperial subjects” (p. 3). Shih’s anxieties about the homogenizing effect tying Chineseness to China

after centuries have passed as well as those on an assumed “cultural dependence” or “political loyalty” to the Chinese state by Han Chinese migrants everywhere are legitimate. By using the Sinophone in reference to the multiple Sinitic languages spoken around the world, Shih attempts to get rid of the center and periphery framework by reminding us that “the center is always already the margin (Tsai 2013). Amrith (2011) echoes this view as he questions how methodological nationalism underlies debates of center and periphery. He describes researchers being “too quick to project into the past the modern world of nation-states with strict controls over movement into and out of their territories”, elaborating that “borders did not pre-date mobility”. In other words, transnationalism is the historical norm, not the exception.

While my analysis is informed by both Shih and Chan, I retain the use of diaspora while opting to sever the link between an ethnic Chineseness and a contemporary political loyalty or cultural dependence on the Chinese state. Conceptually, diaspora remains salient in my study because the ancestral homeland for Taiwanese and PRC Chinese immigrants in the US is China, but the PRC is only one source for the making of Chineseness in the US. The core or center of Chineseness in my rendering of diaspora is the *huaren* identity or a general sense of Chineseness, one that changes across time and space.⁹ Like Ang (2001), I pair diaspora with the idea of “Chineseness” because the paradigm is “necessarily unstable” and “anti-essentialist”. In this way, diaspora embodies the in-betweenness of transnational spaces as it resists centering dominant narratives of Han-ness or politically driven notions of “Chineseness”. In other words, diaspora destabilizes both popular notions of “Chineseness” forwarded by the ROC and the PRC as well as the orientalism of the West because it allows for multiple and simultaneous “Chinese” and “Taiwanese” identities without prioritizing any single one.

Because it takes place in the US, my study is careful to recognize what Peggy Levitt and her colleagues (Levitt and -Nieves 2011) call “an American-inflected version” of Taiwan and China in circulation. Culturally “anchored” by the US, the version of Taiwan and China produced in the US may resemble but not align with that of people still living there. Levitt’s notion of inflection complements the local nature of the Sinophone because Sinophone culture is place-based and thus, a key part of where it is created. “Sinophone American culture is American culture” (Shih 2013a, p. 7). The importance of the US context is located precisely where it is unseen. When particular attributes of diasporic Chinese appear racially fixed and distinctly un-American, it emphasizes how embedded the process of racialization is and drives us to question these ostensibly hard boundaries between Chinese and American. Shih’s Sinophone further unsteadies the binary of ethnic preservation and assimilation that took place in early migration scholarship, asking why the eating of certain foods or celebration of certain holidays are necessarily Chinese and not American. Thus, a deeper dive into all aspects of identity-making within these diasporic Chinese communities provides us with answers not only to how this process is negotiated between diasporas and their homelands but also unearths the American inflection inherent in Chinese America.

Similarly, scholars of race caution against making arguments without questioning the labels and categories employed. While race may be “socially constructed”, its “social reality” is made material because individuals believe it is true (Bonilla-Silva 2003). Ethnicity and race are not fixed categories but rather ones that have become “taken-for-granted” and “normalized” through racialization processes that are historically contextualized (Chen and Jeung 2012; Jeung 2005; Omi and Winant 2014). By showing that the decisions made by immigrants are subject to “the racial identity typically imposed on them by white outsiders” (Chou and Feagin 2014, p. 16), we can direct our

⁹ Yang (1999) highlights the different ways of saying Chinese in Mandarin: *zhongguoren* means people who are citizens of the Chinese state; *huaren* is broader in meaning and refers to those who are of Chinese descent and living outside of China; *huayi* refers exclusively to those who are of Chinese descent, especially the second-generation. Depending upon the political climate, the specific Chinese identity of members of diaspora may change. For more information on being *hua* or generally Han, see Shih (2013b), Chow (1997), and Carrerio (2012).

attention to how immigrants forge their identities under these conditions rather than emphasizing their agency in choice-making.

2.2. Geopolitics and the Taiwanese Identity

Yang (2000) notes that the Taiwanese are “not a homogenous people”, pointing to the “host of subcultural, language, and sociopolitical differences” within the people (p. 99). In his study of Chinese churches in Houston and Washington, D.C., Yang (1999, 2002) writes that many early members were from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and areas of Southeast Asia, while mainland Chinese began arriving during the 1980s when the US “switched its formal diplomatic relations from the ROC to the PRC”. As a result of their different migration histories and country-of-origin experiences, these diasporic Chinese groups may not always relate to each other as a single group. Thus, in various situations, diasporic Chinese may more closely identify with their regional or subethnic identifications rather than simply being generally Chinese. It is important to recognize when they deploy their Chinese identities as opposed to their subethnic groups.

My paper highlights the salience of these internal divides that began with the return of Taiwan to China in 1945 after fifty years of Japanese colonization continues to this day. Hsiao A-chin (Hsiao 2013) writes that under KMT rule, the relationship between the *benshengren* or local Taiwanese¹⁰ and *waishengren* or “people from another province” quickly became strained. As Chiang Kai-shek and KMT or Nationalists saw being in Taiwan as a temporary stop on their way to retake the mainland, they claimed their government to represent “free China” or only legitimate Chinese government. During this period of martial law, commonly known as the White Terror, (1949–1987), the KMT promoted mainland Chinese cultural values and ideas at the expense of the local culture, effectively minoritizing the majority. Philips (1999, p. 276) writes of the ambivalence that the local Taiwanese felt upon decolonization and reintegration into China: “where did they fit in the nation of China? What was their place in the Nationalist state?” To them, the chaotic and brutal way that the Nationalists governed was simply a less competent form of colonization (ibid.). After the return of Taiwan, local Taiwanese, at least among the Han Taiwanese, imagined that they could simply become Chinese again, but the blatant corruption within the KMT government and military as well as authoritarian practices ultimately dispelled those hopes (Brown 2004, p. 9).

Violent encounters like the February 28 Incident in 1947 or the Kaohsiung Incident in 1979 color the relationship between the state and citizens, complicating internal divides. Furthermore, while the KMT deemed that local Taiwanese were corrupted or degraded by Japanese colonization, during Japanese colonization itself, anticolonial movements were spearheaded by the local Taiwanese, and prominent writers of the time even envisioned themselves as part of the greater Chinese literary tradition (Hsiao 2013). These ardently anticolonialist local Taiwanese writers, like Chen Shaoting, affirmed their Chineseness and nationalized their literature by highlighting its unique anti-Japanese perspectives (ibid.). This kind of affirmation of Chineseness would later be picked up by the early political challengers to KMT rule in the late 1960s, forwarding a reformist program. During the 1970s, intellectuals and activists of both *waishengren* and *benshengren* background began to explore the dynamics of a Taiwanese identity apart from China, anticipating the democratization movement and cultural indigenization or “Taiwanization” that would come in the following decades (Hsiao 2013).

Today’s KMT, known as the pan-blue coalition, no longer espouses the “oppose communism and restore the country” platform it held well into the 1970s, but rather supports status-quo cross-strait

¹⁰ It should be noted that local Taiwanese refers to earlier waves of Han Chinese immigrants, specifically those who arrived prior to 1895 when the Japanese colonial government stopped immigration from China (Brown 2004, p. 9). Shih Shu-Mei (Shih 2013a, p. 12) notes that “immigrants from China arrived on the island of Taiwan beginning in the seventeenth century and proceeded to colonize the aboriginal Austronesian peoples, even though they had previously been subjected to Dutch colonialism, and later to Japanese colonialism, followed by a new regime from China after WWII”. Brown (2004, p. 8) also highlights that prior to Japanese colonization, Han Taiwanese did not consider themselves to be a unified group. Hoklo, a regional variety of Han Chinese, also refers to local Taiwanese and *benshengren*, a term coined during the 1980s (ibid.).

relations between mainland China and Taiwan and opposes Taiwanese independence. While the *waishengren* and their descendants were the original followers of the Nationalists, this group has also developed a sense of Taiwanese-ness that separates them from their PRC Chinese counterparts and may no longer support today's KMT. Some have learned Hokkien, the language commonly called "Taiwanese" by pro-independence proponents, and have intermarried with the local Taiwanese. Indeed, today's *waishengren* have started to embrace being "from Taiwan" if not being "Taiwanese" itself (Brown 2004). Nevertheless, this does not mean that tensions fostered have disappeared. During the White Terror, *waishengren* were largely excluded from small- and medium-sized businesses owned by the local Taiwanese while *benshengren* were excluded from positions of power in the government (Brown 2004, p. 10). These historical events are not soon forgotten, and so, these labels continue to articulate themselves in contemporary society. However, these post-1949 identities do not stand still but rather take on new meanings with political and social developments. In the historical memory of those who experienced martial law and migrated to the US shortly after, these labels.

The production of these *waishengren* and *benshengren* identities reveals the significance of states and institutions in shaping identity formation. Criticizing the gaps left by both the loyalist (used in China and Taiwan) as well as the assimilationist paradigms (used in the US), Wang (2013) formulates the structure of dual domination to describe how domestic US policies and US relationships with the home countries of Asian American immigrants jointly affect the social organization of Asian American communities. He notes that China "will continue to have a profound influence over the identity formation of Chinese Americans and Chinese overseas in a shrinking world and in an age of instant global communication and transnational migration of capital and labor" (p. 175). Thus, not only do Chinese Americans experience racism and exclusion in the US but they also are subject to what he calls "the extraterritorial domination" of the Chinese and Taiwanese governments. Both China and Taiwan have historically inspired loyalty within their overseas populations (Shih 2013b; Wang 2013a, 2013).

In his study on early twentieth century Chinese Nationalist factions, Duara (1997) writes that these political parties relied upon "older, pre-national or non-territorial discourses of community such as Confucian culturalism or Han racism" or "primordialist narratives of belonging and rootedness" emerge in later narratives of identity with the explicit purpose of rallying support for each group's particular cause. Similarly, Chow (2013) highlights that both the KMT and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have appropriated a "historical master narrative" that emphasizes the "national humiliation" (*guochi*) of China at the hands of western powers from the late Qing to the Republican period. Currently, this fabricated "collective memory" is the official view of Chinese history in the PRC. These examples demonstrate how states mobilize notions of Chineseness and forge a collective Chineseness to forward their political aims, competing for the loyalties of overseas populations.

These geopolitical relationships among Taiwan, China, and the US manifest within Chinese communities. Wang (2013) describes these communities as a litmus test of sorts because "they lay bare the practice of imperialism, racism, extraterritorialism and political opportunism in Chinese politics and in American democracy and the complicity played by intellectuals on both sides of the Pacific in their history writing". In short, tensions in Asia cannot be contained to that region and the individuals living that region. As a result, the ever-changing relationships among Taiwan, China, and the US affect the boundary drawing delimiting the many "simultaneous" identities of contemporary Chinese America (Duara 1997, 2003; Levitt and Schiller 2004). We can see the articulations of these boundaries across various areas of social life and domains of practice, including religious ones.

Today, cross-strait relations between Taiwan and China are deteriorating. Specifically, the historic phone call between US President Donald Trump and Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen, leader of the

Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) or the pan-green coalition,¹¹ have muddied the waters. While the PRC has maintained the “one China Policy”, which is supported by the US and formerly supported by Taiwan (Brown 2004), it has taken a hardline stance since Tsai’s election in 2016 by freezing diplomatic relations and has acted to restrict mainland Chinese tourism in Taiwan (Smith 2016) and demand that US airlines designate Taoyuan Airport in Taiwan as “Chinese Taipei” (Wee 2018). Taiwanese immigrants among other diasporic Chinese are affected by these political changes as they reconstruct the boundaries of their identities.

2.3. Christian Frame of Mind

A space uniquely both intimate and inclusive, the social context of religious organization is an apt site to examine these modern articulations of historical cleavages that create identities. As political relationships among nations spur present-day logics of regrouping, it is important to investigate how religious sites, as represented by church leaders and influential congregants, respond and shape them. With rituals and worship practices aimed at creating close connections within both immediate and broader (imagined) communities, the religious context reveals its particular vision of inclusivity and thus the type of Christianity it practices through interpretations of the Bible, lessons embedded within sermons, as well as “real world” events of interest. As such, rather than applying a universal definition of Christian values to my framework of identity formation, I instead opt to understand their Christian framing. Specifically, I do not assume a definition of inclusivity but rather how congregants interpret inclusivity, decency, or other commonly cited values. Levitt (2013) defines religion “not as a packageable, stable set of beliefs and practices rooted in a particular bounded time and space, but as a contingent clustering of diverse elements that come together within to-be-determined spaces riddled by power and interests” (p. 160). Thus, religion, like ethnicity and other markers of identity, is affixed with characteristics rather than pre-packaged. As a result, it is necessary to consider various forms of religion, not simply what is readily recognizable or legible popularly (Levitt 2013; Edgell 2012; Bender and Klassen 2010).

In order to productively conceptualize religion, it is necessary to explore the contingency of the religious form especially when in encounters with “power and interests like geopolitical relationships. What happens when Christian values like inclusivity meet with potential political divisiveness? How do definitions of these values then change with shifting powers and interests, especially those that mobilize ethnicity? These questions make ethnicity-based congregations an ideal site to explore the impact of geopolitics at a community level. As congregants differently articulate their post-1949 identities according to the political climate, their attitudes toward who should be included in their congregation and who counts as one of them also changes. By examining the way that they justify or implement these boundaries and re-curate, in a sense, their congregation, we can probe what being Christian means to them and how that identity intersects with and integrates with their ethnic identities.

Chen (2008) shows that becoming Christian in effect means becoming a “new person” as one gains “new moral vocabularies, institutional structures, and ethical traditions that reconstruct community, identity, and self in the United States” (p. 5). Chen stresses that religious conversion not only alters the core of one’s identity but also includes a “systematic reordering of personal meanings” (pp. 42, 61). Not only does this Christian frame of mind allow for re-interpretations of difficult experiences that are part and parcel of migration, but also extends to rethinking social inequality and racial hierarchies. Becoming Christian entails and implies a shift in value system, which is articulated with new moral vocabularies to regard social phenomenon such as racism or other forms of discrimination. In fact, the ideas of inclusion and exclusion, constructions of insiders and outsiders, are themselves transformed in the process. The Christian frame of mind, a result of personal transformation, cannot be limited,

¹¹ Founded in 1986, the DPP is the opposition party to the KMT. It has supported Taiwanese Independence from China and a distinct Taiwanese identity separate from that of PRC Chinese.

bounded, or universalized. Commonly invoked values of tolerance, inclusion, and love among others require deep scrutiny so that we can understand how they materialize across various contexts.

Such reorientations recall deeper familial-type relationships that Weber (2009) identifies as a “new social community”, a “universalist brotherhood” that effectively competes with and devalues natural sibling, matrimonial, and other worldly bonds. Weber elaborates that committing to religious communities means the acceptance of both an “in-group morality” as well as an “out-group morality” and a prioritization of the former, especially in transactional relationships (pp. 329–30). For insiders, the principle of “simple reciprocity” applied and the wealthy or those with means are obligated to help others in need without concern for profit or repayment, while outsiders were excluded from such reciprocity (ibid.). For Weber, religious norms operate according to its own logics and, most importantly, applies in all aspects of one’s life, not simply during church activities. Religious frames may complement or oppose secular value systems and laws of the world. In the event of clashes, the degree to which Christian ones take precedence over others remains personal and thus, individualized.

According to the Pilot National Asian American Political Survey¹² (PNAAPS), over half of Asian Americans have a religious identity (Lien and Carnes 2004). They (ibid.) further note that despite being the Asian American group with the lowest religious identification, among Chinese Americans, there is “fast growth of Fujianese, Taiwanese, and college-educated mainland Chinese religious groups; transnational religious contacts” (p. 45). While the survey combines all Taiwanese groups, PRC Chinese, and other subethnic groups into one Chinese category, these trends highlight the importance of religion as a site of social organization among all Chinese American groups. As previous studies on Chinese Americans have shown (e.g., Yang 1999; Chen 2008; Jeung 2005), the context of religious sites differs from those of other secular ethnicity-based organizations. Their voluntary nature, frequent meetings, and their inward focus on the intimate and the sacred make them a fitting site to understand the interrelationships among race, ethnicity, and politics. As Chen (2008) and Yang (1999) point out, the personal stakes are uniquely high for immigrants as they consider metaphysical issues such as their salvation as well as transmitting their religious beliefs to their children (Min 2010).

Within diasporic Chinese churches, issues of inclusion and exclusion are not uncommon. Various sociopolitical differences and viewpoints arise as a result of different migration histories and political loyalties both within the US and abroad. While cosmopolitan congregations may have what Yang (1998) calls a “tenacious unity”, more insular ones that are formed based upon narrower definitions of Chineseness have what I call contingent inclusion. This concept builds upon Yang’s “tenacious unity” in that minority members may not be overtly excluded from joining the congregation, but their spiritual needs, among others, may be of lower priority or ignored altogether. One example is being subject to often disparaging characterizations or beliefs of the majority group as a condition of their inclusion, one that they can contest at the cost of conflict. Within MEC, conversations surrounding Taiwanese independence as well as negative descriptions of the PRC Chinese and President Xi Jinping’s administration are common topics that the minority PRC Chinese churchgoers have to endure. In other words, while they are not excluded from joining or participating in the worship activities, it is still important to emphasize that they do not dictate the culture of the church and may, at times, be marginalized. While they are united by their Christian faith and a general sense of being Chinese, this type of unification does not ensure that everyone in the church is treated equally.

Even though contention within a cosmopolitan Chinese church may ultimately result in a necessary or de facto unity, that within homogenous churches may not be acceptable at all. Yang (1999) notes that when some members of cosmopolitan churches display “divisive tendencies”, they are reminded by church leaders that “they are Christians after all, united in the same God, same Christ, and

¹² Data from PNAAPS was collected from 2000 to 2001 and published in 2004. For more information on this survey, see <https://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR03832.v1>.

same Spirit” (p. 173). Depending on who constitutes the majority, different viewpoints are perceived as divisive or political; ones that are generally accepted appear rational or common sense. Unity within a homogenous church may be similarly procured through reminders of a global or universal Christian identity but are instead applied to other sets of behavior. What may have been divisive within cosmopolitan settings, like vocal support for Taiwanese independence, is normalized and even embraced. Within MEC, church leadership and other influential voices may encourage a Chinese identity, but the terms of that identity prioritize being Taiwanese, displayed in either Mandarin accents, political views, or even common childhood activities. In other words, being Chinese is a moving target depending on which group of diasporic Chinese’s idea is dominant. Therefore, it is important to recognize the dominant characteristics being circulated so that we can examine who benefits from such a rendering and who is marginalized.

3. Ethnographic Details

Founded by five families who are affectionately and reverently known as “the founding families” approximately twenty years ago, MEC, a majority Taiwanese church¹³, holds its main events like Sunday worship services and seasonal holiday celebrations in a small building it rents. Many of these congregants, like the founding families, used to attend more cosmopolitan Chinese churches but ultimately settled on MEC because they felt more comfortable among other Taiwanese. With approximately seventy active members who contribute weekly to monthly offerings in support of church activities, MEC serves a middle-class first-generation Taiwanese American population and their families. Most of the congregants arrived in the US in the 1980s or 1990s for graduate school or as accompanying spouses and later raised families here. As a result, they do contribute resources toward conducting their own English language Sunday school with a rotating teacher selected among Baptized members.¹⁴ While MEC primarily recruits among and serves an immigrant population, there is a growing contingent of the second generation who return sporadically after college.

While MEC is a homogenous church, one issue that reveals internal differences is language. While Sunday worship is currently held in Mandarin with simultaneous English translation by a Baptized member, originally it was in Hokkien or Taiwanese. Because more recent arrivals from Taiwan experienced their education in Mandarin, Taiwanese may no longer be generally understood by both *waishengren* and *benshengren*. To accommodate these later generations, MEC voted to have Mandarin service every other week and, eventually, it became the norm with the added English translation. Recently, it was decided to have one Sunday worship a month that was conducted solely in English, from announcements to sermon. These changes reveal not only the generational differences in educational experiences among Taiwanese immigrants but also how earlier generations attempt to adapt and accommodate later ones. Printed and online materials are all written in traditional Chinese script (adopted by Taiwan) with occasional English translation. Members also send their children to the local Chinese language school with a curriculum that teaches traditional script run by Taiwanese staff as opposed to the local one run by PRC Chinese staff.

I began attending MEC at a point when they were in the middle of a pastor search. For over two years, they had been without a regular pastor and, thus, rotating among four pastors: two white American and two first-generation Taiwanese American men. Depending upon the pastor, the sermon translation would either be in English or Mandarin. From conversations, I have gleaned that the two white American pastors are generally better respected for their Biblical interpretations and messages than the Taiwanese ones. Nevertheless, these feelings do not represent a complete embrace of all white Christians. Prior to the search, the church retained a white pastor who committed significant

¹³ MEC is evenly split between *waishengren* and *benshengren* congregants with one or two PRC Chinese families at any given time.

¹⁴ Roles in the church from leadership positions like being a deacon to ushers, translators, pianists, and hosts for local small group fellowship meetings are selected among the Baptized individuals and decided months in advance.

church resources toward helping inner-city black youth. After allowing this practice for some time, the leadership informed the pastor that they did not want to continue this type of outreach, resulting in the departure of that pastor. Towards the middle of March 2018, they finally concluded the search and decided upon a Singaporean pastor who has a Taiwanese wife who is also a minister. Through reactions to these various pastors, it was obvious that congregants were most comfortable with leaders of Taiwanese or other overseas Chinese descent but not PRC Chinese. Furthermore, their contingent acceptance of white pastors or friends of the church reveal not only the type of American Evangelical culture they approve of but also how their vision of their church is bounded. A fruitful venue for future research on ethnicity-based churches would be to explore how issues of race emerge and are dealt with in worship practices.

After a recommendation from a Christian student group, I started to attend Bible study, Sunday worship, and joint activities with area churches at MBC in November 2017. MBC represents a secondary site in my project and allows me to compare and contrast experiences within different kinds of homogenous Chinese churches. Compared to MEC, MBC is much smaller in scale with approximately twenty active members and caters primarily to PRC Chinese graduate students or young professionals, which contributes to a quick turnover in members. The printed material circulated by MBC is also written in simplified Chinese script (adopted by the PRC). Finally, because there are no second-generation members, apart from myself, Sunday services are conducted entirely in Mandarin without any translation.

They also have an informal daycare for children, but there is no formal Sunday school because the children are too young. They conduct their activities in a church rented from a predominantly white congregation. Unlike MEC which has a rotating and formally elected deacon's board, the leadership of MBC is comprised of a *waishengren* couple who have been in the US since the early 1990s. Both middle-class professionals, this couple encountered Christianity in Taiwan but did not become very devout until coming to the US for their graduate education. Having attended primarily cosmopolitan Chinese churches, they know of MEC but encourage their congregation toward activities hosted by mainly PRC Chinese organizations. The relationship between the leadership and the congregants takes on more of a teacher-student or mentor-mentee dynamic as opposed to one of equals, as demonstrated by MEC.

3.1. Internal Divisions within Taiwanese

For congregants at MEC and MBC, maintaining strict in-group and out-group moralities solely according to one's religious status remains a struggle as these post-1949 identifications threaten religious unity. During a conversation with Thomas, a deacon from MEC who identifies as *benshengren* and specifically "native Taiwanese", he told me a story about one of his *waishengren* church friends who was born in Taiwan:

[My friend] is a second generation in Taiwan, meaning his dad came with the military. He told me this, which I never thought about it. When I was growing up in Taiwan, my mom would say, oh, they are the other province people [*waishengren*], so she does look down on them. For us, it was just a thing, we didn't care much, because mom can tell me he's from the other province all she wants, but you still tell me to call him, 'grandpa.' So, what's the difference? Not until I was at the church [in another state], there's this gentleman who told me, 'please help me understand this. People from Taiwan don't view me as Taiwanese. People from China also don't view me as from China. What am I? I'm not ABC [American Born Chinese], I'm not born here. I'm nothing.' To me, I think it is different and it is difficult.

Thomas describes himself as not caring about the difference between *waishengren* and *benshengren* despite his mother's condescension. He even goes as far as to note that he would respect all elders in the same way even if they are not *benshengren*. However, after I mention that another self-identified *benshengren* congregant told me that she felt both groups were interchangeable as "one Taiwan" and

“from the same island”, Thomas noted that *waishengren* are Taiwanese only when “politically speaking” and elaborated,

To say that we’re all Taiwanese, that is a very . . . she did it with a lot of consciousness, to say that. What I do think is that if you consciously say something, it doesn’t necessarily mean what’s in your heart. Because you just said something politically correct. But that of course is a big blanket statement too.

While Thomas did not directly disagree with the other congregant, he demonstrated that the “one Taiwan” view was a popular one to say aloud but belied deeper, more divisive feelings, perhaps even for himself. While citizenship status and political identity may be clear-cut, Thomas wavers on who has the right to claim a cultural Taiwaneseess, an assertion that simultaneously suggests and questions an authentic Taiwaneseess beyond membership in the polity. While he remains sympathetic to his church friend, access to this cultural Taiwaneseess appears to be nevertheless selective and reserved for those unaffiliated with the KMT. Consistently referring to *waishengren* as “those who came with the KMT”, Thomas reveals that the aspect of the *waishengren* identity that remains most salient for him is the historical relationship with the KMT despite the fact that not all *waishengren* were willing members and suffered through not-infrequent purges. The boundaries of Taiwaneseess go beyond the mere demarcation of arriving before or after 1949, but rather, draw upon what Ang (2014) calls an “inherent exclusivity”. Simply put, in order for one to be Taiwanese, others cannot be Taiwanese. Far from fixed, these shifting boundaries of ethnic and cultural identifications are sourced from both historical constructions of what it means to be Taiwanese and informed by contemporary revisions. As such, while Thomas’ generation may not care about this divide or relate to it in the same way as that of his parents, the fact that he does not wholesale accept a “one Taiwan” view reveals that historical and current geopolitical relationships manifest at the community level.

Similarly, Rebecca, a self-identified *waishengren* from MEC, highlights how these internal divides have changed over time. While she felt that she would relate to any immigrant who “shared the same values” whether they are “Jewish or Italian”, she did identify some important factors for making friends and establishing close relationships with other Taiwanese. Like many *waishengren* in the US, Rebecca adheres to the practice of telling others that she is from Taiwan rather than Taiwanese:

I think that I’m Chinese American, if I had to be more specific, I would say that I’m Chinese but from Taiwan. As a kid, I would feel like I’m Chinese but not Taiwanese, but after being in the US for so many years, and we don’t like the Communist system so I’ll explain more and say that that I’m from Taiwan.¹⁵

Here, Rebecca identifies how the process of migration and becoming a minority within the US has led her to become more specific with her identity. As a member of the minority but historically politically dominant *waishengren* group, Rebecca felt that in Taiwan, she did not relate to *benshengren* and that she equates being Taiwanese with the *benshengren* identity. Thus, even though she was born in Taiwan, she does not call herself “Taiwanese” or *taiwanren*, a term mobilized by pro-independence supporters. However, while before she would simply say that she is a Chinese person, she now has expanded her explanation to include that she is from Taiwan, and thus, implies that she is not PRC Chinese. As she and her husband do not support the Chinese Communists or the CCP, she does not want to be conflated with them by the ambiguous label “Chinese”. For Rebecca, being PRC Chinese is associated with Communism and Xi’s regime. As her evolution of identification shows, Rebecca’s ways of thinking about herself have changed according to the political events around her.

After I asked her if she relates to other immigrants from Taiwan, she said that,

¹⁵ While this interview with Rebecca is mainly translated from Mandarin, here she uses the more ambiguous English word “Chinese” rather than *huaren* or *zhongguoren* so I am not sure how she is identifying as Chinese, whether it is politically, culturally, historically or a combination of all three.

Of course. I relate to those who came from Taiwan. We spent our childhoods in Taiwan, raised in the same educational system, and we eat the same foods. Of course, we would feel a close connection, but [laughs] if I meet those who are very pro-independence [*taidu*] . . . if they have a lot of bias, then I will feel uncomfortable. I won't be able to identify with them. I've once met some Taiwanese [*taiwanren*]. I don't hate them, and I don't hate anyone. In the 1970s, those pro-independence people really despised us so-called *waishengren*. I've once met this Taiwanese person who told me, 'oh now, I can talk to you people who only speak Mandarin [*Guoyu*].' She said that before she never spoke with people who speak Mandarin [laughs]. The fact that she had that kind of comment, I felt it was so ridiculous. These kinds of people, I won't like so much; I won't feel that I can recognize them.¹⁶

Rebecca reminisces to her childhood in Taiwan and recalls the 1970s as a time when she felt the full force of the disdain that pro-independence Taiwanese aimed at post-1949 immigrants. It is important to show that Rebecca conflates Taiwanese (*taiwanren*), pro-independence supporters, and *benshengren* at various points in our conversation, displaying how these three identities and simultaneous political stances are interrelated, even though nowadays there are also *waishengren* pro-independence groups in Taiwan. While these internal divides are still very much active in today's Taiwan and its US diaspora, Rebecca's story regarding the *benshengren* she met at a church retreat reveals not only the past prejudice harbored but also that those prejudice, however "ridiculous" they may have been, are no longer articulated in the same way. Similar to how Rebecca has embraced being from Taiwan more in the US than she did in Taiwan itself, that person no longer feels the difference between *waishengren* and *benshengren* to be so unbridgeable in the US. It is also important to point out the role of language in *waishengren* and *benshengren* relations. *Benshengren* typically speak Hokkien,¹⁷ a language or dialect that has been dubbed Taiwanese by those who support Taiwanese independence while *waishengren* generally speak Mandarin or *Guoyu*. Thus, the politics of language are actively at play in contours of Taiwanese identity.

In addition to language differences, another defining difference is perception of migration to Taiwan. MBC is led by a *waishengren* couple but the congregation is mainly comprised of PRC Chinese. During an early visit, Ellen, one of the leaders, drove me back to my house. While we discussed my previous religious experiences, she also asked where my parents are from. After I told her that my parents are *waishengren*, she nodded and said, "they are like me". Later, during another meal, she elaborated upon the *waishengren* and *benshengren* difference, noting that *benshengren* are also immigrants from China to Taiwan, they merely came earlier. For Ellen, it was frustrating that *benshengren* had more "legitimacy" to being Taiwanese simply because of earlier migration and that *waishengren* have been referred to as "second generation mainlanders".

Another attitude among *waishengren* members is an embrace of being from Taiwan and even knowing Taiwanese themselves. One MEC member, Seth, another self-identified *waishengren* who was born in Kaohsiung, a known "green" city in southern Taiwan with DPP and pro-independence supporters. When Seth interpreted one of my follow-up questions to suggest that he was not Taiwanese because of his *waishengren* background, he highlighted that he spoke Taiwanese outside the home with his friends and that he was comfortable with the language. He further noted that he considers himself to be "Chinese in America" in a strict "race or ethnicity" sense. His daughter, a second-generation Asian American, will refer to him and his wife as "Taiwanese", he believes "his ancestors are from China, so it's not the same". However, "politically, [he] is from Taiwan" and not China as they are separate countries. Similar to Rebecca, Seth attempts to affirm his Taiwaneseanness through language proficiency. Nevertheless, this connection relies upon a definition of Taiwaneseeness that centers

¹⁶ I have provided the relevant Mandarin terms that Rebecca used in the interview in italics.

¹⁷ Hokkien is a general language spoken in the southern region of mainland China as well as among many diasporic Chinese in Taiwan, Southeast Asia, and other places. While each version of Hokkien is unique to its particular region, they are not mutually unintelligible.

benshengren and potentially the pro-independence movement. The liminality of the *waishengren* identity especially in changing national contexts merits further research.

In a church with both *waishengren* and *benshengren*, DPP and KMT supporters, hardline anti- and pro-independence proponents as well as the apathetic, Taiwanese congregants have found a unity that is not necessarily “tenacious” or tenuous even, but rather one based upon native-place identity, the nostalgia of cuisine and childhood, that is animated not only by migration but by a common difference. In other words, together, they forge a Taiwanese identity that does not necessarily root itself in the struggle for Taiwanese independence or the ideologies of any singular political party in Taiwan but rather one that reflects the political and linguistic diversity of Taiwan.

3.2. A PRC Chinese Other

Initially from attending Sunday worship, weekly fellowship meetings, sporting events, celebrations, and other official activities, I did not hear about conflict or contention within the group. However, as I became embedded in the congregation, I began to receive invitations to informal activities from congregants who viewed me in a parental manner because of my proximity in age to their own children. It was from these late-night conversations in the car when they would give me rides back to campus or over dinner that I learned of disagreements among leadership. One particularly contentious issue was the inclusion of PRC Chinese within the congregation. One of my close contacts in the church told me about a PRC Chinese congregant whom she suspected was only using the church to gain permanent residency in the US. She did not feel like his motivations were “pure”, linking his PRC background to her disdain. On the leadership level, some board members have left the church entirely over disagreements over congregation composition.

As one of the East Asian “tigers” or economic “miracles”, Taiwan’s growth in GDP and recognition as a developed state makes its mark discursively as Taiwanese are widely considered to be “open-minded” and “thoughtful” while PRC Chinese are represented as “materialistic” and “status-seeking”. Variations of these stereotypes circulate in MEC with even one non-Chinese visitor remarking upon the difference between immigrants from China and Taiwan is that mainlanders have different values that disregard the family and focus solely on acquiring material possessions. When these Taiwanese congregants describe the facets of their identity, they draw upon not only what being Taiwanese means but also what it is not. Pointing to growing tensions between China and Taiwan, both *waishengren* and *benshengren* congregants have expressed fears and anxieties of an increasingly powerful and invasive PRC alongside assertions of dissimilarities with PRC Chinese.

During an MEC retreat workshop on being Christian in the workplace, a Taiwanese former member shared a story about a frustrating colleague. As a lawyer, she primarily makes money through billable hours, and her colleague from Peking University, “full of degrees” advised her to work slower so that she can earn more money. She felt “so annoyed” by this colleague among other colleagues from China who are “obsessed with money”. She noted that during one assignment, she needed only fifteen minutes to complete it, but this colleague told her to simply rush it. Fed up, she announced to him that he had a personality that’s “likely to be struck by lightning”. In a safe space with other Taiwanese, she felt that she could share her experience without judgement in an effort to find a Christian resolution to her problem. In her rendering of the situation, she focused on his PRC Chinese identity as the root of his materialism and desire to get rich rather than any other markers, demonstrating the strength of these stereotypes.

Another variation of this stereotype is materialism aligned with notions of moral depravity. At the same MEC retreat, the husband of a Taiwanese member struck up a conversation with me outside of the cabins. Hailing from Hong Kong, another East Asian “tiger”, he finds affinity with Taiwanese, an attitude is common among Cantonese immigrants I have interviewed and met through church activities. An employee of the US government, he describes how PRC Chinese tourists like to visit old US battleships and scrape off paint with keys so that China can more easily get water-proofing technology. He described them as “stealing our technology doing the type of things we can’t even

imagine". With the "we" and "us" referring to the US, he simultaneously highlights our commonality as American, rather than Chinese, and others the PRC Chinese by casting them as foreign and inscrutable agents of the government. For him, their identity is inseparable from Chinese politics and the agenda of Xi's government. He further notes that they "are all about moving up and making money" and that they do not consider their "moral development" or interpersonal relationships. For him, the reason for their lack of morality is the fact that "they make so much money that they have a *fuercdai* or rich second-generation problem". Thus, not only are the PRC Chinese spying for Xi, but they are also mindlessly pursuing wealth within attention to something greater than themselves.

This idea of a difference in moral beliefs also emerges in discussion of worship practices. Sally, a PRC Chinese member of MEC, is from Fujian, a southern province in China, and grew up in a working-class family. She immigrated to the US at the age of 8. Having attended predominantly white, Evangelical churches, cosmopolitan Chinese churches, and now MEC, she has had a variety of religious experiences. When I asked her about how Taiwanese Americans worship, she said that they base their churches around a Taiwanese identity and that "Chinese people" worship differently. Furthermore, after I asked her why she chooses to worship in a homogenous Taiwanese church as opposed to a cosmopolitan Chinese church, she noted,

I'm probably not the first Chinese person in our church but we had another couple who was Chinese and they came here and they're much older than me so they're more influenced by their Chinese culture. I think there are still differences [between PRC Chinese and Taiwanese] in how they communicate about things and their perspective of things and that's why they're no longer here [at MEC] . . . I have to admit that the Taiwanese people are more influenced by their western culture because they were dominated during a certain period by Americans, right? So, they're all a little bit more open-minded yet they still have the Chinese tradition. That's why I like it so much. The Chinese people are a little bit more closed-minded. They're still stuck in that close-knit traditional Asian culture even though they know that they can think a little bit more freely but I think it's ingrained in them and it's hard for them to separate themselves.

Sally also implies that living under the PRC government has impeded the ability of the PRC Chinese to think freely and most importantly, their ability to be open to an ideal hybrid Chinese-western culture, like that of the Taiwanese. Sally positively associates being "western" or "open-minded" with the Taiwanese whereas the PRC Chinese are unfortunately bound by their traditional ways. For her, it is precisely getting this "western" influence without having to go an American church that makes her stay at MEC, a church where she is not only a minority but also where she is subjected to stereotypes of PRC Chinese.

When I asked her about specific examples of Chinese and Taiwanese having different interpretations of the Gospel, she noted that,

That's my biggest worry, when you interpret the Bible, there's no way that you can separate yourself completely from your background, your perspective. You'll always use your perspective to interpret the Bible, so therefore, you're always influencing the interpretation. It may not be what it was actually intended to be.

SL: Do you have any examples of Chinese and Taiwanese people interpreting the Bible differently?

Sally: I think some Asian people, Chinese people, take the Bible verse very literally. The Bible says this, that's all we can do. Taiwanese people may step outside the box a little bit and say maybe it could be this. I get it if you have a strict interpretation but it goes back to my perspective that you're only using your own perspective to interpret.

Sally identifies an accurate or intentional meaning of the Bible and then, elaborates on her fear that certain perspectives may obscure the real meanings. Not only do certain loaded readings of

the Bible worry Sally but some interpretations and perspectives are indeed better than others. Sally emphasizes the rigidity of how PRC Chinese people think through their strict interpretations and, again, refers back to the Taiwanese being more “open-minded” than their PRC Chinese counterparts.

These stereotypes in circulation also affect church selection and, more specifically, whether to become a minority member or a majority member of a congregation. I asked Thomas how he and his wife, also a *benshengren*, decided to worship at MEC, he told me the factors that were most important to him:

Before we moved here, I was on the internet looking up Chinese churches because my wife feels more comfortable being in a Chinese church speaking the Chinese language. In fact, she feels more comfortable being with other Taiwanese people. To make it even further, she [wanted] to spend more time with Taiwanese young couples. Now, that could be Christian or not Christian. We start off with Chinese churches [in this area] and we had a list of 6-7 churches. [. . .] The last church on my list to visit was the very one that I’m at today. Because [the name] says [Taiwanese] on it, I knew it had a close relationship with the Taiwanese Presbyterian Church [PCT]. The two are closely related; one is like a cousin of the other. The [PCT] has some Taiwan politics because in the development of Taiwan’s history, there was so much oppression for religious freedom so the [PCT] was the dominant Christian group in Taiwan so they wanted to fight for religious freedom. So, they declared that they want freedom, independence from the KMT. Then, it became a thing for the [PCT] to constantly talk about independence. To me growing up, that’s my knowledge of the [PCT]; it’s about Taiwan being independent. To me, growing up, that has nothing to do with God. Although now that you know the history, you can see why they did that, but nonetheless, that distorted what church ought to be doing. Their political agenda is based on wanting religious freedom. But then, their religious freedom can lead to a political freedom as well, which distorted the whole point of this. [. . .] I didn’t want to come to visit this church because I’m afraid that there are these politics involved. But the first couple churches that we visited, it’s all filled with people from China. And my wife was like, well, [shakes head]. She wasn’t too happy so I told her, what are your expectations for seeing young Taiwan families, it’s slim. I told her, we either burst our little bubble and we start to mingle with people from China, or let’s go visit that church at the bottom of our list.

While church selection may seem fairly straightforward, Thomas’ answer meandered into a short political history, demonstrating how narratives of ethnicity espoused by political parties ultimately permeate into these diasporic communities. For both Thomas and his wife, the *waishengren* or *benshengren* status ceased to matter when confronted with “[mingling] with people from China”. As an immigrant from Taiwan, Thomas’ worldview prior to conversion continues to inform the way he organizes the social domains of his life after his conversion. In other words, like all Christians, Thomas enacts that identity according to the contexts in which he was socialized. While the company he worships with matters, the practices themselves should not be affected by “political agendas”. At face value, Thomas’ engagement with Christianity may seem selective, but I argue that it is precisely this selectivity that defines the Christian frame of mind; it does not mean an uncritical or unconditional embrace or inclusivity across all areas of stratification. For Thomas, worshipping in the company of his peers is within the limits of being Christian but devoting time toward forwarding political goals unaffected by religious ones is not legitimate.

3.3. Coming Together in Church

The Christian frame of mind fosters the contingent inclusion within MEC. Indeed, even one of the white American pastors, John, is keenly aware of potential conflict between Taiwanese and PRC Chinese, commonly preaching against divisiveness and forwarding examples from his own experience:

[...] One of my good Taiwanese friends up in [city name] said, ‘This church is not for the mainland Chinese. We are from Taiwan!’ [laughter]. If you feel that kind of prejudice my friends, you’re going to have to overcome it if you’re going to be obedient to God. No place in this kingdom for harboring resentment and prejudice.

Pastor John’s anecdote demonstrates Christianity’s potential to mend political rifts that impact Chinese immigrants. Indeed, his hope and directive is that it is precisely that salve for political problems. While congregants understand his perspective, he somewhat misses theirs. One congregant, Hugo, mentioned that Pastor John’s lessons are “very interesting” but everyone is here because “they want to worship with other Taiwanese”. Hugo’s view shows that while there is a Christian need to serve the community, this church should prioritize the spiritual needs of the members they serve.

Similarly, Seth later mentions that he does not relate to immigrants from the PRC unless they are at church where he relies on a pan-Chinese identity to make friends. For Seth, Chinese is merely a racial/ethnic label, one that denotes his ancestors, rather than one that defines him. Even though his parents are from China, he does not relate to that identity politically as they are “separate countries and places”. Only when he is in church does he default to a pan-Chinese identity in order to remain friendly but apart from that, he does not consider other Chinese immigrants to have a similar migration experience. Indeed, during my time at MEC, I have witnessed baptisms of PRC Chinese members and even offers of transportation to international students from the PRC. Nevertheless, it is the fact that MEC’s vision is not about building a cosmopolitan church but rather a space for Taiwanese Christians and minority members to worship. Thus, while there may not be animosity or hostility, PRC Chinese and their experiences are not central to practices.

Charles, a self-identified *benshengren* who opposes Taiwanese independence and its divisive reverberations in other areas of social life, has always attended cosmopolitan Chinese churches before coming to MEC. He and his wife, also *benshengren*, wanted “to try something new” and join a smaller size church, so they came to MEC where they quickly became integrated into the community and eventually, the leadership. He explicitly tells me that he will not be “political” in the interview. However, despite his best efforts, questions of Taiwanese identity and church life ultimately draw him towards elaborating on his views. After I ask him about his opinion of MEC, he replies,

[...] We have arguments about stuff. Like should we buy a church or not; we’ve accumulated a lot of money at this point. Of course, I know who thinks yes and who thinks no, but they’re all my friends, all good brothers and sisters, I don’t want to go into that kind of debate. Whether or not our church [laughs] need to get some more [PRC Chinese] people. Church should be separate from that Taiwanese independence ideology. I start to realize that some of the important people at church associate with Taiwanese independence ideology. At least they don’t have very obvious actions to support their ideology. Right now, I think I’m okay; they just talk about it, not really strong ideology. [pause]. We just need to continue to do what we’ve been doing, consistently seeking God’s wisdom.

Charles reveals that PRC Chinese recruitment is a hotly contested topic among the leadership and that some members are indeed very pro-Taiwanese independence, something leaves him uncomfortable. For him, these two topics go hand-in-hand as political moves that would negatively affect the worship practices at MEC. He attempts to overcome these divisions by appealing to “God’s wisdom” and seeing everyone first and foremost as “good brothers and sisters”. For Charles, Christianity not only has a reparative effect, but it also becomes a way to maintain that tenacious unity. However, it is important to attend to Charles’ stance on what that unity looks like and the kind of status quo that he supports. For Charles, if contained within the realm of talk and not action, the “Taiwanese independence ideology” is acceptable even if it may alienate potential PRC Chinese recruits or current members. While Charles appears sympathetic toward PRC Chinese and supportive of a pan-Chinese congregation, he still harbors fears of Xi’s spies in Chinese American congregations and does not act in actually recruiting PRC Chinese members.

Similarly, Thomas who prefers to worship with Taiwanese over PRC Chinese and strongly identifies with being Taiwanese perceives being Christian as compatible with these views. A self-identified devout Christian who reads the Bible every day and consistently gives time toward evangelizing efforts, he tells me that everything filters through his Christian frame of mind. It is his lens for interpreting the world. He reveals his strategy for forming friendships:

Because of my understanding of the Gospel, today could be the last day of the universe. To me, I feel like it is extremely critical to tell people who Jesus is and I talk about Jesus passionately. I do want to encourage people to talk about Jesus passionately. The people I spend a lot of time with often end up [being] people I'm trying to encourage and trying to challenge to have a personal relationship with Jesus, want to share the love that God has for them with others. Our friends often end up [as] people we care about and we want to share this part of our life with them. So, my friends, I have a purpose with my friends. I want to share this very important thing with my friends and it's hard for me—it's actually hard to be my friend, I'm a very unfriendly person [laughs]. Because I want to tell you about Jesus. And if you don't like Jesus and you get offended by Jesus, then you probably don't want to be my friend, I guess.

By devoting his time to converting others, Thomas' intimate relationships are with seekers of Jesus, something he considers to be a "critical" task based upon his interpretation of the Gospel. By investing in the salvation of others, Thomas conforms to what Weber calls "in-group" and "out-group" morality. He reserves his friendships and his resources for those who are not "offended" by Jesus, implying that hardline nonbelievers are removing themselves from his message and what it has to offer. For Thomas, being Christian means that he needs to be engaged in the work of conversion but the particular seekers he spends time with are up to his discretion. Like Charles, he can maintain his political stances but still continue to proselytize; they are not at odds with each other.

4. Conclusions

Lachmann (2013) writes that, "sociology can help us understand what is most significant and consequential about our contemporary world only when it is historical sociology" (p. 4). The objective of my paper is to disaggregate among Chinese Christians in America who are commonly seen as a single sometimes racial, sometimes cultural, group by the examination of a Taiwanese (American) case. By attending to the historical circumstances of these identities of interest, I hope to "interrogate" those labels by placing them in their proper moment of emergence and addressing their various transformations over time and over space. I also demonstrate how these labels are fixed and instead continue to shift with contemporary geopolitics as a major influence over the direction of those shifts.

Empirically, my paper builds upon previous scholarship on immigrant churches (Chafetz and Ebaugh 2000; Ebaugh and Chafetz 2002; Warner and Wittner 1998) and diasporic Chinese churches that have established concepts of Sinicizing religion (Yang 1998, 1999, 2002), transformative aspect of religious conversion (Chen 2005, 2008), and racialization processes at work within religious contexts (Jeung 2005; Chen and Jeung 2012). Engaging with their findings and frameworks, my paper shows how the Chinese Christian community has established itself over time as well as how it contends with geopolitical tensions that continue to transform its language and logic of being Christian. In a day and age when cross-strait relations between China and Taiwan are in decline, Taiwanese American Christians construct their identities against a PRC Chinese other as well as a white American other. Their "moral vocabularies", in turn, justify the ways they draw the boundaries of being Chinese, Taiwanese, and American.

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