

Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience

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In Review



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That religion is especially salient for new immigrants is a commonplace in the sociology and history of U.S. religion. That the U.S. is a nation of immigrants is often cited as a reason for the comparatively high level of religious observance and identification in this country. This much was said by sociologist Will Herberg a half century ago. He especially had in mind the millions of Lutherans, Catholics and Jews who came to this country between the 1880s and the 1920s and whose grandchildren, he reported, were returning to church in the 1950s.

As part of becoming American, Herberg contended, an immigrant had to be willing to give up all the old-country ways, including language, national identity and mode of livelihood. But becoming American did not require abandoning the old religion. "Quite the contrary," Herberg wrote, "not only was he expected to retain his old religion, as he was not expected to retain his old language or nationality, but such was the shape of America that it was largely in and through his religion that he, or rather his children and grandchildren, found an identifiable place in American life." Long before anyone heard of multiculturalism, Herberg knew that religion offered immigrants and other minorities cultural space in America where they could work out their accommodation to the new society on something like their own terms.

Yet Herberg knew that America did not leave immigrants' religion utterly unmolested, if only because their children and grandchildren would assimilate to the host country culture and demand corresponding changes in their ancestral churches, beginning with the language of instruction. So eventually religious communities would have to outgrow their immigrant and ethnic roots if they were to survive and flourish. As Herberg put it, their ethnicity would have to (and did) transmute into religion. Immigrants' religion could not solely hang onto an old-country past.

Carolyn Chen's decision a decade ago to study the religions of immigrants from Taiwan for her University of California-Berkeley doctoral dissertation offered her the opportunity, indeed required her, to revisit the nexus between immigration, ethnicity and religion. Immigrants arriving from mainland China, and to a lesser degree those from Taiwan, are disproportionately likely to acknowledge no religious affiliation or merely a residual Buddhist identity. Yet large numbers of them become religious as they settle into life in the U.S. Many convert to Christianity, and some reassert Buddhism. Chen, who now teaches sociology at Northwestern University, concludes that many Taiwanese immigrants "become American by becoming religious."

In the growing literature on Christianity among Chinese immigrants, some scholars argue that there is more continuity between home-country and host-country ways than Chen sees. But what especially sets her research apart is the setting in which she accomplished it: Southern California's San Gabriel Valley, where relatively affluent immigrants from Taiwan have reached critical mass in Chinese-majority (or near-majority) suburbs. Enough of them are now Christian (Chen counts 195 Chinese Protestant churches in the area) to create a disquieting presence among their coethnic, non-Christian neighbors. Some of these neighbors eventually convert to Christianity. Others, countering evangelists' appeals with the claim that they are Buddhist, are challenged to articulate how that religious identity can have relevance in the U.S.

I suspect that the first eyebrow-raising moment in Chen's book for educated, liberal white Americans like me—who admire the Dalai Lama and regard the rigors of Zen practice with awe—will be when they read that Buddhism, at least in its traditional syncretic form, stands in low repute among Chinese immigrants. It is grandmother's religion: rustic, ritualistic, superstitious and profoundly unmodern, a part of the immigrant baggage they are only too happy to jettison.

It is also a religion about which most have had little reason to learn anything at all. When they say they're Buddhist to fend off their Chinese Christian neighbors' invitations, they embrace what they had previously regarded as a stigmatized identity. It is a welcome discovery for them that a few of the sparsely distributed Chinese Buddhist temples around them (one-quarter as many as the Chinese Protestant churches) articulate a modernized humanistic Buddhism that was becoming widespread in Taiwan only as they were leaving for the U.S. in the 1980s. Eventually some of them convert to this Buddhism, which Chen calls an explicit religion (in contrast to an "embedded" religion).

The San Gabriel Valley has thus become home to masses of born-again Buddhists as well as born-again Christians. For both groups, "getting saved" helps them become American, but the choice of which religion to pursue is a product less of the predominantly white American context than of the coethnic one.

Chen learned that immigrants find in religion something they need in the context of living in the U.S.—for example, child care and transportation for those who immigrated on the basis of occupational preference and lack a supportive extended family to fall back on. After they are initially drawn to the religious community for

the services and support it provides, their presence there becomes an occasion for deeper commitment. “We miss something if we focus only on the instrumental aspects of immigrant religion, or treat it as a replacement for what has been lost in migration. Quite often, instrumental motivations pull people into communities of action and belief that end up transforming them in profound and enduring ways.”

The challenges that the U.S. context offers Taiwanese women are different from those it offers the men. Family obligations create the particularly salient social contexts for women. Many men struggle with disappointing career prospects due to devaluation of home-country occupational credentials and the barrier of host-country racism. Chen writes of Mr. and Mrs. Hou, who began attending church when Mrs. Hou, at home with her children in a strange country, found friendship and eventually practical help in the nearby Christian church. Her husband began to go to church with her and found the fellowship to be pleasant, even though he felt that Christianity was not for him. But a crisis in his work situation—the bakery in which he worked seemed to be failing, and he felt in danger of losing his job—led Mrs. Hou to bring his concerns to her prayer circle. A member of the prayer group brought the Hous’ situation up with her own family, who owned two motels, and soon Mr. Hou had a new job as a motel manager. He saw that as a miracle, and within six months he and his wife were baptized as Christians.

In another example, a single woman told of having found help from the monk at her temple when she was seeking to understand why her relationship with her longtime boyfriend caused her such pain. He was a very traditional Taiwanese man and expected her to be an equally traditional, submissive woman, something she knew herself, deep down, not to be. She recognized in herself a tendency to please people, and she learned from “the Venerable” that the source of this tendency, and therefore her suffering, was “greed” for the material support the boyfriend offered. That recognition gave her the courage to terminate the relationship. “It was the possibility of living freely that made me take Buddhism seriously,” she said.

Chen does not make the generalization that having one’s material, social and psychological needs met is always the route to born-again religion for these Taiwanese immigrants. Rather, she contends that those who do embrace religion begin to engage in religious practices—going to church, for example, or practicing Buddhist meditation—before acquiring the respective religious convictions. Engaging in these practices is the occasion for later personal transformations.

For those who become Christian, religious change is a matter of “individuals entering into a relationship with Jesus Christ *through the community*” (the emphasis is Chen’s). For those who embrace Buddhism, their initial approach to the temple is a response to “the need to define, differentiate and defend themselves from evangelical Christians.” Individuals in both communities eventually undergo profound personality changes through intense interaction with the religious tradition they have embraced. But these theological encounters, if we can call them that, are for the most part the result, not the cause, of their newfound religious identities. “Soul searching and religious questioning frequently are byproducts of the search for solutions to concrete everyday problems,” Chen suggests, and she proposes this memorable formula: “Religions are not only meaning-producing institutions, but institutions that produce meaning-seeking individuals.”

Although the routes to involvement with the two religions vary, that involvement eventually leads converts in both faiths to personal transformations that facilitate life in the new country. As different as they are, Christianity and Buddhism alike provide “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 to the United States.”

Not all sociologists are fully satisfied with Chen’s account. What of those Chinese immigrants who have not taken on a religious identity? Are they not also becoming American? Clearly, Chen cannot mean that religion is a necessary condition for successful transplantation. But through her respectful, comprehensive and probing interviews—a method she evidently learned from her professor Ann Swidler, a coauthor of *Habits of the Heart*—she has surely illuminated the path many have taken.