

The Evangelical Church in Boston's Chinatown

*A Discourse of Language,
Gender, and Identity*



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STUDIES IN ASIAN AMERICANS
RECONCEPTUALIZING CULTURE,
HISTORY, AND POLITICS

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Editorial Method

1. The *pinyin* system of Romanization is followed. This is a “spell sound” system based on the standard Chinese pronunciation of the People’s Republic of China. However, in cases where scholarly works have consistently used another system, such as the Wade-Giles, that system will be used.
2. There are several texts in Cantonese and Mandarin. I have translated all written documents and Mandarin-language sermons. Cantonese sermons were translated with the aid of a translator employing simultaneous translation.

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Preface

Protestant Chinese churches have been growing rapidly in the United States since the 1960s when changes in immigration laws spurred an influx of Chinese from Taiwan and Hong Kong. The churches have been established by this group, many who practice the indigenized missionary form of Christianity in their home countries. As such, the churches are predominantly “conservative evangelical” in doctrine and non-denominational. Sociologists, many who are Chinese Christians themselves, have dominated research on Chinese Christian churches in the United States. These sociologists have indicated that evangelical Christianity has many parallels with Chinese culture and non-denominationalism ensures greater appeal to a wider variety of Chinese and other Asian groups. Despite what can be seen as rapid growth in the Christian Chinese community, only a small fraction of the Chinese population in the U.S. is actually Christian. Fenggang Yang (1999) estimates about thirty-two percent are Christian in the metropolitan areas of Los Angeles and Chicago. Nationally, however, pastors estimate it to be much lower. Estimates on the high end are about ten percent.

Historically, many Chinese were labeled as “rice-bowl Christians” because they attended the churches seeking handouts rather than for worship (Hsu 1981:273). Over the decades, through a relatively small thread of followers, Christianity has become a “Chinese tradition” and the majority of church members are believers. Chinese conversion to Christianity has had an impact worldwide. It has not only been used as a form of resistance to the Communist Party in the People’s Republic of China, but through missionary teams, the Chinese who view themselves as the “almost chosen people” (Yang 1999), spread their version of the gospel to areas of Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas.

This book looks at the construction of identity among a theologically conservative evangelical, counter-cultural Christian Chinese community in the heart of Chinatown in Boston, Massachusetts. By conservative evangelical, I

am referring to the promotion of the ascetic lifestyle as well as to the literalist tradition of Biblical interpretation and the “sole means of salvation” through baptism in the Holy Spirit. (Marsden 1991:125) This group, as members of a large evangelical church, creates a united ethnic identity through their belief in the Bible as the literal word of God and their Confucian cultural background regardless of its remoteness. They argue they are Christians first, united in Christ, and ethnic second. However, as demonstrated through discourse analysis, in practice this is not a clear dichotomy. Within the Chinese expression of Christianity is an emphasis on the relational: one’s transcendent relationship to God which serves as the anchor of one’s beliefs and practices, and in conjunction with sociocultural relationships, is the medium through which the individual is defined and beliefs are expressed. As Virsten Choy (1995) argues, the Chinese emphasis on the relational contrasts with the individualism of western discourse. Three main factors motivate Chinese discourse. The first is a continuous awareness of one’s network of relationships. Second, is the recognition of the importance of saving face for those with whom one is in a relationship. Third, is the fulfillment of the obligations involved in maintaining one’s relationship. Socially and spiritually, one’s Chinese identity is fused with a Christian identity. This focus on the relational underscores their approach to becoming “new creations” (an element of being “born again” described below) and counter-cultural Christians.

The sociocultural relationships investigated here are gender and generation, culture and language, and socioeconomic status. I look at gender and generation together, as they are inseparable with regard to status among men and women in the church and in Chinese culture. Gender and generation are also intricately intertwined with the services and prayer. I analyze language and culture within the church since there is a significant variety of both. How does one define him or herself as Chinese when language and culture can provide greater variation than unification? I argue that the performances of the sermons -the style of preaching and prosodic changes in each pastor’s speech- will provide clues to identify elements of a unifying ethnic identity. Despite differences in language and cultural backgrounds, Asian languages generally share a system of contextualization cues that provide participants with subtle cues for the decipherment of indirect inferences (Gumperz 1982). Young (1994) further points out that despite the use of English, it is incorrect to assume that there is a shared understanding. These cues persist despite the linguistic code used.

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Chapter One

Saving Souls in Chinatown: Church and Community

This chapter is a preamble to a study of an evangelical Chinese church in Boston, Massachusetts' Chinatown. The church members categorize their environment into the sacred and the profane reflecting the social and ideological context of the church in the ethnic neighborhood and the greater religious community. The Chinese Evangelical Church (CEC) is nestled in the South Cove neighborhood of Boston. It is the largest Christian Chinese church in the city and boasts a membership of over one thousand. It is one of nearly twenty Chinese churches in Boston and suburbs. The majority of these churches, about two thirds, are Protestant and non-denominational. The six pastors of the CEC reflect the growing needs of the church in cultural and linguistic diversity, leading three language services, Cantonese, English and Mandarin, in two service styles, contemporary and traditional. Since the church's founding in June of 1961 by a small group of Cantonese-speaking Christians in Boston, the CEC has experienced tremendous growth and diversification. At first, this small group of about eighteen members met in their homes or rented buildings until the present church was erected in 1979. The decades of the 1960s and 1970s saw substantial church growth¹. It was at this time that the Immigration Act of 1965 ushered in the third and most recent² wave of Asian immigrants. These immigrants were generally well educated, cosmopolitan and affluent. As Fessler (1983) indicates, many were from Taiwan and Hong Kong,³ which was a break with the "old" immigrant place of origin, namely Guangdong Province (Southern China). While many experienced language difficulties upon arrival in the United States, most became literate in English and certainly their children were more acculturated. There was clearly a need for an English-speaking service. Thus, founded by the present senior pastor in 1983, the CEC incorporated an English-language service. In 1989, the

Mandarin-speaking component grew to where a joint Cantonese/Mandarin service was initiated. The Mandarin group grew to its present size of about sixty regular members, and in 1999, they moved to a neighboring school classroom. They continue to worship there to this day.

Defining its mission to serve the Chinese community of Boston and outlying areas, the Chinese Evangelical Church desires to be an integral part of the Chinatown community. How this is done is a product of the make-up of the community and the church's orchestrated variety of approaches based on each pastor's contributions from their particular religious and cultural tradition. For example, the associate pastor, from a highly politically active Hong Kong tradition (Ko 2000), encourages his service members to become politically aware, if not active, in presidential voting and other significant political matters. The Canadian-born English assistant pastor, being greatly influenced by Black political and religious rhetoric, draws on parallels between the Chinese and Black emphases on family and leads the congregation in political activism in Chinatown, specifically to rid the neighborhood of the "Combat Zone" (the local name for the red light district).

The pastors' outreach focus is on Chinatown residents and members of Boston's Chinese community who regularly visit the neighborhood. The church was intentionally established in this area to support ethnic enterprise and families⁴. As the designated "mother church," the Chinese pastors intend to plant other churches in strategic areas, mainly focusing on the growing number of Chinese satellite communities in the suburbs. There has been one such church plant in Malden, Massachusetts, a suburb of Boston, that has been tremendously successful⁵. Malden is located just north of Boston and its ethnic make up is nearly seventy percent white with a Chinese population of about eight percent. It is a middle class suburb and its educational attainment levels reflect a professional population further reflecting similar levels of the church members. Nevertheless, as membership exceeds the capacity of the present church, the Chinese Evangelical Church is desperately seeking other avenues to accommodate its congregation. Relying on God's guidance through prayer, the church awaits a solution to its losing battle with the city for expansion space.

CHURCH PROFILE

There is a discourse between the greater community, the Chinese community and the church, as well as the church's involvement with the expanding network of Asian—including Korean—churches. This section provides contextualization for the analysis of the complex processes of church and individual identity construction.

Subsumed under the heading of “Christian” in the church is great diversity in language, culture and generation. While the majority of members are Cantonese speakers from Hong Kong, there is a comparable number of English-speaking, American-born Chinese (ABC), American-raised Chinese (ARC) and immigrant Chinese. Cantonese or *Yue* dialect is spoken in Southern province of Guangdong (its capital city, Guangzhou, formally known as Canton), Hong Kong, and Macau. Pre-1965 immigrants were from the Canton region and thus early immigrants to the United States and elsewhere spoke this language. There is now a growing third membership of Mandarin-speaking Chinese from Taiwan and Mainland. Mandarin is the official language of the People’s Republic of China and Taiwan. It is based on the northern Beijing language and is officially called *Putonghua*. It is generally referred to as *Hanyu* in China or *Guoyu*, in Taiwan.

Below I provide a profile of the CEC congregation. This profile is based on a survey conducted in the church⁶. I focused on language, education, and service attendance. Out of over 800 possible respondents, there were 667 surveys completed and returned. According to the survey results, it seems that at least the majority from each service filled out and handed in their questionnaires. That is, no service is over or under represented.

With regard to the language component, many of the respondents are bilingual in Cantonese and English. While the total number of respondents was 667, the total number of English and Cantonese speakers is 993 (they checked both boxes).⁷ Thus, at least 326 respondents claim to be bilingual. That is about one third of the total congregation. Interestingly, one half of the congregation is Cantonese-speaking. The survey indicates a significant number of monolingual Cantonese speakers. This segment derives from the older Cantonese service where many individuals, predominantly women, do not speak English. The other languages represented on the survey are Mandarin with 199 out of 667 respondents, or nearly thirty percent, and Toishanese, a subdialect of Cantonese, with 106 out of 667 respondents, or sixteen percent. The results indicate that there is a high level of bilingualism. Furthermore, those that are bilingual for English/Cantonese are attending English services rather than the Chinese language services. The same can be said for Cantonese/Mandarin speakers. For example, there are only sixty regular members in the Mandarin service with a reported 199 speakers of the language. Sixty-two individuals reported “other” for language. This high level of bi- and multilingualism is essential for the unification of such a diverse congregation. It is these individuals who can move from service to service (and many do) and act as translators, mediators, messengers and cultural liaisons.

According to the survey, most of the church members are U.S. citizens. The respondents claiming citizenship totaled 463, or nearly seventy percent. Based on information from the associate pastor, Mandarin-speaking members have been in the United States an average of five years. He gave me an average of fifteen to twenty years for the Cantonese-speaking members. The founding members of the CEC in the Cantonese service have been in the United States since the first major wave of immigration in the 1960s. This includes founding pastors. Interestingly, many Cantonese speakers learned enough English to pass the citizenship exam but since the language was not used regularly in their daily lives it fell into disuse and was forgotten.

This is a self-identified "family-centered church" with forty-six percent of the congregation married. However, many church members are college students and young professionals. The individuals generally wait to marry until they have attained their educational goals and financial security. This is discussed more in chapter six

With regard to employment, a significant number, twenty-seven percent of church members, work in Boston proper. Professions include lawyers, accountants, and medical doctors, as well as blue-collar service and retail workers. However, many Chinese are moving into the suburbs and setting up businesses where they live. An example of this is Quincy, located seven miles southeast of Boston, which today is home to more Chinese residents than Chinatown. Asians are attracted to Quincy's thriving business district and educational opportunities. We have the making of "suburban Chinatowns" such as we see in Monterey Park, California (Fong 1994), and Flushing, Queens (Chen 1992, Ng 1998, Sanjek 1998). Suburban Chinatowns, described by Timothy Fong (1994), are centered on retail stores, restaurants and businesses as well as residences. The social and political organization falls along the same lines as the older Chinatowns. For example, as Fong states with regard to class and nativity:

Divisions similar to those found in Monterey Park have been described by Victor and Brett de Bary Nee for San Francisco's Chinatown and Bernard Wong for New York's. In both studies, the two main factions were the "traditional elite-" predominantly older, China-born merchants associated with the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (CCBA)-and the "social service elite," made up primarily of American-born Asian social service professionals and students. (Fong 1994:153)

Thus, economically, culturally and politically, the new Chinatowns reflect the characteristics of the old Chinatowns.

In the CEC, the vast majority, seventy-one percent of the church members, work fulltime. The older, more established Chinese members are professionals such as doctors and lawyers. There was a wave of younger professionals in information technology. Typically, this group includes immigrants as well as ABC's. Another wave is going into the social sciences, such as sociology, psychology and even anthropology. Many young people are entering the medical profession as pharmacists and biomedical researchers. The pharmacy degree, taking six years, is relatively fast to obtain, and has a relatively high status. There are a number of students in the colleges surrounding Boston, such as Wellesley, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Harvard, Tufts, Boston University, Boston School of Music and a host of dental, pharmaceutical and optometry schools.

With regard to educational levels, nearly all of the CEC members obtained an elementary education. Ninety percent of those who obtained at least an elementary education went on to finish the secondary levels or high school. College degrees are relatively plentiful with sixty percent of the respondents who indicated they had completed high school obtaining at least a four year degree. With many professionals in the older Cantonese and English service, this is not surprising. The prevalence of graduate degrees among the congregants remains high, about fifty percent of the college educated individuals.

Many blue-collar workers including those in the restaurants are living in Chinatown. Ironically, these folks are not attending the church as hoped. Originally the church was drawing about sixty percent of its membership from Chinatown. Now, with the migration to the suburbs and the changes in Chinatown land values discussed more in the next section, only twenty percent are coming from the area. I met a few Mandarin-speaking Taiwanese and Fujianese who were recent immigrants and residents of Chinatown. The Fujianese are, in general, recent immigrants, predominantly post-1985, that are from Fujian, a Southeast province of China. Hailing primarily from the capital of Fujian, Fuzhou, they are often ill prepared to deal with life in the United States and having established themselves in Chinatowns (mainly New York's), rely on family associations and religious organizations to find work, housing and social services. Fujian's mass emigration is in large part the result of economic restructuring and a "highly organized" human smuggling syndicate (Guest 3:2003). The adults in Boston's Chinatown were underemployed, blue collar or unemployed. Some live in church-owned housing in Chinatown. Many families working various shifts in the Chinatown restaurants make use of the church-sponsored, after-school programs for childcare.

According to CEC data in 1999, there were an estimated 100,000 Chinese in Metro Boston. Boston-wide, sixty percent are overseas-born (OBC) and forty percent are American-born (ABC). Out of the OBCs, forty percent are overseas-raised, indicating that they are culturally Chinese from their native Asian country and sixty percent are American-raised (ARC). Thus, there are an estimated 60,000 American-raised Chinese in metro Boston. There are 500 ARCs (this includes ABCs, too) in the CEC. This is about half the membership. Chinese, who are born and raised overseas represent the other half.

In the section on Chinatown below, I will include statistics that reflect Chinatown “users” and “residents” as a whole. The data will demonstrate the level of representation of the Chinatown Church members of this community. These statistics are provided by the Chinatown/Neighborhood Council, the City of Boston and Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) synthesized in a Chinatown Community Plan. (These statistics will be referred to as BRA data).

HISTORY OF CHINESE IN NEW ENGLAND AND THE RISE OF BOSTON'S CHINATOWN

Boston's Chinatown is a one hundred and fifty year old ethnic neighborhood located in the southern part of Boston. Today, Chinatown is a working class neighborhood that maintains an overwhelming majority of Chinese (ninety-two percent) with only a smattering of other Asian groups such as Vietnamese, Cambodians, Koreans and Japanese. Boston's Chinatown is home to 5000 permanent residents but holds a central role for nearly 70,000 Asian “users” or those individuals that come regularly to shop, socialize or work (BRA 1983).

Early nineteenth century New England provided a political and social atmosphere generally conducive to Chinese labor and education. The Chinese have long been associated with schools of New England such as Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Yale, Wellesley and Harvard. By the early twentieth century there were more students on the east coast than on the pacific coast (Blakeslee 1910: 201). While California was actively anti-Chinese, New England boasted individuals critical of such anti-Chinese sentiments such as 1846 Harvard Law School graduate, Anson Burlingame (1820–1870), who as the U.S. ambassador to China, brought a diplomatic mission from China to Massachusetts in 1868 and authored the Burlingame Treaty that provided for Chinese rights to immigrate. Similarly, Senator George Frisbie Hoar of Massachusetts (1826–1904), rejected the view that the Chinese were incapable of assimilation and supported Chinese labor, arguing that given time, the Chinese would adapt to the American environment.

While there was a Chinese presence in Boston as early as 1784, Chinatown proper was not established until the 1860s. The earliest Chinese in Boston were sailors involved in transoceanic trade (Chinese Historical Society of New England (CHSNE)⁸ 1996). During the decades of the 1860s and '70s, over 30,000 Chinese per year had flocked to California. However, there were a number of factors that drew Chinese to the east coast, such as racism, violence and state legislation on the west coast and educational opportunities in New England.⁹ During the nineteenth century, pressures from high unemployment and increasing nativistic sentiments fueled white aggression toward the Chinese in areas of Washington and California. Following the completion of the Trans-Continental Railroad in 1869, which had employed approximately 12, 0000 Chinese between the years 1865 to 1869, many Chinese laborers were seeking work at lower wages than their white counterparts. Additionally, the Chinese were confronted with the passing of the Nationality Act of 1870, which allowed those of African descent to naturalize while excluding the Chinese. A year later, a large-scale riot broke out in 1871 in the Chinatown of Los Angeles, California where nineteen Chinese were killed.

On the east coast, factories such as the Sampson Shoe Factory in North Adams, Massachusetts, were attracting Chinese laborers who were willing to work for low wages and to break worker strikes. In 1872, the Sampson Shoe Factory brought seventy-five Chinese workers from California to break a labor strike¹⁰ (CHSNE 1996). This was followed by an additional fifty over the next year.

An important Chinese presence in New England was the Chinese Educational Mission established in the early 1870s (Chan and Wong 1998:26). The Mission's first headquarters was Springfield, Massachusetts but it was then moved to Hartford, Connecticut where it remained until its demise in 1881. Here the Mission's students were housed in local homes where they received schooling in English and cultural education including singing, dancing, piano, drawing and painting (Wang 1966). Chan Lanbin, a secretary with the Board of Punishments in the Qing court, was assigned commissioner and Yung Wing, who had been made a low level official in the Qing court, the associate commissioner. Significantly, Yung Wing was Yale educated and Christian. He had arrived in the United States in 1864 prior to their appointments under the tutelage of an American missionary, Samuel Robbins Brown (Wang 1966:42). Ultimately, the Mission's goal was to send 120 students between the ages of twelve and sixteen, over four years to be educated not only in the western sciences and arts but to also continue their Chinese education in the classics and remain loyal to the cause of modernizing China. According to Yung Wing, who