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Geopolitics and the Making of Chineseness in US Sinophone Churches

“...One of my good Taiwanese friends up in Valley Forge 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, MEC

“After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.”

-Revelations 7:9

Introduction

With China’s rise in the global order combined with the continuing push for Taiwanese independence, questions of who counts as Taiwanese and who counts as Chinese have come to the forefront, even outside of the political arena. As these fraught geopolitical relationships evolve, the meanings attached to these sub-ethnic 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. Lien 2010, Chen 2008, 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. Thus, while some Asian American scholarship do attend to sub-ethnic groups and recognize the existence of sub-ethnic groups (e.g. Hsu 2000), many works primarily rely upon the broader Chinese label within their analytical frameworks.

As disaggregation within broader Chinese America can focus upon linguistic or speech groups, surname groups, and territorial or native-place communities (Duara 1997, 2003; Kuo

2014), the Taiwanese (American) identity is appropriate for studying the logics of group formation within the diasporic Chinese community because of the ongoing uncertainty concerning Taiwan's political status as well as its relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC). Not only have Taiwan and mainland China historically vied for precedence in defining Chineseness but also today, within the sociological literature as well as the public forum, the Taiwanese people and Taiwanese Americans are commonly associated with a definition of Chineseness that both centers the mainland Chinese and privileges the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) policy of "One China." By attending to the simultaneous and multiple identities of Taiwanese immigrants, ones that include American, Taiwanese, and Chinese among others, we can then emphasize the existence of competing definitions of being Chinese as well as demarcate the shifting boundaries of their pluralist identities and the external situations that reshape them.

As such, my paper analyzes the politics of identity formation at the intersection of geopolitics, religion, and US immigration among diasporic Chinese Christians or what Shih Shu-Mei (2010) calls the "Sinophone community," a term that highlights commonality of related languages rather than a singular ancestral homeland. I look at how East Asian geopolitics continues to transform these post-1949 identities even after migration to the US, which becomes another political entity to consider. Concerned with meaningfully disaggregating Sinophone communities as well as theorizing the geopolitical terrain against which to understand the contested contours of being Taiwanese, Chinese, American, and Christian, my research questions are two-fold. First, what is the relationship between geopolitics and the ways in which Sinophone Christian communities organize themselves? Implicit within this first question is a second one:

specifically, 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 (2010) call to meaningfully disaggregate among the commonly "lumped together Chinese Americans," I argue that members of Sinophone Christian churches represent one group whose disaggregation can contribute new theoretical and conceptual frameworks for understanding contemporary Chinese America at large. Specifically, my paper disaggregates diasporic Chinese in the US according to the salient ethno-political identities forged out of the events leading up to and of 1949 and examines their experiences after immigrating to the US. Produced after the 1949 victory of the Communist Party of China and the subsequent establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) as well as the inaugural year of the Kuomintang (KMT) led Republic of China (ROC), ¹ new identifications² eventually became the basis of competing Chineseness politically and socially. Specifically, I look at the diasporic Chinese of three sub-ethnic groups: those of *waishengren* (those who fled to Taiwan after the communist victory), *benshengren* (those who migrated to Taiwan prior to the communist victory), and *mainland Chinese* (those who remained in China after the communist victory)³.

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

¹ 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.

² Including Cantonese, Hakka, Teochew, Hokkien, and mainland Chinese, among others. See Chow (1997) and Carrerio (2012) for more on Han Chinese myths.

³ 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).

a majority mainland Chinese Christian church, now known as Maryland Baptist Church (MBC)⁴, as well as interviewed other diasporic Chinese whom MEC and MBC congregants introduced me to. By conducting ethnography churches with relatively homogenous diasporic Chinese churches, I can understand why sub-ethnic groups choose to worship apart from other groups, building on the literature that predominantly focuses on cosmopolitan or diverse immigrant churches. Both MEC and MBC are short distances from several other Sinophone churches with varying congregation compositions, demonstrating the array of choices open diasporic Chinese Christians. By examining the experiences of congregants at these two churches as well as those of others in the area, I piece together a coherent narrative of identity formation within the Christian Sinophone community. 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 feel that they belong with and the ways in which they characterize that sense of belonging.

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 sub-ethnic lines⁵. However, interviews and informal conversations with churchgoers show that both sub-ethnic groups of Taiwanese construct their identity against a mainland Chinese other as well as a broader white American or "foreigner" other⁶. Using their

⁴ Names of churches and individuals are pseudonyms. While MBC is Baptist in name and history, its current practices as well as identification by leadership remains non-denominational, independent, and Evangelical in nature like most Chinese churches. For more information on characteristics of Chinese churches, see Yang (1999).

⁵ Sermon, November 12, 2017, June 3, 2018

⁶ 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.

“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 manifests through their fear of “hordes” of mainland Chinese immigrants “taking over” their church and changing worship practices. Pointing to stereotypes of materialism and desires for social status, Taiwanese congregants simultaneously sympathize with but also distance themselves from mainland 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 the language of the Gospel provide a way to make sense of and justify those boundaries. In other words, messages of inclusivity and transcendence of worldly relations are neither universal nor fixed but redefined according to the 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.

Theoretical Framework

Chinese Diaspora and Geopolitics

The Asian studies literature have analyzed diasporic Chinese according to many different types of social organization including disaggregation by. Many of these works highlight diasporic Chinese communities in Southeast Asia rather than the west (e.g. Zhou and Liu 2016). These studies of the Chinese diaspora are typically not in conversation with the “America-centered” migration and Asian American scholarship (McKeown 2001, p. 3). By viewing Chinese immigrants as another segment of the diaspora, I suggest that the various diasporic identities produced through formation of the Republic of China (ROC) and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) are transformed in a contemporary American context.

When analyzing the Chinese diaspora in the US, it is important to question presentist assumptions about China or Asia at large, drawing conclusions based upon generally unpacked concepts of “American,” “Asian,” or “Chinese.” Indeed, as historian Adam McKeown (2001) notes, “[these] very labels need to be interrogated when conceptualizing a diaspora.” 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; 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 attention to how immigrants forge their identities under these conditions rather than emphasizing their agency in choice-making.

Considering various notions of China and being Chinese have racial/ethnic meanings, cultural meanings, and historical meanings, the “social reality” is that people are constantly being interpreted as either Chinese, non-Chinese, or specific *types* of Chinese, resulting in inclusion or exclusion from different communities. Instead of sorting aspects of immigrant lives into “American” or “Chinese,” it becomes possible to conceive of acts with “hybrid” roots or as “creolized” in nature (Basch et al. 1994; Hannerz 1989). Indeed, “Chineseness is not a category with a fixed content—be it racial, cultural, or geographical—but operates as an open and indeterminate signifier whose meanings are constantly renegotiated and rearticulated in different sections of the Chinese diaspora (Ang 2001, p. 38).” As a result, diaspora is an apt term to pair with the idea of “Chineseness” because the paradigm is “necessarily unstable” and “anti-essentialist” (Ang 2001, p. 40). In this way, diaspora embodies the in-betweenness of

transnational spaces as it is against 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 “Chinese” and “Taiwanese” identities across space and time.

Fenggang 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). The effects of the arrival of Chiang Kai-shek and his approximately two million followers to the recently liberated Taiwan after fifty years of Japanese colonization continues to this day. Deemed *waishengren*, “people from another province,” these individuals and their descendants have since had a complex relationship with the *benshengren* majority, “people from this province” who were already there. As this divide is the inspiration for the current political party system, identity formation goes hand-in-hand with politics. *Waishengren* are popularly associated with the KMT, known as the pan-blue coalition and current supporters of status-quo cross-strait relations between mainland China and Taiwan, although their historical stances deviated from the “One China” policy. On the opposing side, founded in 1986, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) or “pan-green coalition” build their platform upon Taiwanese independence and thus, a distinctive Taiwanese identity. Because of the violent and oppressive nature of Chiang Kai-shek’s regime as well as the decades of martial law under the KMT, there have historically been hostility between *waishengren* and *benshengren*. Even though this relationship still resembles its original iteration, other factors such as the growing hostility with mainland China and the current and overall second DPP presidency have redrawn alliances. While these political affiliations appear clear-cut, today *waishengren* and *benshengren* are not necessarily advocates of their historical parties.

Taiwanese migrants to the US carry these notions with them as they form their diasporic communities in the US. Shelly Chan (2018) 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). As Taiwanese immigrants piece together their Taiwan, their “homeland-nation,” and their ethnic identity, from childhood and young adult memories as well as their continued engagement through short-term family visits, news accessible in the US, and what Peggy Levitt and her colleagues (2011) call, “an American-inflected version” of Taiwan (and China) in circulation. Culturally “anchored” (ibid.) by the US, their imagined Taiwan may resemble but may no longer be the same as the Taiwan of people still living there.

As they outline the boundaries of their community through their everyday, lived experiences of being Taiwanese in America (Levitt 2001, Ebaugh and Chafetz 2002), they also establish dissimilarities based upon the same sources. In his study of Chinese churches in Houston and a 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 sub-ethnic identifications rather than simply being generally Chinese. To this end, 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.

In his study on early twentieth century Chinese nationalist factions, Prasenjit Duara (1997) writes that “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, Chan (2018) asserts that while China “never commanded a single Chinese diaspora,” “the claims of fixed, unbroken ties, in fact, reflect the palpable effects of living in a world that does not stand still” (p. 8). Like the nationalists drawing upon these notions of “Chineseness” to forward their political aims, actors within the PRC, ROC, and the US set out to define what it means to be Chinese, Taiwanese, and America. While the PRC’s “One China” Policy has support from the KMT and the US, other events, like the historic phone call between US President Donald Trump and Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen, leader of the DPP, have muddied the waters. While the PRC has maintained the policy since 1949, it has reinforced its 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 US airlines designate Taoyuan airport in Taiwan as “Chinese Taipei” (Wee 2018). As cross-strait relations between Taiwan and China continue to decline, Taiwanese immigrants among other diasporic Chinese are affected by these political changes as they reconstruct the boundaries of their identities.

In short, tensions in Asia cannot be contained to that region and the individuals living that region. As immigrants are living increasingly transnational lives, their engagement with their countries of origin persist in everyday forms whether it is watching various Asian news channels or keeping in close contact with family and friends. 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 Glick-Schiller 2004). We can see the articulations of these boundaries across various areas of social life and domains of practice, including religious ones.

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 re-grouping, it is important to examine 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 and how they interpret inclusivity, decency or other commonly cited values. Peggy 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). Religion, like ethnicity and other markers of identity, is affixed rather than something that remains the same through time. As a result, it is necessary to attend to factors that destabilize religion and its different forms aside from 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 integrate what Levitt (2013) calls a “transnational optic” and perceive social life (and concepts of religion) as circulating within a broader, not simply national, space. As such, shifts in cross-strait relations inevitably affect religious forms and most importantly, the way that religion is interpreted and used for various agendas. Christian churches, especially those that emphasize evangelizing, open their doors to believers, seekers, and potential converts on a regular basis. These changes in meaning making has important implications for congregation composition. 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. Specifically, as their ideas of Chineseness changes so does their vision of their congregation and thus, their practice of religion.

Carolyn 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” (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. By considering becoming Christian as shift in value system that also equips converts with new moral vocabularies to regard social phenomenon such as racism or other forms of discrimination, the experience of conversion becomes more

nuanced than general calls for inclusion from the pulpit. The ideas of inclusion and exclusion, constructions of insiders and outsiders, are themselves transformed in the process. Similarly, the function of religion, then, is not simply preserving traditions, adopting new American ones, or variations of both but something more encompassing (Chen, p. 187). In other words, the way that Christians consider notions of ethnicity, race, and nationality are themselves transformed and re-interpreted. In short, the Christian frame of mind, a result of personal transformation, cannot be limited, bounded, or universalized. It is these commonly-invoked seemingly universal values of tolerance, inclusion, and love among others that require deep scrutiny so that we can understand how they materialize across various contexts.

Such reorientations recall deeper familial-type relationships that Weber (1946) 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 meant 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 (p. 329-330) For insiders, the principle of “simple reciprocity” applied and the wealthy were obligated to help those in need without concern for profit or repayment while outsiders were excluded from such reciprocity (ibid.). For Weber, religious norms operated according to its own logics and most importantly, applies in all aspects of one’s life, not simply during church activities. While these religious frames may complement other secular value systems and laws of the world, they may also be in opposition. It is this clash with competing systems of thought that highlights the limitations of any single frame; the degree to which Christian ones take precedence over others remains personal.

Within Sinophone churches, issues of inclusion and exclusion are not unordinary. 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 Fenggang Yang (1998) calls a “tenacious unity,” more insular ones that are formed based upon more narrow definitions of Chineseness or other sub-ethnic groups 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, their spiritual needs, among others, may not be prioritized and indeed, may be ignored altogether. One example is being subject to the characterizations or beliefs of the majority group as a condition of their inclusion, one that they can contest but may result in conflict. Within MEC, conversations surrounding Taiwanese independence as well as negative descriptions of the mainland Chinese and President Xi Jinping’s administration are common topics that the minority mainland 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. In other words, 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.

While 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 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. Thus, unity within a homogenous church may be similarly procured through reminders of a global or universal Christian identity, yet such passages from the Bible evoking unity are instead applied to other sets of behavior. What may have been divisive within cosmopolitan settings becomes normalized and 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; a neutral, universal Chinese identity does not exist. 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.

Empirical Section

According to the Pilot National Asian American Political Survey⁷ (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” (45). While the survey combines all Taiwanese groups and mainland Chinese and other types of Chinese sub-ethnic 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 differ from those of other secular ethnicity-based organizations. Their voluntary nature, frequent

⁷ Data from PNAAPS was collected from 2000-2001 and published in 2004. For more information on this survey, see <https://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR03832.v1>

meetings, and their inward focus on the intimate and the sacred make them a fitting site to understand how 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).

As a result of the unique religious environment that enforce certain inclusivity norms aimed at creating unity, it is important to show how these congregations interpret and practice these Christian values given the geopolitical climate. Not only do these relationships among governments affect the way that Taiwanese think of themselves against other sub-ethnic groups but also complicates relationships within people who are from themselves, namely the *waishengren* and *benshengren* divide. With the presidential victory of Tsai Ing-wen of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), the second DPP president in the history of the ROC as well as the PRC's increasingly hardline policies against Taiwan's autonomy, certain aspects of Taiwan's internal divides are no longer as clear cut as earlier generations. As the PRC politically enforces the "One China" policy and has taken steps to define and control the discourse on being Chinese, aligning that to the PRC and mainland China, it has historically and currently undergirded the discussion on what it means to Taiwanese in addition to and apart from being culturally Chinese (Tu 1994).

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 other logics creep in. 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 “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 Taiwanese-ness, an assertion that simultaneously suggests and questions an authentic Taiwanese-ness beyond membership in the polity. While he remains sympathetic to his church friend, access to this cultural Taiwanese-ness 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 arrival of Chiang Kai-shek and his army despite the fact that not all *waishengren* were willing members and suffered through his not-infrequent purges. The boundaries of Taiwanese-ness goes beyond the mere demarcation of arriving before or after 1949, but rather, draws upon what Ien 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 his 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 continue to affect identity formation within the Taiwanese immigrant community.

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 Taiwan⁸.

⁸ 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.

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* as it she noted in Mandarin as the term has been mobilized by pro-independence supporters who tend to be *benshengren*. 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 implicitly not from mainland China. 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,” demonstrating not only does she perceive being Chinese as politicized but also particularly associated with Communism and Xi’s regime as she later notes. As her evolution of identification shows, Rebecca’s ways of thinking about herself has changed according to the political events around her. For Rebecca, being both Chinese and Taiwanese both have shifting and potentially off-putting political implications.

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

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 [*tai-du*]. . .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 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 them⁹.

⁹ In italics, I have provided the Mandarin terms that Rebecca used in the interview.

Rebecca reminisces to her childhood in Taiwan and recalls the 1970s as a time when she felt the full force of the hate 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, as she later told me, reveals not only the past prejudice harbored but also that those prejudice, however unjust and "ridiculous" they may have been, are no longer articulated in the same way. Upon migration, that person no longer feels the difference between *waishengren* and *benshengren* to be so strong, in a way similar to how Rebecca has embraced being from Taiwan more in the US than she did in Taiwan itself. It is also important to point out the role of language in *waishengren* and *benshengren* relations. *Benshengren* typically speak Hokkien¹⁰, 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 are mainly mainland 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

¹⁰ 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.

told her that my parents are also *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 member, Seth, another self-identified *waishengren* MEC member who was born in Kaohsiung, a known “green” city in southern Taiwan with DPP and pro-independence supporters, highlighted that he spoke Taiwanese outside the home and with his friends. He considers himself to be “Chinese in America” and notes that in a strict “race or ethnicity” sense, he considers himself to be “Chinese.” While 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. He later mentions that he does not relate to immigrants from mainland China 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.

Being in MEC, a Taiwanese church, meets the needs of both *waishengren* and *benshengren* even though there may be differences in political views, like there are in Taiwan.

Thus, the historical antagonism that Rebecca emphasizes no longer inhibits immigrants from Taiwan from forging a common identity that is separate from mainland China, 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 the state. In a church with both DPP and KMT supporters, hardline anti- and pro-independence proponents as well as the apathetic, they 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 activated not only by migration but by a common difference. Specifically, 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 mainland 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 “mainlanders” despite being grouped into one Chinese group. As identity formation does not occur within a vacuum, such descriptions cannot simply be a coincidence.

A Mainland Chinese Other

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 mainland Chinese are represented as “materialistic” and “status-seeking.” Variations of these stereotypes have made their way around MEC with even one visitor who was not diasporic Chinese remarking upon the difference between immigrants from mainland China and Taiwan is that mainlanders have different values that disregard the family and focus solely on acquiring material possessions. 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 mainland China who are “obsessed with money.” One time she needed only fifteen minutes to finish an assignment but this colleague told her to simply rush it and 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 mainland 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 how materialism is 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 employee of the US government, he describes how mainland Chinese tourists like to visit old US battleships and scrape off paint with keys so that China can more easily get water-proofing technology years ahead of time, noting that they are “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 mainland Chinese by casting them as foreign and inscrutable agents of the PRC. 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. They make so

much money that they have a *fuerdai* or rich second generation problem. Not only are the mainland 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 shows up in stereotypes of worship practices. Sally, a mainland 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 American churches, cosmopolitan Chinese churches, and now MEC, she has 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 Taiwanese church as opposed to a 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 mainland Chinese and Taiwanese] in how the way communicate about things and 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 by 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 positively associates being “western” or “open-minded” with the Taiwanese whereas the mainland 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 has to listen to stereotypes of mainland Chinese. Sally also implies that living under the PRC government has impeded the ability of the

mainland Chinese to think freely and most importantly, to be open to an ideal hybrid Chinese-western culture, like that of the Taiwanese.

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 Chinese people think through their strict interpretations and again, refers back to the Taiwanese being more "open-minded" than their mainland Chinese counterparts.

Thomas also highlights how these stereotypes in circulation affects church selection and more specifically, the decision of whether to become a minority member or a majority member of a congregation. After I asked him 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.

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 wholesale embrace or inclusivity across all areas of stratification, as some scholars have suggested. There is no singular or universal Christian behavior, so 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.

Coming Together in Church

The Christian frame of mind fosters the contingent inclusion within MEC. Charles, a self-identified *benshengren* who is very much against 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 wanted to be at 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 [mainland 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 the topic of mainland 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 an uneasy 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. If contained within the realm of talk and not action, the “Taiwanese independence ideology” is acceptable even if it may alienate potential mainland Chinese recruits or current mainland Chinese members. Everyone does not win in this superficial show of solidarity. While Charles appears sympathetic toward mainland 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 mainland Chinese members.

Similarly, Thomas who prefers to worship with Taiwanese over mainland 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 non-believers 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. In other words, he can maintain his political stances but still continue to proselytize; they are not at odds with each other.

Conclusion

Richard 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 Sinophone 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 Sinophone 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 deteriorating, Taiwanese American Christians construct their identities against a mainland

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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