




Chinese Gospel Church: The Sinicization of Christianity

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RELIGION AND THE NEW IMMIGRANTS

*Continuities and Adaptations in
Immigrant Congregations*



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The Chinese Gospel Church is the largest Chinese Protestant church in Houston, with several Sunday worship services in various languages and several daughter churches in the metropolitan area. Like most Chinese Protestant churches in the United States today, it is nondenominational and evangelical, and its membership comprises ethnic Chinese from diverse countries. Members value the Chinese character of the church, which assures them that to be Christian does not negate being Chinese. However, as a vibrant evangelical church, the leadership is committed to spreading the gospel and it envisions a future multi-ethnic congregation in which people of all nationalities worship together. There are constant tensions between maintaining its Sinicized Christianity and insisting on evangelistic universalism beyond ethnic boundaries.

I. History & Membership Characteristics

The Chinese Gospel Church (CGC) was officially established in 1975, before which it was a fellowship group composed of students from a local university campus and several new immigrant families living in southeast Houston. Beginning in 1972, a total of about 30 students and young professionals from Taiwan and Hong Kong came together for Mandarin Sunday worship services, which were held in the afternoon at the Chinese Baptist Church in downtown Houston. It was willing to host the new group, and each month its pastor preached and conducted communion services for them. However, because of cultural and social disparities between the newcomers and the earlier, Cantonese-speaking immigrants, integration into one congregation was not feasible. In 1974, the host congregation moved to a western suburb, leaving the Mandarin-speaking service downtown to serve students in various nearby educational institutions. Most of the founding members of the Chinese Gospel Church were already Christian, but they came from different denominational backgrounds. Therefore, they decided to establish a nondenominational church. The Sunday service was held in both Mandarin and Cantonese, interpreted consecutively, because Cantonese-speaking newcomers (students and immigrant professionals) felt greater affinity with Mandarin-speaking newcomers than with the Cantonese-speaking, upwardly mobile, earlier immigrants. With an initial attendance of about 80 people, the church invited the pastor of a Hong Kong church, who was on

15-month sabbatical, to help out. In 1975, with the election of seven deacons the church was officially born.

Within months, Sunday attendance increased to about 150 and by the end of 1976, it reached 250. After the first pastor completed his sabbatical, a missionary from the Philippines, who was on furlough for a year, was hired. He mobilized the congregation to reach out to Chinese families, organize groups in several residential areas, and develop an evangelistic ministry in a southern suburb, which later became a daughter church. In 1978, he decided to resume his missionary work in the Philippines and CGC hired a new pastor from Singapore. Sunday attendance continued to increase, to 380 by the beginning of 1979 and to over 440 the following year. The rented space at an Anglo church became too crowded, and in 1982 CGC held a dedication service for its own church building, located in the southern part of the city, attended by about 600 people. As the church grew, the pastoral staff increased. The previous pastor decided not to go back to the Philippines and was officially hired as a second pastor. He later became pastor for the daughter church in a southwestern suburb. The church also hired a full-time director, a secretary, and an evangelist who also became a pastor.

During the economic downturn of the 1980s, hundreds of church members lost their jobs or were constantly in fear of layoffs. Many left Houston in search of other opportunities. Consequently, although the church continued to gain new members by conversion, church attendance dropped to less than 600 in 1984 and did not grow much during the rest of the 1980s. Growth resumed in the 1990s and the congregation numbered over 800 in 1993. In 1991, CGC sent 120 families to a western suburb to establish a new church and, in 1997, it sent another 300 people to a southwestern suburb to do the same. By the end of 1998, adult Sunday attendance at CGC was back up to 760, and the newly planted church had 630 members. The church planting efforts have extended beyond the Houston area to a variety of towns and cities throughout Texas and overseas to Kazakhstan. It is now one of the largest Chinese churches in the U.S.

According to census data, there were about 30,000 Chinese in the Houston metropolitan area in 1990. However, CGC leaders contend that the actual number is more than triple that figure. The founding members came from Hong Kong and Taiwan as students and young professionals. By 1984, there were apparently more people from Taiwan than from Hong Kong. The church has had members from mainland China, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, Laos, Korea, Japan, France, Britain and the U.S., in addition to Taiwan and Hong Kong, who collectively speak more than 10 languages and numerous Chinese dialects. As the number of young professionals gradually increased, many had children and also brought their aged parents to the United States. This changed a church originally composed of young people into one encompassing all ages. Until the end of the 1980s, few members came from mainland China, but since 1990, many mainland Chinese have converted and joined the church. Church leaders foresee that mainland Chinese will become a majority in the next five or so years, although at this time, Taiwanese still constitute the largest group, Hong Kong immigrants the second, the American-born children of immigrants the third, and mainland Chinese the fourth. The rest are from Southeast Asian and other countries, including several non-Chinese from Korea, Vietnam, and elsewhere.

In 1998, the church roster had a total of 608 households and about 940 adult members. This roster is not a membership list. Rather, it includes all people who regularly or frequently attend this church, some of whom may not be baptized. Less than 500 are designated as official members. Some people simply assume that as long as they attend services regularly, they belong to this church. In some cases, only when one is asked to become a deacon, which requires membership, does he or she officially become a member. When the church was started, most participants lived close to the center of the city, but increasing numbers began to come from the "New Chinatown" in the southwestern area of the city. Today, people come to CGC from all over the metropolitan area, some driving as long as 40 to 50 minutes to get there.

The vast majority of church members are middle-class professionals who work as engineers, computer programmers, medical researchers, physicians and dentists. Self-employed business people comprise no more than 5 percent and their businesses include laundromats, computer sales, consulting, engineering and accounting firms, and real estate agencies, as well as one or two restaurants. In the mid-1980s, when the church had about 600 members, over 100 reportedly held a doctoral degree and many more had master's and bachelor's degrees, a pattern that continues today.

II. Theology & Ritual

Currently, there are two Sunday worship services. The English service begins at 9:30 A.M. and has an attendance of about 250, mostly American-born or raised Chinese. A few are students and adult immigrants from English-speaking countries and communities, such as Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and England. The Chinese service begins at 11:15 A.M. and has an attendance of nearly 400. This service is bilingual in Mandarin and Cantonese. Most Sundays the sermon is preached in Mandarin and interpreted into Cantonese, but once a month the reverse is done.

Theologically, the Chinese Gospel Church is a "non-charismatic, evangelical church," according to its senior pastor, with a strong missionary commitment. It concentrates on saving souls much more than on social services or political activism, stressing the importance of being born again, gaining salvation by grace, believing in the inerrant Bible, the second coming of Christ, and Baptism by immersion for those who have had a genuine experience of conversion attested to by the Church Council. Therefore, infants are not baptized, only people who are in their teens and older.

Evangelism has been the foremost ministry or goal of the church since its beginning. Even before the church was officially established, the Mandarin Sunday service had already included baptizing new converts. Since the official founding, Baptism services have been conducted almost every other month, baptizing about 30 to 40 people each year during its first ten years. CGC provides regular training workshops and Sunday school classes for doing one-on-one evangelism, including how to conduct evangelistic team visits to immigrant families and individuals at their homes. In addition, every year the church organizes a welcoming party for Chinese students coming to Houston to attend local universities and professional schools and evangelistic camp and other meetings. While Sunday service preaching is often evangelistic in theme, there is also an explicitly "Evangelistic Sunday"

every two or three months, at which the sermon has a clear emphasis on converting non-believers. Since 1984, CGC has had a recording studio that produces 13 hours of programs per week for a Chinese evangelistic radio program in Houston that broadcasts daily in Mandarin, Cantonese, and Taiwanese. This is all in addition to the numerous church plantings it has conducted, as mentioned earlier.

According to the pastor, "we are not pro-charismatic or anti-charismatic." However, the church does not allow people to speak in tongues during services or to conduct special healing services. In 1980 or 1981, a deacon, who was a key founding member of the church, attended a charismatic gathering elsewhere and then began holding weekly meetings at his home, where he arranged for charismatic preachers to speak and pray for people with hands on their heads. The senior pastor saw this as a serious challenge and he spent six Sundays preaching about charisma, using Biblical exposition without openly criticizing any person, then spent two Sundays answering questions during the Sunday school time. He told the church, "there are charismatic churches and non-charismatic churches. If you like charismatic, go to a charismatic church where you have full freedom to do what you like. However . . . as long as I am the Senior Pastor of this church, this church will not allow it." Subsequently, that deacon stopped coming to CGC and about a dozen people followed him.

Between 1975 and 1995, 64 CGC members entered seminaries and became ministers or missionaries or their wives. Chinese Christians regard the wives of ministers and missionaries as participating in full-time ministry service, along with their husbands. The church also supported 20 non-members in their seminary education. It will not support people attending liberal seminaries, including all of the divinity schools affiliated with top universities. Most approved seminaries are either independent or Baptist.

Concurrent pluralism in terms of religious practices is rare in this church, where fundamentalist strictness is practiced in the name of Christian purity. It rejects anything religious in Chinese traditions and, therefore, funerals and weddings are conducted according to western, Christian tradition. However, in practice, accommodations are sometimes made. For example, on one occasion, a woman member had to enact some Buddhist rituals when her mother died, because her brother's family in Houston is very actively Buddhist. The brother asked the pastor to conduct a Christian funeral service at the funeral parlor, after which he also arranged for a Buddhist chanting ritual at home. Both siblings attended the Buddhist ritual as well as the Christian service. Because Christians are still a minority within the Chinese immigrant community, this kind of accommodation for family members may not be exceptional.

III. Church Structure

The Chinese Gospel Church has 6 pastors: a senior pastor, a Chinese pastor, an English pastor, a youth pastor, and head and youth pastors for a recently planted church that is still considered part of the CGC. In addition, it has a music minister and several full-time and part-time administrative staff. The Church Council is composed of 32 lay leaders: six elders, 13 caring deacons, 10 administrative deacons, a treasurer, a chairman (elder) and two vice-chairmen, divided between the main site and the newly planted church. Pastors

are not members of the Church Council and therefore do not have the right to vote. However, they are "advisors" to the Council and they participate in Council meetings by giving reports, opinions, and suggestions.

The senior pastor called the church structure a "leadership democracy. . . . We strongly believe that leadership must not be assumed. Leadership must be recognized. A leader can lead only if people give you the power of leadership. You cannot say that I want to lead so I lead." He continued:

The leadership democracy is also Biblical. What we see in the Bible is theocracy, not democracy. The church is of God and Jesus Christ is head. However, how does God raise people to lead the church for Him? We need church members to recognize and agree that this man or that man is risen by God.

Pastors are "called," not "hired," according to the church's constitution:

The call of the Pastor shall be by recommendation of the Church Council with three-quarter majority vote, after due consideration and prayerful seeking of the will of God and the seal of the Holy Spirit. Such recommendations must further be approved by a two-thirds majority vote at a General Membership Meeting.

In other words, a candidate can become a pastor only if he has been accepted by considerably more than a majority of church members, however, a vote on the pastor by church members is not a democratic election. It is a procedure to testify that this man is chosen by God to lead this church. Technically, a new pastor has a one-year probationary period, at the end of which the Church Council decides whether to keep him. If there are strong objections, the pastor could be dismissed with a two-thirds majority vote of the congregation; otherwise, he receives lifetime tenure. The constitution does include an escape clause; however, no pastor has ever been fired or resigned from the church, although a couple have been sent as missionaries to other churches and Christian organizations.

Pastors make plans and present proposals to the Church Council as advisors, not members. The senior pastor noted:

Our leadership is by influence. Pastors can have tremendous influence upon lay leaders. If lay leaders think what we say is reasonable, Biblical, accordant with God's intentions, they would agree, testify, and make the decision. We pastors may influence them but do not make decisions for them.

Pastors can actually exert great influence. For instance, at one monthly Council meeting, after discussing several proposals concerning fund-raising for the construction of a new building for the planted church, there were apparent disagreements among members. The senior pastor then analyzed the pros and cons of each proposal and stated clearly his support for one. He said, "I must make my opinion known because I don't have a vote." One young deacon jokingly complained: "You are influencing us!" The vote confirmed his proposal. The senior pastor believes that by making decisions, lay leaders develop a sense of ownership and they become willing to devote time and energy to assuming the responsibility to carry out their plans.

Church Council members have term limits: two years per term and, after two consecutive terms, one must take at least a one-year break. This system of term limits is for the welfare of lay leaders, who serve the church voluntarily in addition to their regular employment. This system also assures healthy development of the church because every year there are deacons and elders who have to take the year off and the church must find new people to serve in these roles. On average, the church elects 20% new people to the Church Council every year.

Elders are responsible for ministries to people, whereas deacons mostly assume administrative responsibilities. Elders do caring work, Christian education, visiting church members, and nurturing people in their spiritual growth. However, the "elder" title sometimes scares away those who are good at ministering to people. In Chinese culture, the term "elder" means people who are old enough to command universal respect and high prestige. Therefore, the church created the title of "caring deacon" for people who do the same tasks as an "elder" but without the other connotations of that title. In many Chinese churches, "elders" are permanent, however, the senior pastor persuaded the church to set term limits on the eldership and to select several to help him minister to this large congregation, along with the caring deacons.

The senior pastor noted that the pastors sometimes differ in opinion because of different training, backgrounds, ages, and even native languages. However, they must achieve agreement on an issue before it is brought to the Church Council. Similarly, at the Council, in the absence of consensus no plans or proposals will be carried out. "My view is simple," said the senior pastor. "When only a minority of people agree with you that something should be done, when the majority of people have not yet agreed with you, if you forcefully push it, it won't work." He continued,

I learned this after twenty years ministry here. . . . When I came to this church, I would make plans and ask lay leaders to pass and carry them out. . . . Now, I start with working papers...[and] I invite people to think through with me. . . . I spend a lot of time on achieving consensus before making concrete plans [which may take 6 to 18 months].

Because of the diversity in the social and cultural backgrounds of its members, CGC consciously seeks to have representatives from each subgroup on the Church Council. Some are children of immigrant members, others are second or third generation Chinese Americans who grew up in California and Hawaii, came to Houston for employment, and joined the church as adults. Since 1990, many mainland Chinese have joined this church. In the past two or three years, the Nominations Committee has sought to nominate a mainlander for deacon, only to be declined by the potential candidates. Mainlanders will likely be elected to the Council within a year or two. Various committees also have representatives from diverse backgrounds.

In 1977, the church formed a Missions Committee, which later evolved into a Missions Department, to which more than 20% of CGC's income is devoted. Besides the church plantings, missionaries have been sent to South and Central America, to work at the Houston Port with Chinese seamen, to various Asian nations, and to Britain and elsewhere in Europe. CGC also produces, in addition to the radio programs mentioned earlier, the Texas edition of the New York-based, Christian Chinese newspaper, *Herald (haojiao)*.

In 1992, when 211 Chinese were detained near the U.S.-Mexican border for illegal entry, church members began regular visits to the detainees and eventually converted 200. It is now actively supporting missionary work in China with a \$50,000 per year memorial donation from an immigrant church member.

The Chinese Gospel Church has a large membership, which can make it difficult to provide adequately for members' individual needs. As a result, it has developed a system by which members are strongly attached to smaller church-based groups. Recall that the CGC emerged from a fellowship group. Over time, as church attendance grew, more were formed. At first, they were based on the university campuses, in residential neighborhoods, and according to language/dialect. By the mid-1980s, however, many residential fellowships were reshuffled because of the high rate of geographical mobility among immigrant members. Commonly, when Chinese immigrants first came to Houston, they rented apartments near their workplace or close to Chinese grocery stores. When their children reached school age, they moved to neighborhoods with very good public schools. Later, as they became yet more established, many bought spacious houses in the western and southwestern suburbs. Because people moved out of their neighborhood, some earlier fellowship groups based on residence were disbanded. Meanwhile, fellowship groups in the far suburbs grew, some evolving into daughter churches. Since the late 1980s, CGC fellowship groups have most often been organized according to language, age, gender, place of origin, or a combination of these characteristics. Today, there are 13 Mandarin-speaking, 4 Cantonese-speaking, and 4 adult English-speaking fellowship groups, and 85 percent of regular church attendees belong to one. The four Cantonese groups include one each for seniors, families, young professionals, and college and graduate students. The four English fellowships include one each for families with teenage children, families with pre-school children, young professionals, and college and graduate students. There are additional groups for high school and middle school students. The Mandarin fellowships include two for seniors, four for middle-aged married couples in various neighborhoods, one for young families from Taiwan, two for mainland Chinese families, one each for young professionals, college and graduate students, housewives, and divorced and widowed people.

The fellowship groups meet regularly—every week, every other week, or monthly. Most meet on Friday evenings at the church, while some meet at a member's home during the weekend. Meeting activities commonly include singing, praying, Bible studies, and religious lectures on topics such as married life, children's education, and workplace relationships. They also have picnics, camping trips, potluck dinners, and parties. The pastors believe that the ideal size for a fellowship group is 50 people. In reality, they vary in size from a dozen to over 100 people. While a small fellowship group may only have one elected chairperson and one or two officers or "coworkers," large fellowship groups often have several elected officers or coworkers with well-defined responsibilities. Some large groups, such as the Mandarin Students Fellowship, even have their own written constitutions and publish their own printed magazines.

Most fellowship groups further divide their members into cell groups. The size of cell groups varies between 5 and 15 people and each has a group leader and an assistant. When a cell grows to a dozen or more, fellowship leaders encourage it to split into two groups, one going with the leader, the other with the assistant. Some cell groups meet Friday evenings after the fellowship group gathering; others meet at members' homes once a week on a

weekday evening, in addition to the Friday evening fellowship meetings. Within the cell group, people grow in intimacy through weekly meetings where they pray together, share their daily life stories in a warm and secure atmosphere, exchange ideas and opinions concerning personal decisions, provide mutual assistance in tangible and intangible ways, and get immediate help in case of crisis or emergency. Many people, especially students and young professionals who are away from their families, appreciate the intimacy and mutual support provided by their cell group. During the 1990s, the cell-group ministry has become a major priority for CGC.

Besides caring for each other, another intended function of the cell group is proselytization. The group leader and assistant invite new acquaintances to their homes for supper and a chat. Later, if the new acquaintance appeared receptive, he or she is invited to attend a cell-group meeting. If the guest is a Christian, she or he is encouraged to get involved in the cell group, then the fellowship group and later the church, or simultaneously in various levels of the church. If the guest is not a Christian, the cell group provides Bible studies in a loving and caring environment, which has proved to be a highly effective method of gaining converts.

Fellowship groups are regarded as the basic units of the church. While the cell group provides intimacy, the larger fellowship group serves all those of homogeneous background, and has several important functions. The first is to share the burden of pastoral care. At a meeting of fellowship group leaders, the pastor said, "Our goal is to provide the warmth of a small church through the fellowship groups." He explained that a big church is good for the provision of specialized services, such as high quality Sunday school classes specifically designed for various age groups, but it also runs the risk of becoming impersonal. As a big church, the four full-time pastors are too busy to pay special attention to each individual member. To share the responsibility for pastoral care, lay ministers are necessary. Each fellowship group is assigned an "advisor" who acts like a pastor for that group, providing spiritual guidance, psychological counseling, and social care for its members. He also communicates with the pastors in regard to various fellowship group and member needs. Most are elected elders and deacons but a few hold no elected position in the church. Most problems are taken care of within the fellowship group without going to the pastor or to the Church Council. In case of serious needs, such as the hospitalization of a member, the advisor contacts the pastors and accompanies a pastor on a hospital visit, after which the advisor and fellowship leaders take over the responsibility for providing assistance to, caring for, and comforting the person and his or her family. Also, the members of this church have very different social and cultural backgrounds. Within the homogeneous fellowship groups, the same habits and customs, similar stages in career and life course, and a common vernacular make it easier to establish intimate relations with others.

The second function of the fellowship group is training lay leaders. People who want to get more involved in church leadership can start at this level, where they can demonstrate their talents and capabilities in singing, teaching, administrating, organizing, networking, etc., within a supportive, homogeneous group. Church volunteers are always needed and once someone is found to have a talent or special capability, fellowship leaders are eager to recommend him or her to serve at the church level, in such capacities as Sunday school teacher, member of various committees, or even deacon. Pastors always ask for recommendations from fellowship leaders, which means that fellowship groups

also serve as a social control mechanism. One has to achieve credibility first at that level before being granted a more influential leadership position at the church level.

The third function of the fellowship group is communication and mobilization. The pastors and Church Council communicate their visions and decisions to members through the Sunday pulpit, Sunday service bulletins, and church bulletin boards. However, the most effective means is through the fellowship group. Once a decision is made by the Church Council, deacons and elders go to fellowship groups to explain why it was made, what should be done and how to do it. Fellowship leaders, in turn, take feedback and suggestions to the pastors and Church Council. If grassroots mobilization is necessary, this is effectively done through fellowship groups.

Homogeneous fellowship groups meet the diverse needs of a heterogeneous church membership. However, homogeneous groupings also pose dangers of schism within the church. Therefore, the CGC stresses inclusiveness, the need to incorporate diverse groups into one church in order to reach the ideal of unity in diversity. Not only do pastors often preach unity from the pulpit, the church also organizes activities across fellowship groups, such as two groups sharing a camp retreat, several having a picnic together, two groups preparing and serving Sunday lunch, and several celebrating the Chinese New Year together. Through these activities, people from different fellowship groups get to know each other and learn about what other groups are doing. For this reason, the pastors strongly encourage those who do not belong to a fellowship group to join one, even organizing a "Fellowship Sunday" where each group had its own booth to provide information for potential members.

IV. Community Relations & Social Services

The Chinese Gospel Church was founded as and remains a nondenominational, independent church but, since its inception, it has had close relationships with Southern Baptist churches and its theology also has a Baptist flavor. The senior pastor grew up in a Christian and Missionary Alliance church in Hong Kong, attended a Baptist seminary in the U.S., was ordained in a Baptist church, and continues attending a Baptist seminary. He has personal connections with many Baptists, but he also has personal connections with Christian and Missionary Alliance people. The church maintains close contact with its plants in the Houston area but, with one exception, these are now entirely independent congregations. They form a loose, but not formally structured association. After discussing the possibility of forming a denomination, they opted instead to form this informal association to coordinate missionary and church-planting activities. CGC has no contact with other Chinese religious organizations in Houston.

The church provides social services in several ways. A bulletin board on the hallway wall displays ads and information—for example, used cars for sale, ads for real estate and insurance agents, live-in babysitter wanted, babysitting provided. Another column has ads for jobs. The bulletin board also has announcements, such as the location for donating food for the canned food drive for homeless people. All posted announcements and ads must be approved by the church office. The church has a charity fund under the leadership of the Deacon for Social Services, which is designed to help members and non-member

church participants in emergencies. During the economic downturn in the 1980s, the church established a special crisis fund to help church members who lost their jobs. CGC developed one of Houston's first Chinese schools and teaches over 300 K-12 students Chinese language and culture. It seeks to attract non-members' children to the school, so it advertises in Chinese newspapers, although now more than a dozen such schools exist in the Houston area. In 1998, several English classes were begun for adult immigrants to learn English. According to the Deacon of Social Services, the church sporadically had such classes in the past and he now wants to strengthen this service. The planted church still closely connected to CGC conducts classes to teach how to apply for a job, how to get various kinds of insurance, etc. Some members have established scholarships/fellowships, administered by the church, to help poor families who have children going to college. These are advertised in Chinese newspapers and non-members are encouraged to apply. The church and various fellowship groups frequently give lectures on how to maintain a happy marriage, educate children, better communicate with your boss and co-workers, make investments, take care of your health, etc. As discussed earlier, cell and fellowship groups also support members in need, materially, spiritually, and emotionally. The pastors also provide private counseling, such as premarital counseling.

Some church members are involved in community organizations unrelated to the church, and recently some initiated the "Salt and Light Society," an independent Christian organization designed to involve lay people in social service delivery. However, the church does not have formal relationships with these secular organizations. Nor does the church sponsor political discussions, or mobilizations, or maintain relationships with Chinese government agencies. The senior pastor said,

... the church does not have any formal relationship with Chinese governmental agencies. Our church is a religious organization and the governmental agencies are political organizations. We want to avoid them. We are very careful, especially because there are two political organizations here [meaning the competing PRC consulate and ROC office]. However, we encourage our brothers and sisters to be salt and light in the society. They can participate in various activities as individuals.

V. Ethnic & Religious Identity

The official position of CGC is that Christian religious identity supercedes Chinese ethnic identity. It welcomes non-Chinese to the church and extends missions to non-Chinese. Nonetheless, the number of non-Chinese is still very small and many of those are inter-ethnic couples. Anyone who walks into this church will notice that it is very Chinese. The vast majority of people are Chinese, although they come from various provinces of mainland China, Taiwan, and elsewhere in Asia and the world. The Chinese Sunday service continues to have a larger attendance than the English one. The Chinese language is still commonly used, although the Church Council has made English the official language for communication and documents.

A Christian identity serves to ease tensions between Chinese and American identities, however, a Christian identity sometimes creates tension with a Chinese one. Christians

constitute a small minority of the populations of most Chinese immigrants' homelands, and in no case is Christianity the pre-colonial, traditional faith. Many people come to CGC precisely because it allows them to be Christian yet also to maintain their Chinese identity and those aspects of traditional culture that do not clash with Christian beliefs. Because nearly all church members are Chinese, that identity can be taken for granted even while practicing a faith that has, at best, shallow roots in their traditional culture. Members need confront no contradictions between the two identities at CGC.

The cosmopolitan composition of the congregation is a testimony to the strong Chinese ethnic identity of its members. People from Taiwan (about half the members) are not a homogeneous group. Many are *waishengren* (people of "foreign" provinces), who were born in mainland China or whose parents immigrated to Taiwan in the late 1940s and early 1950s with the Kuomintang government, after it was defeated by the Chinese Communists. The rest were born in Taiwan but their ancestors had come much earlier from Fujian and Guangdong Provinces on the mainland. Among native-born Taiwanese there are also distinctive Hakka-speaking people and people who speak a variety of Fujian dialects, which are often mutually unintelligible. In addition, half the congregation comes from a myriad of other nations. They congregate together despite a host of subcultural, language, and sociopolitical differences. Among those who were Christian before they immigrated, there are also religious differences. Their backgrounds include Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, Christian and Missionary Alliance, and the Christian Church of China. In spite of varied denominational backgrounds, they have come together to form this nondenominational Chinese church, indicating that their Chinese and Christian identities are stronger than those which differentiate them.

The Chinese school has two goals: passing on Chinese language and culture, and attracting non-Christians for proselytization. The senior pastor thinks that the school is not an effective means of teaching the Chinese language: "We who grew up in China spent over ten years attending regular school to master the Chinese language. How can we expect the American-born to spend just Sunday afternoons to master this difficult language? It is simply impossible." For him, the school functions primarily for the purpose of bringing non-Christians to the church. However, many lay members think differently. They send their children to the school to learn to speak and write Chinese, to make friends with other Chinese children, and to be nurtured with cherished values. Some parents, who are dissatisfied with the quality and intensity of the school at CGC, send their children to other Chinese schools in Houston. Actually, some church members are key leaders of the Chinese Cultural Center, which is an independent, nonprofit, ethnic organization that has a Chinese school and provides various cultural programs. The pastor seems happy about the situation because he wants the church to concentrate on Christian evangelism rather than preserving Chinese culture.

CGC celebrates the Chinese New Year, although this is done through the fellowship groups, not by the larger church. Moreover, English fellowship groups did not hold a party to celebrate the 1998 Chinese New Year. All Mandarin fellowship groups had a combined party, as did all Cantonese fellowship groups. Again, church leaders wanted to use these opportunities to invite and befriend non-Christian Chinese. However, members tend to simply enjoy the parties and use the opportunity to introduce Chinese customs and values to their children. Because this is not a paid holiday and the Houston Chinese community

is not sufficiently well organized to celebrate together, as it does in New York and San Francisco, the meaning of the Chinese New Year has been relegated to some special foods that can be made at home or to a meal at a Chinese restaurant. In brief, it is becoming more "privatized." The pastor said that when he first came to Houston, he considered holding a special service on *Qingming*, a day in spring for remembering dead family members and ancestors. However, he soon found that Chinese here did not care much about this observance. They live in a non-Chinese country, which makes it easier for Chinese Christians to drop traditional cultural practices that are rooted in other faiths. Chinese identity is maintained primarily through connections with other Chinese, both inside and outside the church, with relatives in Houston and other places of the U.S., and with family members and relatives in Asia.

VI. Incorporating Newcomers

The leadership agrees that in the coming years, the numbers and proportions of American-born and raised Chinese and of mainland Chinese will increase. According to the December 1997 Elders' Meeting minutes, the congregation is getting younger in age and therefore increasingly English-speaking, and a very high percentage of newcomers are Mandarin-speaking mainlanders. In comparison, fewer Taiwanese are coming to the church and the number of Cantonese-speaking foreign students is decreasing. The church is making various preparations for its changing membership. Many leaders stressed the crucial importance of integration across subgroups, and called for getting mainlanders represented on the Church Council. A pastor reported that last year one was approached by the Nomination Committee but he refused, saying that he was not ready. However, several deacons also voiced warnings, as this pointed comment shows:

The pastor's suggestion to integrate mainlanders is good. But have we considered their educational, cultural and social backgrounds? They were trained differently from us, although we are also mainlanders. We left the mainland before the PRC. They are different from us—we mainlanders before the PRC and people from Taiwan. Therefore, we should very carefully train them.

Another deacon added, "as we grow, it is necessary to involve more workers in the leadership. However, to have them in the Council, we need to be careful. We need to monitor their activities and make sure they are parallel to our thinking." Some people pointed out that mainlanders seem to have low commitment levels. Nonetheless, the pastor concluded the discussion on this issue by saying that "integration is what we need to do, is what we want to do."

Two fellowship groups exist that are organized specifically for mainlanders and designed to provide them with financial and personal assistance. In addition, several other fellowship groups include substantial numbers of mainlanders. The members of the two fellowship groups for mainlanders are all adult converts and most were baptized at this church. The church provides financial support for their activities (such as retreats). Also, an English-Mandarin Sunday service is soon to be offered, intended to attract foreign students and young adults primarily from the mainland.

The Pastor entertains a multi-ethnic vision for the church's future. Indeed, the newest church plant in the Houston area does not have the word "Chinese" in its name. Nonetheless, the senior pastor recognized that it "is not happening yet. . . . Some people still do not buy the idea. But they will." One church member whom I interviewed asked, "There are good American churches. . . . why would white Americans come to a church with a dominant number of Chinese?" Another member remarked, "Why would white people want to mix with our yellow face and black hair people?" Few members said that racism was the real barrier, but they believe that the Chinese have a distinct culture that other Americans may not like. In this regard, some members thought that it might be possible to attract some other Asians who share Chinese values.

More importantly, the goal of ethnic heterogeneity is at odds with the fact that a major attraction of this church to many of its current members is that they can be Christian yet maintain their Chinese identity; many church members are not ready to relinquish their Chinese identity. If the church wants to continue to convert fellow Chinese, and perhaps even keep its current members, it has to maintain distinctive Chinese cultural characteristics. Because Christians are still a numerical minority among the Chinese, they will have to continue to affirm Chinese identity in the coming years and even decades. Otherwise, the vast majority of Chinese simply will not convert. However, reaffirming Chinese identity does not mean wholesale preservation of Chinese traditions. Selective acculturation and selective preservation of Chinese traditions are simultaneously occurring by transcending localisms (various Chinese provinces, dialects, subcultures) and nationalisms (diverse political parties and contending nation-states) that have long divided the Chinese.

VII. Social Activities

The church hosts many social activities. Since it was officially established, it has served lunch to Sunday service participants. Fellowship groups take turns volunteering to cook and distribute the food. The meal costs a nominal \$1.50 for adults, \$1.00 for students, and \$.50 for children; it is free to first-time visitors, who are invited to share their meal with the pastors and elders. The last Sunday of each month includes a special lunch for all visitors who attended during that month. A pastor and some elders give a brief introduction to the church—its structure, fellowship groups, mission statement, and various activities and opportunities for people who want to get involved. Meanwhile, newcomers are assigned/introduced to fellowship groups, whose leaders take over caring for them, bringing them to the classrooms where those fellowships eat Sunday lunch together. They eat at the same table and chat, getting to know each other and exchanging information concerning housing, jobs, schooling, and anything else of practical importance.

Besides the Sunday lunch, large festivals always have good food. For example, there was a Thanksgiving Banquet in 1997, at which invited students and their host families ate turkey, chicken, several Chinese dishes, and various fruits. Fellowship groups often have potluck dinners, parties celebrating holidays, and picnics, and a cell group may sometimes dine out together. Some families also invite newcomers to their homes for dinner. There are many banquet occasions: honoring high school graduates, Sunday school teachers, "coworkers" in a special ministry, missionaries, a special speaker, etc. Recently, coffee

and donuts have been served after the early Sunday morning service in order to attract people to the Sunday School classes that follow and also to facilitate clearing the vestibule for the people who are attending the later service. However, the church has never had a fund-raising banquet or bazaar, as far as I know. The donation boxes are inconspicuously set in corners and even the Sunday service does not have a procedure for collecting tithes and donations.

VIII. Transnational Ties

CGC does not have a "home community" or a corresponding local community in China. Nonetheless, the church and its individual members maintain close relationships with "Cultural China," including Chinese communities throughout Asia as well as the mainland. There are several levels of connections, the first of which is the individual level. Those who were Christian before immigration often retain relationships with their former congregants, especially church leaders. For example, the senior pastor has been invited by the Hong Kong church in which he was a member as a youth to lead a retreat camp, a revival meeting, and an evangelism meeting. He also once served as the dean of a seminary in Singapore and is sometimes invited back to give a series of talks or lead meetings. The president of the Christian and Missionary Alliance Seminary in Hong Kong, that the senior pastor and some other CGC members attended many years ago, came to visit Houston for fund-raising and student recruitment. CGC provided him a platform and financial support for his seminary.

Another type of personal connection is through returning migrants. CGC has had an active Student Ministry for international students from Taiwan, Hong Kong, mainland China, and Southeast Asia who are attending Houston educational institutions. After several years of participating in CGC, many return to their original country and some do so with evangelical zeal. In addition, some immigrants who have become U.S. citizens have gone to Asia to work, attracted by greater job opportunities but also motivated by evangelical zeal. For example, one couple in their forties moved back to Taiwan in the spring of 1998. He was an engineering researcher at a large company before he quit and moved back. During an interview, they said that their major reason for returning to Taiwan was that they saw the opportunity to evangelize there. The Taiwanese now enjoy material prosperity, but also "empty hearts and lost souls." Another couple, in their thirties, the man from Hong Kong and the woman from Singapore, came to the U.S. to study and met at school and the church. After graduation they found jobs in Houston and applied for permanent residence. However, after much soul-searching they decided that they should not live the same way for the next five years. After a few months of searching, he found employment with a U.S. company in Shanghai, where the couple moved in the spring of 1998. At that time, they had not yet received their green cards but they were prepared to lose the opportunity to do so. Before they left, they went to the altar at CGC and the pastor prayed for their evangelistic mission in China.

The next level of transnational connections is through the Missions Department of the church, which provides regular financial support to several Christian organizations and seminaries in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macao, Singapore, and South America. It sends money

to Chinese Christian organizations in the U.S. that conduct missions in various places. Some CGC pastors are on the boards of these organizations. CGC frequently sends people on short-term missions to South and Central America, to China, and to other places. Every summer it supports several college students to go to China on language tours or on trips organized by Christian organizations.

The third level of transnational connections is through worldwide Chinese Christian associations, such as the Chinese Christian Congress of World Evangelism (CCOWE), which was formed in 1976 and is headquartered in Hong Kong. It holds an international congress of Chinese evangelicals every five years and various other meetings more frequently. It publishes three magazines, distributed at no cost to individuals and churches, and missionary books, and it conducts various consultations and seminars. CGC also purchases teaching materials from the Hong Kong office of the Evangelism Explosion III, which considers the customer-church as a "member." Overall, however, formal organizational connections are few and weak.

Among those who were Christian before they immigrated to the U.S., the main difference they perceive between their home churches and CGC is that the former usually belong to a particular denomination, which has a set of rules and regulations that control the local church. CGC, as a non-denominational church, is more flexible in policy and practice, more free to create, adjust, and change its organizational structure and ministries.

IX. The Role of Women

Women's status is a theological issue for evangelical Christians. CGC pastors disagree on the issue, some opposed to women assuming leadership roles at the church and others less conservative. For example, the English pastor opposes women serving as ministers and elders, believing that they should not even speak when men are present. The youth pastor would like to see the church hire a female children's minister or even a women's minister. The senior pastor is open to the idea of women in leadership roles. Lay members also hold a variety of positions on this issue. A few years ago, upon assuming his position, a newly elected Deacon of Christian Education immediately dismissed all female Sunday school teachers. He did so without first discussing the action with the pastors or at a Church Council meeting, and it became a major crisis when several deacons complained that their wives had been dismissed. The issue was raised at the monthly Church Council meeting; however, because of its potential to create conflict if openly debated, the senior pastor suggested that he and the Deacon of Christian Education spend some time studying the Bible, each writing a position paper within the next month and reporting back to the next Church Council meeting with their conclusions. At the following monthly Council meeting, only the pastor had a position paper to present and after he read it, the Council voted unanimously (except for the deacon in question) to support the pastor's position. Since then, many women have taught Sunday school classes without interference.

"Can women be deacons, elders, and pastors?" I asked the senior pastor, who responded, "We do things based on Biblical teachings. There is no woman elder in the Bible, so we have never considered having a woman elder up to now. But there are women deacons in the Bible, so we have women deacons." Currently, there are two women deacons out

of 23. Overall, six women have served in this role. The church has a rule that a husband and wife cannot serve as deacons/elders at the same time. Most of the time the wife encourages her husband to serve. According to the senior pastor,

I see this as a very positive phenomenon. Many Chinese churches cannot find men to be deacons. . . . They don't even come to the church. When women take the lead in spiritual affairs, their husbands often withdraw and engulf themselves in doing business and making money. Men would not like to compete for the status of spiritual leadership in the church with their wives.

He also said, "In principle, serving the Lord does not depend on sex but on gifts," to which I responded, "If a woman has the gift of preaching, can she preach?" He replied,

. . . my view is yes. However, I have to consider the various backgrounds of the people in our church. In order to let people tolerate and accept each other in these sensitive issues, I would not push too much on this. Therefore, for the purpose of unity and harmony, you would rarely see a woman preach. However, when our missionaries come back, I always have them go to the pulpit and speak.

The issue of women's status creates some tension within the church, although it is not very open. According to a woman deacon, she has heard various opinions and views on this issue among church members. Some favor women pastors and more women in leadership positions while others strongly oppose it. She said that she could go in either direction, as long as there is consensus. Personally, she thought that women deacons were good, but women should not serve as elders and pastors. She believed that the church has to take a clearer position on this. Another female deacon, who is very active in the church, would take no stand on whether women should be able to serve as pastors. She said that she can speak at Council meetings and her opinions are treated seriously by others. She did not feel that she received unequal treatment by her male peers. I think that the senior pastor has no intention of pursuing further discussion of this issue, preferring to direct congregational energies and resources to issues such as evangelism and missions. As long as no strong opinions are voiced publicly and no incidents occur that force the church to deal with the issue, it will continue to enjoy silent "consensus."

X. The Second Generation

When the church was established in 1975, members were predominantly young people from Asia, but by 1984, their children had begun to grow up. CGC had about 30 college and adult English-speaking members and 45 youth who were American-born children of church members. The church hired a new seminary graduate for the English Ministry and began the AWANA (Able Workmen Are Not Ashamed) Club for children. It met on Friday evenings at the same time as adult fellowship meetings. The new director of the English Ministry also began the Youth Worship Service for middle and high school students and formed the English College Students Fellowship. By 1990, youth Sunday school atten-

dance had increased to 175, and the English college group had evolved into the young adults group. In 1992, the English Youth Worship Service expanded to become the English service for both youth and adults. The English service is contemporary in nature, with choral singing, congregational prayer and sharing, and dramas. Responding to the growth of English-speaking youth, the church hired a youth intern in 1988, who became the youth minister in 1990. CGC currently provides programs for all age categories: babysitting and childcare during the Sunday Worship service, AWANA on Friday evenings, Sunday School classes from Pre-K to High School, and separate fellowship groups for middle school and high school students. After college, some youth found jobs in Houston and have continued to attend CGC. Some have even become deacons on the Church Council.

The English Ministry is not only for the children of immigrant church members. Some are adult immigrants and/or international students from Asia who, although usually bi- or trilingual, prefer to speak English. These English-speaking immigrants share many cultural values with American-born and raised Chinese. They adjusted to American life relatively easily and are now able to communicate with the youth more comfortably than can other immigrants. Strictly speaking, the Youth Ministry is oriented to the second generation. However, some of the American-born who attend the church are not second, but third or fourth generation members. Two English-speaking deacons represent this phenomenon. They grew up on the West Coast and moved to Houston for employment. Because of their professions (medical researcher and business manager), they are regarded as role models for the youth by church leaders. In addition, some youth are not the children of immigrant church members. They were brought to the church by their friends and their own parents are not Christian. The Youth Ministry is currently directed by an Anglo. He has initiated many outreach activities, such as an Asian-American Youth Night, which brought youth from several other Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese churches to CGC. On another occasion, he led a racial reconciliation night at the church, which brought in youth from black, Hispanic, and Vietnamese churches.

The church also helps youth to maintain their Chinese identity, which is an issue of concern for some pastors and most immigrant parents. The Chinese school alone may not be sufficient to make the American-born fluent in the language, but it complements their parents' efforts at home. Some youth continue to take Chinese as their second language in college and a few even major in it. Moreover, the Chinese school helps to introduce traditional Chinese customs and values, such as respect for parents.

Among the first cohort of the second generation, most came to the church as children with their parents and grew up with other children whose parents were church members. According to the senior pastor, those youth were easy to teach and control because they grew up in the church. When they reached 16 and got their own cars, they began to bring their school friends to the church. These youths had very different lifestyles, values, religious backgrounds (non-Christian parents), and even language (some are Vietnamese-speaking) from their church member friends. Some might even have been involved in gangs. Therefore, the high school fellowship group became complicated. In addition, as the church youth reached that age, many were influenced by American society and culture. There were even cases where a girl and boy would kiss and hold each other in the church. Many parents could not accept this and became frustrated. Some could not communicate with their offspring. Parents looked to the church, the youth pastor, and youth advisors for

help. To meet this challenge, the church invited more people to work in the Youth Ministry. For example, about 30 teachers now teach youth Sunday school classes so that every grade can have at least one Sunday school class and each class can have assistants as well as a teacher. The teachers, young professionals or graduate students in their twenties and thirties, understand second generation youth and yet can serve as role models for them. Through various activities they befriend the youth and provide practical instruction and counseling to them. The church also designed various activities and programs to attract the youth, including lectures about respecting their parents, how to deal with life problems, and how to choose a university. The church holds father-son, father-daughter, and youth "Discover Camps" with fun activities, talks, and workshops. Other youth activities include gym nights, talent shows, and skit nights with homeless and runaway teenagers. High school youth can join various ministry teams, including music, caring, spiritual life, and social teams. Some go on mission trips, participate in a puppet ministry, witness in malls or parks, and participate in an evangelistic basketball program. The middle and high school musical team has performed in New Orleans, Austin, Dallas, and San Antonio.

Christian education for youth is emphasized through Bible studies, Sunday worship services, short-term mission trips, camps, and prayer meetings. CGC also maintains a prayer meeting at several public high schools. On a weekday morning, a pastor goes to a school and gathers CGC youth and their friends outside under the flag. Sometimes these prayer meetings are attended by a hundred students. A substantial number of youth have gone to one of the two major state universities in Texas, where students from CGC have organized themselves into student organizations. At one, the Chinese Bible Study group is the largest student organization on campus, the weekly meeting often attended by 300 people. In 1998, CGC sent a full-time missionary to this university, a young man who grew up in the church and whose father has been an elder. CGC sends college students to China on short-term missions or to study the Chinese language and it encourages parents to put their children in Chinese government-sponsored programs that provide language and cultural education during the summer. Young people commonly prefer speaking English, but many are bilingual or at least understand spoken Chinese. Some can also read and write Chinese. Finally, looking to the future, church leaders encourage youth to participate in decision-making. To facilitate this, the Church Council has introduced English as the official language at Council meetings.

XI. Conclusion

The Chinese Gospel Church is a non-denominational, evangelical congregation that has been enormously successful in its main goal of proselytizing among Chinese immigrants. It has planted several new churches in the Houston area, sent missionaries abroad, and baptized large numbers of new converts, all in about 25 years. Virtually completely Chinese in membership, nonetheless congregants speak several different native tongues and originate in a wide variety of different lands. The church successfully accommodates this diversity, and its different generations, through its homogeneous fellowship and cell groups and by offering services in three languages. These groups also create for congregants a sense of intimacy within a large church that might otherwise be too impersonal. However,

there is also a strong emphasis on the unity they share, first and foremost as Christians but also as Chinese. These two identities can combine smoothly for members as long as the church continues to be distinctively Chinese; that is, as long as members can take their ethnicity for granted within the church. However, the leadership has as its goal a multi-ethnic congregation. Given that Christianity does not constitute a component of traditional Chinese culture, a truly multi-ethnic congregation may lack the kinds of support necessary for the Chinese to comfortably maintain their ethnic identity. Moreover, to the extent that it is no longer perceived as an explicitly Chinese institution, CGC may be unable to continue converting large numbers of non-Christian Chinese, something it has been extremely successful in doing. It does not appear that CGC will be able to recruit very many non-Chinese in the near future and, therefore, the church will continue to provide the means for Chinese Christians to celebrate comfortably their ethnic heritage and their religious convictions. In short, the Chinese Gospel Church is successfully Sinicizing Christianity.