

Religion and Ethnicity Among New Immigrants: The Impact of Majority/Minority Status in Home and Host Countries

FENGGANG YANG
HELEN ROSE EBAUGH

Research shows that religion continues to be an important identity marker for new immigrants in the United States. However, immigrant groups differ in the ways they integrate religious and ethnic identities and the emphasis they place on each. In this paper, we argue that majority or minority status of their religious affiliation in the home and host countries is an important, but overlooked, factor in understanding strategies concerning religious and ethnic identities. By comparing two Chinese congregations, a Chinese Buddhist temple and a Chinese Christian church in Houston, Texas, we analyze what happens when an immigrant group moves from majority status in the home country to minority status in the United States (Chinese Buddhists) and when a minority group (Chinese Christians in China) become part of the Christian majority in the United States. We conclude by arguing the importance of going beyond U.S. borders and taking into account factors in their home countries in attempts to understand patterns of adaptation of the new immigrants.

The diversity of post-1965 immigrants to the United States in religion, race, and ethnicity is noted by many scholars (e.g., Christiano 1991; Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000; Ungar 1995; Warner and Wittner 1998). Compared with earlier immigrants who came mostly from Judeo-Christian Europe, many new immigrants come from Asia where traditional religions include Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, as well as many other traditions. In addition, immigrants from South and Central America are importing distinctive forms and styles of Catholicism and Protestantism. Do new immigrants follow the steps of earlier ones in their cultural and religious assimilation? For example, do new immigrants remain attached to their traditional religion and experience intensified religiosity? Does the immigrant church facilitate assimilation of its members or serve mainly as a bastion for preserving ethnicity? What changes do immigrant religious groups undergo in their adaptation to U.S. society?

Generally speaking, research shows that religion continues to be important for the new immigrants (Díaz-Stevens and Stevens-Arroyo 1998; Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000; Kim 1996; Smith 1978; Warner and Wittner 1998); that it continues to provide a social space for expressing ethnic differences (Herberg 1960; Warner 1993; Williams 1988); that religious organizations continue to serve both ethnic reproduction and assimilation functions (Dolan 1975; Yang 1999); and that immigrants continue to adapt to the U.S. context (Fenton 1988; Haddad and Lummis 1987; Kashima 1977; Smith 1978; Warner 1994; Yang and Ebaugh 2001). However, immigrant groups differ in the ways they emphasize and integrate religious and ethnic identities. Some immigrant religious communities emphasize their members' religious identity more than their ethnic core, whereas others stress ethnic identity and use the religious institution mostly as a means to preserve cultural traditions and ethnic boundaries. In-depth analysis shows a more complicated picture of the relationship between religious and ethnic identities. More specifically, majority or minority status in the home and host countries is an important factor in understanding strategies concerning religious and ethnic identities and the success of these strategies.

Fenggang Yang is an Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of Southern Maine, P.O. Box 9300, Portland, Maine 04104-9300. Email: fyang@usm.maine.edu

Helen Rose Ebaugh is a Professor of Sociology, University of Houston, Houston, Texas 77204-3474. Email: Ebaugh@UH.edu

The global spread of religions from those countries in which they constitute the majority religion to nations in which they are one of many minority religions has been well documented (e.g., Indian Hindus, Pakistani Muslims, and Punjabi Sikhs in the United States (Williams 1988); Pakistani and Middle Eastern Muslims in the United States (Haddad and Lummis 1987); Arab Muslims in West Africa (Kane 1997); Protestantism in Latin America (Levine 1995; Martin 1990; Stoll 1990); West African Yoruba in Brooklyn, N.Y. (Curry 1997)). Likewise, immigrant groups that are religious minorities in their countries of origin and become part of the religious mainstream in their host countries have been studied (e.g., U.S. Korean Christians (Huh and Kim 1984; Kwon, Ebaugh, and Hagan 1997; Min 1992); Sephardic Jews in Israel (Heilman and Friedman 1991)). While shifts in majority/minority status of immigrant religious groups have been described as part of the migration process, almost no research exists on the differential impact of this variable on sociocultural outcomes. One exception is the work of Danzger (1998) who compares Jews who convert to Orthodox Judaism in the former Soviet Union, the United States, and Israel. In the former two countries where Judaism is a minority religion, he finds that converts undergo a two-step process, first identifying ethnically with Judaism and only later moving to religious identification. In contrast, for Israelis, conversion to Orthodoxy is a one-step process of religious identification. Danzger demonstrates that the majority/minority status of religion in a given country affects how religion and ethnicity are related in the conversion process and suggests that other religious processes may also be impacted by the status of the religion in the home and host countries.

In this paper we compare two religious congregations of the same ethnic group—a Chinese Buddhist temple and a Chinese Christian church in Houston, Texas. By holding ethnicity and socio-geographic contexts constant, we analyze what happens when an immigrant group moves from majority status (Chinese Buddhists in Chinese societies) to minority status (Buddhists in the United States) and when a minority group (Chinese Christians in China) becomes part of the Christian majority in the United States. We argue that the shift in majority-minority religious status from home to host countries has significant impact on both the religious and ethnic identities of these groups.

THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN RELIGION AND ETHNICITY

Sociologists have long recognized the interrelated functions of religion and ethnicity (Durkheim 1915; Warner and Srole 1945; Weber 1961). Until the mid-1970s, however, the two disciplines of ethnic studies and religious studies went “their separate ways and any substantive examination of the interworkings of religion and ethnicity has remained largely neglected” (Stout 1975: 204). Consequently, “the nature of this relationship and how it developed is not yet clear” (Smith 1978: 1155). Among earlier scholars of American religion, many regarded religion and ethnicity as opposed to one another. For example, Will Herberg (1960; see also Lenski 1961) advocated a “religious pluralism” model and argued that immigrants and their descendants would retain their old religion—Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism—whereas everything else of the old country, including the original language and national loyalty, would be given up. In reality, however, religious identity never completely replaced ethnic identity (Marty 1972). Indeed, ethnicity or national origin has been one of the main reasons for the creation and development of multiple Protestant denominations (Marty 1972; Niebuhr 1929; Pozzetta 1991). In addition, other scholars have emphasized the religious factor in creating and maintaining ethnic groups. Church historian Timothy Smith (1978) argues that ethnic grouping is determined by immigrant identification with particular religious traditions more than any other factor, such as common language, national feeling, or belief in common descent. Traditional religious beliefs, customs, and loyalty “have been the decisive determinants of ethnic affiliation in America” (1978: 1174). Smith argues further that the religious factor in ethnic formation is strengthened by the migration experience. The acts of uprooting and repeated resettlement produce the intensification of the psychic basis of religious commitment in the minds of new Americans.

Andrew Greeley (1971) emphasized the mutual and intimate relationship between ethnicity and religion. For example, he argued that the identification of Catholicism and Irish nationalism in the United States cannot be separated. He believed that both ethnicity and religiosity were somewhat primordial and could mutually reinforce each other. Therefore, a "more fruitful way of viewing the situation is to acknowledge that religion and ethnicity are intertwined, that religion plays an ethnic function in American society and ethnicity has powerful religious overtones" (Greeley 1971: 82). In his study of Irish and German Catholics in New York, Jay Dolan (1972: 360) commented that, "Religion and ethnicity were intimately bound up together in the national parish, and one supported the other." Harry Stout (1975) went even further to emphasize the indistinguishable oneness of ethnicity and religion and suggested the term "ethnoreligion" to signal their mutual influence.

We believe that the relationship between religion and ethnicity should be viewed as a variable for various groups. Andrew Greeley (1971) identified three types of relationships in the United States: some religious people who do not hold an ethnic identity; some people who have an ethnic identity but are not religious; and cases in which religion and ethnicity are intertwined. Phillip Hammond and Kee Warner (1993), following Harold J. Abramson (1973), further explicated the "intertwining relationships" into a typology. First is "ethnic fusion," where religion is the foundation of ethnicity, or, ethnicity equals religion, such as in the case of the Amish and Jews. The second pattern is that of "ethnic religion," where religion is one of several foundations of ethnicity. The Greek or Russian Orthodox and the Dutch Reformed are examples of this type. In this pattern, ethnic identification can be claimed without claiming the religious identification but the reverse is rare. The third form, "religious ethnicity," occurs where an ethnic group is linked to a religious tradition that is shared by other ethnic groups. The Irish, Italian, and Polish Catholics are such cases. In this pattern, religious identification can be claimed without claiming ethnic identification. Hammond and Warner also suggest that the relationship of religion and ethnicity is strongest in "ethnic fusion" and least strong in "religious ethnicity." Recently, some scholars have argued that even Jews' religion and culture (ethnicity) can be distinguished from each other and are separable (Chervyakov, Gitelman, and Shapiro 1997; Gans 1994). Hammond and Warner's (1993) typology, while a significant scholarly contribution, is nonetheless incomplete. It does not include Greeley's two types of singular identities (either ethnic or religious but not both). Moreover, they fail to consider ethnic groups that adopt a nontraditional religion, such as Latino Pentecostals, Korean and Chinese Protestants, and Vietnamese Catholics. For these immigrant religious groups, the dynamics of their religious and ethnic identity construction is very different from those groups that maintain a traditional religion. This paper compares a religious convert group (Chinese Christians) with a group that practices a traditional religion (Chinese Buddhists) in the United States.

Data in this paper are derived from the RENIR (Religion, Ethnicity, New Immigrants Research) project at the Center for Immigration Research at the University of Houston. As part of the project, the senior author spent 18 months studying a Chinese Buddhist temple and a Chinese Christian Church, which we call the Hsi Nan Temple and the Chinese Gospel Church, respectively.¹ In addition to attending religious services and social activities, the author was given access to historical materials, newsletters, and minutes of meetings. Systematic interviews were conducted with clergy (monks), lay leaders, newly arrived immigrants, established members, and youth in each congregation.

THE BUDDHIST HSI NAN TEMPLE AND THE CHINESE GOSPEL CHURCH

Both the Buddhist Hsi Nan Temple (HNT) and the Chinese Gospel Church (CGC) were established in the 1970s in Houston, Texas. The Chinese Gospel Church was the second Chinese Christian church in Houston. Since 1953, a Chinese Baptist church had served earlier Chinese immigrants, who were mostly Cantonese-speaking laborers and merchants, and their American-born

children. The CGC was officially established in 1975 by several dozen young Houston professionals and students on college campuses. They were from Taiwan and Hong Kong and commonly spoke Mandarin, the official language of China, although many also spoke Cantonese, Taiwanese, and some other dialects. The CGC first secured two interim pastors, one from Hong Kong and another from the Philippines, then in 1978 called Reverend Daniel Chao to be its senior pastor. Reverend Chao was born in China and grew up in Hong Kong, had seminary education in the United States, and taught at a Singaporean seminary before coming to Houston.

A year later, a Chinese Buddhist monk, Venerable Jong-Hang, arrived in Houston. He was born in China and became a novice monk at age seven, went to Taiwan in the late 1940s, studied Buddhism for many years in Thailand and Japan, lived in New York for several years, and came to Houston to launch a Buddhist mission. Having few contacts in this strange land, Jong-Hang first slept on the living room floor of some Chinese students at a local university. He contacted a business couple recently immigrated from Hong Kong whom he had never met but had been told were enthusiastic patrons of Buddha dharma. After meeting Jong-Hang, this couple helped to secure financial support from a Buddhist monk in Hong Kong. Jong-Hang purchased a house on a big lot in south Houston, gathered some Buddhist adherents, and formally established the Houston Buddhist Society. This was the first Chinese Buddhist group in Houston. In 1990 this society completed a magnificent Chinese-style temple in southwestern Houston—the Hsi Nan Temple.

Today (1998), the greater Houston area has more than 30 Chinese Christian churches, five Buddhist temples, and three syncretic Chinese temples. The CGC is the largest Chinese Protestant church in Houston with about 1,200 adults in regular Sunday service attendance. The HNT is the largest Chinese Buddhist temple in Houston with 740 local households (either single, couples, or large families) listed as members, about 100 adults in attendance most Sundays, about 300 adults for festivals, and sometimes more than 500 for special celebrations. Members in CGC and HNT are similar in terms of socioeconomic status, except that HNT may have a slightly higher proportion of business owners. Most members of both congregations are middle-class professionals—engineers, physicians, and computer programmers—and very few are poor laborers. This reflects the general pattern among recent Chinese immigrants in the Houston area who, unlike those in New York and San Francisco, are mainly highly educated, professional immigrants and re-migrants within the United States.

Both the CGC and HNT are independent local congregations without organizational affiliation. CGC was established by Chinese immigrants and students who had different denominational backgrounds. Although it has close theological affinity with the Southern Baptist Convention and used two Baptist churches for its own Sunday services before building its own church building, CGC has remained nondenominational. A number of Chinese Christian churches in Houston are affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, but about half of all Chinese churches are nondenominational, a characteristic of most Chinese Protestant churches in the United States (Pang 1985; Yang 1999). HNT was founded by a monk with connections to various Buddhist temples and masters in mainland China, Taiwan, Thailand, Japan, and the United States, but he has never become a member of a particular Buddhist sect/denomination.

In 1980, another monk, Venerable Hao-Yan, joined Jong-Hang in Houston. Similarly, Hao-Yan has never been a member of a particular sect/denomination. He was born in the 1950s in Yunnan Province, China, moved to Burma as a child, and soon became a novice monk. When the Burmese government suppressed the Chinese in Burma and prohibited teaching the Chinese language, Hao-Yan was sent to Taiwan to receive a Chinese education. Later he entered the Buddhist School of Fo Kuang Shan (Buddha Light Mountain), which has become an international denomination under the name of the International Buddhist Progress Society. The famous Hsi Lai Temple near Los Angeles, California is a Fo Kuang Shan Temple. However, Hao-Yan never became a member of the Fo Kuang Shan although his theology has been heavily influenced by Hsing-Yun and his denomination. Before coming to Houston, Hao-Yan stayed at a Chinese

Buddhist temple in New York. The organizational independence of the HNT is very much determined by the religious backgrounds of these two monks. In the 1990s, Houston saw the development of several other Chinese Buddhist groups, including branch temples of the International Buddhist Progress Society (*guo ji fo guang hui*), the Tzu-Chi Association (*ci ji gong de hui* or Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation), the True Buddha Sect (*zhen fo zong*), and the Pure Land Society (*jing zong xue hui* or Amitabha Buddhist Society). Some individual monks and nuns are also trying to assemble flocks of their own, but HNT remains the only successful independent temple.

GOING BEYOND ETHNIC BOUNDARIES

Both Christianity and Buddhism are world religions with believers in various nations representing a variety of ethnic groups. Both are also proselytizing religions. Their respective theologies allow, even encourage, recruiting people of various national origins. Although CGC and HNT were founded by Chinese immigrants and have been serving mostly Chinese immigrants, both congregations are currently trying to attract non-Chinese adherents to their ranks.

Hsi Nan Temple started an English service in 1992 designed mainly for non-Chinese inquirers. In 1997, among the approximately 30 people attending regular English Sunday services, more than half were white Americans, a few were English-speaking Chinese (lay leaders and American-born Chinese young adults), and the rest came from South Asia (Sri Lanka and India) and Southeast Asia (Burma, Thailand, and Vietnam). We were told that occasionally some African-Americans attend this service, but we did not see them during our field work. Monks and lay leaders agree that they should pay more attention to the English service and allocate more human and financial resources for the English ministry. The abbot, Venerable Jong-Hang, speaks little English and his Mandarin has a heavy Zhejiang accent that is hard to understand at times. Venerable Hao-Yan, the younger monk, speaks English well along with fluent Mandarin and Cantonese. He is also very popular among Chinese immigrants and is in demand in all the ministries. However, Hao-Yan told the Trustees Board, the leadership body composed of monks and elected lay leaders, that he would reduce his ministries to immigrant Chinese and spend more time with the English group. Meanwhile, he also mobilized a group of lay leaders, including two former chairmen (*zong gan shi*) of the Trustees Board, to work with him to expand the English ministry. These lay leaders, who are immigrant professionals, speak fluent English. Currently, the English service is held at the smaller Kuan Yin Hall, whereas the Chinese service is in the larger Grand Buddha Hall. However, Hao-Yan envisions a shift in the future—the English service superseding the Chinese service in attendance and being held at the Grand Buddha Hall.

To prepare for the growth in the number of non-Chinese people, the Trustees Board resolved that they would put up English signs next to the Chinese ones on the doors of the library, conference rooms, and various offices and that they would find proper English names for all ministry divisions and leadership positions, which had been in Chinese only. On various occasions, monks and lay leaders have encouraged Chinese immigrants who can speak English to greet and converse with non-Chinese Americans in the temple and for those Chinese who cannot speak English to smile at them. To instill a sense of belonging, non-Chinese participants are encouraged to participate in cooking and serving the Sunday vegetarian lunch, cleaning the temple lawn, making plans for programs and activities, and playing certain roles in festival celebrations. For example, on the Buddha's birthday celebration, two or three white Americans went to the altar and gave speeches while several others were assigned the honorable roles of drummers and bellmen during the service. The combined festival service also provided English interpretations of announcements, speeches, and the sermon. In the spring of 1997, a white man asked about starting an English class on a weekday evening to systematically teach Buddhist teachings and practices. Venerable Hao-Yan liked the idea and immediately authorized the plan. Foreseeing an increase in non-Chinese participants, the HNT selected the first non-Chinese as a "Dharma Guardian" in 1997. Dharma Guardians

(*hu fa wei yuan*) are core lay members of the temple who have voting rights and from whom the trustees and executive trustees are elected.

In its more than 20-year history, the Chinese Gospel Church has also received about 30 to 40 non-Chinese members. Most of them are people of mixed marriages; some are Christians who like Chinese culture or want to go to China for missionary work; and some are young people brought in by their schoolmates. For example, a white couple attended this church regularly for several years in the 1980s, learned to speak Mandarin, entered seminary, and now are serving as missionaries in East Asia. Most non-Chinese are Caucasians but a few are Vietnamese, Koreans, or other Asians. More importantly, the church has had a Caucasian youth pastor since 1988. Peter Peachy grew up in a Mennonite church and attended the Denver Baptist Seminary. He has helped CGC to minister to non-Chinese, especially by organizing youth to hold activities for racial reconciliation and to evangelize youth of various racial groups in the neighborhood and on university campuses. Meanwhile, the church has provided financial support to non-Chinese seminarians, missionaries, and Christian organizations. The number of non-Chinese members presently in CGC is slightly more than that in HNT, but the proportion of non-Chinese in the whole membership of the church is smaller than that of the Buddhist temple.

In 1997 the CGC planted a new church that it intends to develop as a multi-ethnic church in a southwest suburb of Houston. During several years of preparation, CGC pastors shared a vision for a nonexclusive church where Chinese and non-Chinese would worship together. Reverend Daniel Chao, the senior pastor of CGC, held a series of monthly sermons on church planting in which he repeatedly emphasized the mandate of embracing people of diverse backgrounds. In the first sermon of this series, he said, "God is not the God of Chinese people only, but of all peoples." Referring to the Antioch church (Acts 11), Reverend Chao said that Chinese immigrant Christians should follow the steps of the early disciples.

They had a sense of the commission. They were just driven out of Jerusalem, just arrived in Antioch, but they were telling about their faith in many places They were people who were uprooted new immigrants. They left home unwillingly but were driven out. They must have had many difficulties as new immigrants, such as language obstacles, unknown places and strange people and did not know where to send the sick. However, they were not bothered by their own problems but immediately began spreading the gospel to other peoples.

The head pastor of the planted church said in an interview: "As followers of Christ, we cannot skip doors to find only Chinese families for evangelism. God's grace of salvation is meant for every person, not just Chinese." Through persistent efforts, lay leaders and many members were persuaded to go beyond Chinese boundaries in planting the new church. To reflect this intention, the congregation voted to name their newly planted church the Southwest Community Church. By dropping "Chinese" from the church name, they hope to eliminate obstacles to inviting and including non-Chinese people.

While both the Chinese Buddhist temple and the Chinese Christian church want to expand beyond their ethnic boundaries, they have different resources and face different obstacles, and, consequently, they will likely experience differences in achieving their goal. Generally speaking, the Chinese Christian church appears to be more Americanized than the Chinese Buddhist temple in terms of language, lifestyles, values, organizational structure, and so forth. This suggests that the Christian church would have less difficulty in achieving the goal of integration. However, our data on these two congregations show the opposite outcome. The Buddhist temple is increasing the number of non-Chinese adherents, while the Christian church is having a harder time accomplishing this. Why? To understand what is happening, we need to understand the social contexts in the home country and in the United States.

CONTEMPORARY CHINESE AND AMERICAN SOCIAL CONTEXTS

In Chinese societies (mainland China or the People's Republic of China, Taiwan or the Republic of China, Hong Kong, Macao, and ethnic Chinese communities in Southeast Asia),

Christianity has been a minority religion with a short history. Not until the mid-19th century, when gunboats of Western powers knocked down the closed-door of the Qing Dynasty, did Christian missions begin to penetrate Chinese society.² By 1949, when Communist China drove all foreign missionaries out of the mainland, Christians were less than 1 percent of the 450 million Chinese at that time. In Taiwan, Christian missions fared somewhat better, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, but the proportion of Christians has never risen to more than 5 percent of the Taiwanese population (Swanson 1981). Hong Kong, under British colonial rule until 1997, had a policy of religious freedom but favored Christianity. The proportion of Christians has been higher, but never reached 10 percent at its highest (Law 1981). In fact, in modern times there have been strong anti-Christian sentiments among the Chinese. Christianity was regarded as part and parcel of Western imperialism, the spiritual opium for conquering the Chinese nation. Chinese converts to Christianity were chastised with this common sarcasm: "One more Christian, one less Chinese." In other words, becoming Christian was defined as losing Chinese identity (Yang 1999).

In contrast, Buddhism has enjoyed a history of about 2,000 years in China and has become one of the three mainstream Chinese traditions, along with Confucianism and Daoism (Taoism). Even though Buddhism is of foreign origin, it has been so assimilated into Chinese culture that the untutored common man in China is no longer aware that it was introduced from India (Yang 1967). Buddhism declined in the later years of dynastic China and lost its status in modern times as China began striving for modernization. Contemporary, educated Chinese often regard Buddhism as a set of superstitious beliefs, backward feudal customs and habits, and beliefs that only uneducated and old people still practice. Buddhist monks and pietistic believers are often ridiculed or misunderstood. However, since the 1960s, Buddhism has had a successful revival in Taiwan (and in Hong Kong as well, although to a lesser degree) and has superseded folk religions to become the largest religion. Several denominations or temples have arisen in the last few decades that helped to transform premodern Buddhism into modern or "engaged Buddhism" (Queen and King 1996). Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to go into detail about recent reforms and changes of Buddhism in Taiwan, suffice it to say that Buddhism has been in a process of internal modernization and has restored its social influence in that country. Therefore, it is appropriate to define Buddhism as a majority religion in Taiwan. Although Buddhists are not a numerical majority in the population, the religion is mainstream in the same sense as Catholicism is in American society (Herberg 1960).

THE CONSEQUENCES OF MAJORITY AND MINORITY RELIGIOUS STATUS

The minority status of Christianity in Chinese societies is related to the high proportion of adult converts in Chinese churches in the United States. At CGC and other Chinese Protestant churches in the United States (Yang 1998a), more than half the adult members are adult converts. Church documents show that in its first 10 years, the church had baptism services almost every other month and often baptized 30 to 40 people every year. It continued to have frequent baptism services in the 1990s. Having undergone the process of becoming Christian, religious identity often takes priority over ethnic Chinese identity. In the meantime, because Chinese Protestant churches in the United States are mostly evangelical and focus heavily on proselytization, especially to fellow Chinese immigrants, Chinese Christians have to demonstrate to prospective Chinese converts that becoming Christian does not mean becoming non-Chinese; they have to "Sinicize" Christianity (Yang 1999), just as Korean Christians "Koreanize" Christianity (Min 1992). Evidence of this phenomenon in the CGC includes speaking and teaching Chinese language, eating Chinese food communally, showing Chinese arts, celebrating Chinese festivals, appreciating Chinese values, and illustrating Christian doctrines using Chinese stories. For instance, Reverend Chao told the senior author in an interview that the Chinese school cannot succeed in effectively teaching children the difficult Chinese language. It exists mainly as a strategic device designed primarily as a means to get Chinese immigrants into the church, befriend them, and convert them. In short,

to get non-Christian Chinese into the church, the church must design programs that make it appear Chinese.

In Sinicizing Christianity, the Chinese Christian church has been very successful. Christianity has become the most practiced religion among Chinese Americans (Yang 1999). In the Houston area, there are more than 30 Christian churches but only half a dozen Buddhist and syncretic folk religious temples, and the overall number of regular participants in Christian churches is much higher than that in Buddhist temples. The Chinese church has also achieved the goal of unity among Chinese people by gathering ethnic Chinese from diverse social, political, and national backgrounds (Yang 1998b). In the CGC, half the members are from Taiwan (including both native Taiwanese and “*wai sheng ren*”—mainlanders who migrated to Taiwan since the 1940s), about 20 percent are from Hong Kong, nearly 20 percent are adult American-born Chinese, more than 10 percent came from the People’s Republic of China, and about 7 percent come from other Asian countries, including Malaysia, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Korea, and Singapore. Chinese cultural identity has been reaffirmed while Chinese political identity is declining. Church members like to proclaim that “we are all Chinese, no matter where you are from . . . We may not speak the same language/dialect, but we have the same written language and share common Chinese values.” To achieve such unity, the church avoids any formal relationship with any Chinese government agencies (consulates or offices).

In the United States, where Christianity is the majority religion, emphasizing the Chineseness of the Chinese Gospel Church in order to draw fellow Chinese simultaneously sabotages the church’s attempts to become multi-ethnic. A year after planting the Community Church, Reverend Chao acknowledged that the “multi-ethnic” church “is not happening yet” and “some lay leaders and believers still don’t buy this idea [of a multi-ethnic church].” In interviews with lay leaders and ordinary members, many expressed reservations about that goal for the new church. A common argument is: “There are many good American churches in that area. Why would white Americans come to join a church dominated by Chinese? We look different, and we have distinctive cultures. White Americans would not feel comfortable being a minority among us.” In practice, converting Anglos is difficult for a Chinese immigrant church. For example, a CGC elder attended an English “Evangelism Explosion III” workshop organized by an American church that was designed to instruct evangelists in effective ways to proselytize. As part of practicing one-on-one proselytization facilitated by a three-person team, he and his team approached two white women who responded with anger. In comparison, they had a better experience explaining the gospel to an African-American man. In spite of these racial and cultural difficulties, CGC pastors firmly believe that striving to develop a multi-ethnic church is the right thing to do. Reverend Chao also believes that this goal will eventually be achieved. Some lay leaders, however, have warned the pastors that, while it may be necessary to maintain this lofty universal ideal, they should not be disappointed and discouraged if it does not happen within five or ten years.

The “majority” status of Buddhism in Taiwan and other Chinese societies is related to the high proportion of immigrants in the HNT who had been Buddhists before immigration. For them, it was simply “natural” to attend a Chinese Buddhist temple when one became available in Houston. In interviews, some people said that before the HNT opened, they used to go to Chinese Christian churches in order to satisfy their religious and social needs. However, after the monks came to Houston and developed a temple, they naturally switched to it and feel more comfortable there. For other Chinese immigrants, especially highly educated professionals, conversion to Buddhism occurred in the United States, influenced by their relatives and friends in Taiwan who had become active Buddhists during the recent revival of the religion there. Still others encountered Buddhist masters who had come to the United States and influenced their practice of Buddhism. A third kind of convert are the few who want to maintain their Chineseness in multicultural American society. The young female youth director in 1997 is a good example. Arriving in the United States as a small child, she and her family did not have any religion. While attending college, she was challenged by her Caucasian college friends to do volunteer work, which they were doing through

their churches. Because she did not want to do exactly what they were doing, she turned to the Yellow Pages and found the phone number of the Hsi Nan Temple. She went to the temple and asked to do some volunteer work, where, delighted by her inquiry, Venerable Hao-Yan assigned her to help in the library. Gradually, she learned more and more about Buddhist teachings and eventually she formally took the “refuge” (the counterpart of getting baptized at the Christian church) with Hao-Yan.

Overall, Hsi Nan Temple is less cosmopolitan than Chinese Christian churches. About 90 percent of temple participants are from Taiwan and the rest are from Hong Kong with a few ethnic Chinese from Southeast Asian countries. There were almost no mainlanders (PRC people) among the regular participants. This is not because the temple does not welcome mainlanders. Like Chinese Christians, these Buddhists also like to say that “we are all Chinese” but they add that “Buddhism is our Chinese tradition.” However, HNT maintains close relationships with the Taipei Office of Economic and Cultural Affairs, the de facto consulate of the government in Taiwan. Not only do they frequently exchange information concerning the welfare of Taiwanese immigrants in Houston, Taiwan government representatives are honored guests at all festivals at the temple. Given the dominance of Taiwanese members in the temple, political identification with the ROC is natural; many other immigrant religious groups do the same. However, this close political connection with the ROC government agencies is an important obstacle to the recruitment of Chinese mainland immigrants. A Hong Kong immigrant woman, who used to be a citizen of the PRC but emigrated to Hong Kong before immigrating to the United States, said that she sensed subtle cultural and political biases of the Taiwanese temple members toward mainlanders. The monks and some lay leaders are earnest about welcoming mainland Chinese and are puzzled by the reservedness and reluctance to join of occasional mainland visitor to the temple.

Although HNT has not been successful in recruiting mainland Chinese, it has been reasonably successful in attracting non-Chinese, especially white Americans. In American society, Buddhism is considered one of the “new religious movements,” which have gained increasing numbers of nonimmigrant adherents since the 1960s (Numrich 1996; Prebish and Tanaka 1998). Although Buddhism is clearly a minority religion in the United States, its very un-Americanness constitutes an attraction to some native born Americans who seek alternative beliefs. The white participants at HNT, who numbered more than a dozen in 1997 and whose number was growing, come from Mormon, Lutheran, Southern Baptist, and Methodist backgrounds. They said that they had been “turned off” by their parents’ religion or had become fascinated by Chinese culture. The first white convert was an architect of Mormon background. He first saw the temple in a TV news report about the Dalai Lama, who gave a lecture in the HNT during a visit to Houston. He immediately went to the temple to see this example of authentic Chinese architecture in his own town. He marveled at the magnificent Chinese building and was immediately impressed with Venerable Hao-Yan. Other white converts also came to search for “authentic otherness,” cultural and/or religious. Some nonconverts also participate in meditation services. One man remarked, “This place is great. I can be in absolute solitude while in a crowd.” Several of these people come to the temple only for the meditation service and do not want to interact/talk with people. They regard meditation as an alternative to physical exercise or therapy.

Conscious of their minority status, Chinese Buddhists strive hard to Americanize their religion. “Entering mainstream America” is an important goal of this Buddhist temple. Besides recruiting non-Chinese, another means for achieving this goal is joining the Interfaith Council of Houston and becoming actively involved in its programs and activities. In addition, along with several other Buddhist temples, HNT cooperated with some professors of religion at a local university to offer Buddhist festival services on campus as a way of educating the public. The monks and lay leaders always try to make the point that Buddhism fits very well with American values of equality, liberty, and peace. To be accepted as a part of mainstream America, Chinese Buddhists have been Americanizing many aspects of their religion in beliefs, rituals, and organizational structure.

In short, on the surface, the Chinese church looks quite American whereas the Chinese Buddhist temple still looks very Chinese. Both the church and the temple are trying to go beyond their Chinese boundaries. However, Chinese Christians face the task of “Sinicizing” Christianity to convert fellow Chinese, while Chinese Buddhists face the task of “Americanizing” Buddhism to become accepted as part of mainstream America. Meanwhile, the majority status of Christianity in the United States makes few non-Chinese available for the Chinese church to recruit because of racial and cultural obstacles, whereas the minority status of Buddhism in American society is an appealing characteristic of Buddhism to some non-Chinese Americans who are seeking to flee their past and everyday reality. Ironically, because Buddhism is a fringe religious group in the United States, the potential market is large. Even if the temple achieves only a small piece in this huge religious market, it will gather a substantial number of non-Chinese participants. In contrast, the Chinese church is less likely to integrate a large proportion of non-Chinese into its membership in the near future because there are many other evangelical churches from which seekers can choose and the Chinese ambiance at the church is off-putting for many non-Chinese Christian Americans.

CONCLUSION

This paper compares two immigrant religious congregations of the same ethnic group. Both the Chinese Protestant church and the Chinese Buddhist temple are independent local congregations established in the 1970s by Chinese immigrants; both have overwhelmingly served Chinese immigrant professionals; and both are attempting to go beyond Chinese boundaries by integrating non-Chinese participants. Their goal of integrating non-Chinese is their own. It does not represent a policy driven by any denomination hierarchy, although it is driven by the proselytizing theologies inherent in both religions. However, the dynamics, strategies, and achievements of these immigrant religious groups are strongly influenced by their religious status in the home country and in American society. Chinese Buddhist immigrants commonly retain a secure Chinese identity because Buddhism has deep roots in Chinese tradition. However, Buddhism is a minority religion in the United States. Therefore, the Hsi Nan Temple strives hard to achieve an American identity, and one way of doing that is to recruit non-Chinese Americans. Meanwhile, the “authentic otherness” of Buddhism is an attraction to some Americans who seek an alternative to dominant, majority religions. Consequently, the Hsi Nan Temple is slowly but successfully gaining non-Chinese members. In contrast, Christianity is a minority religion in Chinese society, and Chinese converts to Christianity are sometimes chastised for becoming non-Chinese. Thus, the Chinese Gospel Church faces the task of asserting a Chinese identity for Christians in its efforts to convert fellow Chinese. However, the emphasis on Chinese culture sabotages the church’s attempts to go beyond ethnic boundaries. Christianity is a majority religion in the United States and many evangelical churches exist in the community to serve Americans. Consequently, in the course of Sinicizing the church, the Chinese church has a more difficult time attracting non-Chinese Americans.

This study demonstrates that the analysis of religious and ethnic changes in immigrant religious communities cannot be confined to the receiving community. It is necessary to go beyond the borders of the host country and to take into account the relative status of different faiths in home countries. Majority/minority religious status in the home and host countries is an important factor that impacts the internal dynamics and overall changes in immigrant religious institutions. Rather than simply describing the religion of immigrants in majority/minority terms, as is the case in many current studies of religion in new immigrant groups (e.g., Abusharaf 1998; Haddad and Lummis 1987; Kurien 1998; Numrich 1996; Rutledge 1992; Williams 1988), our analysis of a Chinese Buddhist temple and a Chinese Christian church suggests that the majority/minority distinction in home and host countries is predictive of variations in patterns of adaptation. Further research is needed to determine whether the patterns that differentiate majority/minority Chinese religious institutions are generalizable to other immigrant religious groups.

NOTES

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1. In this paper, pseudonyms are used for the religious organizations and their members.
2. The first presence of Christianity in China can be traced to the seventh century when the Nestorians arrived in the Tang Dynasty. Catholic missionaries had some successful missions in the 16th century in the late Ming dynasty, but Catholicism was suppressed by Qing emperors due to cultural and political conflicts, and the number of Chinese converts to Catholicism remained minuscule. Only after the Opium War (1840) did Protestant and Catholic missionaries begin to convert Chinese in large numbers. See Ching (1993).

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