

Church or Sect?

Exploring a Church of New Chinese Immigrants in Southern California

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Abstract:

Existing studies document that while sharing many similarities among themselves, Asian immigrant churches in the United States differ from American mainline churches in certain distinguishing aspects. These distinguishing aspects and the reasons behind them, however, have rarely been subject to theoretical analysis. This study examines a church of new Chinese immigrants within the church-sect theory and market metaphor by analyzing participant observation and interview data. The data reveal that the church in question stands half way along the church-sect continuum, being close to the sect pole in terms of its theologies, while approaching the church pole in terms of its organization. By being a church-sect hybrid, it meets the particular needs of the well-educated, yet marginalized, Chinese immigrants. The findings show that although the church-sect theory is derived from European cases, it can be well applied to Chinese immigrant Christians. The cultural and ethnic backgrounds of Chinese immigrants nonetheless affect their Christian experiences profoundly. In a market-economy metaphor derived from the church-sect theory, such backgrounds situate them in a segmented rather than an entirely free religious market.

The Churching of new Asian immigrants in the United States has provoked increasing sociological interest in recent years, as this rapidly growing immigrant group has become a new target population of Christian evangelicalism. Most research on new Asian immigrant Christians focuses on either assimilation or ethnic preservation (Hurrh and Kim 1984; Min 1992; Ng 2002; Yang 1999a; Kurien 1998; Kwon 2000; Tizon 1999; Zhou, Bankston and Kim 2002; Jeung 2000) rather than on religion per se. These research studies mostly draw from theories of race and ethnicity or of immigration, rather than from theories in the sociology of religion. In contrast, research on churches of early European immigrants, blacks, and recent Hispanic immigrants draws more directly upon the sociology of religion. A theoretical framework frequently applied in these studies is the church-sect theory (Finke and Stark 1997; Hammond 1963; Johnstone 2001; Kyle 1985; Lawson 1998, 1999; Mol 1961; Sherkat 2001; Thomas and Thomas 1989; Hernandez 1995). These studies often show that churches of immigrants or minorities tend to be sectarian because of the marginal position of their congregants. This theory has rarely, if ever, been applied to studies of Asian immigrants, although previous studies consistently documented many characteristics of Asian churches that can be related to sectarianism. Asian immigrant churches tend to be strict and conservative and to insist on Biblical literalism. They often lack hierarchy and have untrained

leaders; they strongly emphasize personal salvation and maintain higher tension level with other religious groups (Yang 1998; Alumkal 2003; Guest 2003; Chen 2002). When placed in the church-sect framework, these characteristics distinguish the Asian immigrant churches from American mainline churches, yet reveal striking similarities with early European immigrant sects. However, studies that documented these characteristics have not gone beyond description to theoretical analyses.

Since Christianity is not an indigenous religion for Asian immigrants, there is no doubt that their experience with Christianity is closely related with their assimilation. However, this does not mean that religious theories, such as the church-sect theory, originally derived from observing European cases, does not apply to Asians. In fact, nascent Asian Christian churches provide valuable opportunities for church-sect exploration, since religious institutions typically start as sect-like groups, and then subsequently shed sectarian features in their institutionalization process (Johnstone 2001). Furthermore, some scholars have recently connected church-sect theory with a market metaphor, which proposes that sects and churches offer different products to fit the particular needs of their various customers (Finke and Stark 1997; Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 1987; Iannaccone 1988, 1994; Warner 1993). What would be the particular religious needs of recent Asian immigrants and how would an Asian church address such needs? Exploring these questions will contribute to the church-sect theory and market metaphor by adding new cultural perspectives. In this paper, I analyzed data from fieldwork in a Chinese immigrant church and found a mixture of both church and sect characteristics. I found that its theology and discourse tend to be sectarian while its organization tends to be more church-like. Such a mixture well suits the needs of its members, who are mostly newly arrived professional immigrants. These new arrivals tend to be well-educated, yet found themselves in a marginal position as immigrants and minority group members. Their marginal position in American society and their recent adherence to Christianity predispose them to sectarianism. However, their high education attainment and potential for upward mobility pull them away from the pure sects. Therefore, an organization which mixes the characteristics of a sect and a church suits their needs and thus appeals to them.

**Theoretical Perspectives, Background and Research Questions –
*The Church-Sect Theory and the Market Metaphor***

Church-sect theory is one of the most important theories in the sociological study of religious organizations and religiosity (Christiano, Swatos and Kivisto 2002). It was introduced into sociology by Max Weber ([1930]1998), then developed and revised by many later scholars. In this theorizing, a *church* is a large, institutionalized and hierarchical religious organization. It tends to compromise with the secular world, and to accept popular values and religious pluralism. It also interprets Biblical scripture metaphorically rather than literally. Its leaders are usually professionally trained, and its members mostly of the well-educated, middle class. A *sect* has the opposite characteristics. It holds itself separate from the larger society, and believes that the church has become too worldly. It is a small and informal group offering close personal relationships among its members. The belief system is very rigid and interprets the scriptures literally, while its leaders tend to be unspecialized. Sects mainly attract lower class, less-educated, or marginalized members (Iannaccone 1988; Stark and Bainbridge 1985; Finke and Stark 1997; Johnson 1963; Yinger 1970; Wilson 1970). In reality, however, we can hardly classify religious organizations into such a clear-cut dichotomy; a more widely used and realistic scheme is a continuum (Kyle 1985).

In its recent development, some scholars connect the church-sect theory with a market metaphor. They propose that in a society with religious pluralism, like the United States, religious organizations compete for consumers in a kind of religious free market. Churches and Sectarian groups have very different products and differing marketing strategies that attract different kinds of customers, the former appealing to those with a more well-educated and middle class background, the latter to those of a lower socioeconomic status (Finke and Stark 1997; Stark and Bainbridge 1985 1987; Iannaccone 1988, 1994; Warner 1993).

The New Chinese Immigrants and Christianity

Immigration is closely related to religion. As Smith (1978) states, migration itself is often a “theologizing experience”, as it brings anomie and alienation that call for religious explanations. Such a phenomenon can be seen among the influx of Asian immigrants in recent decades. Many new Asian immigrants resort to Christian churches and faith in coping with the hardship during their immigration process. The fact that Christianity is not an indigenous religion for Asians makes their Christian experience more interesting, complex, and puzzling in many ways. This is particularly true for Chinese, a group with the least Christian tradition among Asians. Many Korean immigrants were already Christians prior to their immigration (Min 1992), and numbers of Filipinos, Asian Indians, Vietnamese and other Southeast Asians were Catholics or Protestants in their home countries (Christiano et al. 2002; Warner 1993). In contrast, the percentage of Chinese who were Christians before immigration is very low (Yang 1999b). The exceptionally low proportion of Chinese Christians can be traced back to an irreligious tradition in China. Confucianism, dominating Chinese thought for the last twenty-five centuries, has raised strong

protests against supernatural beliefs and put overwhelming emphasis on the secular world and on pragmatic issues (Chai 1965). After the Opium War (1840) many Chinese regarded Christianity as part of Western imperialism and held hostile attitudes towards it. By 1949 when the Chinese Communist Party took over, Christians represented less than one percent of the Chinese population (Yang 1999a). For decades the Communist party has indoctrinated the people with atheism, with the result that many Mainland Chinese take atheism for granted as a world view.

Given such a background, people often find it puzzling why so many Chinese would join churches; some reports show that 32 percent of Chinese in the metropolitan areas of Los Angeles and Chicago practice Christianity (Yang 1999a). It is this puzzle that first led me to do field research on a Chinese church. However, observations in my fieldwork yielded another research question dealing with the significant differences between the Chinese Christian church and American mainline Christian churches. The discourses in this Chinese church are very strict and fundamentalist. They condemn many issues that are more or less tolerated in American mainline churches, such as certain sexual practices and non-protestant religions. Moreover, they often do not tolerate many things common in Chinese culture, such as dancing, singing pop songs, playing cards, and using the dragon image. In short, many features of this church correspond to those of a sect described in the church-sect theory. However, while the theory says that sectarianism is typically found among those who are less-educated and poor, members in this church tend to be well-educated professionals. Many of them have a post-graduate degree and live in an affluent suburban area where the church is located. Furthermore, while a sect is typically small and informal, this church is relatively large and organized even though it is not as established as the American mainline churches. Can things in this Chinese church still be explained by the church-sect theory, which is conceptualized from observations of European Christian organizations, or can the theory not be applied because of its different ethnic and cultural backgrounds? This paper will attempt to answer these questions.

Data and Methods

The paper is based on one year of field research that I conducted from 2000 to 2001 in a Chinese immigrant church, which will be called “Pineland Calvary Church” or “PCC” (pseudonym). I visited several Chinese Christian groups in the same area before finally deciding to conduct my study at the PCC, mostly because it was larger and more established than the others, and because its members were also more diverse. Furthermore, this church had a number of different fellowships, which enabled me to do comparisons. In 2000, I talked to a leader at PCC about my research and obtained his consent. I began my study and frequented the PCC for about a year, but did not become a formal member. My position enabled me to do interviews and to observe most of the activities in the PCC, although I was not in a position to explore its internal operations.

Methods

My data were obtained through three ways: participant observation, interviews, and content analyses. To carry out participant observation, I attended various activities organized or facilitated by the PCC, including Sunday worship services, Friday Bible studies, Sunday school classes, holiday celebrations, sermons, regular meetings, and so on. I took field notes in or after these occasions. In addition to conducting informal interviews by talking to the PCC members casually and extensively, I also did semi-structured interviews with eight members. These semi-structured interviews contained open-ended questions asking their reasons and feelings about churchgoing, in general, and about attending the PCC and their own fellowships in particular. I also asked them to describe their immigration experiences and feelings about their American lives. Content analyses were also conducted on materials printed or distributed by the PCC, including flyers, booklets, program brochures, newsletters and magazines.

Setting

The Church is located in a medium-sized city that I will call “Pineland” (pseudonym) in Southern California. This region has a high concentration of Asian new immigrants. It is also where several new conservative Christian movements originated (Perrin, Kennedy and Miller 1997), and the city of Pineland lies within this conservative environment. Pineland is an affluent suburban city with many churches, synagogues, mosques and temples established by different ethnic groups. Meanwhile, it has a number of high-tech companies, which employ many professional immigrants, and has a nearby university town that attracts many international scholars and students.

The Pineland Calvary Church is medium-sized with about 500 members in 2000; it is conservative, evangelistic, nondenominational and independent, just like many of the typical Chinese new immigrant churches that have been documented (Yang 1998). The PCC was established in 1992 by merging two Christian groups, *Resurrection* and *Epiphany*. The two predecessors were also relatively new; having been set up in the 1980s when neither had their own church buildings and had to borrow rooms from other organizations for meetings. After the merging, the PCC became a much larger and more formal church. It now has its own church building, which is a spacious one-floor structure with more than ten separate rooms. However, its external appearance does not feature itself as a church. It has neither a cross on its building, nor any statues. Inside the church there is also hardly any decoration: no cross and no portrait of Jesus Christ. The church leaders claim that decorations will pull them away from the real God and contaminate their religious purity; they also state that worshipping the portrait of Jesus Christ is a type of idolatry, which is forbidden by the Bible.

The PCC’s members have very diverse backgrounds. A slight majority of the members are from Taiwan and church leaders are mostly Taiwanese. The Taiwanese and those from Hong Kong have been in the United States for a relatively long time and most are professionals or self-employed. A

smaller but growing portion of its members are from mainland China. Most of them are students and scholarsⁱⁱ who have been in the United States for less than ten years. The PCC also hosts a large number of “diasporal” ethnic Chinese from many countries. The church establishes different ministries and fellowships to accommodate the diverse members. There are four ministries arranged by languages, including three Chinese dialects (Mandarin, Cantonese and Hakka) and English; while under them are more than ten fellowships.

In this study particular attention was given to a fellowship that hosted Mainland Chinese. This was selected partly because I was from Mainland China, participated in this fellowship much more often than in other fellowships, and thus have more knowledge and insight about it. The PCC had very few members from Mainland China until 1995. In 1995, the increasing influx of Mainland Chinese caught the attention of the church’s Taiwanese leaders, who then set up a fellowship for the Mainlanders. Since most Mainlanders in the area are students or scholars recruited by the university, this fellowship was named “Outreach to University Fellowship” (or OUF, pseudonym). Starting with eight members, the OUF grew to host about 100 members by 1996, and had about 60 members in 2000. Compared with members in the other fellowships, the OUF members tend to have higher educational levels since they work mostly for the university, and yet are economically worse-off, both because they are the newest immigrants and because they are from Mainland China, which has a lower income level. They are also the most unaccustomed to Christianity because of the atheist ideology in Communist China. The discourses in the OUF are more sectarian than in many of the other fellowships. Although its sectarian tendency seems to be at odds with its members’ higher education, I find it compatible with their newness and marginality both in American society and in the church.

Topology and Classification

I found that the Pineland Calvary Church incorporates characteristics of both a sect and a church. Particularly, its theology is rather strict and sectarian, although some compromises are made. Its organization, on the other hand, is structured to a certain extent and resembles that of a church, but is still less formal and hierarchical. I will elaborate these aspects in the following section.

Tension with the Secular World

This is regarded by many scholars as the most important variable distinguishing a church from a sect (Finke and Stark 1997; Lawson 1999). “*A church is a religious group that accepts the social environment in which it exists. A sect is a religious group that rejects the social environment* (Johnson 1963, italics in original).” Tension is marked by difference, antagonism, and separation (Stark and Bainbridge 1987:122). The PCC certainly exhibits such features. It rejects many popular values and practices outside the church. In the PCC, the term *worldly* is equivalent to *dishonest*. The ministers frequently criticize contemporary American society as lacking morality and as being distant from God. They also condemn many popular activities in Chinese societies, such as playing cards, dancing, singing pop songs, and drinking. They denounce many other religions, including Catholicism, Mormonism, Judaism, and Christian Science, as being untrue, heretical or hypocritical. Neither is the PCC very interested in political involvement or community service outside the church, as the ministers claim Christian life and evangelism to be their sole purpose. Moreover, like other typical Chinese churches, it is independent and has no denominational affiliation.

The PCC, however, is not completely isolated from the outside world. It recognizes some conservative Christian organizations as true and has informal networks with a number of them. Some fellowships also have contact with secular organizations such as student associations in the university, and hold events together with them which help the church in recruiting members.

Organization

Emphasis on Equality and Fraternity. Unlike the often hierarchical churches, sects are characterized by a high degree of equality and fraternity among its members (Wilson 1970). In the PCC, ministers always declare an equal relationship between leaders and members. The leaders emphasize to members that they are all the same, with the only difference being that they have different burdens before the Lord: The ministers' burden is to serve the church. For instance, a minister emphasized equality at a Sunday school class as follows:

Today we have different types of people here. Some have high education, some have little education. We have men and women. We have old people and young people. But before our Lord, there are only two kinds of people: those who belong to Adam and those who belong to Christ. Those who belong to Adam are sinners. Those who belong to Christ are those who are saved.

Members of the PCC call each other "sisters" and "brothers", instead of using their names or titles. Spouses refer to each other as "my sister or my brother". The PCC fosters a close, home-like community, where each one watches out for and supports each other.

Semi-formal structure.

Although a sect will avoid formal structure in pursuing religious purity, this usually changes as the group develops. The organization process draws it away from the original goal of religious purity to increasingly devote energy on organizational maintenance (Eitzen and Zinn 1988), with its structure becoming increasingly formal.

The organization of the PCC is structured to some extent, although still less formally than the mainline churches. It organizes its members into four linguistic ministries with each ministry having several fellowships hosting members with various backgrounds (see Figure 1). The Mandarin Ministry is the largest one with eight fellowships. These fellowships group people by their ages, marital status, occupations, and so on. For instance, "Venerable Living Fellowship" is for seniors who are 65 years old and above. "Evening Love Fellowship" is for 55-65 years old couples. "Happy-Family Fellowship" is for middle-age couples with children going to senior high school. "Sunrise Fellowship" is for couples with children in elementary and junior high school. "Verdant Days Fellowship" is mainly for singles. "Night Star Fellowship" is for those who work in restaurants and thus have a late schedule. The Cantonese Ministry is for immigrants from Hong Kong. The English Ministry and Children's Ministry are small and mostly composed of youths who are born or raised in the United States.

Leadership.

A sect typically has untrained and charismatic leaders, while a church has formal seminary-trained leaders (Wilson 1959, 1970). The leader styles in the PCC vary among fellowships. The minister of Verdant Day Fellowship, which mainly hosts Taiwanese young professionals, obtained formal

training in a seminary. Some leaders do not have such formal training, such as the minister of the Outreach to University Fellowship, which hosts the Mainland Chinese.

Most ministers in the PCC are middle-aged married men. Their wives usually work shoulder to shoulder with them and become leaders without an official title. Members call these leader couples “auntie” or “uncle”, as in some other Chinese churches (Yang 1999a). They maintain close relationships with the members, talking to them, visiting their residences and giving them practical help. The female leaders particularly take on the role of giving members a feeling of being at home. They often greet members by hugging, sit next to them during services or dinners, and talk to them hand-in-hand. Such physical intimacy is not customary in Chinese tradition and is hardly seen among non-churchgoing Chinese. Some female leaders often cook for members in family meetings, or offer haircuts to the members as American commercial haircuts are too expensive for some.

A sect also has a high degree of lay participation in worship and organizational activities (Mann 1962). Lay members are also encouraged to participate in the management of the PCC. For instance, in the OUF, newly converted coworkers may lead parts of Bible studies and meetings; in the Evening Love Fellowship, members take rotating positions as the leader for six weeks at a time.

Doctrines

The belief system of the PCC is very rigid, fundamentalist and conservative; this is its most sectarian element. Churches generally accept religious pluralism and liberal interpretation of the Bible. The American mainline churches have responded to a number of contemporary social changes and modified their scriptural interpretations to accommodate changes concerning anti-Semitism, subordination of women, and human sexuality including premarital sex, adultery, divorce, and homosexuality (Glock 1993). In contrast, the PCC takes a fundamentalist stance on these issues. The denunciations of Judaism, homosexuality and divorce often appear in its ministers’ and members’ discourses. Absolute subordination of women is also emphasized repeatedly, even though in practice women in the PCC are not as subordinate as the rhetoric would indicate.

Biblical literalism.

As a rule, the PCC insists on a literal interpretation of the Bible, as a typical sect does. But leaders also make some compromises to make their interpretation compatible with the environment where they are situated in. For instance, the Outreach to University Fellowship’s interpretations of wives’ obedience to husbands and the indissolubility of marriage exemplifies such a stance.

During several Bible studies, elders addressed wives’ obedience by teaching Ephesians 4:22: “...(T)he husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church...wives should submit to their husbands in everything.” They also addressed the sacredness of marriage and have members study Matthew 19 verse: “...(W)hoever may put away his wife, if not for whoredom, and may marry another, doth commit adultery; and he who did marry her that hath been put away, doth commit adultery.”

While insisting on these strict doctrines, sometimes ministers would make certain compromises in their messages. For instance, a minister said:

The Bible says that wives should obey their husbands. We should not *quote out of the context* while reading the Bible. The Bible also says that husbands should love their wives. So this is the requirements for both sides; we should not only emphasize one side. If there is love between them, they will not get divorce. For those who are divorced, we should look at their contextual situation; we should not simply blame them. They may have their difficulties. We don't encourage divorce...however...we should not quote out of context from the Bible.

By saying that “we should not quote out of context”, the literal interpretation of Bible could be maintained without alienating some of their members.

Religious purity.

Religious purity is a very important point and is emphasized repeatedly in the PCC. All other religions and their practices are denounced here. PCC's leaders forbid worship of any idol, such as ancestors, Buddhist idols, and the Virgin Mary.

They are also very intolerant of dragon images, for the reason that the dragon is an evil character in the Bible. However, the dragon is a very important symbol in Chinese culture; Chinese regard it as their ancestor and called themselves the “the dragon's descendants”. It is also a very common decorative figure in Chinese daily life. PCC's leaders forbid members to have any dragon image at home. The year 2000 was a year of the Dragon for Chinese and dragon images appeared on almost every Chinese calendar. The ministers told members to throw away all those calendars and gave them special Chinese calendars that feature Chinese Christian history instead.

In contrast, the American mainline Protestant churches generally show a greater acceptance of pagan Chinese traditions. This may partially be due to the cultural differences between Chinese and Americans, but there are more religious reasons behind it. Not all the Chinese Christian churches are as intolerant; the least tolerance are seen among those newly established evangelical Protestant churches that host new immigrants. On the other hand, those Chinese Catholic churches that were mainly established by early 19th century Chinese immigrants are more tolerant of the Chinese heritages. Some of them even offer sacrificial pig heads and incense sticks to worship ancestors (Chen 2002; Yang 1999a).

There is nonetheless a certain degree of compromise in the PCC's strict atmosphere, as illustrated in the following example. During a Bible study, after an elder denounced idol worship, a member raised a question: “I went back to China last summer; that was before I believed (in Christianity). I went to visit my grandparents' graves with my family and relatives and worshiped my grandparents. Will I be punished?” The minister answered: “Before you believed that was OK. This is just as if before a law existed, people who violated the law wouldn't be punished. Now you have believed and you shouldn't do that. If your family asks you to go and you have to, you may go and watch, but remember: Do not ever worship.”

Salvation.

Sects tend to place a strong emphasis on personal salvation. They also reject the institutional means of attaining salvation advocated by orthodox churches. “Sectarians usually believe that salvation is scarce and that few will attain it, but they often also believe that the means are essentially simple and direct (Wilson 1970: 21).”

The PCC does strongly emphasize salvation and regards it as the only way to gain happiness in life. All other things, such as money, education, or secular work, are worldly and thus meaningless. The importance of “belief” in salvation is always stressed here. For instance, a minister taught the members: “Whether we can be saved or not, does not depend on our (secular) work or education—our work in a company or getting a Ph.D., but depends on our faith. Our salvation is because of our work before our Lord, the work of our faith.”

However, they do not believe that salvation is scarce and only few can attain it, but rather that simply believing in God will lead to salvation and anyone who opens his or her heart will experience God and thus gain salvation. An evangelical flyer of the PCC is named “Easy Salvation”. It says:

The way that humans gain salvation is simple and easy. Suppose that salvation is given only to those with education, then many people will be excluded; if salvation is given only to rich people, then thousands of people won’t gain it; if salvation is given only to those with perfect morals, then no one will have a chance. The true God’s salvation gives to everyone with faith. To gain salvation is as easy as walking through a door...is as easy as drinking water...and is as easy as believing in God.

In the PCC, the teaching is that if you are touched in your heart by God, then you can be baptized. If you are baptized then you can be saved. A member who was never been exposed to Christianity was baptized two weeks after he started to attend the PCC. This is unlikely to happen in institutionalized churches. The PCC often arranges group baptisms. Right before the ceremony, some ministers may encourage those who have not planned to do so to receive the baptism. This shows that the PCC has emotional and spontaneous elements, which are characteristics of a sect and differ from the rational features of established churches. However, the conceptions of baptism and salvation are not entirely without rationality in the PCC. They do not baptize people who come to the church the first time, as some missionaries in developing societies do. They have Bible studies and Sunday schools to teach members the systematic concepts of salvation. Although they may baptize people without much knowledge of the Bible, the newly baptized members are asked to sit together with non-Christian members in a “Seeking-heart Class” to study the Bible from the beginning.

Adult Converts

Most members in the PCC are adult converts, which is often a critical mark of sectarianism (Niebuhr 1929). However, adult conversion of the PCC members is a result of being adult immigrants from the non-Christian China, thus whether it can still be a mark of sectarianism may be questionable. However, first generation converts tend to be fundamentalist, strict and radical, and this adds a sectarian tint to the PCC.

Active Recruitment

Another important mark of sects is that they tend to actively recruit new members in order to sustain their membership. Members of sects are often eager to share their faith with others in hopes of recruiting new members (Macionis 1997). Such behavior also characterizes the PCC. Many leaders in the PCC recruit members actively, and the ones from the Outreach to University Fellowship are among the most diligent. The OUF leaders often talk to their acquaintances or people they meet at school or work, in their neighborhoods or in public places like grocery stores to share their faith, and invite them to come to their meetings. They distribute flyers on campus, in dormitory areas, and at local Chinese grocery stores, while electronic mail and community newsletters are also used. At the beginning of each school year, the OUF leaders and coworkers often pick up incoming students and scholars at local airports and open their homes for some newcomers to stay temporarily. They also set up booths on campus and hold welcome parties and Chinese festival celebrations, to which they invite all Chinese students and scholars and their families. The parties and celebrations all include sermons. These methods turn out to be quite successful as they recruit a large number of new members at the beginning of every school year. Within the fellowships, ministers and Christian members eagerly preach to non-Christians and frequently ask them whether they are ready to convert and be baptized.

Further Analyses: How the PCC suits its members

Why does the PCC mix characteristics of a sect and a church as described above? Why does a church-sect hybrid appeal to new Chinese immigrants? Sociologists of religion have found that peoples' religious motivations can be traced back to their biographies (Christiano et al. 2002:46) as well as to the social, cultural and ethnic embeddedness of the religious institutions (Ellison and Sherkat 1995). Consumers of sectarian groups are usually marginalized people from lower classes, while churches mostly serve well-educated people with a higher socioeconomic status. New Chinese immigrants in the PCC cannot simply be put into either category.

The PCC members face many disadvantages as both newcomers and as racial minorities. First, many of them have experienced financial difficulties. Those who are still students have often had to live and support their families on limited school financial aid. Some of those who are working are employed in ethnic businesses that pay less than the mainstream businesses. The financial

constraint is particularly acute among the Mainland Chinese members in OUF because they are the most recent arrivals and are from a region where the average income is low. Thus, practical helps offered by a close-knit sect-like group appeal to them much more than the formal religious products from an institutionalized church.

Economic difficulty is not the greatest problem for Chinese new immigrants, because as racial minorities they often feel marginalized and isolated even when they are economically better off. During my interviews, several working professionals consistently insisted that they were “second-class citizens” along a racial line even though they were then earning a comfortable income. They also complained about isolation and the lack of opportunities to participate in American social activities. To these members the PCC’s emphasis on fraternity and equality is valuable because marginalized people often find that sectarian groups offer them “compensators” (Stark and Bainbridge 1987: 36) for what they lack in the secular world.

In addition to offering them comfort, the PCC also gives them guidance, as several members mentioned in the interviews. They expressed their need for a system of doctrines to provide guidance to their lives, because the value system in China is now distant while the American values are largely irrelevant to them. Under such circumstances, the strict doctrines of a sectarian group are often welcomed.

With these disadvantages, the PCC members find that a sectarian group fits their needs well. This is consistent with the church-sect theory. But church-sect theorists also note that disadvantages derived from being minorities or immigrants do not always lead to sectarian participation. For instance, some middle-class blacks would join denominations instead of sects (Glock 1964). In a study of the Mennonite Brethren, Kyle (1985) proposes that sectarianism could arise from an ethnic group’s geographic isolation, attachment to members’ own language and culture, isolationist mindset, and a general reaction to different religious groups and cultures, but denominationalism would arise from its accepting and being accepted by American society, contact with the evangelical communities, urbanization, and movement of its members from an agrarian people to an educated, professional class. The PCC members undoubtedly have a number of characteristics leading to sectarianism, such as isolation and attachment to their own language and culture, but they also possess features that predispose them to denominationalism. The PCC is located in a new affluent suburban area with a number of high-tech companies and colleges attracting many professional immigrants and students from China and Taiwan. This is reflected in the member composition of the PCC. Among its sixteen fellowships, only one (the Night Star Fellowship) is for those who take up unskilled occupations. Most working-age members in the PCC are either professionals or students who have the potential to get into the mainstream job market in the near future. They are among those new immigrants who were mentioned by Massey (1981) as having high human capital and upward mobility. This is one of the characteristics prevent them from entering into or forming pure sects.

In a word, the combination of marginal status and high human capital creates the demand for an alternative service which neither a mainline church nor a sect provides. The PCC, by being a hybrid of a church and a sect, provides such an alternative religious product.

Separated, but not Isolated

As discussed above, the PCC is more separated from the secular world than the mainline churches are, but it is not isolated. My observations and the interviews show that the separation can be explained at least partially by the following factors:

First, the PCC members are mostly new immigrants who are not fully integrated into American society. An important factor contributing to the lack of integration is the language barrier. The young members typically came to the United States after their 20s and have passed the critical period for language learning. Although they usually have obtained American post-secondary education and are able to speak English in their work, they still feel more comfortable speaking Chinese in their daily lives. One PCC member in his mid 20s said, he could not talk to Americans with ease. When he had conversations with Americans, he felt like he was acting in a drama and could carry out those conversations only with much effort. Therefore outside of his work he preferred to interact with only Chinese. The PCC also hosts many older members who came to the United States at an advanced age to join their children or siblings here; they speak almost no English. These language barriers separate many PCC members from local Americans in their daily lives. Such ethnic separation typically results in religious separation (Kyle 1985).

Second, Chinese new immigrants are more concerned with issues in their private spheres—their work, families, and children's education—rather than community participation and political involvements (Yang 1997). In the PCC the most popular topics among members are green card, job-seeking, salary, housing, and children's schooling and health; societal and political issues are rarely discussed. Some of my interviewees said that they have to take care of practical issues at this point in life and thus do not have much time to look at the broader society. Some also attribute their political apathy to the general indifference towards public issues in Chinese traditional culture, the political turmoil in China's recent history, and the lack of a sense of belonging to the American society.

However, Chinese immigrants do not intend to be isolated from the broader society. Many of them are professionals who work or intend to work in racially diversified mainstream institutions (Yang 1997). They desire to be incorporated into the mainstream society. Contacting with the larger society and establishing social networks with more people are regarded as being to their benefit. Through connections with other churches, the PCC members can meet more people, extend their social networks, and obtain better knowledge and information about Christianity and American society in general. Therefore, most of them will not join a sect that totally isolates itself but rather prefer a group with connections to the outside world.

Organization

Semi-formal structure and brotherhood.

The PCC has a semi-formal organization to accommodate the competing demands of its members for a personalized community within a diverse congregation. Its less formal, close-knit community with an emphasis on fraternity provides newcomers with many psychological, social, and material supports. Many PCC members told similar stories about this: They felt very lonely and empty when they came to this new land, but they found a family after they joined the PCC. There they came to know many sisters and brothers who gave them a lot of help. For instance, a member said:

After we came here, we felt that the Chinese here were all very cold, so we missed home a lot. Later we came to this church, and we found our home here. Once we wanted to move to a new apartment, Uncle and Auntie Wong (the minister and his wife) offered to help us right away. There were more than ten people in the church who helped us and we finished moving in one hour.

However, a somewhat formal structure has emerged in the PCC in response to its growing size and heterogeneity. In 2000, the PCC had around 500 regular members, who had a wide variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, political ideologies, educational attainments, socioeconomic status, and lifestyles. It was difficult for them to form one close and comfortable community. The selection of fellowships in the PCC offers them more choices and allows them to stay with those who have similar backgrounds. A Mainland Chinese member in OUF told me the importance of this by his own experience:

People can look around and try a couple of fellowships before they find one that they like. Finally you just stay in any one that you feel comfortable with. I went to Verdant Day Fellowship a couple of times. Most people in that fellowship are Taiwanese; they are so different from us (Mainlanders). Their experiences are usually simpler than ours, hence their ideas are purer than ours. We Mainlanders have experienced too many complex things before. Now it is difficult for us to believe in anything absolutely. Also, they (Taiwanese) have a better material life, but we have to struggle for survival and material things, so we can't pay as much attention to spiritual things (as they do)... Their way of studying the Bible is very academic, because they are raised in an environment that makes them take Christianity for granted. But I'm different. The Bible study reminds me of studying Maoism during the Culture Revolution... I studied Maoism very sincerely at that time and I believed every word of it. After I became disillusioned, it is hard for me to accept any belief entirely. I try to believe in Christianity, but it is not easy for me.

Leadership.

Some of the PCC ministers have no formal training in seminaries and their relationship with the members is more personal than professional. The minister of the Outreach to University Fellowship is such an example. Compared with those more professional church leaders, he focuses more on providing members with practical help and maintaining a home-like community. His offering meets the needs of those newest Mainland Chinese arrivals in his fellowship because what they need the most at this point is practical and emotional support. There are, however, more professional leaders in the PCC. The minister of the Verdant Days Fellowship, for example, obtained seminary training and his leadership style is different. The Verdant Days mostly hosts Taiwanese professionals who immigrated earlier and have already settled down with improved material lives. They also converted earlier or had a closer contact with Christianity than the Mainlanders. Moreover, the Taiwanese fellowship was established in 1989 while the Mainland Chinese fellowship was founded in 1995, and as a result it is more institutionalized. In congruence, its minister focuses less on providing personal help but more on formal religious teaching. His teachings are also more intellectual, in contrast to the more emotional messages given by the minister of the OUF, as described by some member who attended both fellowships.

Although females tend to have lower status in sects, female leaders play important roles in the PCC. This may be attributed to the traditional roles that females play in Chinese families as well as to the characteristics of Chinese churches. In their study of the Chinese immigrant churches, Cayton and Lively (1955) found that “an emergent ‘momism’ is a characteristic of the contemporary Chinese families.” The mother “acts as intermediary between father and children” and “is the focal point of affection in the household” (p.29). The situation in the PCC is similar, as successful female ministers here often use their amicability to attract attendants and to take up the role of holding the church community closely together like a home. However, there is a certain line that these female leaders do not cross, as they never give sermons, lead Bible studies, or make speeches during formal meetings.

The diversity of training and leadership styles of the PCC leaders shows that some fellowships are more sectarian than others. These diverse leadership styles also correspond to the heterogeneity of the congregation.

Doctrines

Declaring equal status.

An important reason why sectarian groups attract disadvantaged people is that the emphasis on equal status within the group compensates for their lower social status. The new Chinese immigrants in the PCC need the comforting effects derived from the assurance of equal status because they not only face marginalized positions in the host society, but often also experience status down-grade from their former positions prior to immigration. Some members who are professionals in China cannot find equivalent jobs here because of their poor English skills or a lack of American credentials. Some, who used to be supervisors in China, are now subordinates in the United States. A member described the feeling as follows:

Every overseas Chinese has his or her own story, but there is one thing in common:

They have to have an “adjustment period”. Facing the new environment and our new roles, we feel upset and lost. During my adjustment period, a sentence that I heard in a Bible study helped me a lot. That is “every person has his own value in our Lord.” That encouraged me, the newcomer, a lot and gave me a lot of self-confidence. Now I can face reality and find my position.

Strict Doctrines and Bible literalism.

Newly-formed sect-like groups often have very strict and rigid doctrines, and the PCC is not an exception. In the beginning of my field work I was a bit puzzled by why members would accept the strict stances that often seemed to be in conflict with their own lives; for instance, the statement that education is useless and that only Christian faith is meaningful, or the denunciations of common Chinese practices. After a period of observation and conversation with members, however, I found that those strict doctrines gave many of these newcomers a sense of certainty, which was functionally helpful to them in at least two ways. First, as most members are new converts and had not internalized the Christian rules, such strictness and certainty was necessary in disciplining them to follow such rules. More importantly, many of them felt that such certainty would provide a firm anchor in their lives, which was needed since they were largely detached from the norms of the past while experiencing radical changes and the insecurity of the immigration process. The teaching of scriptures on wife’s obedience and the sacredness of marriage in the Outreach to University Fellowship are good examples.

These topics are very relevant in the OUF, where most members are married couples. Many of their marriages face challenges from the dramatic changes associated with the immigration process. Meanwhile, many social norms and institutions in China, such as family and community that used to stabilize marriages, no longer exist here. This makes problematic marriages dissolve much more easily. Many couples who do not want to divorce thus resort to the doctrines and community of the church. Sometimes only one party in the marriage wants to divorce and the spouse will persuade him or her to attend the church together in hope of saving their marriage.

To these members, the OUF leaders and members always tell them firmly “you should not divorce”. Furthermore, in their teachings, the leaders often address particular marital problems common among new Chinese immigrants. One of the common problems is the change in relative status of the husband and the wife. According to some interviewees, such marriages will be particularly vulnerable if the wife came to the United States before the husband did. This is because, under this circumstance, the husband often lagged behind his wife in adapting to the American society, which then became a critical challenge to the traditional gender role and power structure within the marriage. This and similar situations in which the husband cannot find a decent job and the wife became the main family supporter often cause a severe marital crisis. The ministers address these problems with the biblical teachings of gender role. They often teach members that “the husband is head of the family”, “The wife should follow husband in any circumstance”. There are discussions on whether the wife should follow the husband if he is making a wrong decision, and the conclusion is that she should still follow him, according the Scriptures. This Biblical literalism reconstructs the traditional power structure in marriage, which is endangered by the immigration process. It is thus welcomed by some couples who desperately

want to save their marriages. In the witness given by members and materials distributed in the PCC, there are numerous stories on how the church teachings on gender role and marriage sacredness save marriages. A typical story printed on a publication distributed in the church goes like this:

“Before I got to know God, I didn’t know the woman’s role in family. (I wanted to divorce and sought support from a sister in the church)...To my surprise, she told me at the very beginning: “You can’t divorce.” She had me read (the Bible), I was caught by the verse...(Later) my husband and me had a big fight and he said he would leave home forever, unless I kneel down to beg him. I have never done this before...But God gave me the power to see that submitting to my husband is to submit to the Lord who masters everything behind. So I knelt down...This shocked him. He didn’t know what kind of power can change me so much. So he often attended the fellowship after that...He became better and better. I have never thought that I can have such a good husband. My Lord gave me more than I asked.
(Zen 1998)

Another common marital problem is caused by rash marriages. Due to the small number of Chinese immigrants and their unbalanced sex ratio, there is a paucity of single women. Thus some, mainly men, go back to China in search of spouses. They often have to do this during short vacations or business trips and enter into the marriage with neither partner knowing the other very well. Such marriages often encounter marital problems later (Chen and Li 2000). In the OUF there are also many stories about how going to the church saves these marriages. For instance, a member said:

My friend went back home (China) to grab someone to marry. They married so rashly and they did not know much about each other. After they married they began to have bad fights all the time. They almost got divorced. But after believing in the Lord, they became a very good couple. We can all tell that.

Another member described her experience as follows:

Our marriage belongs to that kind of “Marry first and then love later” typeⁱⁱⁱ. After we married we always had a lot of friction. We quarreled a lot, and my husband wasn’t too nice to me. But after my husband joined the “Old Testament Class”, our relationship became much better. I can say my husband really improved himself a lot. I am planning to sit in the “Old Testament Class” too, to improve myself.

However, some members did get divorced or had families or friends who were divorced; it is difficult to assert that those divorcees all committed adultery as the Scripture postulates. Some compromises are thus made. For instance, as mentioned earlier, a minister taught the congregation not to quote the Bible out of the context but to look at the contextual situations of those who are divorced.

Religious purity.

To assert religious purity is especially crucial to a Chinese audience because the Chinese religious tradition is polytheistic (Cayton and Lively 1955; Yang 1967). In contrast to the monotheistic Christians who declare that Jesus Christ is the only God and Christianity is the only truth, Chinese tend to think that various religions can all be true in different ways and thus can be employed together. Strict and strong religious doctrines are necessary to govern them and hold them together under the new belief system. However, pagan ancestor worship lies at the heart of traditional Chinese culture and folk religions. Many PCC members' families still practice ancestor worship. Moreover, families and ancestors are always an individual's first consideration in Chinese tradition (Cayton and Lively 1955). Thus forbidding ancestor worship is a critical challenge to their basic family values, while insisting on religious purity with a certain readiness to compromise is a sensible and realistic stance for them.

Active Recruitment

A major factor that makes the PCC recruit actively is that its congregation members are themselves adult converts. The PCC members are not born into the church and most of them are not used to church-going before active proselytizing drew them in. The OUF leaders are more diligent in recruiting than other fellowship leaders, and the more sectarian recruiting practice is consistent with the lesser Christian background of its targeted Mainland Chinese members. It is also necessary because of the high mobility of its student and new immigrant members. Every year many of the OUF members move out of the area after graduation, transferring or dropping out of school, or changing jobs. Some switch to different Chinese evangelical Christian groups, who also recruit members actively. There are also those who switch to American mainline churches, such as Lutheran and Methodist churches, as they begin to enter American mainstream society. Moreover, since most members do not have a Christian, or any church-going tradition, some simply stop attending when they are too busy, when they no longer need the practical help from the church, or when they found their own social networks outside the church. The number of members who remain in the fellowship for a long time is limited. The OUF was established with eight members in 1995; five of them later moved out of this area, one switched to another PCC fellowship, and one moved to a local Lutheran church, thus leaving only one of the original members. The active recruitment, however, drew in more newcomers and made the OUF grow quickly to host more than 100 members by 1999.

Discussion

This paper applies the church-sect theory to Chinese immigrant Christians, a population that has rarely, if ever, been subject to analysis with the help of this theory. I find that the church-sect theory, although originally derived from analyzing European churches, applies quite fittingly to a Chinese immigrant church. Nonetheless, the cultural, ethnic and social contexts of its congregation members profoundly affect where the Chinese church is located along this church-sect continuum. While the church-sect theory proposes that sectarianism typically occurs among less-educated people, the Chinese church has many sectarian characteristics even though it hosts mostly well-educated members. I believe that its sectarianism arises from its members' marginality both as an ethnic minority and as newcomers to American society and to Christianity. However, with its semi-formal organizational structure and some semi-professional leaders, among other church-like characteristics, it is not a pure sect. Its church-like features fit its members' profile of well-educated professionals who are upwardly mobile.

By being a hybrid of church and sect, the PCC matches the needs of these Chinese new professional immigrants and thus finds a niche in the competitive religious market where it can survive and grow. The market metaphor, developed from the church-sect theory, proposes that religious products of a church have to meet the needs of its consumers in order to compete with others in the American religious free market (Finke and Stark 1997; Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 1987; Warner 1993). However, the PCC members do not live in an entirely free market. The religious market that accommodates them is best described as a segmented market that is divided into subsets by racial and ethnic, cultural, and other lines. Being new immigrants and minority group members, they have limited choice in this market. Most of them are unable or unwilling to join an American mainline church as racial, cultural and language differences form an invisible barrier, even though the physical doors of mainline churches are always open. There is, nonetheless a certain level of free competition within this segmented market because there are a number of local Chinese Christian groups actively competing for members. My observation shows that the other groups tend to be less formal, yet stricter than the PCC, that is, they are more sectarian. The fact that the PCC is most successful in this local segmented market supports my argument that a church-sect hybrid would appeal to these Chinese new immigrants more than those that are too sectarian in nature, as the market metaphor would imply.

This paper is only the beginning of applying theories in sociology of religion to the churching of Asian immigrants. Particularly, it applies the church-sect theory to this group for the first time and generates meaningful analytical results. In future research, comparisons across different Asian immigrant Christian groups will further reveal how different points along the church-sect continuum provide for the unique needs of different Asian American groups. Furthermore, testing the church-sect theory and market metaphor against Asian Americans, for whom Christianity is not an indigenous religion, will reveal to what extent these theses are universally applicable or culturally relative. I tend to believe that they are more universal than people often think, but we

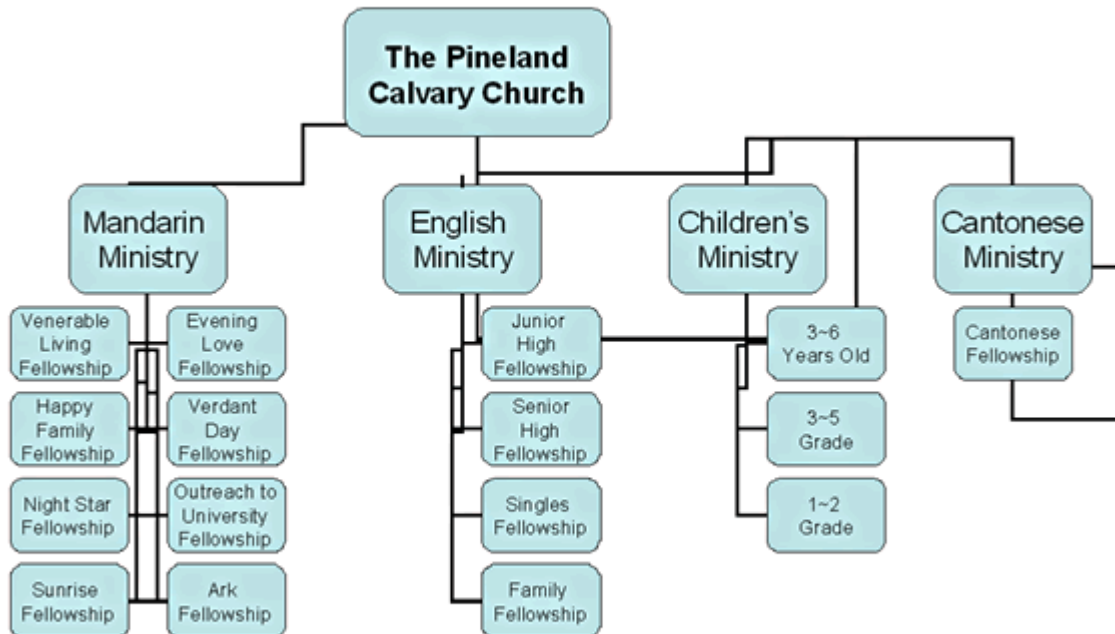
need to study more groups and take larger samples to demonstrate that. On the other hand, longitudinal studies are needed to reveal the trajectories of evolving nascent Asian immigrant Christian groups. Church-sect theorists suggest that sectarian groups often evolve into churches or established sects when their members move upward along the class ladder. Specifically, Yinger (1970) suggests that those sects concerned with individual anxiety and salvation tend to become full-fledged churches, while those focusing on social injustice and call for political reforms become established sects. I suspect that the PCC and many other similar Chinese Christian organizations will follow the first trajectory because they are typically not interested in societal and political activism, but are interested in individual salvation. However, due to their ethnic and cultural distinctions, it is also possible that they do not follow the same trajectories of American Christian groups, but will instead always retain a certain unique religious character. For instance, all the Chinese churches in existing studies show certain levels of conservativeness and strictness. Is it entirely because of their nascence compared with the white churches, or can be partly attributed to the Chinese culture? As they evolve, will they become as liberal as some American mainline churches, or will they always be more conservative? Future longitudinal studies will be required to find this out.

Notes:

- ⁱ For confidentiality, the names of the church, fellowships, its leaders and members, and the city it is located in are all pseudonyms.
- ⁱⁱ Many of Chinese students and scholars adjust to permanent resident status upon their employment as professionals (Yang 1999a). In fact, this is the major way that Chinese professionals immigrate to the United States. Therefore, the students and scholars are regarded as immigrants in this paper.
- ⁱⁱⁱ “Marry first and then love later” is a popular verse from a well-known Chinese movie *Herdsmen of Horses*. In this movie two strangers were married without knowing each other first, and then felt in love.

Appendix:

Figure 1: Organizational Structure of the Pineland Calvary Church



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