

*Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience.* By Carolyn Chen. Princeton University Press 2008. Pp. 248. \$35.00. ISBN: 0-691-11962-7.

The subject of the religious experience of Taiwanese Americans is fascinating yet challenging. This book is a significant study of contemporary Taiwanese migration and religion. It explicitly combines in-depth case study and sophisticated theoretical analysis. Many books deal with either Asian Christians or Asian Buddhists in America, but Chen's book examines both Christians and Buddhists in an appealing yet well-executed manner.

Strikingly, Chen has offered us a very rich and lucid image of the religious experience of a minority group in the United States by analyzing their new religious institutional structures, moral disciplinary system, and the rhetoric of conversion that they use. Her examination importantly reveals that Buddhism and Christianity transform Taiwanese immigrants into Americans. Chen probes the cultural and religious identity of the immigrants from Taiwan by asking how Taiwanese immigrants become religious and how they become Americans by becoming religious. Her analysis of contemporary immigrants focuses on classical sociological categories such as family, community, gender, and self-identity, bringing a fresh perspective to our understanding of the relationship between religion and society. Any scholar who is interested in Asian-American studies should not ignore this book.

Written in a beautifully articulate yet accessible writing style, this book can serve as a textbook for undergraduate students who have no background in the development of Asian-American religions. Whenever there is a Buddhist technical term, Chen gives a footnote to explain it. Many terms such as "*Kuan-yin*," "*Ma-tsu*," "Chan Patriarch," "*Chi chi (qiqi)*," have been treated nicely. Chen has also provided further explanations on some viewpoints held by classical sociologists such as Max Weber and Emile Durkheim whenever the general reader might need the particular information.

In this review I will introduce the main points presented in this book chapter by chapter in the following sections and offer my own evaluations. Chapter One introduces the contemporary context in which the Taiwanese immigrants form their new community in the United States. On one hand, they seek economic and educational advancement

in the United States. On the other hand, they seek an alternative political shelter while facing the tension between the two regimes across the Taiwan Strait. Chen notes that the majority of Taiwanese middle-class immigrants established their permanent residence through the occupational preference categories from the 1970s to the 1990s. Chen concludes that these Taiwanese immigrants have created a unique, ethno-urban area in Southern California. Then she also introduces two major religious organizations around which she conducted her fieldwork: Grace Evangelical Church and Dharma Light Temple.

Overall, this is a very concise and informative opening chapter; however, one minor point is worth discussing further. Chen claims that the former political leader Chen Shui-ben used the Christian cross as the language favored by Taiwanese Americans who have converted to Christianity and have adopted new Christian icons. (17) However, the use of this Christian icon is not limited to the United States. The target of this language, if it is Christian language, does not appeal only to Taiwanese Americans who are "American Christians." In Taiwan, former president Lee Teng-hui used a similar rhetorical reference when he likened himself to Moses who led the captive Jews out of Egypt. Lee Teng-hui's supporters portrayed him as the Father of democracy in Taiwan; yet Chen Shui-ben envisions himself as the Son of Taiwanese people. From father to son, from Moses to icon, we can find some parallels between the stories of Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-ben. In other words, Chen Shui-ben's use of the Christian cross actually continues Lee's political legacy. However, this raises a further question: what is the relationship between Christians in Taiwan and in the United States? Chen's work offers no answer to this question.

In Chapter Two, Chen deals with how Taiwanese immigrants converted to Christianity and how they worked to organize new congregations in Southern California. Chen discusses the ways in which new immigrants from Taiwan worked to form a community that bound them together ethically and viewed Christian congregations as a new family. The immigrants utilized the many social and economic benefits that this new family afforded them, such as parenting classes, solutions to financial problems, networks to secure jobs, general solidarity, and a forum for resolving personal problems.

Chen also analyzes the ways in which the Christian church proselytizes to Taiwanese immigrants. The Christian church is a unique and effective institution in attracting members to serve it through its numerous activities, including Sunday services, cell group meetings, Bible Study and Friday night fellowship meetings. Chen also examines

how Taiwanese immigrants broke with their old traditions in Taiwan and created a new tradition of conversion in the United States by approaching Christianity rationally. They found that Christian doctrines and institutions, including the church, offered answers to many of the common yet profound questions in their daily lives. To Chen, the breaking away from old traditions and the creation of new traditions indicates that the “family” obligation to Chinese culture was renounced by American Christians, while their personal preference toward American culture was achieved.

In this chapter, Chen clearly demonstrates her sharp and cogent skills in discussing family, community, and social networks and other sociological issues that shape the Christian community of Taiwanese immigrants. However, this chapter seems to lack a historical and cultural context when it is examining Christianity. For instance, in her discussion of how the members of the congregation refer to each other as “sister” and “brother” (47), she does not pursue in greater detail the Taiwanese immigrants’ understanding of the Christian notion of “fellowship.” “Fellowship,” an English language translation for the concept of Christian communion in Greek, was understood as a way of binding members together, and is an extraordinary feature in the history of the Christian communities. For the Greeks and Romans, Christianity was a new religion. Chen offers no explanation of how these Taiwanese Christian fellowships continue, diverge from or innovate on this key concept. It might be an issue worthy of further study.

In Chapter Three, Chen explores Buddhist practices among Taiwanese immigrants in Southern California, centering on the Buddhists affiliated with Dharma Light Temple. This chapter first maps out the religious experience of Taiwanese in their homeland Taiwan and then in the United States by introducing popular Taiwanese religious practices such as family obligations; the institutionalized religions of Buddhism, Daoism, and Christianity in Taiwan; and the encounters between Taiwanese Buddhists and Taiwanese Christians and non-Christians in the United States. Chen points out that the educated middle class in Taiwan was not interested in Buddhism and thought of Buddhism as outmoded and backward. Yet, to most Taiwanese, Christianity maintains its conventional image as a foreign religion. Chen then moves to discuss ways in which Buddhism was introduced to Taiwanese immigrants, through funeral rituals, family connection and friends. Chen suggests that the Buddhist practices of Taiwanese immigrants in Southern California have transformed Buddhism from an embedded religion to an explicit religion. Taiwanese Buddhists in the

United States have attempted to revive an appreciation of Buddhism by describing it as a modern, scientific, and rational way, which they call pure Buddhism.

It is worth pointing out that Chen does not provide sufficient documentation of some of her claims about religious experience in Taiwan. For example, in Chapter Three, she claims that in Taiwan, only monastics knew Buddhist scriptures (101), which might not be true for Taiwanese Buddhists belonging to organizations, such as the Dharma Drum Mountain and Foguangshan. From my experience, both of these organizations make a concerted effort to hold scriptural study workshops for lay people. Many lay people have spent days in Foguangshan headquarters in Gaoxiong in order to finish copying a particular scripture. The abbot of Foguangshan has also published a beautifully printed bilingual pamphlet to educate lay Buddhists about the significance and procedure of copying scriptures.

In Chapter Four, Chen discusses the construction of the new self understanding of Taiwanese immigrants to the United States and its relationship to their religious experience. Chen demonstrates how Christianity and Buddhism offer an alternative for Taiwanese American women to earn their independence from traditional kin-centered family and to reconstruct their self-identity in tandem with their American peers. She then analyzes how Christianity and Buddhism offer an opportunity to help Taiwanese American men reassess their true selves while struggling with uneasiness in their professional careers in a highly competitive society. She argues that religion actually liberates Taiwanese Americans from old traditions and allows them to develop new selves. The reader is immediately struck by the question why Chen chooses to use two church deacons (Chu and Wang) rather than lay members as the examples while dealing with Christian men's narratives. (137-40)

In Chapter Five, Chen argues that Buddhism and Christianity offer Taiwanese immigrants an alternative moral discipline to replace the old Confucian value system that regulated daily life in Taiwan. She develops her argument using the theoretical framework of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim. She examines many key issues, including various concepts of sin, the practice of rituals, and the function of scriptures, to investigate how Taiwanese Americans applied Buddhist and Christian ideas and practices in regulating their daily life in conjunction with the greater personal freedom they enjoyed in the United States.

In the Conclusion, Chen describes the religions of the Taiwanese immigrants as immigrant religions. She indicates that the activities and

experiences of Taiwanese immigrants mirror in a number of ways the religious experience of earlier European as well as Korean immigrants to the United States. She also concludes that for Taiwanese immigrants, religion serves as a venue to create new social and ethnic identities as Americans while also maintaining their own traditions.

Given my own observation and conversation with Taiwanese Christians in Southern California, there are two issues that this book overlooks. The first issue is the family tradition of Christian conversion. From personal experience, I know that many officials from the Nationalist governments played a vital role in shaping the early Christian community of Taiwanese immigrants. Many were Christians living under Chiang Kai-shek and his wife Soong May-ling. They sought a peaceful shelter in the United States partially because they felt uneasy as political and religious “immigrants” from mainland to the Taiwanese Isle, and they were ashamed of losing the war against the Communists on the mainland. After they made Southern California their home, their sons and daughters also inherited their family tradition of Christianity as they grew up. This strong family tradition has had an impact on the local Taiwanese immigrant society in Southern California, yet it lacks treatment in current scholarship.

The second issue that needs future development is the spirituality or inner consciousness of Taiwanese Christians, which seems not to be explored sufficiently in this book. While Chen has skillfully analyzed many social factors in determining why Taiwanese immigrants evangelized converts, she does not take the spiritual quest of these Christians into account. Many Christians believe that God has a road map for evangelizing every corner of the earth. According to God’s plan, the seeds of Christianity were well preserved among Taiwanese Christians, who are prepared to spread Christianity to the West and the East, the United States and China. Although this is just a discourse many pastors articulate, we can see the vigorous root of proselytizing among Taiwanese immigrants. While they are proselytizing, they do not discriminate between the immigrants from mainland China and Taiwan, the “*waishengren*” (people from other provinces of the Republic of China) and “*benshengren*” (people from Taiwan province of the Republic of China). It seems that the Christian church has offered a place for members from different political and cultural backgrounds to achieve solidarity despite their political and geographical divergence. Insiders and outsiders tell different stories, but in this case, the insiders within the Christian community never give up the opportunity to evangelize outsiders.

Further, Chen's book has important implications that she does not cover in her discussion. In discussing the internal institutional structure of the Christian church, Chen argues that this structure serves to mobilize Taiwanese Christians as it serves to create a community of solidarity. Yet, she does not offer an analysis of the role played by the broad expression of religious freedom afforded by the federal government in the United States. This long-standing stance toward religion gives considerably more freedom to Taiwanese immigrants in organizing their Christian churches and Buddhist organizations than they experienced at home. In Taiwan, the regulations for registering various religious organizations changed significantly around 1990 with the democratization of Taiwan. The end of a restrictive policy toward religion and easing the registration of religious organizations certainly helped religions flourish in the 1990s. While she discusses the religious experience of Korean Americans, the change brought by a similar democratization in their homeland should also be taken into account.

We might ask a second important question which goes beyond the subject with which Chen deals, namely, to what extent we can find similar religious experience among immigrants from mainland China? I think this book offers invaluable insight for the future study of the religious experience of Chinese immigrants.

Unfortunately, this book is neither well-edited nor carefully produced. It contains several errors and omissions in the main text as well as in a glossary of Chinese characters. Nevertheless, they are minor errors, which do not undermine any argument of this wonderful book. I am sure that this book will be a great benefit to scholars doing religious studies and to those in Asian-American studies.

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