

# *From Filial Piety to Religious Piety: Evangelical Christianity Reconstructing Taiwanese Immigrant Families in the United States*<sup>1</sup>

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While current scholarship suggests that immigrant religion reproduces ethnic traditions, this article suggests that religion can also challenge and transform ethnic traditions. Like other immigrants from Confucian cultures, Taiwanese immigrants find that their Confucian family traditions are difficult to maintain in the United States. The immigrant church is an important community institution that offers new models of parenting and family life. This article discusses how through the influence of evangelical Christianity, the immigrant church reconstructs Taiwanese immigrant families by (i) shifting the moral vocabulary of the family from one of filial duty to religious discipleship; (ii) democratizing relationships between parents and children; and (iii) consecrating the individuality and autonomy of children. These new models of family life both reproduce and alter Taiwanese traditions in the United States. Religion mediates and shapes immigrant cultural assimilation to the United States.

Describing her frustrations with raising children in the United States, Mrs. Kau,<sup>2</sup> a Taiwanese immigrant in her mid-40s, proclaims, “We just can’t use our OBC (Overseas-Born Chinese) ways on our ABC (American-Born Chinese) children!” Children in the United States, she claims, have too much freedom and consequently are uncontrollable, disobedient, and disrespectful. Her Taiwanese practices of parenting that are based on Confucian notions of filial obligation are no longer effective on her Taiwanese American children. To solve her parenting problems in the United States, she turns to religion – specifically, evangelical Christianity. Evangelical Christianity has become immensely popular among many Chinese immigrants, including Taiwanese<sup>3</sup> (Dart, 1997;

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<sup>2</sup>I use pseudonyms to protect the identity of individuals and institutions in this paper.

<sup>3</sup>By “Chinese,” I am referring to people of Chinese ancestry rather than national identity, and thus include people from Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and others in the Chinese diaspora. “Taiwanese” specifically refers to people from Taiwan, including post-1945 Mainlanders.

Yang, 1999a; Ly, 2003; Chen, forthcoming). When Mrs. Kau came to the United States, she, like most Taiwanese immigrants, was nominally Buddhist and non-practicing. But like many Taiwanese immigrants, Mrs. Kau converted to Christianity and became actively involved in a local Chinese evangelical church after moving to the United States. She claims that the main reason she and her family became involved in a Chinese church was for the family: "We wanted to make sure that the kids were on the right track – so we took them to church." Indeed, within the Taiwanese community the common wisdom is that children will not go astray if they attend church.

Mrs. Kau is not alone in turning to religion to solve the intergenerational tensions that arise in immigrant families. The growing body of scholarship on religion and immigrant adaptation addresses the importance of religion to parenting, particularly in reproducing traditional values and culture to the second generation (e.g., Warner and Wittner, 1998; Zhou and Bankston, 1998; Ebaugh and Chafetz, 2000). This is the case even among groups who are largely converts to Christianity, like Koreans (Min, 1998, 2003) and Chinese (Yang, 1999a, 1999b). Like Mrs. Kau, other immigrants find that religion protects the second generation from the "immoral" influences of American culture (Zhou and Bankston, 1998; Waters, 1999; Yang, 1999a, 1999b; Ebaugh and Chafetz, 2000). For example, in their study of thirteen immigrant religious congregations in Houston, Helen Ebaugh and Janet Chafetz write: "Surrounded by what they see as immodest clothing and demeanor, a consumer-oriented culture beamed incessantly by T.V. and popular music, lax sexual standards, family breakdown, a lack of respect for authority and the elderly, guns, gangs, and drugs, immigrants want their congregations to 'do something' to inoculate their children" (2000:124).

These works emphasize the tendency for ethnic religion to reinforce traditions among immigrants and their children against Americanization. For example, religious congregations frequently offer language and cultural classes, celebrate ethnic holidays, and sponsor cultural events. Chinese and Korean churches selectively teach traditional values that conform to the Christian tradition and enforce gender and age-based hierarchies (Chong, 1998; Yang, 1999b; Min, 2003). Monthly *bala vihar* (child development) meetings among South Indian Hindu immigrants teach children Hindu songs and philosophy while imparting Indian culture and morality (Kurien, 1998). Kelly Chong (1998) argues that second-generation Korean Americans who are more religious are also more likely to embrace traditional Korean values. Min Zhou and Carl Bankston (1998) show that among Vietnamese American youth, religious participation correlates positively with stronger ethnic identity.

These works rightly point out that religion reproduces traditions, but overlooks how religion may change, rather than preserve, inherited traditions. East Asian immigrant families transform in the process of negotiating Confucian traditions in American society (Kibria, 1993; Buriel and DeMent, 1997; Min, 1998; Zhou and Bankston, 1998). Scholars have shown that East Asian immigrants respond to the environment by developing styles of parenting that are more similar to American parents – less controlling (Chiu, 1987; Lin and Fu, 1990), and more democratic and egalitarian (Chiu, 1987). Factors such as changing economic conditions, women’s participation in the labor force (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Espiritu, 2003), an unbalanced sex ratio among immigrants (Kibria, 1993), American culture (Kibria, 1993; Min, 1998), and the legal system (Min, 1998) in the United States have been cited as contributing to shifting familial relationships. Relatively little attention, however, has been given to the role of religion in creating new family patterns in the United States, while instead its capacity to preserve traditions has been more extensively discussed.

Let me return to Mrs. Kau’s provocative comment, “We just can’t use our OBC (Overseas-Born Chinese) ways on our ABC (American-Born Chinese) children!” By turning to religion as a solution, her statement implies that ethnic religion does something more than reproduce traditional, or “OBC,” ways when it comes to parenting. In fact, traditional ways don’t work on second-generation children, and making sure that kids are “on the right track,” as she puts it, requires something different than reinforcing traditional ethnic values.

In this article I suggest that Chinese churches do more than reproduce ethnic traditions, and offer new models of parenting and family life to Taiwanese immigrants in the U.S. Churches occupy prominent positions in immigrant communities and shape how immigrant families adapt to and transform in American society. In particular, Chinese immigrants are influenced by mainstream American evangelical Christian models of the family through their Chinese Christian churches and networks. Where immigrant parents struggle to apply Confucian principles of parenting to their American children, evangelical Christianity offers an attractive new moral model of the family. In this article I will first discuss some of the problems that Taiwanese immigrant parents face in raising children in the U.S. and why they turn to religion for parenting solutions. Second, I discuss how religious conversion to Christianity shifts the moral vocabulary of the family from one of filial duty to religious discipleship. Third, I consider how Christianity can restructure the family by democratizing relationships between parents and children and consecrating the individuality and autonomy of the children. While the church may provide new models and

strategies of parenting, I argue that these have tendencies to both reproduce and transform Taiwanese traditions in the United States.

### *METHODS AND SETTING*

My findings are based on a larger ethnographic study of Taiwanese immigrant Christians and Buddhists in Southern California. The bulk of my data in this article is based on fifteen months of fieldwork that I conducted at a Taiwanese immigrant church in Southern California between January 1999 and March 2000. To maintain the anonymity of this institution and the persons involved, I give this church the pseudonym "Grace Evangelical Church." At Grace Church, I participated in Sunday services, Sunday School, Friday Night Fellowship meetings, church visitations, church social events, youth group activities, and children's Vacation Bible School. Although I concentrated most of my fieldwork at Grace Evangelical Church, I also observed the services and meetings of other local Chinese churches and para-church Chinese Christian organizations.

In addition to participant-observation, I conducted 25 in-depth interviews with Taiwanese immigrants who converted to Christianity. The respondents, who I recruited through snowball sampling, were members of different Chinese churches in Southern California, including Grace Church. They varied in age from the mid-thirties to the mid-fifties. One person was divorced, and the rest of the respondents were married. All but one of the respondents had children. The age of their children varied from two to twenty-three. The majority had children in the range of twelve to eighteen. I also interviewed religious leaders, both lay and clergy, at Grace Church and at other local Chinese religious congregations. Taiwanese and English were used in the interviews.

Grace Evangelical Church is located in a suburb of Southern California, an area that experienced an influx of Taiwanese immigrants in the 1980s and early 1990s, and has the largest Taiwanese community in the United States. To meet the demands of a growing immigrant population, Grace Evangelical Church was "planted" by a neighboring sister church in 1989. The sister church had been in existence in Southern California since the late 1970s. Grace Church is one of many ethnic Christian churches that were started by and are composed of Chinese immigrants, and whose culture, language, and traditions reflect their Chinese heritage. Although the majority of Taiwan identifies as Buddhist, Chinese Christian churches are far more numerous than Buddhist temples in the United States. For example, in Southern

California there are one hundred and ninety-five Chinese Protestant churches but only forty-five Buddhist and Taoist temples/organizations. And within a five-mile radius of Grace Church there are four other Chinese Protestant churches.

Grace Church is like other Chinese American churches, which tend to be denominationally independent, theologically conservative, and evangelical (Yang, 1999a). Its members belong to a larger Chinese Christian network of radio shows, television shows, bookstores, publishing houses, revival meetings, and non-profit organizations that is both local and transnational (Yang, 2002). As evangelicals, these Chinese Christians are strongly influenced by trends and ideas in the larger American evangelical subculture. Chinese Christians read popular evangelical books, including some that have been translated into Chinese, and attend mainstream evangelical meetings like the Billy Graham Crusade. Furthermore, many of the local Chinese pastors are educated at Fuller Seminary in Southern California, the flagship evangelical seminary in the United States.

Grace Church differs from other Chinese churches because the vast majority of its members are Taiwanese immigrants and their children. However, a small minority of its members are mainland Chinese and Minnan-speaking Chinese from Southeast Asia. In general, Taiwanese tend to be more educated and middle class than other Chinese immigrants. The population and experiences of Grace Church members are therefore not representative of all Chinese churches, for example, urban working-class churches, but are more similar to those of other suburban middle-class Chinese Christians.<sup>4</sup>

The respondents in my sample reflect the patterns of length of residency and social class of Taiwanese immigrants. Although some of the respondents migrated to the United States as early as 1965 and others as late as 1997, the majority came in the 1980s and early 1990s, while they were in their late twenties and thirties. One should keep in mind that their memories of parent-child relationships are not necessarily representative of Taiwan today, but are of a less urban and less modern Taiwan of twenty to thirty years ago.

Many of the respondents came to the United States to pursue advanced degrees and then decided to settle here. Like the majority of Taiwanese men in

<sup>4</sup>For example, my respondents had quite different experiences in Asia and in the United States from the population in Kenneth Guest's study *God in Chinatown* (2003), which examines working-class Fujianese Christians in New York City. On the other hand, my respondents' experiences were far more similar to the educated, suburban Chinese Christians in Fenggang Yang's study *Chinese Christians in America* (1999a).

the Southern California area, the men in my sample are educated and skilled professionals who are concentrated in the science, technology, and medical industries. For some, however, the process of immigration has meant professional downward mobility and they have opted to run small businesses in the ethnic community. Over half of the Taiwanese women respondents are college-educated. More than one-quarter have advanced degrees, all earned in the United States. Slightly more than half of the women work outside of the home.

### *THE PERILS OF RAISING CHILDREN IN THE UNITED STATES: SEX, DRUGS, AND NURSING HOMES*

Commenting on the perils of raising children in the United States, Dr. Lin, a father of two junior high school children, proclaims, “Freedom built this country and freedom will destroy it.” He embarks on a litany of the downfalls of American freedom – school shootings, teenage pregnancies, rampant drug use, and last but not least, nursing homes. Although Dr. Lin is fairly Americanized – he received his doctorate in engineering from a prestigious American university twelve years ago and speaks flawless English – he echoes the common sentiment among Taiwanese immigrants of raising children in a land of excessive freedom. Lacking an adequate sense of limits and boundaries, children in the United States are “wild,” “unmannered,” “disobedient,” and “disrespectful.” Parents remark that children in the United States have too much individual choice. In this environment, Taiwanese parents fear that their children might succumb to the vices of American freedoms, and among these fears, sending parents to nursing homes tops the list.

Most American parents can identify with immigrants’ fears of school violence, drug abuse, and teenage pregnancies, but placing nursing homes in this list of social ills seems odd. However, to Taiwanese and other immigrants from a Confucian heritage, nursing homes, along with the social problems that plague American youth, are at root all consequences of the same cause – lack of filiality or filial piety, the sense of duty and indebtedness to one’s parents. That is, children become involved in shameful activities ranging from violence to parental neglect because they are not devoted or respectful to their parents, who made great sacrifices in raising them.

To immigrants from Confucian traditions, filial piety is a central moral principle that guides human behavior. Scholars have noted how Confucian traditions of the family clash with the values of mainstream society among Korean, ethnic Chinese, and Vietnamese immigrants (Kibria, 1993; Kim, 1996; Zhou and Bankston, 1998; Yang, 1999a). The principle of filial piety is

based on a conception of the self and the family that is quite different from that of most Americans. Rather than the individual self as autonomous and independent, in Confucian tradition the individual is inseparable from a set of hierarchical relationships and obligations within the family. For the sake of harmony, the individual will is subordinated to the will of the family, and, more specifically, to the will of the parents. The family is based on a clear hierarchy of members of the family, where the young are deferential to the elderly. Central to filiality is the concept of obligation and indebtedness to one's parents. Consider the following quote from the Confucian scholar Tu Wei-Ming (1998:128):

The Confucian belief that moral self-cultivation begins with the recognition that biological bondage provides an authentic opportunity for personal realization. The duty and consciousness generated by the acknowledgement that we are beneficiaries of our parents and older siblings and that our well-being is inseparable from theirs is not one-way obedience. Rather it is a response to a debt that one can never repay and an awareness that the willingness to assume responsibility for paying that debt is morally exhilarating.

My respondents, who were children in Taiwan from the 1950s to the 1970s, confirmed the significance of filial piety, and specifically parental authority, in their own family experiences in Taiwan. They reported that even for important life decisions that extended into adulthood, such as marriage, career, and even immigration, parents made these decisions for them, or at least had a final say in these matters. The respondents both romanticized and were critical of their experiences as children in Taiwan. On the one hand, they described themselves as virtuous children who did not dare disobey their elders, in comparison to their children in the United States. For example, one respondent in his mid-forties claims, "In that kind of society we could not speak out against our parents or elders. If we said, 'I don't believe this,' we'd get into trouble. We just kept quiet." But in retrospect, some are also critical of the conformity that their upbringing produced. One respondent suggests that in her experience as a child in Taiwan, "You don't really have your own thinking."

Taiwan has certainly changed with modernization in the last two decades and my respondents' childhood experiences do not necessarily reflect those in Taiwan today. Filial piety, however, continues to be a central moral principle in Taiwanese families (Huang and Wu, 1994; Jordan, 1998; Jochim, 2003), who tend to be even more traditional than families in China (Whyte, 2004). According to a 1988 survey of Taiwanese youth, the majority of respondents agreed that "filial piety is the most important among all good deeds," and listed "follow parents' opinions" and "support parents" as the most important characteristics of filial piety (Huang, 1988).

But the concept of filiality is more than a moral code of disciplinary conduct for children, but a basis of family solidarity. This sense of duty and gratefulness toward one's parents weaves an iron web of material, emotional, and spiritual interdependence between members of the family. Studies of Chinese immigrant families show that this critically shapes children's behaviors (Li, 1985; Ng, 1998). For example, if the child fails or shows deviant behavior, the whole family loses face. Similarly, if the child is very successful, the whole family shares in this achievement. This awesome responsibility is a powerful form of constraint on children's behaviors, and is also a source of intergenerational tension among immigrant families of Confucian tradition (Zhou and Bankston, 1998).

The tension between Chinese traditions of collectivism and American traditions of individualism are a constant theme in dialogues about the family in the Chinese church. According to the American moral traditions children must be given a certain allowance of freedom to develop their moral selves (Bellah *et al.*, 1985). The goal of parenting is to raise children who can eventually become independent and self-sufficient (Tobin, Wu, and Davidson, 1989). Strong middle-class families are measured by healthy relationships among individual members where the mutual exchange of respect, communication, and affection do not cultivate co-dependency and loss of self.

But Taiwanese perceive the individual freedom that Americans celebrate as a threat to family harmony. American individualism leads Taiwanese parents to warn their children as one respondent does, "When we get old and sick, you must take care of us. I don't want the American way where you don't take care of mom and dad!" Many immigrants claim that Americans face so many family problems such as high rates of divorce, marital affairs, and runaway children because they are too individualistic. Without a moral tradition that sets collective obligations before the individual, the stability of the family falls victim to the vicissitudes of the individual wills of its members. But, to mainstream middle-class Americans, filiality is an untenable solution to American "family problems." To the extreme, the practice of filial piety will only produce dysfunctional adults who are ridden by guilt, co-dependent, and, worst of all, lacking a sense of self.

### *REPRODUCING CONFUCIAN TRADITIONS IN THE UNITED STATES?*

While Taiwanese parents bemoan the fact that their children are not so obedient and pliable in the United States, they also know that re-creating Taiwanese children in the U.S. is neither practically feasible nor desirable,

particularly among a middle-class group of immigrants such as the Taiwanese. First, like other immigrant parents, it is difficult for them to maintain the authority they once had in the home country because of their own difficulties navigating American society (Kibria, 1993). Immigrant children are forced to learn things on their own and become more independent in the United States because their parents do not possess the skills and knowledge to help them (Athey and Ahearn, 1991). One woman admits, "Sometimes I just cannot help my daughter if she has a problem because I don't understand this society." When I asked one working-class respondent what problems she encountered with parenting in the United States, she said that she has a difficult time helping her children with their schoolwork. For the most part, she claimed, "They have to figure it out themselves." The extent to which she does participate in her children's schooling is signing her name, although she admits that she usually doesn't know for what she is signing her name because she cannot read English very well.

Children of immigrants expressed the other side of having to do things on their own. For example, Bill Tang, who is currently a college student, shared how he dealt alone with a frightening experience he had had in junior high. He and his other Asian schoolmates were threatened with knives by a group of Mexican students. Even though the incident garnered a schoolwide meeting among teachers, parents, and students, Bill and his Asian friends never told their immigrant parents about it. In retrospect he claims, "We pretty much took care of ourselves." Realizing the linguistic and cultural limits of their parents, Bill and the other immigrant children did not turn to their parents for help on certain matters.

As other scholars (Sung, 1980; Kibria, 1993; Tse, 1995; Zhou and Bankston, 1998) have pointed out, not only do children of immigrants learn to take care of themselves, they also learn to take care of their parents. The tables are now turned in the United States, where immigrant parents must often depend on their children's help for English translation and various other tasks. What were once clear lines between authority and subordinate are now muddled. This confusion may be even more extreme among working-class immigrants, who depend on their children more than their educated, middle-class counterparts.

Second, even if Taiwanese parents can re-create the Confucian structures of hierarchy and status to produce obedient Taiwanese children, many parents are reluctant to do so. Many of the respondents are middle-class immigrants who work in American companies and recognize that inculcating Confucian virtues such as obedience and deference may create a harmonious home, but will not lead their children to success outside of the home. When I ask respondents

what qualities they need to succeed in the United States, they reply independence, aggressiveness, and courage. When I ask what qualities they need to succeed in Taiwan, they say studiousness, hard work, and obedience. From their own experiences working amongst Americans, they realize that the qualities required for success in Taiwan are quite often incompatible with those in the United States.

For example, one woman who is an executive in an American corporation says that she has become more aggressive after moving to the U.S. When I ask her why she wasn't more aggressive in Taiwan, she answers, "If I were more aggressive, I would have just been a pest. And I'm not that kind of person." Her response suggests that although aggressiveness is an effective strategy for getting what you want in the U.S., it is ineffective and off-putting in Taiwan.

Respondents agreed that to succeed, their children needed to be aggressive and independent in the United States. In many ways, the qualities that immigrants inculcate in their children are ones that stem from an *immigrant* experience, that is, the experience of being a foreigner and a minority in the United States. Immigrants realize that because they lack the networks and cultural capital to further their children's upward mobility, their children not only need to be aggressive and competitive with other Americans, but they need to be *more* aggressive and *more* competitive than the typical American. Taiwanese immigrants, many of whom are professionals, are especially cognizant of this fact. They have learned through their own experiences in the professional workplace that, despite having comparable if not superior technical skills than their American co-workers, their job mobility is beset by the phenomenon of the glass ceiling. The combination of lacking connections, American cultural sensibilities, and being Asian works against immigrants' upward mobility.

Having experienced the same barriers that will limit their own children's success, immigrant parents now encourage their children to be independent and aggressive – not to conform to one's particular station or status in life, but to jockey for more. For example, Dr. Su, an engineer who works in a large American company, claims that, because of his own experience of racism in the workplace, he encourages his sons to develop qualities of leadership and independence. He comments:

In America I encourage my children to be more outgoing and social and develop leadership skills. If you're shy you'll never be a leader. In Taiwan you have more relatives and protection. Here you're by yourself. Alone. Especially for us immigrants who don't have white skin. I feel like I know something about American society, so I want them to be leaders in order to survive. Based on my experience, you have to be this way or you'll fall behind.

As Min Zhou and Carl Bankston (1998) note in their study of Vietnamese American children, the concerns for social mobility and cultural preservation may often work at cross-purposes. Sometimes parents are forced to choose between cultural reproduction and upward mobility. They know that the traditional Taiwanese child is not going to succeed in a white American society and yet, the child who is too “American,” meaning too independent and individualistic, can threaten family harmony and solidarity.

Taiwanese immigrant parents find themselves in a dilemma regarding the family. Surrounded by the mainstream culture of American individualism, some of the claims of the Confucian family have lost their moral legitimacy within the family. Pressured by the demands of surviving and thriving in American society, Taiwanese immigrants realize that it is neither feasible nor desirable to hold on to all of the family practices of their own parents. Yet what immigrants perceive as a morally bankrupt mainstream America does not offer any more attractive models for the family.

Where then do Taiwanese immigrants turn for models and traditions of family and parenting in the United States? How do families establish a common moral language that both generations can regard as legitimate? Where some traditions of Taiwan have lost their relevance and the traditions of mainstream America offer no desirable alternatives, Taiwanese immigrants turn to the solutions offered to the immigrant public. The immigrant church is one of the most vocal institutions in this arena.

### *THE CHINESE CHURCH AND FAMILY IDEOLOGIES*

As with other immigrant groups in the United States, the church plays a prominent role within the Taiwanese immigrant community (Warner and Wittner, 1998; Ebaugh and Chafetz, 2000). The frequent meetings and shared faith among members cultivate a sense of moral obligation, accountability, and belonging that makes the church more influential than other organizations within the ethnic community. This fact perhaps explains why a significant number of Taiwanese convert to Christianity after migrating to the United States (Chen, forthcoming). Whereas Christians comprise a mere 2% of the population in Taiwan, Christians are approximately 25% to 32% of the Chinese population in the U.S. (Dart, 1997). Although there are no precise figures of how many Taiwanese Americans are Christian, pastors of Taiwanese churches in Southern California estimate that about 60% of their congregations are converts. Other studies of Chinese churches similarly report a high percentage of converts (Yang, 1999a; Guest, 2003).

Chinese churches' emphasis on the family, particularly their conception of the "good family," is strongly informed by the larger mainstream evangelical tradition to which they belong. Chinese evangelical leaders are influenced by concerns about the dissolution of the traditional family that have preoccupied conservative Christianity since the 1970s (Hunter, 1987; Smith, 1998; Wilcox, 2004). Many Chinese pastors have been trained in American evangelical seminaries. Chinese churches like Grace Church use Bible study guides and Sunday school materials from evangelical religious education sources. For example, in one Chinese church I visited, the congregation was collectively reading the popular evangelical best-seller *The Purpose-Driven Life*. Chinese Christian publishing houses translate and distribute mainstream evangelical literature on the family to Chinese immigrants. The well-known evangelical Christian organization Focus on the Family is a familiar and respected name in the homes of many of my respondents. It should be no surprise that immigrants might be attracted to evangelical Christian ideologies of the family, for both reject and feel threatened by trends in the American family. Where Taiwanese immigrants are searching for a solution to the problems of creating a family in the United States, the evangelical Christians have a ready answer in hand.

Like other immigrant groups (Min, 1998; Yang, 1999a), some Taiwanese immigrants who are not Christian start attending an ethnic Christian church in the United States out of a concern for their children's moral upbringing. For example, Mrs. Lee, a mother of two girls in high school, claims, "When I came to the United States, people told me that the children wouldn't go the wrong way if I brought them to church. At the time I myself had no desire to attend church but I wanted my children to go to church." Another respondent, Mr. Wong, says that after his 12-year-old daughter started coming home from school and copying the language and behavior of "American" kids, he and his wife decided to bring their children to Grace Church. One man, Mr. Liu, used to belong to a Chinese Buddhist temple, but claims that he switched to Grace Church because the temple lacked a children's moral education program for his two teenage children.

Like other immigrant groups (Yang, 1999a; Ebaugh and Chafetz, 2000), many Taiwanese regard the church as the last moral bastion in an otherwise immoral American society. Several immigrants remark how in Taiwan children gain a moral foundation through the public school system. In the United States, where Taiwanese believe that the schools offer no, or severely deficient, moral education, Christianity fills this function. For this reason, Taiwanese who are not Christians will send their children to church. For example,

Mrs. Kau, a homemaker who sent her three children to Christian schools and churches before she became a Christian, explains:

Kids are young and naive about what's right and wrong. With too much freedom they don't have anything to follow. In Taiwan they have moral education in school. America doesn't and that's not good. That's why I believe that children should be sent to a Christian elementary school. In Taiwan they teach you how to treat people in a class about morality. It has nothing to do with religion. After I came to the United States I became exposed to the Bible and I realized that it had a lot of stories of how to be a good person. I think this is good. Thank goodness in America they have the Bible. I think it's prevented many people from going astray. In Taiwan there aren't many Christians but thank goodness they have moral education.

Promoting strong families is a ministerial priority to Grace Church and other Chinese evangelical churches. For example, the cover of the Grace Church bulletin depicts a church as a hospital healing families and individuals. Knowing that immigrants struggle with intergenerational and bicultural tensions in the family, pastors are particularly mindful of addressing these problems in their ministries to maintain membership and attract new members. At Grace Church, Sunday sermons frequently address family issues. For example, in one sermon the pastor admonished Taiwanese parents for being concerned only about their children's academic achievement and yet neglecting their spiritual development. "So what," he asked them, "if your child becomes famous and successful but neglects you in your old age?" His question suggests that cultivating Christian virtues in one's children similarly cultivates traditional Taiwanese virtues of filiality.

Many of the programs at Grace Church and other Chinese churches are devoted to the family. In addition to a summer and winter retreat, Grace Church sponsors a special "family retreat" that concentrates specifically on issues of parenting and marriage, and attracts the participation of many who do not belong to the church. Chinese churches frequently invite family professionals, such as therapists, psychologists, and pediatricians, to speak on family issues during their weekly fellowship meetings. At Grace Church, children and parents gather together to study the Bible, pray, and socialize during their weekly Family Bible Studies. Quite frequently the discussions revolve around how to incorporate biblical teachings into their family lives.

Chinese churches introduce Chinese immigrants to evangelical Christian literature and resources on the family. Grace Church's publishing house translates and distributes many mainstream American evangelical books about the family that are sold in Chinese Christian bookstores. For example, three of the five new titles that Grace Church's May newsletter introduced were related to

parenting: *What My Parents Did Right*, *Different Children, Different Needs*, and *Parents' Guide to Sex Education*. One Chinese church has its own library, and another church has a small bookstore, where both English and Chinese-translated books, many of them family-related, are available.

Chinese churches distribute the literature of and publicize events for Christian organizations, such as Focus on the Family, but also national Chinese Christian family-centered organizations, such as Focus on the Chinese Family and Chinese Family for Christ. These para-church organizations publish newsletters, hold workshops and retreats like marriage enrichment retreats, and host family vacation camps that Chinese Christians attend. For immigrants who are involved in these tight-knit church communities, evangelical Christian ideologies and models of the family are easily accessible and widely known. For example, several respondents (mostly women) told me that church friends introduced them to a popular talk show about the family on a local Chinese Christian radio station.

The church also serves as a network where immigrants can informally disseminate information on family life. During social hours at Grace Church, parents exchange tips ranging from such topics as college applications, music lessons, teenage dating, and baggy pants. Parents with older children give advice to younger parents. And more established immigrant families serve as role models for others. Parents will frequently seek the advice of the youth pastor in dealing with a variety of issues and not only spiritual problems. The youth pastor at Grace Church told me that parents often approach him for advice on how to motivate their children to study, or how to steer their children away from "bad" friends. For example, when one respondent's daughter ran away from home, the youth pastor counseled her family regularly. Now, the mother says, things have returned to normal in her home.

For youth, the church offers a supportive environment to the 1.5 and 2nd generation who struggle with family issues. Through the institutional structures of the church, the youth group becomes a venue for the children to voice their concerns and needs to the parents. For example, at Grace Church the youth group sponsors an annual "Family Night," a banquet to express their gratitude to their parents. At one Family Night, an American-trained Chinese psychologist delivered a talk describing the struggles that Chinese immigrant parents and their children face in the United States. Dr. Wei, the psychologist, discussed how Chinese American children are overwhelmed by parental pressures to achieve academically and feel emotionally neglected by their parents' "Chinese" lack of expressiveness. These concerns, delivered at the church and through the voice of a credentialed professional, gained an authority that

they otherwise would not have when articulated by children in the privacy of the home.

Although most Taiwanese come from a Buddhist heritage, they do not look to Buddhist temples for family guidance. From my fieldwork at one Chinese Buddhist temple and observations at other Chinese temples, I noticed that monastics and laypeople would occasionally discuss family issues during meetings, however, the temple offered no explicit programs, talks, or literature devoted to the topic of the family. As I mentioned earlier, part of the Chinese Christian preoccupation with the family stems from the influence of the mainstream evangelical Christian culture. Chinese Christian churches are a part of a larger culture where a model of, and the resources to support, “the Christian family” exist.

In comparison to the congregational and communal nature of Protestant churches, temples in Taiwan have traditionally been places of ritual ceremony rather than religious and moral education for the laity. This is, however, slowly changing in the United States where non-Western religions assume congregational forms and functions (Warner, 2000; Yang and Ebaugh, 2001). Chinese Buddhism does not have a long-standing tradition of children’s religious education like Protestant Christianity. This is largely a Chinese American development. Most immigrant Buddhist temples struggle to offer even modest children’s religious education programs because they lack English-language materials (Suh, 2005). In interviews, some Buddhist parents lamented the difficulty of passing their religious tradition down to their American-raised children. They expressed that once their children entered junior high, it was hard to convince them to come to the temple. Buddhist parents, however, did not force their children to attend the temple. In contrast, Christian parents regarded church attendance as a mandatory family activity. The absence of a known tradition of children’s religious education also influenced Buddhist parents’ expectations of the temple. A Chinese Buddhist nun told me that parents regard her temple’s children’s program as “daycare,” suggesting that parents do not expect the temple to engage in serious religious teaching. Consequently, there are far fewer active youth in temples compared to churches. While there is an attempt to develop children’s programs in Chinese Buddhism, they still lag behind the vast resources that Christians have.

### *RAISING GOOD TAIWANESE KIDS: FROM FAMILY DUTY TO CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP*

In this section I discuss how the immigrant church shifts the moral foundation of Taiwanese immigrant families from filial piety to religious piety while

simultaneously reinforcing what are perceived as traditional Taiwanese values. Rather than the Confucian language of indebtedness and obligation, immigrant parents use the new moral language of Christian discipleship to achieve traditionally Confucian ends.

A plaque that reads “Christ is the Lord of this House” adorns the homes of many Taiwanese Christians. Symbolically, it replaces the ancestral altar in the traditional Taiwanese home, where family members ritually offer fruit, food, and incense to their ancestors, who in turn protect their living descendants. The plaque symbolizes that Christ, rather than their ancestors, is the source of their protection, and the authority to whom they owe their obedience. In the Gospels, Christ demands total loyalty when he proclaims, “He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Matthew 10:39). One is first a disciple of Christ before he is a father or a son. No loyalties, even to the family, may stand before Christ’s authority in each person’s life.<sup>5</sup> Christ’s lordship must pervade every aspect of the disciple’s life, and most certainly his family life. By insisting on the sovereignty of Christ over the family, Christianity sets a new model for *how* to be a family – one where Christ’s authority reigns supreme.

The symbolism of the plaque replacing the ancestral shrine vividly illustrates how evangelical Christianity shifts the moral foundation of Taiwanese immigrant families from filial piety to religious piety.<sup>6</sup> Whereas the Confucian family is based on the sense of duty and indebtedness to one’s parents, the Christian family is based first and foremost on discipleship to Christ. Individuals are beholden to certain codes of behavior, not because of the obligations that fall upon them as members of the family, but because as Christians they

<sup>5</sup>Indeed Chinese have historically not converted to Christianity in large numbers because of this very tension between religion and family. Protestant Christianity prohibited Chinese Christians from participating in “idolatrous” practices of ancestral veneration.

<sup>6</sup>Certainly the degree to which Christianity trumps competing commitments and ideologies varies by individual. For example, regarding the difficult Protestant Christian teaching prohibiting ancestral veneration, some Taiwanese Christians absolutely refuse to participate in these acts of “idolatry,” while others do, however, only when they visit their family members in Taiwan. These Taiwanese Christians struggle with reconciling their new religious commitments in the United States with their family traditions in Taiwan. They often justify their participation in ancestral veneration rituals as symbolic, cultural acts of “respect” rather than worship. Similarly, some Taiwanese Christian homes also display Chinese Buddhist figures, such as the Maitreya Buddha. Christians, however, decouple the cultural and religious meanings of these figures, and claim they are symbols of Chinese culture, rather than of Buddhism.

are disciples of Christ. As a Christian, one is an obedient daughter, a nurturing mother, or a loving father because this is what Christ commands.

In reality, however, conversion is rarely the neat substitution of one system of ethics to another. Nor does religious conversion involve the total rejection of Confucian values and traditions, but rather the selective rejection and inclusion of some elements of the past, however now reinterpreted and re-prioritized through a religious lens (Harding, 1987; Stromberg, 1993). Taiwanese parents in my sample used evangelical Christianity to reproduce some traditional Taiwanese values by morally reframing these as acts of Christian discipleship rather than using the Confucian vocabulary of family duty.

Where Taiwanese parents fear the decline of their authority in the United States, some invoke the authority of Christ to discipline their children. Many Taiwanese immigrants claim that Christian teachings are very similar to traditional Taiwanese values and morals, such as respecting elders, shunning drugs and alcohol, and prohibiting divorce and premarital sex. In fact several respondents claimed that because of their Christian values of honesty and hard work, they embody the traditional Taiwanese spirit better than the “modern Taiwanese” who are materialistic and greedy. By appealing to their children’s sense of Christian discipleship, Christian teachings are ways to reproduce traditional Taiwanese values. For example, in this quote, Dr. Wu discusses how God’s authority replaces his own loss of control over his two middle-school-aged children in the United States:

Because of too much liberty in the United States, they allow some behaviors here that they don’t allow in Taiwan. So parents start to worry about kids going in the wrong direction. Like if they get addicted to drugs or become a punk or become sexually active. What can you do? I’ve already talked to a lot of parents, and some who have children who are older than mine. They say you just cannot control your child because of all the liberties and human rights here. You can make suggestions but beyond that what else can you do? For example, if they get sexually involved with someone, what can you do? Well, in Taiwan we didn’t know about sex at so young an age. Believe me, it’s true. But in the U.S. getting sex education is very important for kids these days. But if you are a Christian you have some way to guide them in the right direction. If you have sexual relations before marriage, that’s not allowed in the religion. You’ve already crossed the boundaries before God!

As Dr. Wu’s response suggests, Christianity now replaces the moral authority that parents have over their children in a traditional Confucian society. His comment, “But if you are a Christian, you have some way to guide them in the right direction,” is particularly elucidating in this regard. Both parents and children now have an objective and common source of moral reference – the

Bible. Immigrant parents claim that their American children often talk back to them. When children ask “why,” immigrant parents realize that the traditional answer, “because I say so,” holds little ground. With Christianity, parents now have an answer. They find legitimacy through the Bible, a source of authority that is collectively recognized among children and parents alike. Immigrant parents are able to reclaim their authority by referring to the biblical teaching to honor one’s parents. In so doing immigrant parents legitimate their authority over their children as God given.

An example from a Family Bible Study meeting illustrates how parents use the Bible to legitimate their authority. On a monthly basis, church members and their families meet at each other’s homes, share a potluck meal, and study the Bible together. At this particular meeting children and parents read a passage from the gospel of John where, at the request of his mother Mary, Christ turns water into wine, despite feeling that it is not yet his time to perform a miracle. Parents and children offered varying interpretations of how this passage applied to their daily lives. One child teasingly suggested that the passage advocated children drinking alcohol, to which parents responded by pointing to other biblical passages where drunkenness is condemned. After much discussion, parents and children concluded that children ought to obey their parents, for Christ obeyed his mother, despite his own disinclination.

### *Affirming Moral Agency*

Both traditional Taiwanese and Christian approaches to parenting advocate the same end – children’s obedience to parents – the *means*, that is the moral concepts by which these behaviors are framed, are very different. Parents realize that it is no longer effective to use the language of familial duty and indebtedness to their American children to impress certain codes of behavior upon them. As one respondent told me, “in the end they will do what they want.” Christianity, however, frames these issues as personal choices. From the earliest ages the church teaches children that Christianity is a personal choice that one makes to commit one’s life to Christ. For example, in a Sunday school class, a teacher asks third-graders whether each one would like to make a “personal decision” to “ask Jesus into your heart.” In true discipleship one must have the moral freedom to choose to do right. By framing things in the language of moral agency – the choice to follow Christ – rather than the traditional language of moral obligation to the family – indebtedness to parents – parents are able to affirm the children’s sense of personal freedom

and simultaneously discipline them. This is not to say that children are always obedient, but at least children and parents pay allegiance to the same moral tradition and share a common moral vocabulary.

The church's children's education program plays a crucial part in instilling this sense of Christian discipleship in the children. **The moral language of the immigrant home reflects the moral language of the immigrant church.** Through Sunday school classes, Sunday worship, and youth group meetings the church constantly affirms the language of moral agency. For example, in a high school Sunday school class Charlie, the instructor, an Asian American student at a local evangelical seminary, challenges students to keep track of what they do in their free time. "Are you using this time to honor God?" he asks. He goes on to discuss how mainstream American culture has become increasingly immoral. He points to the language and pornographic references in television, radio, and movies, as well as the teaching of evolution as a scientific fact in public schools. "It's almost come to a point where we cannot live in this world and be Christian," he concludes. The solution is a challenge to these middle-class suburban students ensconced in our media-frenzied consumer culture: "We have to step away from the values of this culture." Consider how Charlie frames "honoring God" in one's free time:

Your free time is that one area where you have freedom to exert your independence and develop your identity. It's in those small details of life that it's hard to be uncompromising. You're not just impulsive kids anymore. You're given a certain amount of freedom to align your life with God's will.

Here Charlie suggests that doing the right thing, *i.e.*, watching wholesome movies, not engaging in premarital sex, obeying your parents, is an act of individuality and independence from our fallen culture. Doing the moral thing is not about suppressing one's individuality and meeting social expectations, but having the freedom to resist an oppressive secular culture and do what is right, or "align your life with God's will." **In so doing Christianity frames morality as a personal choice, an interpretation that is far more palatable to American children.**

On another occasion in a Bible study, the students examined why particular sins, such as premarital sex and drugs, were wrong. They referred to different biblical passages to substantiate their claims. They then came up with concrete strategies to resist these temptations and sins in their daily lives. The church instills the parents' own traditional moral values, however, using the language of Christian moral agency. By training them to be good Christians, parents in turn raise them to be good Taiwanese children.

## *SOFTENING HIERARCHIES: BECOMING FRIENDS WITH YOUR CHILDREN*

But immigrant churches do more than simply reproduce Taiwanese values by repackaging them in Christian trappings. My findings suggest that the church offers a new model of parent-child relations that challenges Confucian hierarchical styles of parenting. In comparison to traditional Taiwanese parent-child relationships, evangelical Christian teachings sacralize more egalitarian relationships. When asked if and how they have changed after converting, respondents frequently cited how they had changed as parents and softened from more authoritarian styles of parenting. For example, Dr. Wu, an engineer in his mid-forties who is the father of two teenage children, recalls that in Taiwan his father was the “king” of his family. His father’s word was the sole authority and indisputable.

My father followed the traditional way. He was like a king. The son must follow. He cannot say anything. He cannot fight back. If he says, “you must study now,” as a son you cannot argue. You just go. That’s the way it was in my family. If you don’t follow then there will be all kinds of punishment.

In his own family in the United States, Dr. Wu continued this pattern of being “king” over his wife and two children until he and his wife converted to Christianity in 1997. He claims that when he and his wife converted, they confessed their sins before God and asked God to remove the sinful patterns that had burdened their lives. One of these sinful patterns that God removed was something that he inherited from his father – the manner of relating to his children as a king.

Taiwanese immigrants learn through their own experience that the old model of parent as absolute authority is no longer effective with their “wild” American children. Through the church Dr. Wu and other Taiwanese immigrants learn that being an authoritarian parent is “wrong” and un-Christian. On this point Dr. Wu reflects:

In the Bible God represents two things – love and justice. I am too much justice and I don’t show enough love to my kids. I just want them to be good, but I don’t give them enough love. *I’ve done it the wrong way. The old me who just showed justice but no love is wrong and I must change.*

Dr. Wu’s account illustrates how evangelical Christianity can alter immigrant styles of parenting. The emphasis on love Dr. Wu refers to reflects the expressive and therapeutic turn in evangelical Christianity in the 1970s (Hunter, 1987; Wilcox, 1998). In his research on conservative Christian childrearing,

Bradford Wilcox (2004) finds that compared to religiously unaffiliated men, conservative Christian fathers are not only more involved with and emotionally supportive of their children, but are warmer and more expressive with their children.

Studies show that relative to white Americans, Chinese parents tend to be more controlling (Chiu, 1987; Lin and Fu, 1990). Asian American evangelicals who have been influenced by therapeutic evangelicalism now recognize the “dysfunctions” of their own Confucian upbringings and seek “healing” from what they perceive as the psychological damage of their emotionally distant and controlling fathers (Jeung, 2005).

In place of the traditional hierarchical relationship between parent and child, the church promulgates a new relationship that is based on a friendship between two near-equals. For example, at a Chinese Christian event, Dr. Hsu, a Western-educated Chinese psychologist, encouraged parents to shed their authoritative demeanor. “To be a good parent you need to be on the same level with your kids. You need to become friends.”

Although the idea of becoming friends with one’s children is admittedly foreign to most Taiwanese immigrants, accepting this proposal is far more palatable under the aegis of a Chinese Christian church than an American secular institution. Chinese Christians look to Western psychology for advice in the arena of the family. Like Dr. Hsu, many of the experts are Chinese who are trained in Western psychology. Through religion, Western models of parenting are thus filtered to Taiwanese immigrant parents through the visage of a familiar Taiwanese face.

### *Friendship Strategies: Respecting Individuality and Communication*

To become friends with their children, parents must recognize that children are separate and autonomous individuals who belong to God. At a Grace Church fellowship meeting Dr. Lin, a child psychologist, spoke at length about the unhealthy tendency for Chinese parents to want perfect children and therefore make excessive demands on them. To solve this problem, he offered two principles of parenting:

- 1) Remember that your children are gifts from God. As parents you are managers of God’s gifts for 18 years of their lives. Learning how to be a good manager means learning not to be a control freak.
- 2) Remember that kids are their own person – God’s person. Learn to respect them.

Here Dr. Lin offers a new model of the self and family. Instead of prioritizing the collectivity over the individual, as in the traditional family, Dr. Lin suggests that in the Christian family, the collectivity exists for the development of the individual. Christianity consecrates, and does not repress, the individuality of each child by referring to her as “God’s person.” The role of Christian parents is not to lord their will over that of the child, but to respectfully develop the particular calling that God has given their child. Parents must help their children become the unique selves that God created them to be. No matter how well intentioned, parents, as managers, need to be wary that their own self-will does not interfere with God’s plan for their children. As Dr. Lin warns, “Don’t try to make a Mozart out of a Michael Jordan.”

Immigrant parents also learn that the key to becoming friends with their children is communication. Friendship is perhaps a trickier type of relationship to negotiate than the hierarchical relationship that characterized traditional parental interactions. Whereas in traditional parent-child relations communication is unidirectional from the parent to the child, a friendship assumes a mutual relationship between two equals. A friendship requires both parties to give and take, speak and listen. Children are well trained to listen to parents, but parents don’t know the language of their children. In a family retreat at Grace Church, another American-educated Chinese psychologist told the audience of immigrant parents ranging from their 30s to 50s, “You have to speak to kids in their own language. Learn the trendy words like ‘cool’ and ‘phat.’ Learn the names of popular rock stars like the Backstreet Boys and Britney Spears.”

Immigrants articulate this very same emphasis on communication in their own families. “Communication skills are the key to a strong family,” Mrs. Su, a mother of three, tells me. She claims, “We can’t order our kids anymore, we have to communicate with them. It’s not the way it used to be in Taiwan, where you can just say ‘no.’”

My respondents expressed the importance of setting aside time to spend with their children. For example, at a Family Bible Study, Mr. Lin, an engineer and father of two, introduced the folk song “Cat’s in the Cradle” to stress this point. In the song, songwriter Harry Chapin describes a busy father who fails to spend time with his son despite his promises. When the son grows up, the situation is reversed. The father wants to spend time with the son, but the son has no time. Mr. Lin then reported the surprising finding of a recent study – the average amount of time that a father spends alone with his children each day is only three minutes.

Respondents shared how they now try to listen to their children. Consider the experience of Mrs. Chang:

Before, if my kids did something wrong I would yell, “Why do you do this and why do you do that?” I didn’t know what they were feeling. Now I look back and think that they must have been very scared. Now I’ve changed my behavior because I know that I acted wrong. I discuss things with my kids and I encourage them to tell me how they really are feeling. I changed. I seldom yell now.

Parents are more likely to designate special “family times” on a daily or weekly basis. For example, respondents told me that they incorporate daily or weekly family Bible studies where family members gather to sing, read the Bible, share their experiences, and pray together. By cultivating their children’s spiritual lives, parents are simultaneously cultivating family ties.

Immigrants learn through the church that strong families are no longer built on a sense of obligation and indebtedness, the pillars of the old ways of filial piety. Instead, parents and children now cultivate lasting family ties through developing communication and affection for one another. In fact, traditional styles of parenting are more of a liability than an assurance of continuing family ties in the United States. Commenting on traditional styles of parenting, Dr. Wu said, “Once your children grow up and become teenagers, then there will be a lot of trouble if you follow the old traditional way. The gap will only grow.”

Mrs. Wong, a mother of two, expressed similar fears of excessively individualistic children:

As a parent I worry. But if you don’t have good communication with your child before they become mature adults then you will worry even more. They’ll become teenagers and graduate and then say “bye-bye.” No more parents because I don’t understand you and you don’t understand me. They’ll just leave you!

### *THE COSTS OF FRIENDSHIP – RELINQUISHING PARENTAL CONTROL*

Despite the solutions that the immigrant Christian church offers to Taiwanese parents, these benefits do not come without some costs. By making Christ the head of the family and attempting to become friends with their children, parents lose some of the authority that they might have in a traditional Confucian tradition. Just as the parents can use biblical teachings to justify their own disciplinary decisions, so too can children use biblical teachings as a defense of their own will against that of their parents. For example, one respondent recounts how after scolding her son for misbehaving he responded, “Mom, you didn’t listen to what the pastor said at church! You didn’t listen. You should just talk to me and not yell at me!” Another respondent claims that she

feels ashamed if she misses church on Sunday because her daughter will reprimand her.

Some parents complain that their children can be “too Christian” by prioritizing church over their schoolwork. One high school student even printed on his namecard, “Part-Time Southern California High School Student, Full-Time Christian” to advertise that his Christian commitments supersede his academic commitments. Planning and participating in church youth activities can occupy precious time that parents would prefer be spent on academic work. Christian parents have a very difficult time justifying to their children that schoolwork comes before church. The youth pastor, Pastor Tom, claims that several parents have come to him, hoping that as the pastor he can convince their children to prioritize academics over church. Given what he truly believes, that Christ comes first, he is in a difficult position to intervene. When religious commitments compete with academics, Christian teachings not necessarily work to further parents’ interests. Indeed, Christian teaching may not always create family harmony, but can lead to new and different tensions.

Taiwanese youth who feel beleaguered by excessive academic demands from their parents may strategically use Christianity to ease their parents’ expectations. These educated and professional Taiwanese parents who see their children as the beneficiaries of their own academic excellence may find these teachings challenging and threatening. For example, consider the reflections of Mrs. Lin, an active deaconess in the youth ministry, on a parent-youth dialogue at Grace Church:

I knew that there were communication problems between the children and parents, and so I organized a parent and youth dialogue. The parents sat on one side of the room, and the youth sat on the other side of the room facing each other. I had them write out questions from either side, and Pastor Tom read the questions. Of course his questions were selective, and he chose to concentrate on education issues. He kept pressing the parents – “So what if they get straight A’s and go to the best school, and then what?” He kept on pressing us, and then what and then what, until the parents just didn’t know what to answer. The parents responded that without education we wouldn’t be here. But somehow we just didn’t communicate on that issue.

With Christ as the head of the household, parents can be proven wrong. Some respondents told me how they have learned to apologize to their children when before they could not imagine doing any such thing. Parents learn that in their “friendship” with their children both parties must be willing to change and compromise. Mrs. Huang told me that her disapproval of her daughter’s white boyfriend had caused a great deal of tension in their relationship. After her daughter pointed out that God created everyone equal, she reflected on this for

awhile and prayed about it. She then came to the conclusion that she was wrong. She asked for her daughter's forgiveness and made the attempt to accept the young man as "who he really is."

Consider how Mrs. Lin, the deaconess who is a dentist in her mid-forties, now speaks of parenting as a collaboration between herself and her two teenage sons:

The difference between me as a mother versus my parents is that I am able to come down to their [the children's] level and tell them that I'm not perfect. These are my limits and I need you to chip in and help out. When I was a child, we were taught in school the Confucius teaching that parents are never wrong, and therefore you don't dare challenge your parents. But here, as an immigrant family, my husband and I both have to work. I'm not at home a lot, and my influence is so limited, and yet they're so open to the world online and on TV. I was very worried, especially when my sons were in that 14–15 age range. What helped us go through that was for us to bring it up and talk about it. I was fearful, and I talked about how difficult it was for me, and I told my son at the time, "I am only one mother. Only one pair of hands. I'm pulling you on one side and the world is pulling you on the other side. Compared to the world, I'm powerless. If you choose to fall on this side, then the tug-of-war is over. And so I need your help."

Given the dominance of the surrounding American culture, Taiwanese immigrants have little choice but to accept a loss of control over their children. But rather than viewing this as a threat, Christianity redefines what it means to be a good parent. God does not want parents lording over their children. God is the head of the household, and parents are to be good managers by helping children develop their God-given talents and callings. A good family is based on relationships of mutual respect and communication rather than duty and obligation. Instead of regarding these changes as the loss of tradition or Americanization, Taiwanese American Christians welcome these transformations as a movement toward becoming a more Christian family.

## *DISCUSSION*

My findings both confirm and challenge those of other scholars who argue that religion reproduces ethnic traditions. With the case of Taiwanese Americans, Christianity does perpetuate certain traditional values, albeit using a very different moral mechanism than Confucianism – religious piety rather than filial piety. Through the language of religious discipleship rather than familial obligation, parents are able to effectively discipline their children and teach them traditional moral values. By framing these traditional values as Christian values and by considering moral agency rather than moral indebtedness as the

basis of their actions, the church melds Confucian ends with more culturally effective Christian means.

But I also show that religion can transform traditional ends by legitimating and sacralizing new patterns of family relationships. While sharing certain Confucian values, evangelical Christianity is also critical of the generational hierarchy and lack of emotion that characterize traditional Confucian parent-child relationships. Instead, evangelical Christianity sanctifies more democratic relationships between parents and children, and teaches new practices that cultivate open communication and sharing.

These transformations I observed in these families are perhaps best described as “soft” rather than “radical.” Evangelical Christianity does not eradicate hierarchy, but softens it; nor does it reject filial piety, but preserves the spirit. The individual will is still subordinated in evangelical Christianity – not to the collectivity of the family, but to the authority of God.

This particular case of Taiwanese immigrant Christian families gives us one example of how to theorize further about the connections between immigration, religion, and ethnicity. The centrality of the church and the prominence of evangelical Christianity are hardly distinct to Chinese immigrants, but are notable patterns among many immigrant groups and their children in the United States, such as Koreans (Chong, 1998; Park, 2001) and Mexicans (Leon, 1998; Balmer, 2003). As such, scholars must recognize that these immigrant Christian churches are not merely bastions of ethnic preservation, but participate in a larger culture of American evangelical Christianity. For many Christian immigrants, acculturation to American society is mediated through ethnic *and* evangelical Christian influences.

Although it appears that evangelical Christianity is assimilating Taiwanese immigrants into American middle-class family practices, I argue that this is not quite the case. While embracing *certain* middle-class parenting practices, such as recognizing children’s autonomy, and cultivating friendship and emotional expressiveness with their children, Taiwanese immigrants also use evangelical Christianity to critique other common practices of the American middle class – such as divorce, premarital sex, and nursing homes. Studies of second-generation Asian American evangelicals report that they appear to be more culturally evangelical than ethnic (Alumkal, 1999; Jeung, 2005). Chinese Christian immigrants and their children are culturally assimilating into an American evangelical culture, and even more precisely an *Asian American evangelical culture*, rather than an amorphous American middle class.

Class mediates how religion, and other ideological and cultural influences, alters immigrant families. In working-class immigrant families, parent-child

relationships often undergo more strains than middle-class families. Generational hierarchies are radically inverted because parents are even more dependent on their children for cultural and financial resources (Kibria, 1993; Zhou and Bankston, 1998). Professional and educated immigrant parents, on the other hand, who are better able to maintain an upper hand through control of family finances, may be more open, and less threatened by evangelical Christian ideas such as parent-child friendship. Middle-class immigrants not only have more time to attend parenting workshops and read parenting books, but may be more able to “afford” new parenting practices that working-class immigrants, who are strained in “authority capital,” cannot.

Finally, I’ve made the case that evangelical Christianity simultaneously reproduces and challenges ethnic traditions, but does this generalization apply to other religions like Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam that, unlike Christianity, are immigrants’ inherited traditions and are minority religions in the United States? To this question, I answer a qualified yes. Religions are not mere extensions of ethnicity, but rich and complex traditions of their own. Religions can act independently of ethnicity, and, under certain conditions, are capable of challenging ethnic traditions. For example, scholars show that immigrant women use Buddhism (Chen, 2005; Suh, 2005) and Islam (Kurien, 1999) to challenge traditional gender ideas in the family. These findings suggest that inherited, non-Christian religions may also shape immigrant families in non-traditional ways.

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