

**Sussex
Centre for
Migration
Research**

Sussex Migration Working Paper no. 7

Negotiating the local: youth adaptation processes in a Chinatown church

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August 2002

Summary

Using the ethnographic data collected in a Chinese Christian church in New York City's Chinatown, this study explores the continuity and change of local tradition in the context of migration and globalization. My findings show that the Chinese youth in the church are adapting to the chaotic new socioeconomic environment through their belief and practice that are neither completely Chinese nor totally American in cultural terms, and they participate in making as well as learning the local ethnic tradition. Finally, this study presents an analysis of a dynamic relationship between ethnic legacy, lived experience and institutional structure in the ethnic church.

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Preface

This paper is an abridged and revised version of my MA thesis finished in the Department of Sociology at Fordham University in May 2000 and delivered at the 62nd Annual Meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion in Washington, DC in August 2000. I thank Mark R. Warren, my MA advisor, for his comments and great encouragement. A word of thanks also goes to James R. Kelly, Rosemary S. Cooney, Fenggang Yang and Tony Carnes. Please direct comments to Nanlai Cao at: nanlai_c@hotmail.com.

1. Introduction

An identity and a sense of community are hard to find for the culturally and geographically transplanted, but that has not stopped the Chinese from seeking their identity and community in American Chinatowns since the harsh Chinese exclusion era (1883-1943). Chinatown has become a place that is closely related to the lives of Chinese immigrants in America both materially and symbolically. New York City's Chinatown, an ethnic enclave that has (at least until recently) survived the assimilation pressure and the forces of globalisation in a post-industrial global city, serves as a prime context for understanding the continuity and change of local tradition in the age of globalisation and migration. This study seeks to understand how local processes and relationships are negotiated and how local ethnic tradition is shaped and reshaped by focusing on youth adaptation processes in a Chinese Christian church in New York City's Chinatown.

While Chinatown has become a classic topic of ethnic and immigrant studies and various community organizations have been paid substantial attention by recent studies on New York's Chinatown (Zhou 1992; Kwong 1996; Zhou 1997; Lin 1998), there has been very little research on the ethnic church, particularly Christian institutions, in the community due to scholars' focus on the potential of the indigenous cultural institution and ethnic network, in addition to the fact that the early Chinatown church had limited impact on immigrant adaptation. Since Christianity is not an indigenous religion among the Chinese, the fact that most Chinese Christians in the US are converts after immigration particularly speaks to the role of religion in the uprooted life of Chinese immigrants. Thus, we should not take for granted the existence of the ethnic churches especially the rapidly growing Christian institutions within the physical boundary of Chinatown, which needs to be examined in the historical development of the community.

Christian Churches have been permanent fixtures of American Chinatowns since 1852, yet it seems that their impact on assimilation of Chinese immigrants into American society used to be very limited. The stereotype was that they provided the only opportunity to learn English in a Chinatown setting (Palinkas 1988). During the first half of the twentieth century, when there was an extremely skewed sex ratio among the Chinese in the US, Christian institutions also served as important "rescue homes" for women in the face of the serious problems of concubinage and prostitution in Chinatown (Cayton and Lively 1955). The early

Christian workers conceived their missionary efforts to evangelize "heathen" in the "aggregated paganism" in Chinatown (Cayton and Lively 1955).¹ Although they served as a contact with the larger society, early missions in Chinatown obviously distanced themselves from the indigenous elements of the community. However, Chinatown has been greatly developed and reconstructed since the 1960s, and in this new context the growing Chinatown churches today are beginning to play a new role in terms of immigrant adaptation and assimilation.

In the traditional view, Chinatown was considered a closed immigrant community, and the Chinese were viewed as innately unassimilable. Since the 1960s New York's Chinatown has experienced a transformation from a bachelor's society with a skewed sex ratio to an immigrant enclave with a strong ethnic economy, as a result of the massive post-1965 Chinese immigration and post-industrial American economy in which American businesses shift their production to immigrant communities for cheap labour.² Unlike early arrivals that were here to sojourn rather than to settle and assimilate, recent Chinese immigrants have strong desire to make America their new home. A variety of new community organizations have increasingly replaced traditional ones based on kinship and place of origin, providing various social services to meet the increasing needs of community residents and holding a much more positive attitude to be integrated into American society.³ In this new context, the number of ethnic churches in the larger Chinese community in New York City has doubled since 1965, to over 80 churches (Zhou 1997). The strong enclave economy has provided a concrete material base for the establishment and development of these religious institutions. Also, it seems to be true that "as the human relationships supplied by the family and the wider kinship net weaken and dissipate, church affiliation or other differences will certainly hold the possibility of becoming more relevant to the Chinese" (Hsu 1971, p. 64). According to my count, there are more than 20 churches within Manhattan's Chinatown, among which young members are highly represented. It seems that the older

¹ In the first half of the twentieth century, the pastors and missionaries of many Chinese churches in the US are Caucasians (Cayton and Lively 1955; Woo 1991).

² For details of the transformation of New York City's Chinatown, see Lin (1998, pp. 23-55); Zhou (1997); and Zhou (1992).

³ It is noteworthy that today's Chinatown is still relatively segregated and not fully open to the external forces of change. Kwong (1996) argues that Chinatown is dominated by an informal ethnic political structure, traps the immigrants through segregated labor market, and limits the daily interaction with the non-Chinese.

generation is difficult to reach and the more assimilated young Chinese are looking for new spiritual values.

Youths have fewer burdens from the Old World than their parents do when facing the assimilation pressure in the new society. Thus they are more sensitive to the dual process of ethnic continuity and ongoing assimilation. I am particularly interested in asking such questions in this study: How do church youth present themselves ethnically and religiously in their adaptation processes? How do they deal with their ethnic cultural legacy? Does Christian religion maintain or transform traditional Chinese culture? The data for my analysis was collected in a Chinatown church over one year's period (1999-2000).

2. Data and methods

The church under study is a Christian church located in Manhattan's Chinatown—Church of the Living Lord (CLL). Its members are mostly Cantonese-speaking and working class immigrant Chinese, which makes CLL a typical Chinatown church.

Religion always means a lot to the uprooted people in the new society, because "migration was often a theologising experience" (Smith 1978, p 1175) and "gathering religiously is one of the ways they make a life here" (Warner 1998, p. 3). As a religious institution in the ethnic enclave, CLL inevitably functions as an ethnic community centre. In this study, I try to view the Chinatown church as both a sacred religious community and a secular ethnic centre and to examine youth adaptation processes in both ethnic and religious dimensions.

I collected the data for this study mainly through conducting face-to-face interviews and participant observations. Informal conversations with individuals were also very helpful in the process of data collection. I interviewed ten church members and the pastor.⁴ To explore the religious experience of immigrant youth, I paid particular attention to those who regularly attended church. The age of the church members I interviewed ranged from 20-27. The major interview questions were designed to reveal the relationship between youth religious participation and their adaptation practices. During one year's period, I attended their cell group meetings and Sunday services

⁴ The interviews were conducted in both English and Mandarin Chinese before weekly cell group meeting and Sunday service when the church members were available, and all the interviews were taped. Some quotations are my translation.

intensively to listen to prayers, sharing, and sermons and to observe face-to-face interactions among the co-ethnics.

3. Experiencing socio-economic hardships: retrospective accounts of the disadvantaged youths in CLL

Young people involved in CLL suffer from different kinds of life stresses: alienation, lack of confidence, loneliness, and uncertainty about future, which are directly resulted from the dramatic transition from a Chinese setting to an American one.⁵

Simon left South China with curiosity and excitement for a new experience in a new country seven years ago when he was thirteen. However, his beautiful dreams were broken soon after arrival. "Reality in the States was the exact opposite of my dream. The streets are so crowded and dirty. My parents worked in Chinatown all day long. My brother and I stayed home all day long," recounted Simon. To kill time, Simon went to an arcade everyday. He spent most of his time either at home or in the arcade. He met some street youth there. He started to cut class and hung out with them. "I hung around the park and bossed people around. I made many friends in the park eventually. Then I got to know the gangs, too. They seemed superior and I wanted to be close to them. So I joined them. I got no money and there was no allowance from my parents. I went with the gang members to collect 'protection money.' One time when we collected money from a restaurant, the owner got angry and called the police. I got arrested and was placed in the detention centre," recalled Simon.

Believing America is beautiful with big houses in the countryside, Ricky came to America ten years ago when he was eleven. He recalled that the most embarrassing moment in his memory is when his mother was asked to go to the school to pick up his report card because he failed more than three courses in one semester. Since the immigrant parents in Chinatown are usually not well educated and cannot speak English, the youth cannot get needed guidance from them. Ricky felt that no one really guided him or talked with him when he was in great need of such kind of help. As a result, he began to be close to the street life. "There is an arcade next to my school. I had a buddy there. I went to the arcade every-

⁵ Sung (1985; 1987) has done some pioneering studies on the adjustment experience of Chinatown children and youth in New York City. However, there is no discussion of church youths.

day. It was crowded and noisy there. I've heard that there were gangs in the arcade. It was a bit scary but the arcade was always very exciting. I could find myself there. The feeling of winning a game was exhilarating."

Being with gangs gave them an identity, a sense of belonging, and a sense of power as well as further distancing themselves from the school, the family, and the mainstream culture. As Ricky said, "I felt down after being caught several times by the police. My family didn't accept me. My teacher thought I was bad. My classmates didn't like me. I was only accepted in the arcade. The arcade was like my home where I could show off. With only a quarter, I could play for several hours. I liked the feeling of being superior. I hoped to be superior in school, too. I wanted to be better than other students. Then I could tell my mom that I had good grades, and I was not wasting your money on video games. But this was only a dream that I didn't know how to make it come true."

Closely associated with the situation of transplantation, parental absence and emotional detachment in Chinese immigrant families also contribute to the stressful immigration experience of the young Chinese in CLL. As Manni, who came to New York City from South China at the age of seven, recounted, "My dad came here first to support the family. I had never met him before I came here. It is very strange to have a father. My parents hadn't seen each other for over seven years." Such a "strange" family situation has a profound impact on the way that immigrant youths grow up. Manni shared her feeling, "As immigrants, we have each other. But, at the same time, we don't have each other. My parents are always working. My brothers stay to themselves, and I stay to myself."

Manni's father works in a Chinatown restaurant, and her mother works in a garment factory in Chinatown. Her family is a typical Chinese immigrant family in Chinatown. Most immigrants, like Manni's father, have to be in the US alone for many years in order to achieve citizenship before bringing their immediate family members, and it will also take a few years for the INS to process their applications.⁶ As all the family members are reunified after a long period of separation, their relations often face crisis and need to be re-

⁶ The 1965 Immigration Law sets up a relative preference system that specifies the proportional distribution of immigrants, ranging from US citizens' children to their siblings (Congregational Research Service 1979, p. 89). It encourages family reunification and "chain immigration," a form of migration in which new immigrants move into destination areas to join relatives.

newed. However, the economic hardship requires both parents to work long hours outside, and thus reduce parent-child interactions in the family.

Barry, who emigrated from South China at the age of ten and is currently a college freshman, talked about his parents both of whom work in Chinatown. "My mom works in a factory. My dad is a construction worker. They are kind of busy. They leave home very early in the morning that is the time when I wake up for school. When I leave for them, they go to work." Although parental absence can provide youth a sense of independence, it makes their risky teenage period even riskier. Barry recalled his early experience of going astray, "I hung out with a whole bunch of friends. We cut school because we didn't understand what the teacher said in school. We played mahjong. We came out of those stupid ideas. I got arrested once because I broke into someone's house. Luckily, the case was dropped, so I didn't get into trouble. During those years, I didn't have any hope. I lost the goal of life. I didn't have a goal. I just did something to replace the emptiness."

Although the school is an important socializing institution for immigrant youth to deal with a new life, the relations are impersonal and secondary in the school setting. The youth's quest for the identity and the meaning of life cannot be adequately satisfied in the primary groups, immigrant families, which greatly weaken and even break down in the new society, neither could the school system, a secondary institution. As Ricky recounted, "As new immigrants, we really had a difficult time when we came here. I did not have confidence before. So I was easily to quit whatever I was doing. I quit school because I didn't have friends and I had problems with my study. I always failed class. Why should I go to school? And I had family problem that was the most important thing. So I cut school and did stupid things."

3.1. Growing up in a church family

It is overwhelmingly important for these disadvantaged youths to look for a sense of familial belonging and warm bonding when they face the pressure of assimilation and their immediate families cannot satisfy their psychological needs. The Chinese family metaphor in the church speaks to such needs.⁷ Younger generation is socialized in a church family where they learn the Chinese way.

⁷ In the middle-class Chinese church, most members are highly educated professionals and they prefer a democratic church structure, which is signified by their voting for reappointment of the pastor (Yang 1998). In

The family is the primary way for the Chinese to deal with a new and hostile environment through providing protection and certainty. As Freedman (1966) has found, the Chinese in South China adapted to an environment characterized by political unrest and ecological problems by extending kinship. As a Chinatown church, CLL plays a Chinese family role and helps people overcome difficulties by rebuilding interpersonal relationship. As Pastor Yip put it in a sermon:

In the new society, the relationship among people was broken down. Unfortunately, people would lose strength for survival. Our church is a big family. That is why we would have a feeling for the brothers and sisters who are going through difficulties. I hope everyone who comes to our church is able to experience the warmth that comes from this relationship. For all of us, who have been helped by our church, they would become other people's blessings.

Relationship building is a major concern in CLL. This relationship is not only the one with God but also the one with other church members. CLLers believe "if you have the right relationship with God, you do with others as well." A young member even told me, "Being a Christian is not about being a person. It is about relationship." Such a relationship is essentially familial and reflects Chinese traditional authority. The analogy between the parent-child relationship and the God-human relationship is evident in CLL. Worship of Christ equals the respect for the head of the family. The family metaphor pervades in the church setting in a subtle way. "We are one in the bond of love, we are one in the bond of love, let us join our spirit, with the Spirit of God, we are one in the bond of love." The above lyric is the English version of "we are one in the bond of love." In CLL, the Chinese version is somewhat different. The title becomes "our family." The lyric is: "We are one family in the Living Lord, we are one family in the Living Lord ..." It shows Pastor Yip's effort of portraying his church as a family. "It is my simple slogan that reflects my hope and the direction to which I want to lead this church," he commented. Similarly, their weekly newsletter is titled "our CLL family" that focuses on interpersonal relationships, particularly parent-child relationship.

In the CLL family, the pastor is viewed as "the father of the younger generation and the son of the older people" in taking care of those lacking family support. "Chinese people desire to have a big intergenerational family," Pastor Yip spoke of the family spirit in CLL, "however, people living

together do not necessarily have close feeling for one another because of the hierarchical family structure. In church I hope that not only are the different age groups joined together, but they mingle with each other and show deep concern for one another." Weekly visitation, picking up the elderly to church, praying with them, contacting people by phone and letters, sending birthday cards, and outings are a few activities that promote a family spirit in CLL.

The relationship building starts from reaching out to those youths on the street. Pastor Yip referred to his role as "a positive father figure" to those youths whose demand for self-esteem and self-identity cannot be met by their immediate families. To lead them past this dangerous period of time, Pastor Yip's strategy is to be patient and to spend a lot of time doing things together with them. He has brought home some teenagers who did not want to live in their own families for a temporary stay. He has even taken them to other states for a short tour. Given the mutual trust established, the youths always turn to him for help when they face problems. In fact, the difference between the intergenerational family of CLL and the traditional Chinese family model is signified by the difference between the father figure of Pastor Yip and their biological fathers. In the eyes of the church youth, Pastor Yip has many roles such as the father, the best pastor, the counsellor, the basketball coach, the group leader, and the one they admire the most. The church family provides emotional support that their immediate families fail to provide.

The church also provides a concrete space in which the younger generation and the older generation are brought together for face-to-face interactions. Sunday service is the most important church gathering with the largest attendance among various activities in CLL. It also reflects the intergenerational family model in the most institutional way. During Sunday services, younger CLLers usually take seats in the front of the hall, while the elderly sit in the back, because grandparents like to watch their grandchildren and enjoy joining them. In the first half-hour of the service, two or three girls in casual dress would stand in the front to lead people to sing church songs and clap their hands, one girl acts as an English translator, and one boy would play an electronic guitar next to them. Sometimes people rise and sit down as directed during the singing. The pastor always sits on the first row and sings with others together at that time. When the music of "our family" starts, people would leave seats and go to shake hands with each other. The young and the elderly always greet each other warmly. After the singing, the pastor would initi-

contrast, the family style seems better suited to this Chinatown church.

ate and encourage personal sharing by saying, "In Jesus Christ, we are one big family. We share all the happiness and unhappiness with others in our family, and in doing so we can give support to each other." For the youths, the topic of their sharing is usually about their relations with their parents and friends. For the elderly, they like to talk about their relations with their kids. After each sharing, prayers would follow under the pastor's guidance. A strong sense of being in a big family permeates the service. In fact, it has been found that the parent-child relationship is placed at a more important place in the speeches and lectures of the Chinatown churches than the non-Chinese churches and the non-Chinatown Chinese churches.⁸ Chinese food is served each time soon after Sunday service. CLL is a church family. It is also a Chinese family where the notions of Chinese-ness are celebrated.

There seems to be a dual effect for the family organization of the Chinese church. On the one hand, the Chinese family metaphor facilitates the members' acceptance of Christianity that is foreign to Chinese culture and helps to maintain the unity among them. This shows the efforts of incorporating Christian religion to their indigenous culture and social order. On the other hand, the family metaphor relieves the uncertainty and the anxiety of the Chinese immigrants who have lost the protection and the sense of security within the traditional family in the processes of immigration and assimilation.

As reflected in the analogy between the church and the family, the Chinese Christian church also engages itself to restore the family and strengthen the family bond by integrating sacred elements from Christian religion. As the Bible says: "honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you (Exodus 20:12)."⁹ God's will seems to match the Chinese emphasis on the family value. The pastor has repeatedly stress God's role in rebuilding the family. As he put it in a sermon:

"... In this society, we really need this type of relationship (family relationship). We really need it. Because in this society there are many places that give us a sense of insecurity. We have difficulties at work. Yet it is still not our refuge when we get home, which is the most difficult part in our lives. . . . We don't need to be desperate. Circumstances can be changed.

Because our hearts can be changed. Because God can help us. Let's pray together. Dear Heavenly Father, we ask you to remind us what we are trying to gain at this stage of our lives. Father, we ask you to touch our hearts, prepare our hearts, so that we could preserve the precious family that you gave us. We pray this in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen."

People living in the violent and hostile environment need to depend on "the precious family" to overcome a sense of insecurity. When facing the family crisis, the power of God is illustrated in CLL. Faith provides a motivation for the church youth to bridge the generation gap that is exacerbated by the assimilation gap by giving them patience, tolerance, and courage to compromise.

Jennifer's story shows how she repaired her relationship with her mother by her faith in God and expressing small concerns. Jennifer, an accountant in a Chinatown bank who immigrated to the US ten years ago when she was sixteen, described pressures from her mother that disturbed their relationship. She had to work to contribute to family's purse as well as attended school, which she felt she could not handle.

"... Since I believed in God, I would follow what God says in the Bible. When I feel angry, I will pray to ask God to help me, to change me, and to give me a sense of love and patience. I will also pray to let my mother understand me. I think I need to change myself first in order to establish a good family. Now our relation is getting much better. It is God's work. I believe, no matter how long it will take, small greetings will bring great comfort to her eventually. Unlike Americans who will say, "I love you" explicitly, the Chinese keep their feelings deep in mind. To let my mother know my love, I would run to open the door for her when she was back and talk with her about what happened in her factory over dinner."

God plays a mediating role in the relationship between Jennifer and her mother. Jennifer's prayer involves a three-way interaction between her mother, God, and herself. There is power in prayer that can transform individuals, fix broken relations, and enhance the family unity. In the presence of God, minor things can turn out to be very meaningful.

In fact, Chinese ways and Christian religion are intertwined in the church, which is signified and symbolized by the fact that the church celebrates both religious festivals such as Easter and Christmas and traditional Chinese festivals such as Lunar New Year and Mid-autumn festival. To

⁸ Palinkas' study (1989, p. 77) of two non-Chinatown Chinese churches indicates that parent-child relations were a less important subject for sermons than they appeared in Chinatown churches.

⁹ The Holy Bible, new international version.

those church youth Christmas and Easter are just as important as the Chinese Lunar New Year. The pastor's success in stabilizing the church and reaching out to the youth actually depends on his ability to communicate with both the socio-cultural elements of Chinatown and the Protestant ethic.

3.2 Cultural empowerment and the making of tradition

Sung (1987) points out that the residential and psychological segregation will consequently make the Chinese feel ill at ease in any mixed social setting, which is a psychological as well as an economic barrier to one's well being later in life. Due to language barrier and other disadvantages, the inner-city youth have few opportunities to exercise civic skills and gain self-confidence in the larger society. However, CLL, an ethnic community church, provides an alternative way for their empowerment in the local. Civic opportunities for youths are available in various church activities. Furthermore, the church family offers a caring environment, a safe place, for their self-development.

In the Chinese cultural context, it is not encouraged and even stigmatised to disclose personal emotion and experience to outsiders and non-family members. Lin and Lin (1978, p. 455) make clear this Chinese cultural pattern by indicating:

"For many thousands of years the trust and sense of security rarely extended beyond the family circle. . . . Financial, educational, marital, health, or family discord affecting any of the individuals is seen as the responsibility of the family. The exposure of such information to outsiders is regarded as loss of face and a disgrace to the family."

The Chinese way of life tends to underplay all matters of the heart (Hsu 1972). However, weekly worship service, cell group activities and other church gatherings strongly encourage church members to open their hearts through public speaking in front of other members. In the church I have heard many different types of life experiences told by the church members themselves, involving teenage pregnancy, divorce, personal financial crisis, gambling problem and so on. In CLLers' words, sharing is to "open ourselves to God" and "let others enter our lives." However, these occasions are provided not only for people to voice their concerns, but also for them to exercise presentation ability and develop confidence in their own competence. Delivering a testimony, giving a sharing, initiating a prayer in front of the church, and even making a visitation are all occa-

sions culturally empowering the disadvantaged youths.

Ricky saw his lack of confidence as a direct result of what he had been through in the first few years in America as a immigrant child. "I was so shy, because I had my past experience dragging me. I didn't have any confidence at all in the past. I failed everything. I failed the school, I failed the family, and I didn't have friends. The experience of being hurt when a person was young made what he is like now," said him with emotion. However, since he became a youth group leader in CLL, he has gained a lot of confidence by delivering speeches in public. He was always invited to give testimonies in different churches, sometimes even in the church of other state. "Of course, I was afraid and scared at first. But the more I get used to, the more vocabulary I learn, the more effectively I say to people and explain to them how I have been through and how God has changed me," he believed that he had become a good speaker. "God trained me not to be shy," Ricky attributed this to God's work.

Simon, whose early experience in the US was miserable as revealed above, went to share his life and God's work on him almost every Sunday, because he felt obliged to let others know God's grace. As he put it, "When I share my life story with others during the service, I feel excited because I think it is God who has given me strength and has changed my life. So I will try to change others in the same way." Simon's strong urge to spread the messages of God's work makes him even stronger both in faith and in confidence.

Young people are always encouraged to participate in the weekly visitation, which they think is a way to bring blessings to others. After a visitation of the elderly in a nursing home, a teenager admitted, "We were shy when we first arrived, but after we saw their response after singing, we began to shake hands with them." Another youth echoed, "At first, I thought they would not talk with us, but as I saw how my friends were talking to a person with such joy, then I knew they liked to talk with us." Visitation provides a good chance for those socially isolated youth to gain communication skills. More importantly, they gain a sense of confidence and self-esteem through visiting others. As a youth staff in the church indicated, "They see other people's lives and they compare with their own lives. They learn to respect themselves through learning how to respect others especially the sick and elderly. They get to understand themselves."

In the Chinese cultural context, immigrant youth often feel discouraged to disclose their personal

experiences and feelings to outsiders. However, even within the immediate family circle it is not uncommon for them to have difficulty in expressing themselves. As Zhou (1997) indicates, there is an immediate bicultural conflict among the Chinese American families in the perception of affection. Self-control and indirect communication are valued in Chinese American families while self-disclosure of emotions may be viewed as immaturity and are not culturally accepted. Although in some cases the family ties and kinship system may satisfy the individuals' need for affection, provide a sense of continuity and belonging, and promote stability and security (Hsu 1973), there are significant costs associated with the traditional family roles if we take acculturation into account. Like other Asian American families, the power structure of Chinese American families is vertical and hierarchical (Kim 1985). Due to the parental authority within the family, more Americanized Chinese youths may feel it difficult to express to their less acculturated parents problems that they have never met before. When asked what the church can provide you that the family cannot, Janice stated,

"I think it is support. My family also supports me. But sometimes they don't know how to support you emotionally. My mother likes to blame me and to reveal my disadvantages without giving me face. In the church it is different; people support you emotionally. Lots of Chinese parents can never be your friends. If you have something to tell your parents, they don't like to listen to you, or they don't give you a solution to your emotional problems. They just say "forget it." Something likes that. . . . In my family there are lots of arguments. I would like a peaceful family. Everybody just supports each other."

Younger generation Chinese are not encouraged to share their personal emotions with their parents, nor is demonstrative affection favoured in the Chinese family. The general lack of demonstrative affection in the Chinese American family is sharply contrasted with the mainstream American culture in which affection is publicly displayed (Zhou 1997). This makes young Chinese immigrants feel relatively deprived. However, Sunday services and other church activities provide chances for them to express themselves in the name of God and to disclose their love for their parents in an explicit, non-Chinese way. That is probably why most young CLLers indicated their preference of the casual style of the church. Sometimes the young members would break into tears when praying. Sometimes they would lift up their hands to show they have felt God's love while singing. Manni, a worship team member

who always falls into emotional outburst while leading the service, once shared her feeling about praise in worship:

"Praise is like when a father comes home and once he opens the door, all his children would run to him and hug him; they hold on tight to him, hang onto his arms and legs and they keep saying "Daddy, I love you; Daddy, you're the best" and they kiss him. In Chinese culture we often do not do this. But it should be a natural reaction to celebrate God's presence in our lives. We simply shout out our adoration to Him without explaining reasons or justifications for why we would mush Him with our love. Just think of a time that any of you ever had a nice hug from a little child. They simply do it because of who they see us as. So we must be like children and adore God because of who He simply is. Have you embraced God today when he steps into your private room?"

As what Manni implied, God is like a father. By embracing God, young people display their sense of affection and love not only to God but also to their fathers.

The best time for the church youth to disclose their love for their parents is when the parents are invited to the church, even though most parents are not Christians and some are even Buddhists.¹⁰ In a "Super Special Parent Luncheon," different youths brought their parents to church and shared their heart-felt love and appreciation for their parents. Susanna, a teenage girl, played a song from *Titanic* to express her appreciation to her mother for taking care of her. Simon shared a story about how his mother chased him in order to get him to eat. Ricky shared a story about how he wanted his parents to come so that they could see his change only because of believing in Jesus. In a baptism, a high school girl, Judy, expressed her love to her deaf and mute father through sign language. Using her hands, she started out by telling how happy she was because her father came. She shared, in tears, how she was a good daughter, but her family didn't think that way. When she finished her sharing. She walked to her father and gave him a hug. At that moment, the hug, a gesture of touching and showing emotion, clearly

¹⁰ The polytheism in Chinese culture has long been known. Few immigrant parents would tell their children not to attend a Christian church. Buddhist parents usually accept their children's belief in a Western God. Ricky once told me that whenever his Buddhist parents sacrifice chicken, they would cook more for his God. For details of polytheism, see Hsu (1973, pp. 235-248).

overcame the “non-touching taboo” in the traditional Chinese emotional structure.

Chinese traditional authority tended to hide emotions. However, the ethnic church provides a public space where the disadvantaged immigrant youth who feel so emotionally detached in the new society can transcend the cultural restriction and express themselves in a non-Chinese way. By attending a Chinatown church, the disadvantaged Chinese immigrant youth find a unique way to adapt to the chaotic new socio-economic environment. They gain a feeling of empowerment and a sense of belonging and warm bonding through disclosing their personal experiences in public and displaying their love for their parents. However, neither the disclosure nor the display is quite culturally approved in Chinese tradition.

It seems that the local religious belief and practice have transformed the boundaries of Chinese ethnicity. The local Chinese culture is not an enclosed system but a dynamic system being negotiated in the lived experience of the local youth in Chinatown. In this sense, the poor immigrants are not merely the passive receivers of macro-socio-economic forces. They may also become the agents of change in the ethnic community.

The run-down neighbourhood and overcrowded streets have stereotyped the negative image of Chinatown. It is not surprising that many Chinese Americans view “the Chinatown Chinese” as an undesirable label and try to separate the identity with the Chinatown population, especially for the younger generation. I have found that the Chinese American college students in New York usually make an effort to distance themselves from New York City’s Chinatown by stressing that they barely go there and they grew up in other areas of New York. There has been a strong concern that the community will lose the most adventurous and best-trained youth due to the movement away from Chinatown. For the youth in CLL, the intergenerational church family produces a deeper sense of the ethnic community and an ethnic community identity. The younger generation growing up in CLL shows collective concern about the community issues. Some of them have connected their life decisions to the Chinese community. They have the knowledge of both the American way of life and the Chinese way of life and are willing to help rebuild the Chinese community and enhance the life of the new Chinese immigrants.

4. Discussion and Conclusion: Negotiating the local in Chinatown

Both post-industrial economic development and post-1965 Chinese immigration have contributed to New York Chinatown’s change during the last three decades. The changing community context brought a changing role of the ethnic church as well as other local organizations in the community. Chinatown was a bachelor society filled with sojourners early on, and the Christian church was an outside institution in the community and was often in conflict with other community organizations (Cayton and Lively 1955). Its impact on the community life and indigenous culture was rather limited at that time. During the 1960s when New York City’s Chinatown became a family-centered society with a strong ethnic economy and Chinese immigrants who were also more willing to assimilate into the New World, the ethnic community church began to play an active role in their everyday lives, especially for the younger generation.

The Chinese Christian church socializes the younger generation as both a secular ethnic institution and a sacred religious community. It has a significant impact on the life of its young members, yet such an impact cannot always be reduced to ethnic networks and the solidarity of Chineseness. Because the non-religious Chinese way is not only preserved through intense ethnic interactions, but also created anew somewhat by absorbing elements from a Western religion. An intergenerational church family replaces the traditional hierarchical Chinese family model. Self-disclosure in public in CLL is not interpreted as a stigma as it is in Chinese culture. And demonstrative affection that is not culturally accepted in the Chinese family has been embraced by the church youth. The seemingly stabilized notions of Chineseness are changing in the self-presentation of the immigrant youth who are facing the assimilation and socio-economic pressures in everyday life.

The Chinese Christian church is neither an exogenous cultural institution functioning as an assimilation agency by introducing Western culture and ways in the ethnic community which seems a commonsense presumption,¹¹ nor an ethnic centre simply functioning to preserve indigenous culture and to reinforce ethnic social order (Rutledge 1985; Williams 1988; Nash 1992; Min 1992). It is better seen as a local site where there is a complex interplay between culture, structure, and agency. The non-religious Chinese tradition and the Western religion interact and intertwine in the ethnic church. The community

¹¹ Cayton and Lively (1955) also hold this view.

structure has historically shaped the institutional form of the ethnic church. And the young church members serve as the agents of sociocultural change in the Chinese community.

The continuity and change of local tradition needs to be closely examined in the lived experience of local reality. Poor immigrants are not disconnected victims of global processes. Instead, they exert certain control over their lives in the local. My findings indicate that the Chinese immigrant youth actively negotiate the local in both an ethnic and religious way. They not only learn the local tradition in the ethnic community church but also are part of the local tradition that is neither completely Chinese nor quite American. The local ethnic tradition is relatively stable. However, it is susceptible to change when encountering new situations and life transitions.

As Hall (1997, p. 33) indicates, the return to the local is often a response to globalization. But the return to the local never means a return to a timeless and enclosed cultural system. In this study, the boundaries of locality have been gradually transformed in the youth adaptation processes in a Chinatown church in New York City..

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