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Carolyn Chen: Getting Saved in America

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Introduction

Becoming Religious by Becoming American

What is it about going to the United States that
makes people religious?

—*Question posed to me by Mrs. Chou,
a woman in Taiwan*

THIS BOOK TELLS A STORY of how people become religious by becoming American. The idea for this study developed several years ago during a conversation that I had in Taipei, Taiwan with a lively middle-aged woman named Mrs. Chou.¹ Seeing that I was from the United States, she asked me a question about her neighbor, Mr. Ting, who had immigrated with his family to the United States five years ago, but returned to Taiwan for prolonged visits. After immigrating to the United States, Mr. Ting converted to evangelical Christianity, much to the chagrin of his extended family. With much animation, Mrs. Chou recounted to me how after returning to Taiwan, Mr. Ting promptly went through his entire house and cleared it of any remnants of what he called “idolatry.” The first thing he did was to dismantle the family altar, remove the ancestral tablet, and replace it with a plaque that reads, “Christ is the Lord of this house.” He also removed popular Taiwanese religious icons from his home, such as statues of Kuan Yin Bodhisattva, Ma-tsu, and Maitreya Buddha, as well as books on Chinese astrology and martial arts. He then had a Christian pastor come and exorcise the house of evil spirits. Whenever Mr. Ting returns from the United States, Mrs. Chou hears people who are gathered in his home singing hymns. Mr. Ting frequently talks to Mrs. Chou about Christianity and invites her to attend church. Mrs. Chou knows a few Christians in Taiwan but according to her they are not like Mr. Ting. They keep their religion to themselves. “Mr. Ting has become a totally different man,” Mrs. Chou told me and then asked, “What is it about going to the United States that makes people become religious?”

A look at the number of Taiwanese Christians in the United States clearly shows that Mr. Ting is not an isolated case. In Taiwan, Christians

¹ I have given pseudonyms to protect the identity of the institutions and individuals that participated in my research.

are a mere 3.9 percent of the population,² where the majority practices a religion that is a mixture of Buddhism, Taoism, and folk religion. In comparison, Christians are approximately 20–25 percent of the Taiwanese population in the United States.³ Most Taiwanese convert to Christianity in the United States. Pastors of Taiwanese churches in the United States estimate that over 60 percent of their congregations are converts to Christianity. Other studies of Chinese churches also report a high number of converts (Guest 2003; Ng 2002; Yang 1999a; Yang and Tamney 2006). In Chinese-concentrated areas of Southern California, Chinese churches are common fixtures in the suburban landscape. The overwhelming majority of these Chinese Christian churches are denominationally independent, evangelical, and theologically conservative (Yang 2002a).

But Taiwanese immigrants converting to evangelical Christianity only tells part of the story of Taiwanese immigrant religious experience. No less fervent than Christians are Buddhists, who also experience religious transformation after migrating to the United States. An example of this is Mrs. Lee, a woman who converted to Buddhism after migrating to the United States in 1991.⁴ In Taiwan Mrs. Lee grew up thinking that Buddhism was old-fashioned and backward, “the religion of my grandparents” as she put it. She associated Buddhism with images of elderly women in the back of temples chanting “meaningless mantras.” It was only after migrating to the United States that she encountered what she calls “true Buddhism.” It is a “pure Buddhism” that she claims is untainted by the superstitions of Chinese traditions—a religion that she finds compatible and resonant with her reality as an educated and scientific person. At one time a self-claimed “society lady,” she now lives a simple life where she devotes several hours a day to Buddhist practice, and keeps her social engagements to a minimum. Like Mr. Ting’s conversion to Christianity, Mrs. Lee’s conversion to Buddhism has caused concern among her family and friends. They wonder whether she has abandoned them for her religious practice that now occupies so much of her time and energy.

Like Mrs. Lee, the majority of Taiwanese Buddhists distinguish their current practice of Buddhism from their religion in Taiwan, claiming that

² “Christians” include Protestants and Catholics. Protestants are 2.6 percent and Catholics are 1.3 percent, of the Taiwanese population. These are the official statistics published as of 2005 by Taiwan’s Government Information Office (see *Taiwan Yearbook 2005*).

³ There are no precise data on the religious affiliation of Taiwanese immigrants. A more thorough discussion of how I arrive at this number is in chapter 1.

⁴ I use the word “convert” here because Mrs. Lee and other Taiwanese Buddhists like her claim that they were not Buddhist in Taiwan but became Buddhists only after immigrating to the United States.

they have become practicing Buddhists after coming to the United States (Chandler 2004; Denton Jones 2003). For example, at Dharma Light Temple, a Taiwanese Buddhist temple where I conducted my fieldwork, an estimated 70 percent of the devotees participated in the practice of “taking refuge” (*guiyi san bao*), the Buddhist counterpart of Christian baptism, only after migrating to the United States. What is most remarkable is that Taiwanese immigrants are becoming practicing Buddhists in the United States, despite a popular revival of Buddhism in Taiwan for the past thirty years.⁵

The religious conversions of Taiwanese immigrants like Mr. Ting and Mrs. Lee are part of a broader immigrant experience of revitalized religiosity in the United States. Historians of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have observed the increasing salience of religion to largely European immigrants to the United States (e.g., Bodnar 1985; Dolan 1975, 1985; Smith 1971, 1978). Historian Marcus Lee Hansen (1940) labeled this tendency toward devout piety in earlier immigrants as “immigrant Puritanism.” Immigrants, for example, were among the most avid supporters of nineteenth-century abstinence movements (Dolan 1975, Brady 1976). Studies by sociologists show how religion plays a more vital role in some of the lives of more recent non-European immigrant groups, for example, Dominicans (Levitt 2001), Indians (Williams 1988; Fenton 1988), Koreans (Hurh and Kim 1990; Min 1992), Chinese (Yang 1999a), Thais (Cadge 2005; Numrich 1996), and Cubans (Tweed 1997). And like the Taiwanese, several groups are converting to evangelical Christianity in significant numbers, such as Koreans (Min 2005), Chinese (Abel 2006; Hall 2006; Yang 1999a), Haitians (Richman 2005), Cambodians (Douglas 2005), and Latinos (Espinosa, Elizondo, and Miranda 2003). Religion is so significant to American life that Will Herberg (1960) claimed that while later generations would eventually shed their ethnic and cultural identities, they would continue to maintain their religions. Religion has been, and continues to be, integral to the immigrant experience in the United States.

On one level this study asks the specific question of why and how do middle-class immigrants like the Taiwanese become religious in the United States. On a more general level, this study asks, how do immigrants become Americans? From the outset, I was interested in what dif-

⁵ Taiwanese Christians mark their conversion as the moment that they commit their lives to Jesus Christ. Because conversion for evangelical Christians is designated by the prayer to Jesus Christ to be one’s personal lord and savior, they can often identify the time and place that they became Christian. To Buddhists, on the other hand, this is less clear. Rather than a precise moment in which they started to believe, Buddhists describe the beginning of their Buddhist faith as a time that they started to “study” or “practice” Buddhism.

