
Asian American Religions

*The Making and Remaking of
Borders and Boundaries*

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Gender and Generation in a Chinese Christian Church

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Women's leadership roles in the Chinese American Christian church have been a controversial issue. The immigrant generation at the Chinese church usually goes the extra mile to try to avoid this controversy, whereas the younger generation of American-born Chinese sometimes stumbles upon it in anxiety. This was what happened at the Chinese Fellowship Church, a midsized, nondenominational, evangelical church in a metropolitan area on the East Coast. It was founded in 1958 by a group of Chinese immigrants and has received several waves of new immigrants of diverse sociocultural backgrounds. In 1986 it began a separate English Sunday service and later hired an Anglo assistant pastor to meet the needs of the young adults of the second generation. Tensions between the American-born or American-raised Chinese and older adult immigrants have been clearly present since the early 1970s. But other conflicts in this heterogeneous church, which caused a bitter split in 1976 and the forced departure of several pastors in its history, have often overshadowed them.¹

The young people of the second generation finally won a contentious battle in the summer of 1996. At a congregational meeting, the search committee presented a candidate for the senior pastor's position. Just the previous year, the congregation had voted out the senior pastor Daniel Tang. The process of voting on the pastor frustrated the youth, and the result of the vote led some immigrant members to worry that the notoriety of this church for treating pastors harshly might hamper their search for a new senior pastor.

After a year's hard work, the search committee, composed of immigrant men in their fifties, enthusiastically recommended a man who seemed

very qualified in terms of his seminary credentials, ministry experiences, and multilingual capability. The immigrant members expressed their relief and gratitude that such a qualified candidate was willing to serve their church. Surprisingly, however, the young people of the second generation firmly opposed the candidate. They did so for a single reason: his wife was an ordained minister. "If the biblical principle of no female spiritual leadership can be broken," a young man around twenty years old stood up and said challengingly, "is any biblical principle unchangeable?" Several young people supported him by arguing that to protect the integrity of the faith, Christians should not accommodate to worldly trends in this matter. The search committee and some members expressed their anxiety about not being able to find a capable senior pastor to lead this heterogeneous church, but they failed to offer any theological rebuttal to the arguments against ordained women ministers voiced by the young people. The candidate was dropped.

This incident is very puzzling, but not isolated. Both commonsense and scholarly expectations suggest that immigrants from underdeveloped societies are more conservative in regard to gender equality whereas people who are more Americanized, especially the American-born generation, are more egalitarian (Ebaugh and Chafetz 1999). However, this incident shows the contrary: it was the more Americanized young people who took a fundamentalist position against women's leadership roles at the church. Moreover, this is not an isolated incident. I have noticed the same pattern in several other Chinese American churches that I have studied, and some Chinese Christian leaders and scholars also share the same observation (Yau, Wang, and Lee 1997; Chong, M. 1998; Tseng 2002). Why is the younger generation more conservative on this issue? Where does their fundamentalist standpoint on women come from? Why do their arguments seem so persuasive to the congregation?

In this chapter I explore the dynamics of gender and generation in this Chinese Christian church. I will argue that (1) the major source of the conservative standpoint against women's leadership roles at the church is the fundamentalist subculture of the United States, not the Christian subculture of China, nor the Chinese traditional culture of Confucian patriarchy; and (2) women's leadership is a victim of power struggles between the immigrants and the second generation at the immigrant church: the American-born or American-raised young people who desire recognition and influence use biblical authority to undercut the traditional authority of their seniors.

Key Terms

Some of the words used here are loaded with complex emotions for various people. It is beyond the scope of this essay to sort out all the dimensions and meanings of these terms, but it is necessary to clarify their meanings to reduce any misunderstandings.

Sex, Gender, Patriarchy, and Equality

In the current sociological literature, whereas *sex* commonly refers to the biological characteristics of males and females, *gender* refers to the social characteristics of males and females, and *patriarchy* to the system of males dominating over females. I use these terms with such meanings. Patriarchy has been the dominant gender structure in many societies over many centuries, just as inequality structures race and socioeconomic class. Gender equality or egalitarianism is a modern idea, although its roots may be traced to ancient times and texts. The ideal of *gender equality* is not necessarily to deny biological differences between men and women, nor necessarily to mean that men and women must perform the same roles, either at home or in society. However, sociologists recognize that equality between men and women, or the lack of it, is a social construction that varies in different societies and different times. *Equality* can mean both equal result and equal opportunity. In this essay my emphasis is on equal opportunity. More specifically, I have no intention of measuring gender equality at the church by counting the proportion of women among ordained ministers. The issue is whether women are allowed to be ordained at all. Although gender equality has been the agenda of contemporary feminist movements,² this chapter doesn't advocate a position. Rather, my purpose is to provide an objective and dispassionate sociological interpretation of what is happening in the Chinese American church in regard to women's leadership roles.

Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism

Most Chinese American churches are conservative in theology (Yang 1999a). However, there is an important distinction between two major camps within conservative Protestantism: evangelicals and fundamentalists (Ammerman 1991; Smith 1998). Fundamentalists and evangelicals

share many characteristics: including insisting on orthodox or “traditional” interpretations of Christian doctrines, believing in the Bible as the revealed word of God, actively evangelizing or spreading the gospel to nonbelievers, and often speaking of their life-changing experience of conversion as being “born again.” However, conservative Christians diverge in their ways of responding to modernity and the larger society. For example, while fundamentalists and most evangelicals believe in the inerrant Bible, fundamentalists are more rigid:

As fundamentalists see the situation, if but one error of fact or principle is admitted in Scripture, nothing—not even the redemptive work of Christ—is certain. . . . They insist that true Christians must believe the whole Bible, the parts they like along with the parts they dislike, the hard parts and the easy ones. (Ammerman 1991, 5)

However, having made this rhetorical proclamation, interpreting the Bible is still a tough challenge:

Such contemporary use of ancient texts requires, of course, careful interpretation. Studies of fundamentalists invariably point to the central role of pastors and Bible teachers in creating authoritative meanings out of the biblical text. (Ibid., 5)

In other words, while accepting the principle of the inerrancy of the Bible, in practice fundamentalists have to rely on the interpretations of certain pastors or theologians who command authority. By extension, fundamentalists trust certain institutions. These include the Moody Bible Institute, Biola University, many small Bible colleges, Dallas Theological Seminary, and many independent churches. They accept some individuals such as Jerry Falwell as leaders with charisma.

In contrast, Billy Graham is seen as the primary representative of the evangelicals, and Fuller Theological Seminary is one of the primary evangelical institutions. In 1941 fundamentalists formed the American Council of Christian Churches (ACCC) to set itself apart from both the liberal-leaning Federal Council of Churches (today known as the National Council of Churches of Christ) and moderate conservatives, Pentecostals, Anabaptists, and Holiness groups. Separatism is an essential characteristic of fundamentalists, who are highly sensitive to any appearance of cooperation with nonfundamentalists. Consequently, they hardly tolerate any dis-

agreement. In 1942, the evangelicals organized the more inclusive National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), which has grown to be the largest Protestant association in the United States. The NAE affirms the principle of “in essentials unity, in nonessentials diversity, in all things charity.” The organization says, “Founded on a common acceptance of the infallibility and plenary authority of Scripture, we shelter without offense varieties of biblical understanding. . . . We affirm that our diversities result from our human fallibility and that one day when we know as we are known we shall more adequately see the proper coalescence of all things in the unitary truth which is of God.”³

Sources of Gender Conservatism

There are three major possible sources for the gender conservatism of the Chinese immigrant church: traditional Confucianism that holds to an ideology of patriarchy; a Chinese indigenous Christianity that may have adopted Confucianism; and Christian fundamentalism in the United States. My ethnographic research shows that neither Confucian patriarchy nor Chinese Christianity are responsible for gender inequality in today’s Chinese American churches. The major influence comes from the American subculture of Protestant fundamentalism.

Confucian Patriarchy

Because of its association with foot binding and other oppressive practices against women in traditional China, critics have pointed to Confucianism as the source of gender inequality in China and other East Asian communities. In their studies of women in Korean American Christian churches, Ai Ra Kim (1996) and Jung Ha Kim (1997) observe that women are commonly excluded from leadership roles at the Korean church. They argue that Confucianism is a major factor for this gender inequality. If this is true, we should expect that a person who is more Confucian would also be more patriarchal. Because the immigrants are supposedly under a greater influence of Confucianism than their American-born children, we would expect them to be more conservative than the latter. However, the incident described at the beginning of this chapter shows that the American-born Chinese are more conservative in matters of women’s church leadership.

Doubtlessly, Confucian patriarchy had great influence among Chinese immigrants who came from peasant villages of Guangdong (Canton) in the late Qing Dynasty and early Republican era. The Chinese American women's movement struggled against this heritage in the first decades of the twentieth century (Yung 1995). However, since the May Fourth Movement in 1919, most educated people in China have rejected Confucianism in general and Confucianism-endorsed patriarchy in particular. This is not to say that Confucian patriarchy has completely ceased to exist among the Chinese. In fact, women continue to be devalued in Chinese societies, especially in the villages, and in Chinese American communities, especially those in the ghettoized Chinatowns. Even among educated people, patriarchy persists as a cultural habit to a certain extent. Still, generally speaking, patriarchy and education are negatively correlated. Those who have received a higher education, especially a modern Western education, either in China or America, tend to be less patriarchal in terms of gender roles. Although we do not have equal results in terms of familial and social roles, equal opportunity between similarly capable men and women has become a mainstream ideology among the educated Chinese, especially in the public social sphere. Moreover, one of Christianity's appeals to the Chinese is its emphasis on greater equality between men and women. Christian influence has liberated people from the bondage of traditional customs and practices.

In the United States, over 90 percent of Chinese Protestant churches have been founded by post-1965 immigrants, a majority of whom are educated Chinese from all over China and Southeast Asia. In fact, most of the churched Chinese immigrants are people who came to the United States with their family members to attend college or graduate school. At the Chinese church both the wife and husband commonly have college or graduate degrees and hold professional jobs. The Western educational achievement of immigrant church members limits the influence of Confucian patriarchy among contemporary Chinese immigrants in the church. Of course, well-designed survey research is needed to validate or invalidate this proposition.

Neither the ethnographic data nor published research reveals justifications of women's status and roles in the church based on Confucianism or Chinese tradition. Of course, there has been some integration of the Christian faith with Confucian ideas. Elsewhere (Yang 1999a), I have argued that many Chinese Christians in America indeed can be called *Confucian* Christians because Confucian identity is somewhat synonymous to

Chinese cultural identity. However, the Chinese Christian acceptance of Confucianism is both selective and transformative. Selectively preserved and transformatively integrated are Confucian moral values and virtues that are perceived to be compatible with Christian beliefs, including love (*ren*), filial piety (*xiao*), hard work, thrift, temperance, delayed gratification, and the like (see Yang 1999a, ch. 4; also see Constable 1994). As in the larger Chinese community, Confucian patriarchy is subject to criticism and rejection, not acceptance.

In the public discourses at the Chinese Fellowship Church that I observed, members never invoked Confucianism to make women subordinate to men. From the early days of the church, women have served as deaconesses on the church council or united board. At rituals with high symbolic significance, women were sometimes put ahead of men. For example, at the baptismal ceremony, when both men and women were to be baptized, a common arrangement was for the women to walk into the baptismal pool before the men. However, the traditional age hierarchy was maintained: the usual order was that older women went before younger women, then older men before younger men. Despite the age hierarchy, traditional Confucian patriarchy was not a significant source of gender conservatism in women's leadership roles in the Chinese church.

Indigenous Chinese Christianity

One might ask whether indigenized Chinese Christianity unconsciously integrated Confucian patriarchy, which in turn affects gender inequality at the Chinese immigrant church. The answer seems to be a qualified no. Actually, indigenized Chinese Christianity is less patriarchal than Western Christianity, and the Christian gospel has been a liberating force for Chinese women as well as men.

Some feminist scholars have noted that the core symbolism of Christianity is androcentric and can be used to legitimate male domination and belittle women (Daly 1968, 1973; Ruether 1983; Morton 1985). Two of the three persons of the trinitarian God are male (Father and Son), and God is generically referred to as He. While Chinese Christians inherit the trinity of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, they also use a written Chinese character *ta* that denotes neither male nor female but divine. In the Chinese language, the third person pronoun is uniformly pronounced *ta*, which can be either male (he) or female (she). Moreover, the traditional Chinese notion of the divine can be both masculine and

feminine, as reflected in the Dao (Tao) that manifests itself through the interplay of the yin and the yang. Bible translators have used the word Dao in place of *logos* or "Word."

In fact, the nineteenth century saw the "feminization of Christian symbolism" when Christian symbolism and concepts were transposed to the Chinese context. Pui-lan Kwok (1992) shows that in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Chinese Christianity emphasized the compassion of God, inclusive metaphors for the divine, and Jesus' relation with women. It downplayed the sinfulness of Eve. Kwok argues that "the image of God as father could also be used to challenge the hierarchical and patriarchal kinship relations" (ibid., 56). Instead of the absolute authority of the patriarch, all Christians were now equal brothers and sisters under the same heavenly father. Today, Chinese churches in North America are continuing the feminization of Christian symbolism and Christian teachings. Chinese Christian sermons and evangelistic discussions often highlight God's love and forgiveness instead of judgment and condemnation. The Christianity that appeals to contemporary Chinese immigrants is one that provides comfort, not one that makes prophetic demands or kingly commands. What are highlighted, then, are the soft, tender, feminine characteristics of God.

Historically, Christianity has been a liberating force for Chinese women. This includes the campaign against women's foot binding from the nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries, the role models of missionary women outside the home, and missionary schools for the education of girls (ibid., 1992). Judy Yung (1995) also argues that Protestantism was a significant catalyst in the awakening of Chinese women's consciousness in the United States before World War II. Churches in China even began to ordain women in the 1930s (Chong, M. 1998), much earlier than the missionary-sending churches in the United States. Given this tradition of Chinese Christianity as a liberating force for women, it is no surprise that immigrant women have often actively sought ordination in Chinese churches in the United States (Tseng 1999). Moreover, the very few writings calling for women's leadership roles (Kwok 1992; Yau, Wang, and Lee 1997; Chong, M. 1998) are by women who were raised in the churches of greater China. The *Ambassadors* bimonthly, a popular Chinese-language Christian magazine published by the Ambassadors for Christ, Inc. in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, published a series of articles in 1999–2000 discussing women's leadership roles in the Chinese church. Again, women's advocates, supporters, and sympathizers are those who ei-

ther live in greater China or had grown up in churches in greater China before coming to the United States. Some observers are bewildered by the fact that Chinese churches in North America are more conservative than their counterparts in China and Southeast Asia (Yau, Wang, and Lee 1997; Maak 2000).

Of course, some Chinese Christian sectarian groups, such as the Little Flock, have insisted on patriarchy in church leadership. However, the influence of Watchman Nee, the founding leader of the Little Flock, and similar sectarian charismatic leaders, is mostly limited to first-generation immigrants. Moreover, their strong influence is probably limited to the sect and the churches led by the direct spiritual heirs of Watchman Nee. Watchman Nee was well respected by many Chinese Fellowship Church immigrant members, as reflected in their preaching, talks, and discussions. One of Watchman Nee's spiritual heirs was a frequent and popular guest preacher at the Chinese Fellowship Church. However, there were also open disagreements about some of Watchman Nee's ideas. Despite the influence of the Little Flock among immigrants at the Chinese Fellowship Church, the search committee, which was composed entirely of immigrant men, did not see the ordained wife as a theological problem. They recommended the candidate to the congregation. In short, indigenous Chinese Christianity cannot be held responsible for the gender conservatism of the Chinese Christian church in the United States.

American Fundamentalism

The rapid increase of Chinese Christian churches in the United States since the 1970s has occurred at a time when fundamentalism has become a significant force in American politics and society (Ammerman 1991). Chinese American Christians have been under the broad influence of the Christian Right, parachurch organizations with specialized ministries such as Focus on the Family, and, most importantly, conservative seminaries such as Dallas Theological Seminary, Moody Bible Institute, and Westminster Theological Seminary. Chinese Fellowship Church records show that in the early 1970s, a young deacon proposed to the church that it take action against a legislative bill regarding women's equality. He specifically cited an alarming article in the *Moody Monthly* magazine on this issue. On another occasion, another deacon proposed joining a letter campaign to support astronauts reading verses of the Bible while in an orbiting spaceship, again citing fundamentalist magazine articles.

American fundamentalism's most penetrating influence at the Chinese American church comes from seminaries. In the metropolitan area where the Chinese Fellowship Church is located, a small seminary is fondly dubbed the little DTS (Dallas Theological Seminary) of the Northeast. This is in part because most of its instructors are graduates of the DTS, but there are theological reasons as well. Chinese Christian laity who desire more theological training are often constrained by their jobs and family life. Few can afford full-time seminary study. However, this "little DTS" is very flexible in its curricular design and sends out teachers to teach at receptive churches. Some CFC lay leaders have taken its courses intermittently for many years. These lay leaders in turn pass on what they have learned to other members through Bible study meetings and Sunday school classes.

An incident illustrates the conservative impact of these courses on women's leadership roles. In 1994, an evangelistic fellowship group of the church elected a woman as its chairperson. In the course of a successful career she had been head of a laboratory at a national institute of health research. She was passionate about evangelism and enthusiastic about this ministry opportunity. To better equip herself for this ministry, she took some theological courses with the "little DTS," along with other church leaders. However, before long she was taught that according to the Bible women should not be spiritual leaders. She started pondering several questions: is the chair of the fellowship group a spiritual leader? and can a woman be the head of such a church group over men? The men who attended the same courses reduced or stopped supporting her leadership. She became confused, frustrated, and increasingly ineffective in her leadership. Consequently, after her term, this fellowship group gradually died out. Although other conflicts were present, the fundamentalist influence added its weight in causing the collapse of this once effective outreach ministry.

A more direct influence of fundamentalism came from Assistant Pastor Allan Houston, who came to serve the English-speaking young people in 1989. Reverend Houston holds degrees from a small Christian college in the South and from the "little DTS" in this metropolitan area. He also studied at Dallas Theological Seminary and later became an adjunct professor at the "little DTS." One year after Houston came to CFC, the Chinese senior pastor left for a Chinese church elsewhere in the United States. So, for a time, Houston became the only pastor at CFC. To maintain normal operations, he assumed greater responsibility and pushed to hire an-

other Anglo man as the youth pastor. Some senior members opposed hiring more non-Chinese-speaking pastors. That young Anglo man left after a few months' service at the church without a pastor's title. Houston said that the young man left because he disagreed with the policy of having women as deaconesses and felt the church was too liberal. Actually, CFC has had women deaconesses almost since its inception. In 1990, Houston, together with some conservative lay leaders, succeeded in nominating only men as candidates for deacon. When they found out, some women who had served as deaconesses protested but later accepted the election results in order to preserve a harmonious climate. The following year, however, some women were elected to the church council or united board. The second Anglo man reacted to this by leaving, whereas Houston changed his position from opposition to reservation, justifying his compromise by saying that deacons and deaconesses were not really spiritual leaders. Pressed by senior members, Houston confined his ministry to the English congregation.

However, after eight years of continuous nurturing, fundamentalism had already made a clear mark on the young people. In the 1996 congregational meeting they strongly opposed the candidacy of the senior pastor because his wife was also an ordained minister. Houston had been part of the search committee, but other committee members rejected his suggestions. They considered his advice too American and impractical for their Chinese church. Consequently, Houston made clear to the English congregation his opposition to the candidate and announced his resignation from the church. The English-speaking young people nurtured by his fundamentalism took up the cause and effectively blocked the candidate.

American fundamentalist influence is common in Chinese American churches. In *Following Jesus without Dishonoring Your Parents* (Yep et al. 1998) published by the InterVarsity Press, Jeannette Yep recounts her own painful experience at a Chinese immigrant church. She was teaching a college-age Sunday school class for her church on inductive Bible study methods.

Things proceeded well for a time, until the ten-week quarter was nearly over. Then, after class one day, Tim, a graduate student member, came to me and said that I couldn't teach Sunday school anymore. He had chatted with the pastor and they agreed. Tim would be taking over, and he would finish out the quarter.

In shock, I asked why was I being pulled. He said it was because there were young men in the Sunday-school Bible study class. "The Bible doesn't allow you to teach young men—see 1 Timothy 2," Tim said with authority. So I was relieved of my duties midstream! I passed on my notes to Tim, and he finished teaching the quarter's curriculum. (Ibid., 110)

Similarly, at a large Chinese church in Houston, English pastors who were trained at Dallas Theological Seminary opposed women's leadership roles in the face of a more moderate stance by the immigrant pastors. In the 1980s, a newly elected young Deacon of Christian Education threw the church into a crisis by dismissing all the female Sunday school teachers (see Yang 2000). Cecilia Yau, the leading author of a Chinese-language book calling for women's leadership roles in the Chinese church, had a more shocking experience. A Chinese church in a city on the East Coast had her preach to the Chinese congregation. Afterward, a young man from the English congregation came over and asked for her address. A few days later, she received a postcard without a signature but with words of warning, saying that she was breaking God's law by preaching because she was a woman. Such disruptions are commonly initiated by English-speaking young people under the influence of fundamentalism.

Generations and Authority

Tensions between the immigrants and the American-born or American-raised generation have been a chronic problem at many Chinese American churches. Young people of the second generation growing up in the immigrant church often feel frustrated by their lack of input in church decision making and lack of attention to their needs. Other conflicts and concerns, such as absorbing new waves of immigrants of diverse social, political, and cultural backgrounds and preserving the harmony and unity of a heterogeneous membership, have often taken priority over the needs of the second generation (Yang 1998a). At the CFC, the immigrant generation believes that it has already met the particular needs of the second generation by holding a separate English Sunday service with an Anglo pastor.

Houston, the Assistant Pastor since 1989, did not speak the Chinese language and had little interest in learning about Chinese culture. He was hired specifically to minister to the English-speaking members, most of them children of immigrant members. Why would a Chinese immigrant

church want an Anglo pastor to minister to the young people? In part the reason was a lack of American-born Chinese (ABC) in full-time ministry. Not only have few ABCs become pastors, but the few that do often become burned out after serving the Chinese church and drop out of the ministry. In the 1970s, the senior pastor handpicked a young man who had grown up at this church and ordained him as youth pastor, though he was opposed by some immigrant members. Before long, in 1976, the church split when half the members walked out to form another Chinese church. In 1986 CFC finally hired an ABC youth pastor to start up the English Sunday service, but about a year later he quit the ministry to go to law school.

A major difficulty for the ABC pastor is the language and culture. Chinese immigrant members commonly hope that the ABC pastor will serve as a role model for their children and they expect him to speak Chinese and be deferential and polite toward seniors. However, such ABC ministers are rare. As an Anglo American, Houston was not expected to pass on Chinese culture to the young people. Although some senior members complained about his lack of deference to seniors and general politeness to everyone, the immigrant parents liked his firm Christian faith and effective ministry to the youth.

New immigrants commonly worry about the bad moral influences on their youth emanating from American society (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000a). Chinese Christians who are influenced by Confucianism especially want their American-born or American-raised children to follow cherished traditional moral values and virtues. However, Americanized young people do not easily accept tradition or parents as sources of authority. They react negatively to common parental arguments such as "You should do this because we have done it for generations" or "You must listen because I am your parent." In this regard, the authority of God can be a substitute for the preservation of such Confucian moral values. At CFC, for a period of time several parents were very worried that their teenage youth in high school seemed to be dating. "But we didn't know what we could do," a mother said. She also recounted:

These are youth at a rebellious age in this free American society. But God is really wonderful. Right then the assistant pastor [Allan Houston] gave a sermon: "True Love Waits." It was an excellent sermon. My boy understood the preaching very well and liked it very much. The pastor asked these young people to make a commitment to God, write it down, and keep it for themselves, that they would wait for the true love.

Because of his effective ministry in inculcating the youth with strict moral standards, Houston was well respected and generously treated by church members. The church repeatedly renewed his term without a problem.

Although Confucian patriarchy is not prevalent in the Chinese American church, there is a problem of "Confucian seniorarchy." Rule by age is an implicit or even explicit rule in the daily operation of the church. Young people are expected to defer to senior people, both their parents and others. Indeed, the parents regard propriety as very important, usually more important than the actual issue in a discussion. In 1993 a young man who had once served as a deacon on the church council circulated a six-page letter among church leaders about his frustrations. He complained that young people had few opportunities for church leadership and that their opinions were never taken seriously. Some immigrant members responded that it was not that young people's opinions were never taken seriously. Rather, the first-generation elders said, the young people did not make their point clearly in a good and respectful manner. At deacons' board meetings, some immigrant members frequently complained about how spoiled and irresponsible the ABCs were. After an ABC deaconess protested, she was brushed off. Respectful disagreement by the young people is fine, but confrontational protest is not acceptable. Consequently, some young people feel resentful about the "politics" of senior members.

Before the 1995 congregational meeting that refused to renew senior pastor Daniel Tang's term, as described at the beginning of this chapter, there were quiet campaigns for or against removing him. In informal discussions long before the congregational meeting, some young people expressed their opposition to voting on the pastor. They argued that the church should be ruled by a theocracy, not by a democracy. They said that the members are not the boss, because God is. Pastors are servants of God. They are called to lead the flock, not to be led by the congregation. But the immigrant members insisted that there was nothing wrong about voting on the pastor and argued that "We are in America, where democracy rules." Unable to change the church constitution in a short time, some youth then urged their own parents to vote for the pastor. Some parents were baffled, and brushed it off by telling them, "You do not understand the complexity of the matter, you do not know the situation of the Chinese-speaking congregation." At the congregational meeting that voted on the pastor, before ballots were distributed the chairman of the church council first asked youth under age eighteen and nonmembers to remove

themselves from the main sanctuary, and then requested those who were not familiar with the situation of the whole church or issues facing the Chinese congregation to refrain from voting. Some youth complied, but they later expressed their anger and frustration at the immigrant members for "firing" the senior pastor.

Reverend Tang lost his position for complicated reasons,⁴ but women's status was not a major issue. After he became the senior pastor of CFC in 1991, he circulated a position paper in English calling for greater roles for women in church ministries. Although some immigrant members influenced by fundamentalism questioned it, most church members did not have a clear position on the issue. Most people did not think it an urgent issue, for no woman pastor had been called to serve or invited to speak at the pulpit. Further, some women deaconesses, including some ABCs, had already served on the deacons' board. Young people never took issue with Reverend Tang regarding women's roles at the church. So, in light of the young people's campaign for keeping Reverend Tang, it was surprising that women's ordination suddenly became the major and only issue at the 1996 congregational meeting discussing the new candidate for the senior pastor position. The young people opposed him simply because his wife was also an ordained minister. The immigrant members, especially those on the search committee, were thinking of practical matters, such as whether the church should hire both the husband and wife to minister to the church, or help his wife find a ministry of her own, and were debating whether that would hinder his service to their church. However, the young people opposed the candidate from the fundamentalist principle of opposition to women spiritual leaders. They quoted verses of the Bible⁵ to support their arguments.

Given the history of the church and the circumstances during that period, it seems that the real issue revolved around the voice of the young people, not women's ordination. After being repeatedly put down, the young people finally found an opportunity to dissent from the senior members in a way that made their arguments unanswerable. By referring to the absolute authority of the Bible, they successfully thwarted the authority of the seniorarchy. No longer could the seniors argue that the young people did not understand the situation, for the literal interpretation of the Bible was assumed to be clear and absolute. Since the immigrants had not undertaken a theological study of such biblical verses they were unable to offer a rebuttal based on alternative hermeneutical principles. Further, even if they had offered a rebuttal putting these biblical

verses in their cultural context, they might be perceived as relativizing the Bible and thereby allowing for other compromises, such as justifying homosexuality or other unbiblical lifestyles.

By referring to the danger of the slippery slope of one compromise leading to the next, the youth utilized a most effective argument for maintaining the literal interpretation of biblical verses against women's leadership roles at the Chinese church.⁶ Out of their concern for moral issues in the lives of the young people, immigrant parents conceded to such fundamentalist arguments. In this power struggle between the immigrant parents and the second generation, women's leadership roles evidently became the victim. However, the church may have missed a good opportunity to have a capable pastor. The church finally hired a senior pastor in 1998, but about a year later he abruptly resigned. Since then, the senior pastor position has been vacant.

Conclusion

Chinese Protestant churches in the United States tend to be conservative in theology. Whereas many Chinese Christians are evangelicals, some have been influenced by American fundamentalism. The fundamentalist influence clearly manifests itself in regard to women's leadership roles.

Women's leadership roles in the Chinese American Christian church have been a controversial issue. Because Chinese culture emphasizes harmony over confrontation, immigrant members at the church usually try hard to avoid this controversy in their conversations, discussions, and sermons. Meanwhile, given the Chinese evangelical culture of humility, few women have asked for a serious examination of the issue at their respective churches. Consequently, many Chinese Christian women who may have been well qualified for leadership roles have not been able to serve.

Women's leadership roles at the Chinese church are also sidelined by other controversies. At CFC they became victim to the power struggles between the immigrant seniors and the American-born young people. The immigrants worry greatly about moral problems in American society, and out of their concern for the moral education of their youth they have accepted American fundamentalist claims of absolute certainty and clarity. Few church members have taken the time to study this issue and come to a position of their own. Unless some women members put the issue on the

agenda, it will continue to be sidelined in favor of other more pressing concerns.

Since the late 1990s, some Chinese Christian women have begun to speak and write about this issue. Some male pastors and well-known spiritual leaders have given their support to their efforts. However, most of these efforts have been made in the Chinese language, which fails to reach most Americanized Chinese Christians who have been assimilated into American fundamentalist culture. Without effectively reaching them and replacing their fundamentalism with evangelicalism, the situation cannot be changed in favor of promoting women's leadership roles. But this in turn requires change on several important fronts: the way of caring for and nurturing the spirituality of American-born and American-raised Chinese; alternate sources of theological training for the clergy and laity; and most important, the development of an indigenous Chinese Christian theology. These are profound problems facing the Chinese Christian church. Women's leadership roles may be one of the specific issues that will serve as a catalyst for great changes in Chinese Christianity.

NOTES

1. I thank Tony Carnes, Cecilia Yau, and Lai Fan Wong for their helpful comments on earlier drafts. However, I am solely responsible for the views and arguments in this essay.

Pseudonyms are used in this chapter. For detailed descriptions of this heterogeneous church and of a previous congregational meeting in which the members refused to renew the senior pastor's term, see "Tenacious Unity in a Contentious Community: Cultural and Religious Dynamics in a Chinese Christian Church" (Yang 1998b).

2. Regarding religion and women's status, there are a variety of feminist positions. Rosemary Radford Ruether (1983) identified three major approaches. The "liberationists" see patriarchy as inherent in the text of the Bible but choose to overcome it through criticism and selective rejection. The "Evangelical feminists" believe that the message of scripture is fundamentally egalitarian, but has been misread by traditional theologians and that better exegesis will clean up the problem. The last approach is to abandon Christianity in favor of alternatives, such as goddess worship. Simply put, feminism does not necessarily mean rejecting traditional Christian beliefs. Evangelical feminism is one of the major approaches.

3. See the NAE's website www.nae.net.

The NAE, Fuller Seminary, Graham's crusades, and *Christianity Today* were only a few of the important organizational initiatives taken to institutionalize the

budding evangelical movement. . . . The emerging evangelical educational establishment, for example, eventually came to include not only Fuller Seminary, but, at the graduate level, also Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Calvin Theological Seminary, North Park Theological Seminary, Covenant Theological Seminary, and Asbury Theological Seminary. (Smith 1998, 12)

4. There were personality conflicts, cultural tensions, and theological disagreements. Reverend Tang failed to understand the complexity of the contentious subgroups and their diverse social, cultural, and political backgrounds, and offended too many people. For a full analysis, see Yang 1998b.

5. A literal reading of some biblical verses seems to support the fundamentalist position. For example, "But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God" (1 Corinthians 11, 3); "Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law" (1 Corinthians 14, 34); "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the savior of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. Ephesians 5, 22-24); "Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve" (1 Timothy 2, 11-13).

But some hermeneutics would put these verses in their cultural context and argue that the Holy Spirit has broken the boundaries of race, class, and gender, as expressed in the verse, "For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3, 26-29).

6. A passage from Ammerman 1991, quoted in the body of the present chapter, is worth noting here:

Fundamentalists also claim that the only sure path to salvation is through a faith in Jesus Christ that is grounded in unwavering faith in an inerrant Bible. As fundamentalists see the situation, if but one error of fact or principle is admitted in Scripture, nothing—not even the redemptive work of Christ—is certain. . . . They insist that true Christians must believe the whole Bible, the parts they like along with the parts they dislike, the hard parts and the easy ones. (Ammerman 1991, 5)

In sermons, lectures, and articles in church magazines, Chinese fundamentalists often argue that some people relativize biblical verses in order to justify homosexuality. In other words, a compromise on women's roles at the church would lead to a slippery slope leading to moral chaos, which is not compatible with the immigrants' desire for certainty.