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The formation of global Chinese Christian identities

Joshua Dao Wei Sim

Introduction

Over the last few decades, some leading scholars of Chinese diaspora studies have vigorously prosecuted the case for examining the overseas Chinese as diverse peoples and communities (Nonini and Ong 1997, pp. 3–33; Malvezin 2004, pp. 49–60). These scholars agree that there is a need to dispel the image that the overseas Chinese have been a monolithic, cohesive diasporic entity. They warn that perpetuating the image of a homogeneous overseas Chinese tribe could conjure serious misperceptions, one being that the overseas Chinese have been part of an ‘integrated whole in the form of a network, like a cobweb’ (Chan and Ng 2000, p. 286). Yet, overseas Chinese Christians have not been frequently included in the mainstream of this conversation. Indeed, examining them would strengthen the case about diversity within the Chinese diaspora. What makes this more curious is that Christianity in China has become a burgeoning sub-field within China area studies and the history of Christianity since the 1980s. Why then has less attention been paid to these diasporic Christian communities? Is it because they have been considered as adherents of a foreign religion and, therefore, not seen as ‘Chinese’ enough? Has the lack of perspective about diasporic Christianity prevented scholars from seeing their value?

It is worth noting that scholars of religion have started to pay more attention to these religious communities. The most prominent examples derive from sociological studies on Chinese religion in the twenty-first century; studies pioneered by Yang and others (Yang 1998, 1999; Carnes and Yang 2004; Wang and Yang 2006) have been able to cast the spotlight on Chinese Christians in the United States. This is partly because Christianity became the dominant religion of these immigrants during the latter half of the twentieth century. In historical studies, Tseng (1999, 2008) has examined the construction of nationalistic and evangelical identities in US Chinese Protestantism during the twentieth century. These studies have provided reasons for Christianity’s attractiveness in diasporic communities while demonstrating how the religion aided the immigrants in their adaptation to a foreign land. The recent opening up of new directions in the study of Christianity, such as World Christianity, have also provided more impetus for scholars to focus on the overseas

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Chinese. This has been due to the realization about the importance of studying indigenous Christianities within their local and global contexts. As a recent volume on global Chinese Pentecostalism (Yang et al. 2017, p. 2) suggests, ‘it is time to examine Chinese Christianity ... in the context of global networks.’ Nevertheless, the task of realizing a global outlook on Chinese Christianity remains in its infancy and more work needs to be done to achieve the goal.

This chapter attempts to address the above-mentioned problems and advance the objective of conceiving a globally oriented Chinese Christianity by conceptualizing about overseas Chinese Christianity through the lens of identity. Here, identity refers to individual and group-based discourses which are constructed through beliefs, actions, participation and events. Institutions like the state and religious bodies play a crucial role in fostering such discourses in diasporic communities by appealing to the effectiveness of these discourses in solving the exigencies of the day or creating hope for the future (Duara 1998, pp. 660–666; McKeown 1999, p. 331; Kuo 2013, p. 14). To be clear, the focus of this study will be on diasporic Chinese Protestant communities. As shall be seen, these communities were able to develop discourses which enabled them to simultaneously affirm their ethnic and/or political identities with their religious identity. More specifically, it is shown that religion became the basis upon which the former two identities were developed and articulated. In order to accomplish this, I propose that three identity types, namely evangelical identity, religious nationalism and religious ethnocentrism, became the major identities which were constructed in many Chinese Protestant communities in Southeast Asia, North America and across the globe since the late nineteenth century to the present day. This study takes a diachronic approach in unpacking these three identity types in order to draw out historical continuities and discontinuities. Essentially, the goal of this chapter is to tell the Christian side of the story in the Chinese diaspora. Lastly, diasporic Chinese Catholic communities are not covered in this chapter. Historically, Catholics have been at the forefront of devising alternative discourses and teachings that have enabled the accommodation of Chinese cultural values and familial structures within their faith (Lee 2003; Menegon 2009). However, these discourses are predominantly local in nature and subordinated to the authority of the Catholic Church. Thus, the Catholic story deserves to be told as an independent analysis in a separate study.

Three views of overseas Chinese identity

Before discussing the three identity types, I begin by exploring the work of several scholars who sought to form a coherent understanding of the Chinese diaspora. One of the primary sites which such research has taken place is in the study of overseas Chinese identities. Generally, a number of questions have been asked. How were the identities of the overseas Chinese constructed in specific historical situations? How were multiple identities negotiated, balanced and reconstructed in increasingly diverse cultural contexts across the world after World War II? How did the increasingly globalized outlook of migration and capitalism shape the construction of these identities? How did these identities negotiate and position themselves within the local and global during an era of fluid, multi-directional movement of people, ideas, capital and institutions? Different conceptual schemes have been proposed as possible ways to examine the formation of these identities. For the purposes of this chapter, I will raise three relevant schemes.

The eminent historian Wang Gungwu was one of the earliest scholars to propose several approaches to understanding overseas Chinese identities. Wang sought to analyse them in
two ways. Firstly, he attempted to match various groups of overseas Chinese and time periods to particular identities. In his influential 1988 study, Wang proposes two streams of identity which evolved over time. The first stream emphasizes political identity, where the dominant Chinese nationalist identity of the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia during the 1920s and 1940s gave way to local national identities by the 1950s. This is because they sought to assimilate themselves into their new nation-states and push for ethnic minority status (Wang 1988, pp. 5–6; Huang 2010, pp. 8–9). The second stream carries a cultural emphasis. Wang explains that before World War II, most Chinese in Southeast Asia had a strong historical identity which emphasized traditional values and institutions ‘to sustain Chineseness.’ This historical identity was eclipsed by nationalist identity during the 1930s and 1940s. By the 1950s and 1960s, Chinese communities developed a ‘more flexible’ cultural identity to aid their integration into the new nation-states (Wang 1988, pp. 6–7).

Secondly, Wang proposes a conceptual model to deal with the complex existence of multiple identities among Southeast Asian Chinese after World War II. Through his modelling, he shows how the notion of norms—that is, ‘ideal standards which are binding upon members of a group and which serve to guide … or regulate their behaviour’—could have an influencing effect on the multiple identities of the overseas Chinese (Wang 1988, p. 15). These identities include what he calls ‘normative’ ethnic, national, class and cultural identities, which are respectively shaped by a particular norm. For instance, cultural norms most directly shape the normative cultural identity of the Chinese. However, the type of cultural norm which influences the normative identity could result in the manifestation of different combinations of identities which make up cultural identity. This could include the assertion of historical identity alongside modern cultural identity or the emphasis on modern cultural identity above all other identities (Wang 1988, p. 14). In all, Wang has demonstrated the importance of understanding these identities as processual, historically produced discourses which have been able to co-exist alongside each other since the rise of modern Southeast Asia.

The Chinese state’s role in shaping overseas Chinese identity is another interpretive framework which was developed. Wang has shown that from the 1920s to 1950s, the ‘predominant’ communal expression of the Southeast Asian Chinese was ‘Chinese nationalist identity’ (or huaqiao/Chinese sojourner identity) (Wang 1988, p. 2). This nationalist identity started to emerge from the 1890s when various groups of Chinese nationalist actors such as the revolutionary republicans and the Qing state sought to impose their brand of ideology on Chinese immigrant groups in Southeast Asia who were organized along various community lines such as linguistic groups and native-place societies. As Duara (1998, pp. 661–662) observes, these nationalist actors ‘sought to transform’ these ‘multi-stranded’ communities ‘into a Chinese-ness that eliminated or reduced internal boundaries on the one hand, and hardened the boundaries between Chinese and non-Chinese on the other.’ This was accomplished through the assistance of instruments such as newspapers, schools and political parties that were started in the various places where Chinese immigrants had settled (McKeown 1999, pp. 322–326; Lee 2006).

The final scheme is about the shaping of overseas Chinese identity through participation in transnational practices, institutions, networks and culture. McKeown (1999, p. 331) has argued that participation in practices like migration and nationalism created a sense of ethnic identification among the overseas Chinese. In his words, ‘participation depended upon and produced Chineseness. A person was Chinese by virtue of the fact that he moved through networks channeled through Hong Kong … or Xiamen … participation in these experiences and processes made people Chinese.’ Similarly, Nonini and Ong (1997, p. 23)
also posit that overseas Chinese participation in transnational practices was a means of fostering identities which can be seen as subversive alternatives to ‘modern regimes of truth and knowledge.’ These regimes are the Chinese family, capitalist workplace and nation-state. In their view, participation in these practices enables evasion of ‘normalizing discourses,’ ‘disciplining practices,’ or familial expectations which have been ‘inscribed’ upon them by the state or familial system. Chinese transnationalists, in this sense, circumvent or resist these regimes by ‘moving between national spaces’ or exploiting loopholes in these regimes in order to gain an advantage or carve out their own pathways.

Three important perspectives can be learnt from these conceptual schemes; they are historically produced multiple identities, the state’s role in shaping identity, and participation in alternative modernities like transnational practices, networks and institutions. These perspectives are important and relevant as they can aid us in analysing the three global Chinese Christian identities. That is because the perspectives—which describe specific processes involved in the construction and negotiation of identities—were also actively seen in the formation and evolution of the three Christian identities. Here, it should be noted that the process of religious identity formation has been typically interactional in nature as religion partnered with these perspectives to produce variegated shades of identity (Duara 2003, pp. 57–58). For Protestantism, evangelicalism became central to this process.

**Three global Chinese Christian identities**

Evangelicalism was central to the construction of identities among diasporic Chinese Protestants as it became the predominant expression of their faith from the 1920s and 1930s. Several case studies (Tseng 1999; Yang 1999; Nyíri 2003; Zhu 2004; Ireland 2012; Kwan 2015; Sim 2015) on Chinese evangelicalism in Singapore, Sarawak, Eastern Europe and North America have demonstrated its strong presence in these regions. The prevalence of this tradition can be partly attributed to the impact of prominent revivalists and evangelists who were trained in the independent Christian sector in China during the 1920s to 1940s. Men such as John Sung (Song Shangjie, 1901–44), Watchman Nee (Ni Tuosheng, 1903–72), and Andrew Gih (Ji Zhiwen, 1901–85) exerted their religious influence over Christians in China and the diaspora through their itinerant revival campaigns and evangelistic work (Bays 2012, pp. 128–40). Some of them, such as Gih and Nee’s co-workers, also established their own independent evangelical organizations across the globe in order to reach the different transnational Chinese communities (this point is covered in the identity type religious ethnocentrism). These men have been characterized by scholars of Chinese Christianity as ‘God-centered and Scripture-oriented,’ ‘evangelical and anti-liberal,’ and the ‘vanguard of a revival’ who ‘stressed repentance, conversion, holiness doctrine and discipleship’ (Harvey 2002, p. 24; Leung 2004, p. 89). Major denominational church leaders in the diaspora also played a big part in cementing the dominance of evangelism. They saw fit to appropriate it as the central version of their faith and imbue their congregations with such teachings.

Nevertheless, evangelical theological beliefs and attitudes should not be seen as the sole arbiters of identity formation. Focus should also be placed on the global industry of networks, institutions, ideas, material culture and practices that evangelicalism gave rise to. These elements should be seen as sites that were utilized or appropriated by the Chinese. As Noll (2003, pp. 18–19) suggests, evangelicalism was an ‘ever-expanding, ever-diversifying family tree’ of revival promoters that was perpetuated globally by means of publications, networks and associations. This expansion and diversification also extended into Chinese
societies across the globe by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this sense, evangelicalism should be seen as a multi-faceted movement which was transnational in nature and able to provide the Chinese with a range of options to ‘redefine,’ select and appropriate for their specific diasporic contexts (i.e. migratory, cultural and political circumstances) (Zheng 2017, pp. 12–18). Now, we shall take into account these considerations as we examine the processes by which the three identities—evangelical identity, religious nationalism and religious ethnocentrism—were constructed across various contexts and time periods.

**Evangelical identity (1930s to present day)**

The *evangelical identity* can be considered as the most important identity type which was formed in Chinese Protestant communities across Southeast Asia and North America. This identity was largely fostered through the appropriation of evangelical traditions, such as popularizing practices like revivalism and evangelism, and promoting conservative evangelical beliefs. These practices and beliefs became the main ideas and values which influenced the way Christians sought to engage with culture in their context. This meant that the priority in cultural engagement was slanted towards evangelical means and ends; the goal was to shape individuals, families and societies into believing that Jesus Christ was the most desirous way to personal salvation.

There are two reasons why evangelical identity was promoted. Firstly, prominent Chinese revivalists and evangelists exerted a strong evangelical influence on diasporic Chinese churches through their revival campaigns, publications and independent parachurch/church institutions that they established in the twentieth century. On the other hand, leaders of these Chinese churches saw the adoption of evangelical practices as a means of gaining more autonomy from the Western missions. This was particularly the case in Southeast Asia. In Malaya, the denominational Chinese churches, especially the Methodists and Presbyterians, had been actively taking steps to become more autonomous from missionary control since the 1900s. Compared to other denominations such as the Anglicans or Baptists, the Methodists and Presbyterians led the way in implementing policies to encourage the devolution of power from the missionaries to the Asian leaders (Band 1972; Cheung 2004; Lau 2008). It was through this climate of change that church leaders saw revivalistic and evangelistic practices as prime ways of augmenting their efforts. The goal was to develop Three-Self Chinese churches—self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating churches—through such means (Kwan 2015, p. 80; Sim 2015, pp. 47–48).

Here, I demonstrate how the formation of this prevailing evangelical identity was in a large part due to the intense efforts of the Protestant leaders to utilize the evangelistic bands that John Sung established in the 1930s to 1940s to instil revivalism and evangelism as the principal way of building self-propagating churches while projecting evangelical activism into culture.

The evangelistic bands that Sung established through his successful revival campaigns across Southeast Asia and China were one of the most effective institutional agents in creating popular evangelism. Although the bands were autonomous from the churches, they collaborated with them to form band chapters, effectively becoming ‘their lay evangelistic arms’; this meant recruiting and training church members to engage in regular evangelism (Sim 2015, p. 49). It was reported that the work of the bands brought about significant increases in attendances at Singapore’s Chinese Presbyterian and Methodist churches (Band 1972, pp. 537–538; Koh 2014, p. 24). The various bands set out at least once a week, in
many cases, engaging in open-air evangelism at different locations in the city and villages. In terms of the open-air engagements, they were based on a preaching template, an example of which can be found in the constitution of the Sibu (Sarawak) evangelistic bands. In this template, the bands would attract crowds by singing catchy hymns and choruses, preaching from the Scriptures and advising the people to repent and believe in God through a standard set of topics which were repeatedly reused (1936 Constitution of Sibu Christian Evangelistic Band 1986, p. 36). This preaching template was also utilized by the bands in Singapore till the late 1940s and in their missionary efforts to the Chinese villages in Malaya during the 1930s to 1960s (Zhang 1946, pp. 108–110; Tow 2001, pp. 146–148). An important point here is that being equipped with this open-air preaching template enabled the laity to easily acquire the rudiments of evangelism and apply it in almost any setting. The easy acquisition of these proselytizing tools likely contributed to the higher uptake of evangelistic tasks in churches across Malaya.

Secondly, the diasporic Christians saw the need to adopt evangelicalism as a response to the perceived rise in secularism, materialism and theological liberalism in their specific contexts during the twentieth century. Put differently, evangelicalism acted as an alternative religious modernity which was deployed to recover biblical authenticity and doctrinal orthodoxy in their faith.

During the 1930s and 1940s, Sung and the leaders from the Malayan Chinese churches issued instructions to the bands and congregations to heed conservative doctrinal teachings and be wary of heretical preachers and theological liberalism (Sim 2015, p. 53). Across Southeast Asia and North America after World War II, conservative Chinese Christian leaders and workers worked tirelessly to establish networks of independent global evangelical organizations in order to stem the tide of theological liberalism and communism through the vigorous championing of evangelicalism (Gih 1973, pp. 1–41; Tseng 2008, pp. 135–147). The establishment of evangelical seminaries like the Singapore Bible College, the Southeast Asia Bible College in Indonesia and several others in Taiwan, Hong Kong and North America during the 1950s, ensured that the next few generations of church leaders were thoroughly evangelical in identity (Gih 1973, pp. 33–41; Rubinstein 1991, pp. 95–115; Sim 2015, p. 72). The prominent Chinese revivalist Calvin Chao (based in Singapore during the 1950s) was a strong proponent of such action. He commented that if he could start an evangelical ‘Bible school’ in Singapore, he could ‘train a new generation’ of evangelical leaders to take over the denominational churches and forestall the influence of modernism (Gih 1973, p. 33). Timothy Tseng demonstrates how Chinese American Protestantism was successfully ‘reconstructed’ by four evangelical influences, making it the predominant expression of the Chinese Protestant faith since the 1970s. For instance, Tseng (2008, pp. 138–144) shows how US-born Chinese Protestants attempted to resist and replace the influence of mainline liberal Protestantism in Chinese churches by starting annual Bible conferences with ‘fundamentalist and dispensational roots’ and establishing new congregations that were aligned to evangelicalism. In short, belief in the veracity and relevance of the evangelical alternative modernity for the times meant that it was prioritized as the important strategy for cultural shaping.

One implication of this analysis concerns the relationship between the construction of evangelical identity and Chineseness in the diaspora. The case studies demonstrate how the identity-making projects of religious institutions emerged as an alternative to the state’s initiatives to shape the overseas Chinese into loyal subjects. Nevertheless, this did not mean that the Protestants sought to be direct competitors with the state; as will be seen,
evangelicalism became a congenial ideological platform for the Protestants to incorporate nationalist imaginations, enabling them to hold both identities simultaneously and with no conflict in interest.

Religious nationalism (1880–1940s)

In Kuo’s (2017, p. 16) recent edited volume, he defines ‘religious nationalism’ in China as ‘the interpenetration, overlapping, or syncretism of religion and nationalism.’ He adds that this term comprises two sub-categories:

A nationalism that incorporates existing religious elements or develops a new state cult in national ideologies ... public education systems, and national holidays; and a religion that incorporates nationalist imaginations in its theology, ritual, and religious organization.

It is the latter sub-category that I am tackling in this part. A study by Chau (2017, pp. 116–137) within the same volume develops this concept in further detail. Drawing on two case studies, Chau shows how religious nationalism could be defined as ‘nation in religion’ and ‘religion in nation.’ The former refers to the construction of religious meanings in significant practices (e.g. ‘literati-oriented’ practices) which are believed to be directly connected to the fate of the modern Chinese nation-state. The latter pertains to the creation of religious spheres in China which allowed religious adherents to imagine themselves as members of a particular religious sphere; such an imaginary helped to ‘solidify the boundaries of China’ as these spheres were ‘subordinated’ to the territorial imagination of the nation-state.

Here, I demonstrate how the religious nationalism identity of the overseas Chinese Protestants was both a national and transnational development; that is, the evangelical faith of the Protestants was implicated with transnational imaginations of the state and willingly subordinated to the agenda of the state. My usage of the term ‘religious nationalism’ refers to how the nationalism of the Christians was influenced by their faith, and vice-versa. In short, it was a synthesis that encompassed nation in religion and religion in nation. This part concentrates on the late nineteenth century to World War II as the Chinese nationalist identity was predominant among the diaspora in this timeframe.

There were two scenarios that underlay the formation of transnational religious nationalism. The first scenario relates to the ambitions for autonomy of the Malayan Chinese churches. In order to demonstrate that their Christianity was not foreign-led and thoroughly indigenous in concern, thinking and organization, the church leaders launched initiatives to display that they were just as nationalistic as the other overseas Chinese communities. Like the three different statist nationalist groups from China that sought to ‘nationalize’ Chinese immigrants in Southeast Asia, the church leaders took up the same mantle to nationalize their own congregations in the 1930s and 1940s (Duara 1997, p. 39, 1998, pp. 660–666).

One major initiative which demonstrates religious nationalism was the development of a transnational Protestant sphere in Singapore—a prime example of religion in nation. This was seen in the founding of the Singapore Chinese Christian Inter-Church Union in 1931, or what can be rendered as Singapore Huaqiao Christian Inter-Church Union because the noun ‘Chinese’ is actually a translation of the term huaqiao. The Union was founded by a group of immigrant pastors from the three major Protestant denominations in Singapore—Methodists, Presbyterians and Anglicans. What made the establishment of this Union unique
was that the pastors attempted to imagine themselves as part of China’s Protestant sphere by creating transnational linkages that enabled them to express their loyalty to China. At the same time, the local Singapore sphere which they established became a site to rally the churches in British Malaya around their nationalistic cause. In short, the pastors appropriated the *huaqiao* label in order to effectively integrate the religious with the political for the diaspora (Hang 1971, pp. 144–145; Sim 2015, p. 43).

This synthesis was seen through the creation of religious discourses which fostered a transnational imagination of the nation in religion. Local Chinese newspapers like the *Nanyang Siang Pau* (NYSP) and the Malayan Methodist periodical *Nanzhong* regularly carried articles about these issues (NYSP, 15 Apr 1938, pp. 22, 30; Koh 2014, pp. 44–45). Religious prayers and liturgies emphasizing the miserable state of war-torn China were constructed by the Union’s leaders to invoke feelings of religious nationalism for their homeland—that is, an urgent cry for God to deliver China from war and restore peace. A key theme of nationalism during the 1930s was ‘national salvation’ (*jiuguo*). As a recent study demonstrates, the Chinese Methodists in Southeast Asia participated in ‘a [particular] Chinese Christian discourse on China’s salvation.’ Like most conventional narratives on *jiuguo* then, they regarded ‘failure’ and ‘selfishness’ as causes for China’s national weakness. However, they went beyond the commonly proposed *jiuguo* solutions of ‘modernity’ and ‘mutual assistance’ by advancing evangelicalism as the ‘ultimate antidote’ to the nation’s problems (Kwan 2015, pp. 28–30, 43–48). The leaders of the Union—who were influenced by the Methodist discourse—also engaged in this type of religious nationalism. For instance, in a special prayer meeting organized to commemorate the second anniversary of the Second Sino-Japanese War in July 1939, the Union’s leaders offered their diagnosis of China’s problems. They urged participants of the event to ‘beseech’ God to ‘forgive’ the Chinese citizens of their sins of ‘idol worship’ or superstition and ‘rebellion against God.’ They also offered their solution to the problem: the Chinese citizens were called to ‘repent’ and ‘believe’ in Jesus Christ (*Nanzhong*, July 1939, pp. 16–17). By appropriating the discourse of national salvation, the diasporic Protestants were able to join in the conversation about China from their transnational sphere; they did so by forming their own interpretation of the conflict and transforming their religiosity into an outlet to express their affection for China.

Tseng (1999, p. 24) demonstrates how racial discrimination and social dislocation experienced by the Chinese immigrants in the United States from 1880–1927 created the conditions that fostered religious nationalism in Chinese Protestant churches. Specifically, evangelicalism provided the Chinese immigrant converts with a ‘persuasive worldview’ to ‘cope’ with these ‘disruptions’ while acting as a ‘catalyst that propelled many … onto the paths of social activism [and] Chinese nationalism.’ This is the second scenario. Here, he explains how a synthesis involving an interplay between religion in nation and nation in religion emerged. From 1880 to 1902, the influence of evangelicalism enabled converts to acquire a strong evangelical identity; however, national concern quickly synthesized with evangelicalism. Due to the discrimination that they faced in US society, their evangelistic concerns became ‘obsessively’ focused on China and their fellow immigrants. From 1900 to 1919, the emphasis of their religious nationalism shifted from evangelism to the evangelical critique on ‘backward, pagan China’ as a response to China’s tumultuous political modernization. By the 1920s, their religious nationalism shifted towards a national salvation discourse that was similar to that of the Malayan Chinese Protestants. This developed because of their growing animosity towards Western imperialism which fostered a ‘decisive rejection … [of] the Euro-American model’ (Tseng 1999, pp. 24, 31, 36).
These case studies demonstrate how different communities of overseas Chinese Protestants incorporated transnationalist imaginations about China into their faith and situated their identity-making projects within the limits of the nation-state. Different aspects of faith were integrated with politics in order to generate types of religious nationalism that fitted with the specific historical context. It should be noted that a strident Taiwan-centred anti-communist religious nationalism arose after World War II among significant numbers of Chinese evangelicals who emigrated to Taiwan and other parts of the world to escape China’s Communist takeover. These evangelicals—who were loyal to the Kuomintang—were crucial in establishing an Asian Christian anti-Communist league which was a major religious organization that opposed Communist China till the 1980s (Chin 2016). Although this particular religious nationalism is beyond the scope of this chapter, it serves as a good contrast to highlight the formation of a non-political, globally oriented ethno-religious identity for various overseas Chinese Christian communities during the postcolonial period.

Religious ethnocentrism (1950s to present day)

Religious ethnocentrism arose as a major identity type after World War II. This identity type refers to the formation of an ethnic-centred—rather than China-centred—overseas Chinese Protestantism that constructed discourses about their evangelical identity through independent Chinese evangelical institutions and networks that were established across several continents. These discourses include narratives that emphasize the special obligation of the Chinese Christians to evangelize the world, the need to proselytize the Chinese diaspora, and new global ethno-religious mappings which are based on the mission and objectives of these institutions. In short, evangelical identity was both infused with ethnic concerns and recontextualized within new ethnic-centred religious spatial mappings (Yang 2002; Nyíri 2003, pp. 267–274; Tseng 2008, pp. 135–138; Huang and Hsiao 2015, pp. 384–385). One should note that religious ethnocentrism displaced religious nationalism within the diaspora from the 1950s, though many Chinese who emigrated from China in the 1950s and 1960s remained privately loyal to the Republic of China. As Tseng (2008, p. 136) notes, those who emigrated to escape Communist China shifted ‘their hopes for Chinese Christianity on the Chinese Diaspora rather than on China.’ Another point is that the construction of these discourses also happened in conjunction with the assimilation of these Chinese communities into their adopted homelands. Many of these first-generation migrants thus preferred to emphasize their ethnic and cultural belongings (whether through religion or in their family units) over loyalty to China as they sought to settle permanently into their new homes (Yang 1999, pp. 132–162). In this part, two case studies will be utilized to outline the ethnic-centred discourse making of these transnational Chinese evangelical institutions.

The first example pertains to Gih’s post-1940s work where he established an organization known as Evangelize China Fellowship (ECF) in many countries. ECF can be seen as representative of several major transnational entities which were formed by various Chinese revivalists and evangelists, such as Dzao’s Bread of Life churches and Wang’s Chinese Overseas Christian Mission. ECF was founded in 1947 in Shanghai as an indigenously run ‘faith mission’ for the purpose of training Chinese nationals ‘to win their own people.’ Subsequently, because the organization was forced to close in Shanghai, it went on to establish work in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Southeast Asia. ECF was responsible for setting up a range of organizations in these regions. Alongside churches which were established in cities and rural areas, ECF also established theological colleges in Taiwan and Indonesia.
Christian schools, kindergartens and orphanages were also founded across these regions. The institution also had a publications arm known as Sheng Tao Press which issued publications like the periodical *Shengming* (*The Life*), and other books and gospel pamphlets. *Shengming*, like many Chinese evangelical publications of its day, was circulated to Chinese communities across the five continents (Gih 1970, 49–51; Doyle 2006). ECF’s concern for the overseas Chinese can be seen through its work in Indonesia since the 1950s. Gih visited Indonesia in 1951 and became aware of the large numbers of Chinese in the new nation-state; he also realized that the Chinese churches in Indonesia were in need of theological colleges to train their pastors. In his eyes, the need for evangelism and theological education became major impetuses to start an ECF chapter in Indonesia. Gih’s newfound concern for the overseas Chinese spurred him to establish the Southeast Asia Bible College in 1952 to train full-time workers for the churches and missionaries to the ‘unevangelized’ areas in the nation. According to Gih, the College would come to play an important role among the Chinese churches in Indonesia; 85 percent of these congregations would be ‘manned’ by graduates from this school by 1970 (Gih 1973, 22–37). In this sense, ECF can be seen as a transnational entity which was deeply involved in ethnic Chinese evangelization and the creation of its own ethno-religious landscape through its network of workers, organizations and publications.

While this first example is demonstrative of how an important institution utilized its transnational resources, networks and organizational entities to construct an evangelicalism that was thoroughly interpenetrated with ethnic concern, the next example traces the construction of a particular religious ethnocentric discourse—the special status of Chinese Christians as the ‘new chosen people of God’ for the evangelization of the world from the 1970s (Huang 2017, pp. 87–88).

According to Chan (2006, pp. 88–89), the special status of Chinese Christians was first promoted by the Back to Jerusalem (BTJ) movement, which was inspired by a 1940s Chinese evangelistic movement with the same English name. The current BTJ movement ‘calls for the mobilization of 100,000 . . . Chinese missionaries from China to launch into the Islamic-dominated Central Asia region and eventually spread the Christian faith to Jerusalem ready for the Second Coming of Christ.’ Chinese Christians are regarded as the ‘chosen’ group for the evangelization of Central Asia because of the movement’s belief in God’s selective usage of particular ethnicities throughout human history to complete His plan for evangelizing the world. That is to say, ‘the Christian faith traveled from the West to East through Western missionaries and [is] now carried back by Chinese missionaries to where it had originated to complete the mandate’ of worldwide gospel proclamation. To be sure, the BTJ movement originated in China. However, Pál Nyíri (2003, pp. 290–291) observes that BTJ’s idea has moved into the mainstream of Chinese evangelicalism, especially among several prominent overseas Chinese evangelical leaders and institutions today. Several of such leaders have offered their interpretations about this idea. One example is Su’s global ‘historiography of the Chinese campus ministry’ (1945 to post–2007) which has influenced many contemporary overseas Chinese Christians. Su is the founder of an important organization called Overseas Campus Ministry. By periodizing the history of the Chinese campus ministry into seven different phases, he fashioned a historical interpretation about the ‘progressive preparation’ of the Chinese Christians for the worldwide missionary task. He argued that this began in 1945 when campus ministries were started in China, before their subsequent openings across the globe. Su also explains how the gospel has been promulgated ‘in a circle’ by the Chinese—first beginning in China before moving out to Asia and the West and returning to China in the late 1980s. In practical terms, this has also meant that
converted Chinese students who studied in Western universities have been seen by these institutions as valuable human resources to ‘bring their faith back to China’ (Huang and Hsiao 2015, pp. 386–389; Huang 2017).

In a way, the development of religious ethnocentrism as an identity type since the 1950s is a demonstration of how the overseas Chinese flexibly adapted to the global post-war order. They ingeniously integrated faith with ethnic concerns in order to re-make their organizations into transnational enterprises while simultaneously carving out substantial ethnic spaces by deploying religious ethnocentric discourses that projected their own concerns, ambitions and imaginations of the ethno-religious space.

Some recent studies have demonstrated that class has been an important factor in enabling global Chinese communities to identify with evangelicalism. These studies point to the evangelical/Pentecostal megachurch phenomenon which has arisen in places with substantial Chinese communities (such as Southeast Asia and Taiwan) during the late 1980s. Most of these megachurches have managed to recruit Chinese-majority congregations. In a recent edited volume on the Southeast Asian context, Terence Chong observes that Pentecostal megachurches have managed to find connection and congruity with the different middle class groups in the neoliberal capitalist economies of Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. In particular, their ‘narratives of distribution,’ prosperity gospel theologies and constant focus on the immediate experience of the spiritual dimension can be considered as class-based religious discourses that are employed to attain wide appeal from these middle-class groups (Chong 2018, pp. 8–9). While I agree with the importance of class in building such appealing non-ethnic religious narratives, it can also be observed that the ethnic factor has not received much attention from these same group of studies. This is partly because most of the attention has been devoted to English-speaking (or in the case of Indonesia, Bahasa-speaking) congregations where ethnicity is either deliberately de-emphasized or has a marginal status (Hoon 2018, p. 25). Class-based discourses are thus important in appealing to these groups as they carry a culturally superior language-based orientation which is closely associated with its class-based status (i.e. the English language is the dominant and preferred language of the middle-class groups in Singapore and Malaysia). More attention should be paid to other language-based (e.g. Mandarin, Hokkien, Cantonese, Tamil) groups within these megachurches. Scholars should examine whether class-based discourses are just as effective in such contexts. My suspicion is that ethnic-based narratives may be more prevalent in these circumstances due to the more Asian cultural orientations of these congregations. In the same vein, Pentecostal-leaning congregations from Chinese-based organizations such as Bread of Life or True Jesus Church should be subjected to a similar examination in order to determine whether the strong appeal of class-based discourses also holds true in their circumstances.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how historical and contemporary circumstances from the late nineteenth century to the present day, and the different processes which emerged from these circumstances, were involved in the construction of the three major identity types of overseas Chinese Protestantism. While scholars examining overseas Chinese Christianity have discussed the development of these identities since the late 1990s, few studies have attempted to synthesize the global trajectories of these identity-making efforts into a working conceptual framework. In a way, this chapter follows the work of several scholars of the Chinese diaspora who attempted to provide conceptual accounts of identity making in

Specifically, this chapter has argued that religion has been central for identity making within the Chinese diaspora; as I have shown, religion acted as a basis—in multiple ways—to build Chinese Christian identities in variegated diasporic communities across the globe over several generations, starting from the late nineteenth century. In particular, the evangelical tradition—not just in terms of its theology but also its practices, institutions, ideas and networks—underpinned identity construction efforts. From a historical perspective, evangelicalism has been the constant factor in the construction of the three identities. In this sense, scholars like Tseng and Nyíri have been right to focus on the importance of evangelicalism in the formation of global Chinese Christian identities in different settings. In the final analysis, evangelicalism—in all its different aspects and related traditions—serves as an important starting point for conceiving a globally oriented Chinese Christianity; that is, how these men and women appropriated evangelicalism to build a transnational religious industry that connected, influenced and affected adherents and non-adherents of the faith across the Chinese diaspora.

More broadly, the study alerts scholars to the need to bring religion, especially Christianity, into a direct conversation with mainstream Chinese diaspora scholarship. Integrating findings and analytical tools from Chinese Christian and diaspora studies into research on relevant communities and individuals will enable scholars to tease out more associations between secular and religious diasporic communities. These associations risk being missed out if the subjects are investigated from merely the perspective of one sub-field. In short, through such integration, this chapter has shown that the Chinese Christians were active participants of the larger global diasporic landscape; the difference was that they either appropriated secular means for religious uses, or participated in the Chinese diasporic world through their religious connections.

Finally, this chapter has been a demonstration of the ‘multitudinous forms of Christian religious orientation’ which arose in the context of a global Chinese diaspora. This multiplicity within overseas Chinese Christianity deserves further attention because of the variegated nature and constant movement of the Chinese across different transnational spaces. Such multiplicity signifies the constant shifting and changing which has taken place among individuals, institutions, networks and communities within overseas Chinese Christianity over time (Madsen 2017, pp. 319–320, 324–325). Therefore, scholars should endeavour to study overseas Chinese Christianity in all its diversity and richness across different planes, contexts and times.

Notes

1 I extend my deepest thanks to Wang Zhixi for his insightful comments which have helped to improve this chapter.

2 I will not be engaging in the debate of whether terms like overseas Chinese, Chinese overseas, Chinese diaspora or transnational Chinese are more appropriate for characterizing such communities. I am largely using these terms interchangeably and if there are historically specific terms that should be applied (such as huaqiao), I will specify the usage of the terminology upfront.

3 Evangelicalism is popularly defined by its key theological emphases: conversion (desire for all to turn to Jesus Christ), biblicism (Bible as highest authority in life), activism (evangelistic and social action) and crucicentrism (centrality of Christ’s death and resurrection for salvation) (Noll 2003, p. 19). Here, ‘evangelicalism’ is preferred over ‘fundamentalism’ because the latter can be seen as a subgroup of the former. Moreover, prominent Chinese revivalists who have been identified as fundamentalists learnt their Christianity from various strains of the global evangelical movement.
4 This paragraph is heavily reliant on the analysis from my recent study ‘Chinese Evangelistic Bands in Nanyang: Leona Wu and the Implementation of the John Sung-Inspired Evangelistic Band Model in Pre-War Singapore’, *Fides et Historia* 50:2 (Summer/Fall 2018): 52–3.

5 Kuo calls this sub-category ‘nationalist religion.’ I am, however, not following his labelling in this chapter.

6 The Chinese name is *Xinjiapo huaqiao jidujiao lianhehui*.

**References**

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**Scholarship**


