



# The Globalization and Racialization of Asian American Churches

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**Abstract** “The Globalization and Racialization of Asian American Churches” offers historical reflections that engage with key social and cultural developments that shaped the experiences of Asian American immigrant communities of faith. The perspectives on globalization and racialization of Asian American churches offer readers a deeper understanding of the historical contexts in which HANA congregations serve and grow.

Jeung, Russell. 2015. The Globalization and Racialization of Asian American Churches. *Common Ground Journal*. [v12 n1 Spring]. ISSN: 15479129. [www.commongroundjournal.org](http://www.commongroundjournal.org). EDCOT. Form: eJournal. Pages: 31-38. Keywords: asian, hana, multiethnic, panethnic, transnational.

## INTRODUCTION

*A congregation that I consider one of my home churches, Grace Fellowship Community Church, originally was made up of members from the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in San Francisco's Chinatown. That church was founded in 1894, when the Woman's Board of Missions sent Mrs. Naomi Sutton as a missionary to Chinatown to teach English and care for sick children. Eventually, the congregation called its own Chinese minister, Rev. Gam Sing Quah, to lead it in 1904.*

*Even while Chinese faced discrimination and segregation, that congregation grew as members raised their families in Chinatown. By 1950, most ministries in all the Chinatown churches were conducted in English as the second generation acculturated to their American setting. After the 1965 Immigration Act, Chinese-speaking newcomers filled the pews. As Cumberland grew to become the largest church in Chinatown, differences between the English-speaking and Chinese-speaking congregations, along with new visions and purposes, led to planting of Grace Fellowship in 1983.*

*While Grace Fellowship aimed to be a multiethnic church for the city, its core members and leadership were mostly pan-Asian American professionals. Its initial numerical growth through personal networks, then, was made up primarily of other Asian Americans, including those of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipino descent.*

*In 1992, the congregation relocated to the Mission District of San Francisco, a primarily Latino neighborhood facing gentrification, to further its calling to “serve the most vulnerable.” Today, Grace Fellowship continues to wrestles with the question, “What does it mean to be the Church in San Francisco?”*

The story of Grace Fellowship neatly reflects the intersecting processes of globalization and racialization that have long shaped Asian American Christian identities and communities. Globalization, in which the world's economy becomes increasingly interconnected, spurs the flow of capital, labor, and cultures across borders. For example, flows of culture and labor have long influenced Asian American

Christianity. Just as Western missionaries have brought their cultural model of Christianity to Asia, Asians migrating to America bring their political, social, and cultural agendas to the churches in the United States. Cumberland and Grace Fellowship, as congregations serving immigrants, develop ministries to newcomers who arrive with different forms of capital and who receive various degrees of welcome.

As Asians enter the United States, the government, schools, and even churches racialize them in that Asian Americans are perceived through new, ascribed identities and specific, cultural characteristics. Currently, the U.S. census categorizes the predominant racial distinctions as African American, Asian American, American Indian, Pacific Islander, and White.<sup>1</sup> It also sets apart Hispanics as a separate ethnic category. Such discourse not only affects how Americans identify individuals and groups, but also how they interpret and interact with them. Currently, Cumberland Presbyterian Church targets Asian Americans while Grace Fellowship and its members prefer not see themselves in racial terms. Nevertheless, others continue identify Grace as an Asian American congregation simply because of its membership and leadership.

Asian American Christians have adopted identities and built congregations within five sociohistoric periods of transnational flows and racial discourses.<sup>2</sup> The first period, *Orientalist Paternalism*, characterized how Asians were perceived and evangelized in the 1800s. Not surprisingly, Asian American Christians resisted such treatment as inassimilable foreigners and started their own Christian organizations. The first half of the twentieth century saw nationalist movements in Asia and two world wars. Asian American church members, segregated from mainstream American society in this second period, held to *Transnational Christian* identities and supported movements in China, Japan, Korea, and the Philippines. With the rise of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, ethnic caucuses promoted *Ethnic Family Churches* during the third period, where members maintained bicultural approaches to identity and ministry. A movement toward *Asian American Panethnic Church Growth* emerged in fourth period of the 1980s, as the second, third, and fourth generation of Asian Americans found that they shared more in common with each other than with the new immigrants. By 2008, with the election of President Barack Obama, Americans called for a post-racial society where we are to be tolerant of everything but discrimination and segregation. Corresponding to this discourse of this fifth period, more Asian American ministers have sought to establish *Asian American-led Multiethnic Congregations*, where churches reflect the diversity of the Kingdom of God and racial reconciliation takes place at both a personal and institutional level. While a plurality of congregational forms and individual identities has existed in each period, this article spells out major trends to highlight the significance of globalization and racialization in shaping how Asian American churches conceptualize their identity, mission, and organizational structure.

This article is limited in scope in that it cannot cover each Asian ethnic group, religious tradition, or region. Instead, it offers a broad, historical overview of the development of Asian American congregations.

## **ORIENTALIST PATERNALISM (1850–1900)**

The very parallel ways that the first Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino immigrant churches have developed demonstrate how the same racial ideologies and capitalist forces structured these communities. The first migrants from Asia in the 1800s were primarily men from rural China, Japan, and the Philippines. Large-scale migration began as railroad and agricultural capitalists required thousands of contract laborers to

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<sup>1</sup> David A. Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Russell Jeung, *Faithful Generations: Race and New Asian American Churches* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

lay their tracks and harvest their fields. Flows of laborers circulated the Pacific Rim as most did not plan to settle in the United States, but rather to return to their home villages with their wages. Within these settlements, Western missionaries initiated their work of Orientalist paternalism.

European Americans depicted these first Asian immigrants as “heathen idolators,” a “debased race,” and “free hired servants.”<sup>3</sup> Such characterization exemplifies Orientalism: the way in which Asia, its peoples, and its cultures have been understood and represented in the West. More specifically, these essentialized representations depict Asian societies as static and undeveloped, while Western ones are seen as rational, progressive, and superior.<sup>4</sup>

Employing such assumptions, white American missionaries saw the first Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino immigrants as uncivilized and inassimilable. Introducing Christianity to these groups did not aim just to save their souls, but also to help civilize their cultures, free their nations from authoritarianism, and develop their economies. White missionary societies, mostly women, entered their communities to teach English and to evangelize. They did not expect their converts to integrate into their congregations, but hoped that they would return to their home countries to evangelize there.<sup>5</sup>

In response to virulent anti-Asian violence and discrimination, as evidenced by the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, Asians in the United States drew together in reactive solidarity and saw themselves foremost as Chinese or Japanese Christians. Wanting a measure of self-determination and autonomy, the Chinese organized their own Christian organization, including the *Youxue Zhengdao-hui*, which had 30 branches in 12 states by 1890. The Japanese Christians similarly formed their own organization, the Japanese Christian Church Federation, in 1910.

## TRANSNATIONAL CHRISTIANITY (1901–1945)

The first Asian American Christians were encouraged to return to Asia, so not surprisingly their churches supported nationalist movements there. Unable to become naturalized as Americans, these Christians focused their attentions on the moral uplift and national development of their home nations. Indeed, Asian congregations in the United States were instrumental in providing institutional and ideological support for revolutionary and wartime movements in China, Japan, the Philippines, and Korea. For example, Sun Yat-Sen repeatedly made trips to Chinese Christian congregations in Hawaii and California in order to raise funds for the Chinese Revolution of 1911. Japanese Christians during the Sino-Japanese War collected and sent care packages for the Japanese soldiers stationed abroad.

The first Korean American Christians also illustrate how immigrants used the church as an institutional space for transnational politics. In 1919, Philip Jaisohn partnered with Henry Chung and Syngman Rhee to establish the Korean Congress in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to advocate for Korean independence from Japan. Mobilizing through churches, they appealed to the broader American public by calling on their common Christian values. The Korean Congress drafted a letter to Americans, “An Appeal to America,” that drew on nationalism and Christianity to garner widespread support:

We know you love justice; you also fought for liberty and democracy, and you stand for Christianity and humanity. Our cause is a just one before the laws of God and man. Our aim is

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<sup>3</sup> Timothy Tseng, “Ministry at Arms’ Length: Asian Americans in the Racial Ideology of American Mainline Protestants, 1890–1927” (PhD diss., Union Theological Seminary, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

<sup>5</sup> William Speer, *China and California: Their Relations, Past and Present; a Lecture* (San Francisco: Marvin and Hitchcock, 1853).

freedom from militaristic autocracy; our object is democracy for Asia; our hope is universal Christianity.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond the use of Christian rhetoric, Korean American nationalists had strong networks with white Protestant missionaries, such as the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America, who provided critical support in increasing public awareness and influencing foreign policy. From 1919 through 1921, over 9,700 editorials were published that were sympathetic to the Korean cause in American newspapers and periodicals. Despite their disenfranchisement, Korean Christians' religious partnerships with Protestants gave them leverage in increasing awareness for their cause.

Locked out from full participation in mainstream American society, these Asian American Christians merged their Christian identity with an ardent transnational orientation. Consequently, much of their focus on evangelism and missions was oriented toward their Asian homelands.

### **ETHNIC FAMILY CHURCHES (1946–1980)**

During World War II, the American government interned Japanese American Christians (along with the rest of their ethnic community) in camps as they were all suspected of being disloyal to the United States. In 1946, President Franklin Roosevelt signed the Rescission Act, which barred benefits to Filipino veterans who fought for the United States. As the Cold War began, Chinese Americans were interrogated by the government as Communists and illegal aliens, continuing the policies of treating Asian Americans as outsiders to be suspected. These acts of racialization marking Asian Americans as “forever foreigners” clearly impacted the community as they continued to remain institutionally segregated within their own ethnic communities. These institutions included community newspapers, sports organizations, and churches. At the same time, to join in America's postwar prosperity, Asian Americans sought to adopt American ways as much as they could. American reaction against the Civil Rights movement coincided with the upward mobility of Asian Americans and led to another stereotype of Asian Americans, that of the “model minority.” Unfortunately, this identity pitted Asian Americans against other impoverished minorities, as the latter became blamed for their status.

The growth of Asian ethnic congregations was tempered with the expectation that these groups would assimilate and join mainstream congregations, thereby obviating the need for them. Immediately after the war during the baby boom, Asian American congregations flourished as they ministered to growing families. In the 1950s, Cumberland had grown so large that they hosted twelve youth groups for different ages. Likewise, Japanese American churches constructed new facilities as they rebuilt their communities after internment. Nevertheless, sociologists expected that these ethnic congregations, like other white immigrant ones, would eventually decline as the groups assimilated.<sup>7</sup>

The processes of globalization and racialization again impacted these Christian communities to prevent their disappearance. Recognizing that their immigration policies were discriminatory in the wake of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the U.S. Congress passed the 1965 Immigration Act. This act not only opened up the possibility of family reunification for people throughout the world, but it also gave preferential status to those with particular professional and educational backgrounds. Subsequently, immigration from China and the Philippines rose dramatically, and congregations received newcomers into their pews. The number of Chinese churches in the San Francisco Bay Area, for example, increased from 15

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<sup>6</sup> Richard S. Kim, “Diasporic Politics and the Globalizing of America: Korean Immigrant Nationalism and the 1919 Philadelphia Korean Congress,” in *Asian Diasporas: New Formations, New Conceptions*, ed. Rhacel S. Parreñas and Lok C. D. Siu, 208 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> Frederick Bird, *A Study of Chinese Churches in the Bay Area* (Berkeley: Bureau of Community Research, 1968); Mark Mullins, “The Life-Cycles of Ethnic Churches in Sociological Perspective,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 14, no. 4 (1987): 321–334.

in 1950 to 158 by 1996. Immigration from Japan, however, remained stable as Japan itself benefitted from globalization and its increased economic production.

Just as the churches were impacted by global immigration policy, the 1960s civil rights movement racialized them as well. In response to the demands of African Americans, denominations institutionalized racial and ethnic caucuses to acknowledge their presence within their bodies and to further their growth. Asian Americans also demanded denominational support, which came in the form of staffing for church planting, training of ethnic ministers, retreats and camps, and curriculum support. In San Francisco, Cumberland joined congregations of other mainline denominations in the Chinese Christian Union. This union helped establish many ministries and organizations to serve the low-income immigrant population in Chinatown, such as through housing, employment, and health non-profits.

While these broader processes were reinvigorating the Asian American church, the congregations themselves often operated as ethnic extended families, where they preserved customs, transmitted cultural values and language, and encouraged bicultural identities. Not only were members inculcated with American Christian values of love, grace, and freedom, but they were encouraged to maintain strong Asian values, such as filial piety, collectivist loyalty, and love of learning. This congregational model—an Asian immigrant congregation with a smaller English ministry (EM), which is mostly for the youth—is the dominant form of Asian American church to this day.

## **ASIAN AMERICAN PANETHNIC CHURCH GROWTH (1981–2000)**

The Vietnam War and its aftermath brought major changes to the Asian American community, as it diversified with the influx of Vietnamese, Cambodian, Hmong, and other Southeast Asian groups. The Vietnamese have since become the fourth largest Asian ethnic group in the United States, following the Chinese, Filipinos, and Indians. The 1990 Immigration Act accentuated changes incurred by the 1965 Immigration Act, as the former prioritized skilled workers for immigration even more. Consequently, the Asian American community saw more immigrants of professional status and the corresponding development of ethnoburbs.<sup>8</sup> As one of the few ethnic institutions in the suburbs, Asian ethnic congregations grew rapidly and often operated as the community center for the new groups.

By this time, Ethnic Studies programs had been established on many college campuses, especially in California, and Asian American students taking these courses became racialized as Asian Americans, not just as ethnic Americans. Coming together on campuses, they learned of the common history and oppression of Asians in the United States, as well as of their oft-shared experiences as children of immigrants. Asian American Christian Fellowships, campus organizations which also began to emerge, further created Asian American networks which reinforced panethnic identities.

These networks made Asian Americans a viable spiritual target market for evangelicals. With the success of Evergreen Baptist Church in Los Angeles in the 1980s, more congregations began to identify themselves as Asian American churches for the sake of church growth. By moving away from the immigrant congregation model with an English ministry for children, the panethnic church model also enabled congregations to introduce new worship styles, to gain autonomy over church governance, and to initiate new ministries that were not only focused on ethnic communities. In fact, by 2000, ten percent of Bay Area Asian American congregations studied self-identified as being pan-ethnic rather than as ethnic specific. Cumberland, which had initiated a new church plant in Daly City, a suburb of San Francisco, was one of those congregations.

While evangelicals reached out to Asian American networks for evangelism and church growth, mainline denominations also established Asian American congregations, as well as seminary centers and

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<sup>8</sup> Terrance J. Reeves and Claudette E. Bennett, "We the People: Asians in the United States" (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2004).

publications, to promote issues of social justice. Acknowledging that Asian Americans face common stereotypes and face similar racial issues, the mainline churches tackled issues of affirmative action, anti-Asian violence, and immigration reform. This pan-ethnic church model often is the de facto form of congregation for second generation Asian American churches, even if they seek to be multiethnic.

## **ASIAN AMERICAN-LED MULTIETHNIC CONGREGATIONS (2001–PRESENT)**

Currently, most of the United States endorses a multicultural discourse which encourages respect for diversity and tolerance of cultural and racial differences. Ironically, because of a recession and job losses due to globalization, the U.S. has also seen an increase in anti-immigrant sentiment and legislation. The anti-immigrant policies of the Republican Party have not gone unnoticed by the Asian American and Latino populations, who overwhelmingly voted for President Barack Obama in the 2012 election. The desire to gain entrance into mainstream politics, culture, and society, while also maintaining ethnic and racial pride, is the current thrust of Asian American Christians, especially their ministers. Indeed, instead of establishing ethnic-specific and pan-Asian American congregations, most Asian American church plants are now multiethnic in target, as churches seek to reflect the Kingdom of God in its diversity.<sup>9</sup>

Asian American ministers of multiethnic congregations often employ a color-conscious approach, rather than a color-blind one, to unify their churches and to deal with race relations. They believe that Asian Americans are uniquely suited to be bridge-builders between racial groups in that they are less threatening than other minorities to whites and can relate to the structural discrimination faced by other people of color. Indeed, these ministers are much more likely to acknowledge the barriers posed by institutional racism and inequality than their white counterparts. Consequently, they acknowledge “multicultural racialization” by which they celebrate ethnic differences and acknowledge the salience of race in people’s life chances.<sup>10</sup>

Despite their intentions, many of these congregations remain predominantly Asian American in membership due to continued racialization and church growth by networks. Racialization shapes the membership of these multiethnic congregations through the process of the sociological “niche edge effect.”<sup>11</sup> When non-Asian Americans enter a predominantly Asian American church with an Asian American minister, they might first assume that the congregation is Asian American rather than multiethnic. Later, as they attempt to enter church life more fully, non-Asians likely would continue to feel like the minority despite the good intentions of the church. When non-Asian Americans identify the core of church leadership or small group fellowships to be Asian American, they would be more likely to be on the edge of the core. With less friendships and congregational ownership, non-Asians are thus more likely to leave the congregation than Asian Americans might. Even with mixed success in creating multiracial congregations and in reaching out to diverse neighborhoods, Asian American-led multiethnic churches are now the dominant model for new church plants by Asian American English-speaking ministers.<sup>12</sup>

Just as Asian American Christians have a diversity of church options now available, they also hold identities that are simultaneously diverse and flexible. Asian Americans may see themselves as ethnic, as Asian American, as ethnic American, as American, or solely as Christian depending on the situation.

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<sup>9</sup> Sharon Kim, *A Faith of Our Own: Second-Generation Spirituality in Korean American Churches* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Katherine Garces-Foley and Russell Jeung, “Asian American Evangelicals in Multiracial Church Ministry,” *Religions* 4 (2013): 190–208.

<sup>11</sup> Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided By Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford Press, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> Garces-Foley and Jeung, 196.

Whether they see themselves as authentically Asian or American oftentimes depend on their transnational networks or how they were racialized.

In sum, globalization and racialization have shaped the identities and congregations of Asian Americans differently according to the sociohistoric context. The early first generations maintained Asian identities since they were seen as perpetual foreigners. Even the early second generation, who were bicultural, looked to the East because they were limited in their access to mainstream society. After the Civil Rights Movement and the Immigration Act of 1965, however, the new second generation claimed ethnic American and panethnic Asian American identities to assert ethnic pride and to distinguish themselves from burgeoning immigrant congregations. Today, Asian American churches hold to a multicultural racialized discourse, in which they recognize both ethnic and racial distinctions as gifts of the Kingdom.

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