

Partnership: The Hope of Chinese American Churches

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Women in CACs

Vibrant, faithful women have helped to establish and build the Chinese church. Their robust faith and their engagement with the Scriptures empowered them to evangelize, preach, nurture and teach generations of Chinese Christians. In keeping with the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20), Chinese women committed themselves to bringing the gospel to people both near and far. In obedience to God's creation mandate (Gen. 1:28), many dedicated themselves to the reform of China and the social uplift of Chinese in the Diaspora. In 1944 the Anglican Communion ordained a Chinese woman named Florence Li Tim-oi. Yet, at the dawn of the second millennium in the United States, women only constitute a fraction of the clergy in evangelical Chinese American churches (CACs).

In June 2001, seventeen Chinese women attended the first Fullness of Christ conference in Dallas, Texas. All of them were active in ministry, and thirteen had received masters degrees from seminary. Solidly grounded in the Scriptures, gifted and well-educated, these women were serving as writers and editors, directors of Christian organizations, teachers, speakers, and pastors; yet only one individual was ordained. In the same year in a broader survey of Chinese women ministers in North America, only six out of sixty-three were ordained. In *Ambassadors for Christ's* 2002–2003 Directory of Chinese churches, approximately 6.8% of the ministers listed were women and only 3.7% were ordained. Generally the churches that recognized the ordination of women fell into three categories: they were independent churches with more *charismatic* leanings; they belonged to *mainline* denominations that proactively supported women; and/or they were *small* churches which were eager to call a pastor regardless of gender.

Chinese American Churches (CACs) regularly encourage men and women to dedicate themselves to missions and a life of service but are slow to confer official recognition of God's calling on our sisters. In fact, as long as women do not seek ordination, few churches seem to raise objections to their ministries. For example, CACs usually do not hesitate to call a woman as a youth minister or Christian education director, regardless of their stance on women's ordination. Apparently, CACs accept the leadership of women in women's and children's ministry

because the teaching responsibilities do not involve exercising authority over men, which many conservative CACs understand 1 Timothy 2:12 to forbid.¹ Practically, the acute need to provide spiritual nurture for the second and third generations and the dearth of American-born Chinese male ministers may outweigh other considerations. With more seminary graduates entering the church, more and more CACs are debating whether to include women on their pastoral staff.

The Influence of Confucianism & Fundamentalism

Until recently, critics have tended to attribute the unequal treatment of women in CACs wholly to Confucian patriarchy. For Chinese steeped in the teachings of Confucius, the hierarchical relationship between men and women provided stability in the family. The right ordering of relationships, in turn, ensured peace and harmony in society. While not exonerating Confucianism, recent research has made a strong case for shifting the burden of responsibility to American Fundamentalism.² The influence of Fundamentalism is most noticeable in the doctrinal and political stances of second generation CAC leaders. Pastors in CACs serve as the theological gatekeepers; consequently what they believe constitutes what the vast majority of their congregation believes. Conservative evangelical CACs adhere firmly to the five core doctrines of Fundamentalism: the virgin birth, Christ's substitutionary atonement, the reality of the Bible's miracles, the inerrancy of Scripture, and Christ's bodily return. In conservative evangelical circles, the five essentials of the faith are rarely debated but what has sparked enormous controversy is the issue of women's place in the church.

In so many respects, conservative evangelical CACs have uncritically assumed the same positions as their middle-class, white counterparts. For example, CACs presume that all women's ordination is part of the same liberal agenda that is said to lead to the demise of society. Further, like the majority culture, CACs are unaware that many of the policies that they support benefit the rich few and do not address the needs of the growing poor. Protesting the moral laxity of American contemporary culture, seeking absolute truth in a sea of relativism, CACs have sought refuge in a bastion of conservatism, unaware that some "American values and policies" have actually hurt foreign



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relations with our countries of origin and undermined the well-being of many immigrant and minority populations in the United States, including our own.

While American Fundamentalism has exercised an almost monolithic influence on second generation CACs, the fabric of Confucianism is ever-changing. Unlike in Japan or Korea, Confucianism in China has suffered massive upheaval. Communism has uprooted centuries of traditional Chinese culture, a landscape once dominated by Confucianism.

Yet a Chinese iconoclastic tradition also developed in response to the state-established Confucian ideology. Such a voice of protest fueled the Taiping rebellion, Sun Yat-sen's revolution, and Christian activism in the early twentieth century in China. Timothy Tseng, a historian of Asian-American Christianity, believes that this iconoclastic tradition still continues to fuel Chinese evangelicals today.² Yet the more that Chinese assimilate American mores and values, the more it seems that there is a shift away from iconoclastic thinking and an embracing of the status quo, both Confucian and mainstream evangelicalism. Thus it is, perhaps, understandable that second generation Chinese evangelicals, who feel more of the pressure to conform to mainstream society, are more inclined to adopt a conservative view toward gender than their parents. First generation Chinese Christians, on the other hand, seem more open to the possibility of enlisting women in ministry.

Through extensive study, first generation Chinese biblical scholars have come to a similar conclusion. They have carefully analyzed the biblical texts and the historical and sociological forces at work in shaping gender and have increasingly written and spoken of their support of women.³ Older and secure in their callings, they have publicly challenged the status quo of CACs. Their students and disciples, in turn, are expressing greater acceptance of women in ministry, despite the heavy influence of American Fundamentalist conservatism on the church.

Partnership as a Model of Ministry

In a majority of CACs, the first generation still retains much of the authority to set vision and make decisions in the church. Older brothers and sisters can be instrumental in creating space for second generation women by grooming them for leadership, collaborating with them, and opening opportunities for ordained ministry to them. Pastors, likewise, who believe in women's leadership in the church can provide good, solid, biblical teaching on the subject from the pulpit, in Sunday School, and in Bible studies. Ordained alumni from evangelical seminaries open to women's ordained leadership can encourage both their female and male members to attend seminaries which provide a more balanced perspective on the issue. The first generation has a legacy of wisdom and experience to pass on to the second genera-

tion of working within existing structures for reform. In return, once educated in the United States, the second generation can introduce new assumptions and ideas that can inform how ministry can be improved in successive generations in CACs and in different parts of the world. Together, groups of first and second generation Chinese Americans can work together on books and projects and in think tanks.

One of the most encouraging signs of progress in the CACs is the growing partnership of men and women. Brothers are growing bolder in speaking out for their sisters and enlisting them in various capacities from teaching to committee work. Sisters are insisting on the benefit of soliciting the participation of men in making churches more hospitable places for men and women and including them in all facets of ministries, including child care and marriage counseling. Sisters and brothers are serving together on pastoral staffs. With brothers and sisters joining forces, creative possibilities exist to minister the way Priscilla and Aquila did or two by two as Jesus instructed his disciples. By incorporating singles and families in their missions expeditions, the eighteenth-century Moravians demonstrated the advantage of teamwork in evangelism and church planting. Such an approach can work well in the CACs.

As those with power and vision in the church open the doors for others to serve, church leaders will be emulating their Master's approach to serving in the kingdom. Christ entrusted his disciples with his authority and gave them power from on high. He *distributed* his authority, thereby spreading it to successive generations and to the furthest ends of the earth. As co-laborers with Christ, will we do the same, empowering those who are weak and giving voice to the voiceless? Will we divest ourselves of our own agendas and prerogatives to serve the body of Christ? Will we join hands together to advance God's kingdom? For together we can display the love of our Redeemer, who brought healing and power to all who believed.

Notes

1. For an alternative and compelling interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:12, understood in its literary and historical context, see Catherine Clark Kroeger and Richard Clark Kroeger's ground-breaking book, *I Suffer Not a Woman: Rethinking 1 Timothy 2:11-15 in Light of Ancient Evidence* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).

2. Timothy Tseng, the Director of the Asian American Center and Associate Professor of American Religious History at American Baptist Seminary of the West, wrote his reflections in an email to the author dated August 27, 2005.

3. See Cecilia Yau, Dora Wang, and Lily Lee's seminal work *A Passion for Fullness: Examining the Women's Identity and Roles from Biblical, Historical, and Sociological Perspectives* (Hong Kong: China Graduate School of Theology, 1997). The three authors also compiled and edited a collection of articles by respected first generation CAC scholars and pastors in *Gender Reconciliation: Men and Women Become One in Christ* (United States: Fullness in Christ Fellowship, 2004). Both works are in Chinese.