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Ambivalent Civism: Evangelical Youth, Public Commitment, and Moral Conservatism in Taiwan

Juliette Duléry

Introduction

In the 1990s, Protestant communities in Taiwan underwent a religious revival. This shift in the national Protestant landscape was not unique to the country, but rather started in the United States the same decade, during what became known as the “charismatic third wave.” Compared to its predecessors, what characterized this “renewal” was its emphasis on achieving socio-political transformation. The theocratic goal of this movement is to conquer the world and bring the end times, in order to establish the Kingdom of God on earth (Gagné 2024).

In Taiwan, this revival took place during the period of democratization that followed the end of the martial law era. The country’s policy of religious *laissez-faire* (Laliberté 2009) benefitted the evangelical and charismatic movements, which, through their connection to transnational networks from South Korea, Singapore, and the United States (Rubinstein 1991; Iap – Sween 2015; Yang *et al.* 2017; Huang 2017; Lin 2020), gained influence in the country’s religious and political landscape. Indeed, although only 5.5% of the Taiwanese population is Protestant (Academia Sinica 2019), these believers are over-represented in middle and upper classes, and therefore have both direct and indirect influence over the debates and public policies of the country (Zhai *et al.* 2011). Moreover, charismatic and evangelical churches have attracted an increasing number of new believers in recent decades. Part of their success resides in the deep and individual relationship with God they promise to their believers (who are called to receive “spiritual gifts” such as speaking in tongues, healing prophecies, deliverance from demons). Another key factor lies in their adoption of growth and marketing techniques, helping them to retain and mobilize believers.

Sociologists of religions have documented, in other parts of the world, the role played by conservative Christian groups in creating and feeding illiberalism (Lo Mascolo 2024).

Juliette Duléry, PhD, is a research and teaching fellow in political science at the Université de Rouen-Normandie. She is specialized on evangelical Protestantism, conservative mobilizations, gender, and comparative politics in Taiwan and China. She presented this paper at the symposium “Shaping the Outlook on Life – Education and Religion in Chinese Contexts” which was organized by Esther-Maria Guggenmos, Lund University, in cooperation with Lund Mission Society. The symposium took place in Lund on May 4, 2023. See also the conference report by Prof. Guggenmos in *RCTC* 2023, No. 3, pp. 23-26.

The global trend of the “return of religion” in the public sphere is rooted (Casanova 1994; Zeng 2017), for evangelical believers, in a dominionist project of establishing the Kingdom of God on earth (Gonzalez 2014; Mahieddin 2018). Education plays a central role in this project. In interviews done for prior research (Duléry 2023),¹ I have found that some churches now specialize in the “mountain of education” and target the youth.

In the case of Taiwan, charismatic sinophone churches draw on contemporary Mandopop to attract the youth (Moskowitz 2009), and the growth of several charismatic mega-churches was fueled by their youth ministry and cultural outreach. This is the case of the New Life Church (Xin shengming xiaozu jiaohui 新生命小組教會), the Bread of Life Church (Taibei lingliang tang 台北靈糧堂), or the Hsin-tian Torch Church (Huoba jiaohui 火把教會) (Ho 2016; Huang 2017). The strategies described by church leaders in my interviews raise important questions for the relationship between Protestantism and education in Taiwan. Indeed, historically, Presbyterian groups promoted mass education in order to spread the gospel in China and Taiwan. At the turn of the 19th century, missionary work in China was part of a “civilizing mission” (Hirono 2008; Goossaert – Palmer 2011). Schools and hospitals were built, and Christianity was associated with an “education-transformation” process that resulted in the emergence of a new intelligentsia (Bil-lioud – Thoraval 2007; Jiang 2021). Today, however, it seems that the aim of evangelicals is not anymore to educate in order to convert, but to use education as a tool to permeate the secular society.

Contemporary evangelical and charismatic networks worldwide also connect education to new neoliberal spaces of training and personal development, such as artistic, entrepreneurial and cultural extra-curricular activities (Galonnier – Los Rios 2015). Popular culture is indeed a key area of development for these communities (Young 2012; Fer 2017). As an example, the rapid expansion of the Hillsong Church from Australia is linked to their music and youth ministry (Hynes 2013).

In this conference paper, I investigate the shifting modalities of Protestant influence over education. It will answer the following question: How do evangelical and charismatic educational practices translate into a socio-political goal to conquer the world?

To answer the research question outlined above, I am focusing on the case of the Taipei New Life Church, a charismatic church that targets young believers and has developed activities at all levels of the Taiwanese educational system. I have conducted a four-month fieldwork in Taipei (January to May 2018), where I have interviewed 41 church leaders and ordinary believers. I also rely on the data of my thesis, in which I have conducted 120 semi-directed interviews with religious leaders in various arenas of influence, mainly religion, business/corporate life, but also government/politics, arts/entertainment/media and the nonprofit/social sector, and family in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China (Duléry 2020; Duléry 2023). During this fieldwork research, I have discovered that these evangelical leaders are at the forefront of charismatic educational influence, even though they do not always recognize it publicly. The church is built next to the Taipei Fuhsing Private School (Taibei sili fuxing shiyan gaoji zhongxue 台北私立復興實驗高級中學), and the

¹ Interviews with an elder and a believer of the New Life Church, both company CEOs, Taipei, 2018.

New Life Church rents the school's facilities for the Sunday service. This is part of their strategy to influence this elite elementary institution.

The senior pastor of New Life Church, Abraham Ku, started his community in 1996. According to J. F., elder at New Life Church, Ku was previously a member of a “local church” in Taipei, the Congregation of Zhonghe (Zhonghe libaitang 中和禮拜堂).² In the 1990s, the church experienced a charismatic transformation and became filled with the Holy Spirit, modeled on the charismatic “revival” of the South-Korean Yoido Full Gospel Church. Another influence from Singapore is the organization in cell groups and youth mission. After the leaders visited the Faith Community Baptist Church in Singapore, Ku adopted a cell group model, which provided an organizational base to mobilize the believers in order to transform society (Huang 2017). The City Harvest Church in Singapore is known for its glamorous leader Kong Hee and his Mandopop singer wife, Ho Yeow Sun (Huang 2017). After visiting this church, the senior pastor Abraham Ku declared that his mission is to “influence the entertainment industry and pop culture.” Taiwanese actors, singers, and entertainers have been massively converted to Christianity (Huang 2017).

In this conference paper, I will mainly focus on the preliminary results I have found about the tactics developed by leaders of New Life Church to influence the youth. First, I will analyze the role of the New Life Church as an educational provider at the grassroots level. Second, I will examine the various neoliberal strategies developed by the congregation to appeal to the youth. Third, I argue that inside the church, moral conservatism serves as a tool to transform young believers into obedient subjects and children.

New Life Church as an Educational Provider at the Grassroots Level

Churches in Taiwan belong to the category of “nonprofit organizations” (*feiyingli zuzhi* 非營利組織) (Ho 2016), which refers to organizations that are neither companies nor public administrations and that belong to a “third space.” This fits with the strategy of New Life Church to shape society at the grassroots and community level and to provide multiple welfare services to the population, in the area of education, welfare, entertainment, and business. The believers of the church are “suburban warriors,” a term invented by Lisa McGirr to study the spiritual battle led by evangelical activists in the United States, who plant churches at the community level, in their homes, and in their companies – and within family associations and school boards (McGirr 2001). The mission of the church activists is to “enter and serve the district” (*fuwu* 服務), by organizing charity events for example, and inviting companies, the neighbors and their families to join (Ho 2016). The line between the company and the church has become fuzzy at the district level (Huang 2017).

The focus of New Life Church on education is not new for a Protestant community and shows that the community is rooted in a Protestant educational legacy. However, contrasting with the public role that the Presbyterian church in Taiwan used to play, the end of the martial law, followed by the so-called Taiwan “economic miracle” (1987), has opened up

2 J. Duléry, Interview, J. F., elder at New Life Church, Taipei, 2018.

new spaces for the expansion of evangelical communities, enabling them to develop new creative outreach tactics targeting the youth.

Reaching Young Newcomers through Artistic, Professional, and Civic Training

As Protestant churches are not supposed to influence the secular society anymore, New Life Church has developed completely different strategies to attract the youth. The church has developed a more flexible and neoliberal repertoire of educational tactics. New Life Church seeks to conquer alternative and creative spaces of education, such as new media and pop culture.

First, New Life Church seeks to enter the space of the “new media” (*xinmeiti* 新媒體), to shape the youth culture that defines the mainstream culture (*liuxing wenhua* 流行文化). The strategy of the “Wall-less Church” has become even more central to New Life Church’s identity during the Covid-19 pandemic.³ For the New Life Church leaders, the young believers are indeed “hidden in the cellphones.” The senior pastor, Abraham Ku, has also dyed his hair in purple to gain access to young believers. As a brand, New Life Church has built for example a fanbase on Facebook to advertise and promote its religious contents online. Young individuals thus become “followers” of the church. It increases the public notoriety of the church and makes the community more performant and efficient at a low cost.

Second, another way of attracting young believers is to “make the culture of the heavenly kingdom a mainstream culture.” New Life Church seeks to connect to pop culture. The church is known for having successfully converted hundreds of Taiwanese singers, artists, and entertainers. High-profile Taiwanese Mandopop singers such as Tsai Tsing or Chou Jie-lun are members of the community.⁴ More importantly, the church also provides new artistic resources and training opportunities to attract young newcomers. The revival strategies of the community include the organization of fashion shows and of singing and dancing competitions. These extra-curricular activities contribute to the shaping of new talented and successful citizens.⁵ The acquisition of artistic competences is seen as “gifts” bestowed by the Holy-Spirit. They define the norms of success through an ideal of talent and creativity.

Third, New Life Church seeks to conquer innovative business spaces such as the technology industry. Entrepreneurs are important brokers between the church and the young newcomers, as they can offer business resources to the community to mobilize young individuals. Professionals, artists, or businessmen who are members of the community “enter the schools” to organize extra-curricular workshops targeting young students. For example, the elder J. F., who is a key leader of New Life Church, is also the chief executive

3 J. Duléry, Interview, J. F., Taipei, 2018.

4 “The Christian Testimony of Tsai Ching,” Truelove blog, www.youtube.com/watch?v=7CzSivAtD1U, accessed March 1, 2024.

5 J. Duléry, Interview, J. F., Taipei, 2018.

of an environmental engineering company.⁶ He appears regularly in schools to teach students how to conduct an interview or how to write their curriculum vitae. After the class, he asks the students to hand in their curriculum vitae, so he can transfer it to Christian companies that are recruiting. New Life Church thus provides believers with an important network system to facilitate their first entry in the marketplace (Kwon *et al.*, 1997). The strategic use of business to convert young newcomers reflects the adoption by New Life Church of the business model of multi-level marketing, also known as relationship marketing or network marketing (Luca 2011). Multi-level marketing is a direct selling method that is rooted in the American evangelical business milieu. Adopting the business model of multi-level marketing, cell groups networking strategy involves the recruitment by the community leader of newcomers, who are integrated in the network of the church and have to prove their loyalty to the group by creating in turn a new cell group and by recruiting more disciples. The community thus generates new bonds between clients and employees.

P. C., another active member of the church whom I have met, is the chief executive of a French-Singaporean start-up specialized in the tech industry (Internet of things). He explained to me that each year, New Life Church organizes a national forum (*guoshi luntan* 國事論壇) with the support of the public administration at the city level.⁷ The leaders of the community are invited to exhibit what they have done to educate the young believers. The main exhibitors are Christian leaders who work in the tech industry. The leaders of the virtual reality headset company HTC Vive are the main exhibitors. Municipal organizations of different cities such as Tainan, Yilan, New Taipei, and Chiayi are also invited to exhibit plans of the city of tomorrow. Public actors thus collaborate with religious ones to serve the youth and educate them to become responsible citizens and publicly engaged actors who are committed to new issues such as environment or technology.

Through these new alternative channels, the church can become an influential public actor, and can create new ties with the public administration as a grassroots religious organization. As new converts, young believers are also expected to commit themselves to the church's activities. By becoming members of New Life Church, they are, however, re-affiliated to new educational structures through the mediation of moral conservatism.

Logics of Re-affiliation to Moral Conservatism

When they are recruited to a cell group, the young newcomers are affiliated to new religious networks and integrated into new interpersonal bonds (Bainbridge – Stark 1980). In the case of Taipei New Life Church, young believers are inserted into power relations that reproduce Confucian patriarchal ideals as well as age-based and gender-based norms, where the young individual has to show respect and adhere to the religious authority of older members and senior leaders of the church. Cell groups are divided into age groups, ranging from 0 to 100 years old, catering for primary students, middle school students,

⁶ J. Duléry, Interview, J. F., Taipei, 2018.

⁷ J. Duléry, Interview, P. C., Taipei, 2018. See also www.newlife.org.tw/multi-media-2/church-youth-forum/, accessed March 1, 2024.

high school students, university students, young professionals, parents, and retired persons. According to the elder J. F.:⁸

The family is the core ... the father is the head of the family, he is the pastor of the community, he has to guide his children, to educate them. For example, I belong to a family [a cell group]. We hope that we can reach the two [age-]levels below us. We have to evangelize our neighbors, in particular those who are not married yet, or students from university to primary school. We have to reach the age groups that are below us. This way, a young individual will have a future. Otherwise, the believers I am connected with would all come from the same background as me, they would all have already built a home like me. If that was the case, it would be difficult to integrate young persons in the community. A church ages easily (laohua 老化).

The educational values of New Life Church reflect a combination of Protestant and Confucian ideals. The cell group is the core unit where the young believers are educated to obey their elders. At the same time, they also have to commit to church activities in a neoliberal way, by undergoing artistic, entrepreneurial, and technological training or by serving in the public sphere and various events (national forums). The believers are integrated in religious networks but also learn their place. They are re-affiliated to traditional family values and age-based norms.

Conclusion

In this conference paper, I have examined the commitment of young believers to the socio-political program set out by the evangelical New Life Church to conquer the world. The New Life Church provides various welfare services to the population at the grassroots level in order to influence society. In spite of its civic role in the Taiwanese public sphere, the New Life Church leaders have also imported neoliberal strategies in their community in order to attract young believers, by offering them artistic, professional, or civic training, and an opportunity to serve in their neighborhoods. Contrasted with the public role that the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan used to play regarding education, the New Life Church supports new educational venues at the extra-curricular level, and within both the public and private spheres. The objective of the church is to foster the education of responsible citizens, gifted and talented artists, and good children. At the community level, the shaping of the new generation is related to moral conservatism and to their re-affiliation to the church leaders' and parental figures' authority.

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8 J. Duléry, Interview, J. F., Taipei, 2018.

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