

Asian Americans for Jesus: Changing the Face of Campus Evangelicalism

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One out of four Evangelical college students at New York City colleges and universities are Asian American (Carnes and Yang 2004; Sax et al. 1997). At Harvard, Asian Americans constitute 70 percent of the Harvard Radcliffe Christian Fellowship, and given the popularity of Evangelical Christian fellowships, one can easily spot students who proudly don t-shirts with phrases like “the Asian Awakening” (Chang 2000: 1). At Yale, Campus Crusade for Christ is 90 percent Asian, whereas twenty years ago it was 100 percent white. On the West Coast, the Asian American membership at Stanford’s InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF) from 1989 to 1999, increased by 84 percent, compared to a 31 percent increase in its overall membership (Busto 1996). Meanwhile, UC Berkeley and UCLA have more than fifty Asian Christian fellowships and most of their members are Asian American (Busto 1996; Chang 2000; Hong 2000). UCLA alone has more than ten Korean Christian related fellowships. On most college campuses, you have a far better chance of finding a Chinese Christian fellowship than a Chinese Buddhist club.

Responding to this growth, some in the evangelical community have dubbed Asian American evangelicals as “God’s new whiz kids,” who not only excel in school, but are exemplars of evangelical piety and devotion (Busto 1996; Jeung 2002). Asian Americans are stereotyped not only as “the model minority,” but “the moral minority,” which other evangelicals would do well to emulate. While Asian Americans are being touted as the model moral minority, Asian American evangelical leaders note that being involved in campus ministries has become a “cool” thing to do for Asian American college students.¹ Why is this? Why are Asian Americans embracing Christianity and turning to evangelical campus ministries?

Behind the Growth

Asian Americans account for roughly 4 percent of the U.S. population. But they make-up more than 15 percent of the student enrollment at Ivy League colleges like Yale, Harvard, and Columbia, and more than 20 percent of the student enrollment at Stanford, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and California Institute of Technology. The numbers are even higher in some of the public universities in California. Over 40 percent of the student enrollment at UC Berkeley, UCLA, and UC Irvine are Asian Americans (Hong 2000; Zhou and Gatewood 2000).² Numbers alone,

however, don't tell the whole story.

Most of the students in campus ministries have former religious ties. Given this, the fact that the largest group of Asian American campus evangelicals, Korean Americans, is a mostly churched people is important. Seventy percent of over a million Koreans in the United States identify themselves as Christians and regularly attend the 3,500 or so Korean churches every Sunday (Carnes and Yang 2004; Hurh and Kim 1990). Indeed, it is difficult to find a Korean immigrant who is not part of a Korean church. Many of the children of Korean immigrants who matriculate into colleges and universities, thus, come from church-backgrounds, which can lead them to take part in campus ministries once they are in college.³ Chinese Americans, who also make-up a sizable population of Asian American evangelicals, are not as likely to be churched. Nevertheless, it is estimated that a third of Chinese Americans are Christian—far more than the estimated 1 to 5 percent of the Christian population in Chinese societies—and Christian churches are the most predominant religious institutions among Chinese Americans (Carnes and Yang 2004; Yang 1999).

Church background, however, is also not enough. Campus ministries must be appealing too. And they are. In addition to Bible studies and worship gatherings, campus ministries offer multiple opportunities for social gatherings. They have pizza parties, special banquets, study sessions, trips to amusement parks, sports events, bonfires at the beach, and retreats into the mountains. In campus ministries, students can meet life-long friends and even find one's future spouse. As a staff member of IVCF explains, "This is not just a place of worship; it is a place of community where you develop deep bonds with people."

Newly arrived students on campus have a lot to gain by joining these communities. During midterm and final exam weeks, the older brothers and sisters in the campus ministry will cook and prepare special care packages for the new members. Someone in the campus ministries will remember their birthdays, help them run errands, and assist them if their car breaks down. They can also turn to fellow "brothers and sisters" in the campus ministry for advice on everything from relationships to how to pass a biochemistry exam. What is more, all of these social benefits are offered free of charge. Anyone who is willing to join is technically welcome and can obtain the benefits of joining this "home away from home."

In his in-depth field research at an IVCF chapter at McMaster University in Ontario, Paul A. Bramadat (2000) also finds that campus ministries function as an alternative institution that enables students to work through a sense of "otherness" as Christians on a secular campus. IVCF offers a unique Evangelical counterpart to every secular student social function and organizes meetings and events that help students to address the cognitive and social dissonance that they face as Evangelical Christians in secular academia. For ethnic minorities, however, campus ministries solve more than their spiritual estrangement. They also shield them from marginalization as ethnic and racial minorities.

In ethnically or racially homogenous campus ministries where most Asian Americans are clustered, Asian Americans can take their ethnicity for granted. Their race is a "non-issue"; they don't need to worry about it. In his study of Chinese American and Korean American evangelicals, Anthony

Alumkal (2002) finds that Asian Americans retreat into evangelical campus fellowships as an act of self preservation in a racially hostile setting. Rudy V. Busto (1996) similarly argues that Asian Americans find refuge in evangelicalism on the “increasingly racialized college campus where Asian American students are imaged as competitive, overrepresented and culturally monolithic...” (37). Examining the reorganization of Chinese and Japanese American congregations around a new pan-ethnic Asian American identity, Russell Jeung (2000) adds that contemporary evangelicalism gives Asian Americans a chance to escape the undesirable aspects of their racial status by adopting an alternative identity, by making Christianity the locus of their identity. Ethnic and racial distinctions are thus transcended through a relationship with God. Asian Americans can turn to many of the ethnically or racially homogeneous evangelical fellowships to escape a society where “race” continues to matter.

Asian American pastors and staff leaders are quick to point out that Asian American campus ministries also provide Asian American students opportunities for leadership, which they would not otherwise have in other white-dominated campus ministries. One of these leaders explains, “When I went to the headquarters [of one of the largest campus ministries in the U.S.]...do you know? It is still all white...no blacks at the top...It is still white at the top. So if Asians want to move up in power, they can’t do it over there.” Asian Americans therefore have the best chance of “moving up” and exercising their power within ethnically or racially homogeneous Asian American campus ministries.

Moreover, Asian Americans are creating their own habitus through campus ministries. Studies on churched second-generation Korean Americans as well as Chinese Americans note that the second-generation are not happy in their parents’ church. Many find the immigrant church to be patriarchal, hierarchical, divisive, dry, rigid, first-generation focused, and disconnected to their cultural and spiritual needs (Jeung 2005; Kim and Kim 1996; Kim 2004; Pai et al. 1987). As an Asian American evangelical puts it: “It is too old school.” In this situation, campus ministries for Asian American evangelicals, which are most often organized by the second-generation themselves, offer a refreshing change.⁴ They can “do their own thing.” They can sing the most contemporary worship songs and listen to messages catered to their experiences as Asian American college students. Along these lines, many leaders of campus ministries deliberately try to reach out to Asian American students with the belief that they are a distinct group with unique needs and cultural backgrounds.

Asian Americans, even those who are third-or fourth-generation, are believed to be bound by common cultural traditions, beliefs, and values that become the basis of a distinct pan-ethnic group identity (Jeung 2005). For example, in his book *Invitation to Lead: Guidance for Emerging Asian American Leaders* (2003), Paul Takunaga, the national coordinator for IVCF’s Asian American Ministries, argues that Asian Americans share what he calls an “Asian DNA.” Characteristically, Asian Americans, particularly those of East Asian descent, are described as more self-controlled, disciplined, fatalistic, obedient to authority, humble, and collective relative to the European American population. They are viewed as more shame- and guilt-ridden and bound by “liminality”—being in-between two worlds. These perceived differences motivate campus pastors to create campus ministries especially catered to Asian Americans.

The fact that mainline seminaries educate seminarians about the specific theological concerns, perspectives, and social issues of Asian Americans and offer programs and courses tailored toward them further supports the formation of Asian American campus ministries. There is even a sense that religious institutions should play a role in reconnecting Asian Americans with their ethnic and familial heritages (Jeung 2002). Picking up on this, some campus ministry staff reason that ethnic campus ministries can help Asian American students to sort out their ethnic identity issues in ways that other organizations like ethnic studies programs can not. Ethnic studies courses teach students about their history, culture, and racial oppression, but do not practically help second-generation Asian American students to work through their identity issues as “liminal” beings. As an Asian American campus ministry staff explains: “Asian American studies teaches you that you are oppressed, [they teach you] about internal racism, institutional oppression, what have you... but then what? There is no way out of it... you are just left hanging. But with campus ministries, you have Jesus [the Savior], who is all powerful and loving, who will help you.” In other words, there is a higher power that can help Asian Americans to sort out their cultural tensions, identity issues, and free them from oppression.⁵

Impacting the Campus

Asian American campus ministries tend not to be politically active. They focus on fellowship gatherings and may have a few community service activities and mission trips to nearby countries, but they do not actively engage themselves in politics in or outside of the college campus. Picking up on this, a religious organization coordinator at UC Berkeley reflects: “With a sudden growth in the Asian student population, the campus changed...it is not the radical campus that it once was in the 60’s or 70’s. The general feel is more conservative, there is less political activism, protest.” While they may not be politically active, Asian American evangelicals are certainly enlivening and diversifying the campus Christian community and innovating new ways of worship.

Across the United States, Asian American groups are pioneering a revival of a cappella singing. On West Coast college campuses, Korean American evangelicals are known for their cutting-edge praise music. Students of other ethnicities commonly note, “Oh, the Koreans have a great worship team.” Indeed they do. Although Asian American evangelicals’ praise is largely similar to other evangelicals, it is often more cutting edge. They use the latest praise music coming out of the United Kingdom as well as the United States—before the other campus ministries do the same. They tend to use more modern musical instruments like electric pianos, bass, and guitar than some of the other traditionally white-dominant campus ministries.

The presence of Asian American students itself, has also made the campus evangelical community more diverse. Taking part in campus ministries is no longer just a predominately white phenomenon. Looking at the list of campus organizations or walking through the rows of campus organizations trying to attract students on the popular walkways of college campuses tells us that the campus Christian community has diversified. Moreover, the emergence of Asian American evangelicals has pushed the campus Christian community leaders to create more ethnic and multiethnic ministries and think seriously about issues like “racial reconciliation.” There is more

talk of worshipping with the “entire body of Christ” and moving beyond the racial boundaries that divide the rest of society. A few Asian American evangelical leaders are even forming multiethnic ministries that draw a more ethnically diverse student body.

Despite genuine intentions and attempts to pursue more integrated fellowships, separate ethnic or race-based ministries remain the most popular. Asian American evangelicals have a visible presence and are known for their religious fervor and innovative worship, but their campus ministries run separately from the more established white Evangelical campus ministries. This isn't just the Asian Americans' or other ethnic minorities' doing. It is because white students want their own ethnic fellowship too. The campus evangelical community has diversified, but it is not integrated.

A student involved in IVCF talks about a family friend, Bob (who is white) and his experience searching for a Christian campus fellowship at UC Berkeley: “Bob's parents wanted him to get hooked up with a campus Christian ministry and were concerned that he had not yet done so. When Bob's family asked him why he did not [join a Christian campus fellowship] he said that ‘all of the fellowships are mostly Asian’ and said that he did not feel comfortable in any one of them.” In the end, Bob joined a Christian fraternity instead.

Bob is not alone in his discomfort. When Asian American students increasingly start filling the seats in their campus ministry, white students take flight. They leave in search of their own racially homogenous campus ministry where they can remain the majority, where they don't have to “deal with diversity.” This is what happened at several IVCF chapters. When some IVCF chapters started to proactively promote racial reconciliation and give ethnic minority students more leadership positions, white students left. Many left for campus ministries or similar alternative organizations where they don't have to “reconcile” their differences and compromise their majority group status.

Recognizing that neither white nor the growing numbers of minority students, namely Asian Americans, want to pursue a truly integrated multiethnic community, campus ministries have created multiple parallel ethnic campus ministries. Larger established campus evangelical organizations like Campus Crusade for Christ and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship both have separate ethnic ministries for Hispanics, Blacks, and Asian Americans. On some college campus on the west and east coasts, CCC and IVCF even have ethnic ministries specifically for Korean Americans (e.g. Korea-CCC and Korea-IVCF). Thus, while there are talks about racial reconciliation and a rainbow colored heaven, integrated multiracial campus ministries remain out of reach.⁶ The emergence of Asian American evangelicals has only contributed to the growth of parallel ethnic ministries on college campuses where diversity does not necessarily translate into integration.

Endnotes

¹ A few of the more zealous leaders within the Asian American Christian community boast that “God's spirit” has left the European Americans and are now filling the Asians who are newer to the faith.

2 Students from Asian countries also make-up a significant portion of the foreign student population on many American colleges and universities (Siden 1994).

3 In fact, Korean American students can scout for campus ministries even before they set foot in college through the networks and information available via the Korean church grape-vine.

4 "With campus ministries, you don't have to pay to get friends... Whoever you may be, [campus ministries] will welcome you with open arms."

As a Chinese American student suggests in the above quote, Asian Americans can also turn to evangelical Christian campus ministries because other alternative student organizations that offer close knit community, namely sororities and fraternities, are not as welcoming of Asian Americans. Fresh out of high school and away from home perhaps for the first time in their lives, students seek community and a secure sense of belonging—a family away from family.

5 Speaking of cultures, religious leaders and scholars suspect that Asian Americans are drawn to evangelicalism because their familial cultural background and overall group-character mesh well with conservative evangelical faith. Evangelicalism's emphasis on hard work, discipline, self-control, and obedience compliment Asian Americans' familial and cultural upbringing. Turning to evangelical campus ministries can help Asian Americans to stay on the model minority path of socioeconomic mobility (Busto 1996). It can encourage them to work hard and live puritanical, disciplined, self controlled and obedient lives that "honor one's parents." It is better that Asian American college students spend their free time singing praise and "hanging out" with Christian friends than drinking, partying, and exploring alternative lifestyles with their newfound freedom in college.

Campus ministries, particularly Asian American campus ministries, also look relatively more "model" compared to the other student clubs on campus. Unlike other student organizations like fraternities and sororities, campus ministries welcome all interested students and offer Asian American evangelical students a morally safe community. As one student put it, it provides an opportunity to "meet good friends who aren't going to go crazy." They will accept you even if you don't have stellar social skills and don't look like Barbie or Ken. Similarly, ethnic Christian fellowships may look safer than strictly ethnic student associations like the Korean Student Associations, which students connect with mostly partying, drinking, and "hooking up."

6 Along these lines, Asian American Evangelicals are accused of doing little if anything to challenge the stereotypical images of Asian Americans and offering a viable critique of anti-Asian racism. Asian American campus evangelicals have adopted the Evangelical theology of their white counterparts. In his ethnographic study of second-generation Chinese American and Korean American Evangelicals, Alumkal (2002) finds that Asian American Evangelicals are largely unaware of the Anglo-American roots of Evangelical hermeneutics and treat such beliefs as essential characteristics of Christianity. As he writes, "...many second-generation Asian American Evangelicals do not appear to be interested in developing their own contributions to Christian theology. Instead, they remain committed to the theology of American Evangelicalism with little awareness of its roots in Anglo-American culture" (Alumkal 2002: 249). Similarly, Timothy Tseng (2002) finds that second-generation Chinese American Evangelicals' biblical interpretations are bound by the European immigrant perceptions of identity construction and a "white American

'Evangelical universalism' that subordinates racial identities" (251).

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