

# IMMIGRANT CHURCHES IN 'MULTICULTURAL' CANADA

## The Case of Japanese and Chinese Churches

Makio MORIKAWA

The history of Christian churches in the Japanese and Chinese communities in Canada, and the social roles they have played in their respective communities, show considerable similarities. In both communities, Christianity was introduced in the late 19th century and the first ethnic (Japanese and Chinese) churches were established by the end of the century (Wickberg et al. 1982, Lai 1988). The churches were active in helping immigrants adapt to the new environment through English classes, youth activities and other benevolent services. They provided a locus where Japanese and Chinese could congregate and protect themselves from the hostile and discriminatory attitude of the host society. They were the primary bodies which connected the immigrants through congregational affiliations with Canadian mainstream society. And they were among the most popular ethnic organizations for the Japanese and the Chinese, serving in their heyday a third to one half of the entire population of either community. Although in present-day Canada, they can no longer lay claim to such large memberships, they are still the largest of any of the religious bodies in the respective ethnic communities.

In addition to a general history of this nature, there are other fea-

tures which are shared by most of the Japanese and Chinese churches. Except for some 'new' Chinese churches of various denominational backgrounds which will be discussed later, the majority of the Japanese and Chinese churches, or their original congregations, established themselves in the decades from the 1910s to 1930s. By accepting the post-war immigrants as in the case of the Chinese churches, and by reorganizing the once-dispersed pre-war Christians and their offspring as was the case with the Japanese churches, they continued to grow, peaking in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Since that time, due chiefly to the restrictive immigration policy of the 1950s and 1960s,<sup>1)</sup> fewer immigrants came in, and for that reason neither the Japanese nor the Chinese churches could recruit new members except from the limited group of their own offspring. During this period, in short, the Japanese and Chinese churches became bodies of fixed members who simply aged as time went on. Over the past 20 years, however, the Japanese and the Chinese churches have been placed in a drastically new and complex situation compared to the previous era. On the one hand, there has been serious concern about church decline because of aging members and also due to the younger, assimilated second and third generations leaving or reluctance to join their ethnic churches. In the outer society, on the other hand, following the rescinding of the restrictive immigration law there were unprecedented numbers of Chinese coming in, mainly from Hong Kong and others from Taiwan, Southeast Asia, and Mainland China. There were also some Japanese immigrants coming in, although not on as large a scale. These immigrants were new not only in terms of the period of immigration but also in terms of social background. In addition, their areas of origin, like Hong Kong and Japan, were then fast becoming advanced industrial societies. Unlike the earlier immigrants who were most-

ly farmers and fishermen, these were often urban professionals with advanced educational backgrounds and job skills who qualified under the 'universal point system'. The old Japanese and Chinese churches were put in the position of having to deal with these vastly different compatriots as potential church members. There was also another momentous change in conditions affecting the churches. Shortly after the immigration law was amended, the Trudeau government in 1971 issued a new policy of 'multiculturalism'. It was the first official recognition of the various non-charter group cultures that had evolved in Canada, and by this policy any culture that 'demonstrates a desire to grow' could expect assistance and resources from the government. Though the policy itself was criticized from various quarters as ineffective or discriminatory (e.g. Kallen 1982, Brotz 1980), the concept that the ethnic identity of non-charter groups should be positively asserted was commonly accepted among ethnic Canadians as more and more new immigrants entered the country. Especially in major cities like Toronto and Vancouver where several ethnic groups were becoming major components of the population, one's ethnicity tended to be taken as a 'given' rather than something that had to be suppressed in order that one might 'assimilate'. Among the new Japanese and Chinese immigrants, such thinking was particularly common. Being professional, middle-class immigrants, economic adaptation was comparatively easy. And by virtue of their capabilities, they could take pride in their ethnic identity and culture.

Such acceptance of diversity might be viewed as providing a favorable climate for the growth of the Japanese and Chinese churches. Whereas in the old days, assimilationist thinking made the existence of ethnic associations meaningful for the first generation of immigrants who were unable to assimilate and put pressure upon successive genera-

tions to embrace Anglo-conformity, now the positive mind set on ethnicity in overall society might be seen as encouraging the preservation of traditional cultures and languages within the churches and might also encourage the younger generations to engage in the activities of their own ethnic associations. Further, the participation of new immigrants might strengthen congregations of the same ethnic identity and culture as those of the first generation members, but with certain differences. However, what did in fact happen to the Japanese and Chinese churches over the past two decades was something more complex.

## **THE JAPANESE CHURCHES<sup>2)</sup>**

Today, there are about 60,000 Japanese (or Canadians of Japanese ancestry) in Canada. It is believed that nearly half of them are Christians by affiliation and about 2,000 to 3,000 are members of Japanese churches (see Mullins 1989). There exist some religious groups that originated in Japan like Honpa Buddhism, Seicho-no-ie and Soka-gakkai, but Christianity is by far the most popular religion among Japanese Canadians. While some Japanese Christians are affiliated to major Canadian denominations like Anglican, Baptist, Presbyterian or Catholic, the majority belong to the United Church. As a result of the present concentration of Japanese in two Provinces, i.e. Ontario and British Columbia, the majority of the Japanese Christians are also found in these areas.

Missionary activities among Japanese immigrants began as early as the 1890s. By the beginning of this century, several Japanese churches had been established in British Columbia (JUC 1961, Nakayama 1966). The majority of these early churches ceased to exist when in 1942 all Japanese on the West Coast were evacuated. As a result of the eastward

dispersal of the Japanese, several churches were established in the various Provinces, particularly Toronto. The churches in Vancouver were reorganized after the 'restricted area' ban was abolished in 1951. For large churches like the Japanese United Church in Vancouver and Toronto, the 1950s were a time of expansion. Not only was there a sizeable population of both Christian and non-Christian to be recruited as new church members, there were also a growing number of Nisei (second generation Japanese). The Japanese in general, still suffered from the chaos and hardships of the war-time ordeal and were looking for a spiritual home. In the 12 years after 1946, the Toronto Japanese United Church grew from 51 to 524 members and the newly begun Vancouver Church from 50 to over 150 between 1951 and 1959 (JUCC 1961). But this growth rate was not to continue. After the 1960s, church growth slowed dramatically and by the 70s and 80s most of Japanese churches were barely maintaining their status quo. According to 1983 statistics, there were 1,512 church members in all of the Japanese United Churches combined (Mullins 1989), which means that the Church had attained less than 10% growth over some 25 years after the 1960s. The same trend was evident in the Japanese Anglican churches and, at present, serious concerns about the future are voiced in almost all Japanese denominations.

One of the main reasons for this slow growth was the limited inflow of Japanese immigrants in post-war Canada. Until 1967, there was no substantial immigration from Japan except for a very limited member of Kika Nisei (Canadian born Japanese who were sent to Japan during or before the war) and other sponsored family members of former immigrants. After 1967, when the gate opened for Asian immigrants, there was some further growth, but in all, the total inflow of Japanese was far

below what it used to be. Nevertheless, although the number of new immigrants was small, given the modest scale of the Japanese churches, the 10,000 new immigrants might still have been a major source of new members had they been attracted to the churches. Many Sansei and young Nisei might have become church members as well. Yet, the churches failed to recruit from either group. In the United Church, the present percentage of the Sansei members is only about 15% and only slightly more than 100 out of a total membership of 1,500 are new immigrants (Mullins 1989).

With regard to the low membership rate of young Nisei and Sansei, several reasons can be cited. One is the rapid upward mobility of the Japanese. It has often been noted that the Japanese Canadians quickly rose up the social ladder in post-war Canadian society within a few decades. Despite the severe social deprivation they suffered during the war, most Japanese attained middle-class status in the 70s and 80s (Rose 1985). Consequently, not only the role of ethnic churches but that of ethnic associations in general diminished in importance. The Japanese could now manage their lives economically and socially by themselves and they had less need of protecting themselves as a group or depending upon ethnic associations. This is especially true of the young Nisei and the Sansei, most of whom, unlike their parents, from the beginning, entered careers as professionals or white-collar workers and were able to take for granted 'ordinary' Canadian middle-class life.

Besides their social class, their rather extreme assimilation into the mainstream culture also drew them away from the Japanese church. In part, because of the war-time experience, the Japanese community in the post-war period was strongly assimilationist. There was a tendency to keep as low a profile as possible as an ethnic group and, accordingly,

for parents to raise their children first as Canadian citizens. So there was comparatively little pressure upon Nisei and Sansei children to learn the Japanese culture and language. Also since in post-war Canadian society outright discrimination against the Japanese seldom occurred, they could easily associate with the mainstream culture.

At present, Sansei who can speak Japanese are the exception and the rate of interethnic marriage is extremely high compared to other Asian minorities (Hirabayashi 1977). Under the influence of the civil rights movement of North America in the 1960s, there was some movement among Asian minorities to reassert their ethnic identity, and in the 1970s and 80s, there was growing acceptance of the idea of a 'multicultural Canada' by the general public. The assimilationist trend among young Nisei and the Sansei was never substantially reversed and their Japanese identity continued to weaken. For them, anything Japanese was already alien and they saw no reason to associate themselves with the Japanese churches or other Japanese associations.

As we said earlier, the new immigrants from Japan were also a prospective source of new church members. After 1967, more than 10,000 Japanese came and about two thirds of them settled in Canada (Thurlow 1977).<sup>3)</sup> In contrast to the Nisei and the Sansei, these new immigrants appeared to have many characteristics that might have made them join the churches. They were first generation immigrants with no firm base in Canada; they spoke the same language as the Issei; they shared the same basic Japanese culture as the Issei; and naturally they possessed a strong Japanese identity which, it would be expected, the Japanese churches would welcome. But in actuality, proportionately, few new immigrants joined and those who did so could not revitalize the churches in any substantial ways.

Since many new immigrants entered Canada under the 'point system', most of them were engineers, professionals or had some job skills, and had relatively good education. Nor was English an obstacle, some could manage almost everything in English from the outset and others in due time, could do the same. Thus, there was no incentive to join ethnic support organizations.

Unlike the young Nisei and Sansei, such high adaptability of the new immigrants did not mean that they were ready or willing to be assimilated into the mainstream of Canadian culture. Rather they tended to maintain a strong Japanese identity, and paradoxically, this characteristic was another important factor in their aloofness from the church. Though sharing the basic Japanese culture and language with the Issei, their culture and outlook distinguished them from the Issei and the Nisei church members who were from prewar rural Japan. The new immigrants were part of the post war urban culture from an extremely successful national economy. The Issei and Nisei had kept their Japanese identity mainly because they could not adapt well to Canadian society, but the new immigrants kept their identity out of a sense of confidence, without sacrificing professional and economic adaptation to the host society. More often than not, the new immigrants perceived the Japanese churches and other associations as congregations of rural, poorly educated people which were incompatible to them. Such an attitude was not uncommon even among new immigrants who became church members. This created resentment among some Issei and older Nisei members who felt that they were being looked down upon by the newcomers. On the other hand, the Issei and Nisei criticized the newcomers as being snobbish and affected. Perhaps partly because of such latent conflict, coupled with their small number, most of the new immigrants never became

active in any Japanese churches and few of them were ever appointed to be members of the deaconry. The new immigrants are important for the Japanese speaking sections of the churches because they are the only source supplementing the shrinking Issei membership. At present, there is no indication that they will play a major role in the near future.

### THE CHINESE CHURCHES<sup>4)</sup>

Like the Japanese, early missionary activities among the Chinese began in the late 19th century. The Methodist church began reaching Chinese immigrants in Victoria as early as the 1870s; other denominations like the Presbyterian, Baptist and Anglican followed in the 1880s and 1890s (Wickberg et al. 1982). The first Chinese Methodist church was established in Victoria in 1885. Even in Toronto, where concentrations of Chinese were to be found in later decades, an early Chinese Presbyterian church was established in 1905 (Lai 1988). Despite the traditionalism and the 'sojourner' outlook (Siu 1953) that prevented the early Chinese immigrants from approaching Western culture, Christianity became a popular religion within a few decades. By 1923, about 10% of the Chinese in Canada had become Christians and by the early 1940s about 30% of the community was Christian (Wickberg et al. 1982, p.151). By the end of the Second World War, there was at least one Chinese Christian church in any Canadian city which had a sizable Chinese population. In Vancouver and Toronto where the majority of the Chinese lived, several churches of varying denominations existed. Among them, the United Church was the most popular with the Presbyterian second in popularity.

Quite in contrast to the Japanese churches of the period, the Chinese

churches had one marked peculiarity. Chinese immigration was halted by the 1923 Chinese Exclusion Act. And since there were few Chinese women in the country, the Chinese community in Canada became a 'bachelor' community with little natural growth for the next twenty-five years. Thus, the Chinese churches, too, remained 'male', and though there was considerable church growth during the 'Exclusion' era, this occurred within a shrinking and aging male community. After 1947, when the Exclusion Act was finally repealed, this irregular composition of the Chinese community gradually corrected itself with a flux of immigrants, most of whom were actual or would-be spouses, children or other sponsored family members of the earlier immigrants. With this immigration, the churches, too, experienced quick growth. The number of Chinese churches in the fifties quadrupled over what they were in the thirties (Lo 1981 p.367). By the 1950s and early 1960s, Chinese churches in Canada, for the first time in their history, had memberships of full-fledged Chinese families. There were considerable similarities among the members of the churches of this period: they were pre-war immigrants and their dependents; the majority of them were of rural background and limited education; most of them shared directly or indirectly, the memory of discrimination and persecution leveled against them; and they were, economically and socially, strongly connected to urban Chinatowns.

Up until the mid-1960s, the Chinese churches seemed to have enjoyed relative stability. Though the older people were passing away or retiring, and some of the younger generation, as a result of rapid assimilation or for employment reasons, were leaving the churches, there were still relatives arriving and quite a few of the younger generation born after the war were joining. But after 1967, the churches experienced tremen-

dous change. In that year, the Canadian government rescinded the 'immigration quota' system which had favored immigrants from Western countries, and introduced the new 'universal point system'. Under this system came an enormous influx of Chinese, this time mainly from Hong Kong. Within a decade the Chinese population in Canada doubled.<sup>5)</sup> Not only large in number, the new immigrants were different in other respects. Having been selected by the 'point system' they were mostly professionals, business people or white-collar workers with urban experience in Hong Kong and good educational backgrounds. In the beginning, the existing churches, especially those in Vancouver and Toronto, where most of the new immigrants settled, were willing to accept these new immigrants; and the new immigrants themselves actively participated in the churches. This was not unnatural since in the late 1960s, despite differences in many respects, the new and the old immigrants were connected, at least in part, by kinship, native location, or dialect, and the new immigrants had to rely on the old Chinatown in the initial years. Within a short period of time, new immigrants were to be found in many churches in the Chinatowns. But this coexistence of new and old within the churches was not without conflict. Following on the heels of the initial harmony of the two groups, bitter struggles erupted between them. There was confrontation in virtually all church departments. While the older immigrants wanted to recruit the local (Chinatown) Chinese, the new arrivals wanted to recruit new immigrants; the older people wished to keep the family-like operation of the church, the new preferred a more efficient, bureaucratic church system; the older group wanted church monies to be spent, say, for helping aging local Chinese, the new for modernizing the church premises, and so on. In a word, the old immigrants wanted to keep the churches as 'home' to a once-segregated ethnic

minority, the new immigrants wanted a modern church which would serve the growing middle-class. Beneath these struggles lay a fundamental cleavage. As we saw with the Japanese churches, there was a tendency for the new immigrants to look down upon the older immigrants as rural and uneducated, while the latter saw the new immigrants as snobbish and mammonist. However, in the case of the Chinese churches, the rift was even more serious, especially since the new immigrants, as a whole, far outnumbered, and were far richer than the old.

In many instances, such struggles resulted in a gradual take over of the churches by the new immigrants, leading one researcher of the Toronto Chinatown in the 1970s to report that "(in) most of the churches...the great majority of the members were recent immigrants of the middle class, possessing excellent educational backgrounds and good economic assets" (Thompson 1989, p.215). In reality, there were other outcomes. In some churches the backlash from the old immigrants resulted in the group of new immigrants leaving the church and establishing their own, either in Chinatown or in the suburbs where new immigrant populations were settling. A similar but milder process took place in some churches that had grown 'too large to the extent that portions of the membership (mostly new immigrants) had to separate and become independent'.<sup>6)</sup> A few churches kept both the old and new members, but they had distinct internal cliques that did not cooperate. In general, what would happen after a period of struggle was that a clear separation between the two groups would emerge. Except in a few cases, the churches became one of two kinds, a church for the old or a church for the new immigrants.

This separation within Chinese churches widened even more in the 1980s. After 1984, when the return of Hong Kong to the People's Repub-

lic of China in 1997 was finally determined, there followed a still larger influx of Hong Kong immigrants. Every year 7,000 to 10,000 Hong Kong immigrants enter Canada and by 1990, the majority of Chinese communities in Vancouver and Toronto were composed of immigrants from Hong Kong. They shared similar characteristics with the immigrants in the late 1960s. But the new group was even more upscale, they were professionals, management officials, engineers or investors with extremely advance educational levels and experience in the highly developed Hong Kong urban environment. They had little or no rapport with the old immigrants and in all respects had no necessity to relate to them or to the Chinatowns. With their exceptional skills, they easily obtained jobs in Canadian mainstream industry and with their assets, they were able to afford homes in the suburbs (Morikawa 1990). In the suburbs, they were able to find many churches that had been established in the late 60s and 70s by the second wave of immigrants, or they themselves began new churches in the neighborhoods they lived in. In fact, Toronto now has more than 70 Chinese churches and Vancouver has more than 60 (CCCWOE 1986), over two thirds of which are suburban 'new' immigrant churches that are still rapidly growing. There was no substantial growth during the 1980s of the old churches. On the contrary, they suffered considerable loss through attrition of the old immigrants and the second generation either leaving towns because of upward mobility or simply leaving churches as a consequence of assimilation. During this period, there was a growing consciousness of multiculturalism and Chinese identity. In light of the pervasive economic and social adaptability in Canadian cities, the 'new' immigrants had no hesitation about asserting their ethnic identity. They energetically introduced Chinese (Hong Kong) culture and openly enjoyed it. The members of the

old churches had nothing to do with this trend. For both the older immigrants of rural background who had lived in Western society for a long time, and for the younger generations who had been brought up in Canadian society, the newly asserted 'Chinese' identity felt somewhat alien.

## **THE PROBLEM OF VIABILITY OF IMMIGRANT CHURCHES**

Despite ostensibly favorable conditions like the influx of 'new' immigrants and the popular acceptance of 'multiculturalism', (original) Japanese and Chinese churches have been unable to acquire a substantial number of new members over the past 20 years and have found themselves on the verge of decline. The quick assimilation of the second and the third generations and the diacritically different social background of the 'new' and 'old' immigrants were obviously important external factors. But there was also an 'internal' factor which hindered church growth. This was that surprisingly little effort was made by the church members to adapt church policies and activities to new situations. Except for providing English sessions which, in some churches, had begun in the prewar period, little effort was made to reach their second and third generations who, though highly assimilated and predominantly middle-class, still had a sense of their ethnic background.

There was no understanding that in order to accept 'new' immigrants and get along well with them, the character of the churches themselves had to change to all-embracing Japanese or Chinese institutions. In fact, there was strong resistance within the churches of any attempts that might change anything, other than those formed by the old-time immigrants. The old-timers had insulated themselves from mainstream society,

which, if it was not always hostile, was not accepting either. To the old-time immigrants, 'multiculturalism' was an alien notion. Ethnic identity, together with active engagement in Canadian society were seen as contradicting concepts, neither of which could be achieved without sacrificing the other. It is natural, therefore, that they could not provide any program for a church that would incorporate the third generation or the 'new' immigrants. Conversely, quite a number of the latter assumed that the two concepts were important and compatible.

The conservatism of the Japanese and the Chinese churches derives from the very nature of their being immigrant churches. It has often been pointed out that immigrant ethnic associations quite often work as adaptive mechanisms (Little 1967, Tilly et Brown 1967). Given their lack of knowledge about the host society, the absence of language skills and economic assets, and being of an ethnicity different from that of the host society, the adaptation of new immigrants historically presents great difficulties. The ethnic association works as a 'buffer' with the help of which they can make a 'soft-landing' in the host society. This 'buffer' mechanism has two different functions. For one, the ethnic association provides a locus where the immigrants can assert their ethnic identity: where they can freely speak their language, enjoy their culture and associate with their countrymen without facing any identity conflict. In addition, the association provides educational and other benevolent assistance that enables the immigrants to adapt more easily to the host society. In so far as there is a continuous inflow of new immigrants, the above dual function of the association is maintained and the association itself remains vital. But if the flow of immigration stops the balance of the two functions changes, and the association's structure transmutes. As some of the immigrants gradually leave the association by adapting

to the outer society and the second generation also quickly assimilates, the demand for adaptive aids diminishes, while the function of identity preservation increases in importance for those who could not adapt well to the host society. Thus, in the long run, the ethnic association gradually becomes a secluded 'home' for the older immigrants, or it becomes purely an ethnic 'enclave' (Morikawa 1991).

It would seem that this has been the case in the Japanese and the Chinese churches during the past twenty years. With the decrease of incoming immigrants in the 50s and the early 60s, the churches gradually became more the 'community' of older immigrants. For the 'new' immigrants of the 70s and 80s, and the young, second and third generations of the same period who did not experience an identity crisis and did not seek a secluded 'home' or 'enclave', the original churches could hold no attraction. And for the members of the original churches it was unimaginable to 'forfeit' their 'community', either to the 'new' immigrants or to the 'Canadianized' younger generations for the sake of adapting to new developments. Ironically, one of the important functions of the immigrant churches, i.e. identity preservation, caused them to remain immigrant-oriented even after immigration stopped, and when it became a question of change or perish they had lost the potential to reorganize themselves. Whether this was the only path for the immigrant churches to take awaits empirical examination. For the present at least, the survival of the Japanese and Chinese immigrant churches in Canada, in a future where there will be no immigrants like that of the pre-1960s, seems highly unlikely.

#### NOTES

- 1) Since the establishment of the Peoples Republic of China in 1949, direct immigration has been virtually suspended. Though immigration from Hong Kong

and Macau has continued, it was only after 1967 when the restrictive immigration quota system was rescinded that substantial numbers of Chinese immigrants were allowed into Canada.

- 2) Unless specifically mentioned, the facts and observations in this section of the study are based on the research of Japanese churches in Toronto and Vancouver carried out by the present writer. The research was conducted from July to September, 1990.
- 3) Though not large, there was a steady inflow annually of about 700 to 800 new Japanese immigrants in the 1970s. In the past several years, however, the number has dropped to a level of about 200 annually.
- 4) The observations of this chapter are mostly based on the research done by the writer from 1989 to 1991.
- 5) In 1961, the Chinese population in Canada was 58,197. In 1971, it was 118,815 (Statistics Canada 1976).
- 6) Such was a common explanation given to the writer by pastors or lay church members about the split within their own churches. The writer has shown some examples of the use of similar euphemism in Christian churches in Hong Kong (see Morikawa 1991).

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