

How does (Western) Christianity modernize and liberalize what are considered traditional institutions, roles, and ways of life in Taiwan?

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Rationale and Preliminary Research

I grew up in Taiwan, an island known for its religious freedom.¹ In my travels around the country, I have seen numerous temples, churches, shrines, and dedicated devotees of these respective religions.² Traditional Taiwanese religion consists of a combination of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, meaning the culture of Taiwan and religion are closely intertwined with each other (Liao 87).³

Because I grew up in a traditional Taiwanese family, I have visited temples and prayed to the deities. I later came to an understanding that in Taiwanese religions, not all praying is to the Bodhisattvas, but these customs remain incorporated into Taiwanese culture of honoring ancestors.⁴ This practice of ancestor homage reflects one's filial piety because it is the remembering and honoring one's origins.⁵ Before taking the World Religion Class, I did not notice that the majority of my friends were all Christians.⁶ In Taiwan, the Christian membership exceeds 18,000 people, including converted Christians, highlighting the popularity of Christianity among Taiwanese communities (Hillham).

There seem to be a significant number of people who consider Taoism a way of living instead of a religion.⁷ My grandfather is Christian while the rest of my family are Taoists, so I am interested in studying what draws him and other Taiwanese to Christianity.⁸ I plan to investigate questions: Why are some Taiwanese attracted to (Western) Christianity? How does (Western) Christianity coexist, contribute, or conflict with traditional Taiwanese culture? How does Christianity take into consideration contemporary ideas of community, gender (in)equality, and academic learning in Taiwan?

Plan for Study

I want to know how traditional Taiwanese ways of life are impacted by Christianity on a social level. After doing preliminary research, I categorized the influence of Christianity to Taiwan into two perspectives: gender roles and education, and I include medicine within this wider idea of

¹ Despite the fact that Taiwan is relatively small compared to other countries, it can be considered a religious hub because the people who live on the island have a wide variety of spiritual and religious beliefs.

² These numerous houses of religion give Taiwan the name of the Island of Temples ("Island of Temples").

³ Taoism is also spelled and known as Daoism.

⁴ Bodhisattvas in Buddhism refers to someone who has reached nirvana but has returned to the human realm to help other people reach nirvana out of compassion for others.

⁵ Ancestor homage process is carried out by using burning incense sticks to pay respect to ancestors as well as pray for ancestor's help (Liao 87).

⁶ As I continued my research on this new religion, I realized that within the religious population, there are 6.5% of religious followers that are Christians in Taiwan (Liao 88).

⁷ People consider Taoism a way of living instead of a religion because Taoism in Taiwan consists of traditions and values passed down from ancestral generations.

⁸ My grandfather on my mother's side is Christian, while all my other family members are Taoists.

education. I hypothesize these aspects influence Taiwanese society towards a modernized and liberalized country, drawing Christian believers. Hence, my research question is how does (Western) Christianity modernize and liberalize what are considered traditional institutions, roles, and ways of life in Taiwan?

The impact of Christianity as a modernizing force is often traced to Dr. Mackay, a Canadian Christian missionary who had a profound and lasting impact on Taiwanese medicine and education (Rohrer). I plan to research the topic by finding articles and news reports of Christian impact on education, and I also plan to interview a few people to get their perspectives: a converted Christian missionary and two Christian friends who have both grown up in Taiwan.⁹

For my perspective on gender roles, I plan to focus on Biblical excerpts as well as research in articles about gender roles in religion in Asia.¹⁰ One academic source I used is a chapter from the book *Gender and Language Use in Religious Community* called “Women and Men: Languages and Religion in Taiwan” by Chao-Chih Liao. The majority of my investigation is based on this paper.

Summary of Significant Findings

It is my understanding that modernization is when a country has accessible education and medicine for everyone; liberalization is when citizens are liberated from conservative and oppressive thoughts especially towards women. Therefore, In Taiwan, Christianity is both a modernizing and liberalizing force in the areas of education, medicine, and equality between the genders.

Taiwan’s first Catholic University, Fu-ren University, was founded in 1961, which developed a hospital branch; both institutions remain prestigious, popular, and resourceful.¹¹ Missionaries like Dr. Mackay funded both educational institutions such as Oxford College.¹² In the 1950s, three out of the ten universities in Taiwan were Christian universities (Liao 88).¹³ Taiwan also

⁹ Missionary Huang does not have an English name, so the purpose for this paper, I will just refer to him as Missionary Huang. His full name is Huang ShiJun. In Mandarin, his name is written out as 黃世俊. My Christian friends refer to Rachel Nam and Jill Thai. For the purposes of this paper, I will refer to them as my Christian friends.

¹⁰ Because Taiwan is a small country that is often not recognized as independent, not much research has been done on it. Instead, I found more research talking about East Asia in general, so I used those as well since Taiwanese culture is heavily reflective of Asian culture and Asian surrounding countries as well.

¹¹ Fu Jen Catholic University is known as “天主教輔仁大學” in Chinese. It is known as one of the top private universities in Taiwan. The university was founded in Beijing in 1927 then in Taiwan in 1963 (“Background: Fu Jen Catholic University”).

¹² Mackay is a Canadian dentist who came to Taiwan on a missionary mission, and he stayed in Taiwan for the majority of his life. He often provided free dentists and other medication services for Taiwanese people, especially the aboriginal people. He opened a clinic and educational institutions to improve the lives of Taiwanese. After he died, because of his dedications to Taiwan, a memorial hospital was built and named after him.

¹³The ratio of Christian universities to the overall number of universities show the strong influence of education within the Christian community and its attempt to help Taiwan improve education overall.

adopted Western medicine and technology to perform surgery for the blind and medical education for women (Kim 437).

In 1972, Marjorie Landsborough taught children in Taiwanese through Bible lessons to help them become literate when she served as the Presbyterian Church of England missionary in Taiwan (Liao 91). My Christian friend claimed that Christianity improved her education because her English improved by reading the Bible.¹⁴ Younger generations of Taiwanese (born after 1999) seem to be drawn to Christianity because of the English speaking classes Christian organizations offer (Liao 91).¹⁵

English skills are especially beneficial for women in an environment where the female is traditionally submissive to the male. In Taiwan, if a woman speaks English fluently, she often enjoys a higher social status because speaking English provides better job opportunities, more internationally-related opportunities, and ability to communicate with a wider variety of people. English education is one of the few ways Taiwanese potential and skills can be recognized outside of the household.¹⁶

In the interview I had with Missionary Huang, he explained that Christianity believes in gender equality unlike traditional Taiwanese culture, which believes the proper gender etiquette entails males are superior to females.¹⁷ From a Christian perspective, what matters most is the relationship of an individual to God, so the issue of gender does not exist because everyone can have a relationship with God.

Missionary Huang claimed he initially felt that Christianity and Taiwanese culture clashed because Taiwanese culture is very rooted in honoring ancestors, but Christianity exclusively worships Jesus as the son of God. However, he realized, after converting to Christianity, he did not need to stop honoring his ancestors; instead, he continued to do so but in a different way.¹⁸ My Christian friend mentions that one Christian commandment that is commonly followed in

¹⁴ My Christian friend also mentioned that not only her English skills improved, her social skills also improved by going to Sunday School. She also said that her Christian background allowed her to understand English literature a lot better. She said because of her Christian background she understood most of the allusions in Western novels.

¹⁵ Many Taiwanese students attend churches for the very reason that churches offer conversational classes to improve English speaking and reading skills. In Taiwan, Christian educational institutes tend to have a longer history, higher-quality education, and are more established compared to other institutions illustrating the respect which they are viewed in the country (Liao 90).

¹⁶ Since 1963, two competitive high schools in Taichung known for its high quality of education are both Christian institutions, Stella Matutina Girls High School and Viator High schools (Liao 90). Dr. Mackay established a boarding school for girls in a time period where girls are deemed to be serving the family and refraining from receiving equal education to men (Rohrer).

¹⁷ The phrase is called 男尊女卑 in Chinese. From the characters it means that males are honorable while females are of a lowly status.

¹⁸ Instead of worshipping ancestors with incense, he sings, provides offerings such as flowers, and cleans the ancestor's tomb.

Taiwan is the practice of filial piety towards parents.¹⁹ Therefore, Christianity coexists peacefully with Taiwanese culture in that it provides avenues to free and independent thought that considers giving back to the community.²⁰

Critical Reflection and Evaluation

My perception of the West informs me that Western people heavily emphasize supporting the community and loving each other.²¹ Christianity, the basis of many Western ideas, claims that “thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” which stresses the importance of focusing on other people (Matthew 22:39).²² For example, Missionary Huang’s church sends volunteers to local prisons to purify the inmate’s hearts and share warmth.²³ My friends and I also discussed the fact that English speaking churches provide English and educational summer camps for schools in remote areas as well.²⁴

Because English is considered the international language of business, Taiwanese tend to want to learn English so that they can engage in international business practices to obtain a desirable socioeconomic status.²⁵ Christianity brings a modernizing force to Taiwan because employers understand the global benefit of bilingualism and financially compensate Taiwanese for this skill.²⁶ In the medical field, where English is the international language, Christianity modernized Taiwan by introducing Western medicine through medical missionaries.²⁷ My parents told me that highly-qualified doctors from other prestigious hospitals in Taiwan become doctors at the Fu Jen Hospital because it is well-funded and has plentiful resources provided by the Catholic Church.

¹⁹ This is very significant because the most important aspect of Taiwanese culture is respect and filial piety towards parents, and Christianity in Taiwan has combined these two aspects together.

²⁰Reference to Matthew 22:39. In Christianity this is considered at the second most important commandment.

²¹ I go to an American curriculum school where my teachers and administrators are all from the West. My mom also received education in the West, so my parents also stress the concept of giving back to the community. In our daily discussions, we have also mentioned that we see a contrast in Western and Eastern emphasis of community and support for each other in general.

²² All of my Bible passages are from the Bible Study Tools Website in the English Standard Version. The website link is: <https://www.biblestudytools.com/esv/>.

²³ Church volunteers also bring Christmas gifts for the inmate's family giving care to everyone. Missionary Huang told me specifically that they provide Christmas gifts for the children of inmates because they feel they are the ones who are in need of love the most.

²⁴ A summer camp that my friends and I go to to teach English is ADVENT. Several of my Western teachers volunteer at these types of church services.

²⁵ Going to English speaking churches is an effective way to learn English, and I know local Taiwanese friends who attend Church for this very reason.

²⁶ My friend told me that a group of Church members go to Church for English practice sessions in order to improve their English skills which will enhance their future job opportunities.

²⁷ These practices push Taiwan to offer accessible high quality healthcare to the public.

In my perspective, education equally comes from both academics and personal values. My Christian friends mentioned Christianity's emphasis on love impacted their views of the world. Missionary Huang said before he converted into Christianity, he believed in a combination of traditional Taiwanese folklore traditions and Taoism. In traditional Taiwanese culture, there is emphasis on material success.²⁸ Missionary Huang explained that he used to think money was the only purpose in life.²⁹ After he converted to Christianity, he stopped desiring materialistic needs and found an enlightened purpose.³⁰ In this view, Christianity helps liberalize Taiwanese's conservative ideals of living by changing the follower's attitude towards life to one that supports humanitarian causes.

Throughout my interview I noticed "Lord's Prayer of Matthew 6:9-13" is a heavily practiced prayer in Taiwanese churches.³¹ I believe this prayer preaches showing gratitude for what God has helped and his blessings. Taiwanese tend to not be explicit with expressing their gratitude.³² I believe by expressing thankfulness explicitly, as a community, we become more aware and more open to express daily emotions to the world. This prayer acknowledges human sin, so the public realizes imperfection is part of life. Hence, instead of stressing over imperfection, the focus is on what we have and what we are blessed with.

Christianity generally promotes ideas of feminism by providing women with roles outside the household. With the influence of Christian figures like Mackay, educational institutes for girls opened, encouraging girls to receive education and elevate their intellectual abilities and, consequently, their social status.³³ Jesus teaches that gender does not exist because humans are "all one in Christ Jesus," highlighting that, regardless of gender, everyone should be treated the same (Glatians 3:28).³⁴ However, there are controversial Bible lines that contradict the idea of

²⁸ The Taiwanese culture's emphasis on materialism makes the focus of Taiwanese more self-centered. At the same time, a life heavily dependent on material success is extremely emotionally and energy draining.

²⁹ He told me that when he lived to generate fortune, he felt like he was wearing a mask.

³⁰ He found an indescribable feeling of an enlightened purpose in which he is no longer emotionally drained with his money driven life. Without the money driven aggression, he felt like he found his true self and became kinder and humbler.

³¹ "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." (Matthew 6: 9-13)

³² Asian culture in general is more inward with expressing emotions compared to Western culture. I am an international student where I receive Western education, but I'm growing in a conservative Asian country like Taiwan. Growing up from a Taiwanese family, I was taught to not show my emotions to other people, but at school we were taught to actively express it.

³³ This allowed girls to experience a focus that is centered on themselves rather than on their family and a subordinate role, which is a liberalizing force. In traditional Taiwanese culture, women were subordinate to men and their roles were to stay in the house and take care of the family.

³⁴ Christianity also teaches that "husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies" meaning couples have equal status, so neither partners are worshiped over another (Ephesians 5:28). There is a whole section of the bible dedicated to the worthiness and positives of a wife highlighting the importance and significance of a woman (Proverbs 31: 10-31). Taiwanese women were taught to be submissive to the dominant male in the family whether it

gender equality such as “Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord,” which sounds objectifying to women (Colossians 3:18). However, the next verse says “Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them”(Colossians 3:19).³⁵ The two verses combined demonstrate that though some readers interpret the Bible as claiming women as subservient to males, it also calls on men to treat their wives equitably with each partner holding responsibility for the other.

The information found in personal interviews aligned with my researched academic articles; there were no obvious inconsistencies or contradictions.³⁶ Missionary Huang converted to Christianity for the reason I believed drew Taiwanese to Christianity which is the liberalization and modernizing force from traditional and restrictive traditions. I believe liberalization of emotions from traditional beliefs like pursuing a materialistic life and modernization thought of accepting new ideas and ways of life. However, because I only interviewed three people, their opinions may be biased and not representative of the entire Taiwanese Christian community. Yet, there is no doubt that the spread of Christianity created the emergence of a “New Woman” in Asia by providing opportunities, networks, and new ‘public spheres’ for women in Taiwan specifically and East Asia generally, which answers why some Taiwanese are drawn into Christianity (Kim 436).³⁷

Overall, my research pointed towards the idea that Christianity did bring a positive and progressive push for Taiwan towards modernization and liberalization through introducing western medicine, promoting education, and emphasizing equality between men and women.³⁸ Nonetheless, I believe that the progressiveness of Christianity has plateaued seeing that the Christian church is the main opposing force of the legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan. Missionary Huang told me that Christians in Taiwan accept and respect the LGBTQ communities because everyone is a child of God; however, accepting the LGBTQ community does not mean that the Christian community agrees with LGBTQ beliefs and actions.

For future extension of this research, I want to investigate the current religion that is the driving force for future liberalization. I hope to also investigate how Taiwan can be a liberalizing push for other Christian communities' acts of liberalization. Just like Pope Francis supports same-sex

is her father, husband, or son. A common traditional saying says that “treat your husband like he is your heaven” meaning the husband should be placed as first priority. Oftentimes, the idolization for the husband leads to mistreatment towards women such as abusive treatments since a female is not to question the male’s action.

³⁵ In conventional Protestant Christian churches, women cannot preach at all, and all the priests are men. However, in Taiwan, this policy is more lax, so we see gender equality instituted.

³⁶ There were no obvious contradictions other than the Bible excerpts, but the excerpts can be interpreted differently for each person. I personally interpreted it as supporting equality between the genders.

³⁷ This image of a “New Woman” is developed by interaction of Western Christian missionaries in Asian countries leading to a modernity. The “New Woman” is known as “xin nuxing” or “新女性”

³⁸ Christianity raised awareness of education and working opportunities for both genders as well as raising women’s social status and liberalizing some of the conservative, traditional, materialistic Taiwanese views.

relationship while rationalizing with the Bible, I want to investigate how the Christian community will deal more the conservative believers towards the issue of same-sex relationships.

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