

The Key Emphases for a Chinese Theological Seminary in North America: Responding to the Distinctives, Challenges, and Growth Opportunities of Chinese Churches in North America

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Introduction

This report begins by identifying major distinctives, challenges, and growth opportunities of Chinese churches in North America. It then proposes several key emphases for a Chinese theological seminary called to train leaders for Chinese churches in North America.

1 Distinctives of Chinese Churches in North America

Chinese Christian churches in North America exhibit several distinctive characteristics and practices that differentiate them from their counterparts in China. These distinctions are influenced by factors such as cultural context, the immigrant experience, and the historical evolution of Christianity within American society.

1.1 Cultural Preserver

Chinese Christian churches in North America often serve as critical spaces for the preservation and promotion of Chinese cultural identity among immigrant communities. They incorporate elements of Chinese traditions, festivals, and languages into their worship practices, creating an environment that resonates with Chinese congregants. This integration facilitates a dual identity—both as Chinese and as Christians, allowing congregants to navigate their cultural heritage while embracing their faith.¹

In Southeast Asia, especially in regions like Singapore and Malaysia, Chinese churches also navigate cultural identities, but they often blend Chinese traditions with local customs and practices. Churches might adapt to broader national contexts that include multiple ethnicities and religions, reflected in their worship styles and community events. The engagement with diverse local cultures tends to be more pronounced, as religious pluralism is a norm in several Southeast Asian countries.²

Cultural factors play a significant role in shaping the beliefs and practices of Chinese Christian churches in North America, particularly in terms of community engagement and

¹ Fenggang Yang. *Chinese Christians in America: Conversion, Assimilation, and Adhesive Identities*. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999). See pp. 95–120, where Yang explains how Chinese Christian churches in North America intentionally incorporate Chinese language, festivals, cultural symbols, and traditional practices into worship and community life. He shows that these churches function as key institutions for preserving Chinese cultural identity, helping congregants maintain a sense of “Chineseness” while simultaneously cultivating a Christian identity. Yang describes this as an “adhesive identity”—a dual identity that allows Chinese immigrants to navigate both cultural worlds.

² Chee Kiong Tong. *Rationalizing Religion: Religious Conversion, Revivalism and Competition in Singapore Society*. (Leiden: Brill, 2007). See pp. 145–168, where Tong analyzes how Chinese Christian churches in Singapore incorporate elements of Chinese cultural heritage while adapting to the multiethnic, multireligious national context. He shows that churches blend Chinese traditions with local practices, adjust worship styles to reflect Singapore’s pluralistic environment, and engage in community events shaped by the country’s diverse cultural landscape.

worship styles. These influences derive from the ethnic background of church members, the immigrant experience, and the broader North American cultural landscape.

Cultural events such as the Lunar New Year and Mid-Autumn Festival are often celebrated within the church context, reflecting the congregation's shared heritage and values. These celebrations not only reinforce cultural ties but also provide opportunities for outreach and community bonding, attracting both church members and the wider community. By intertwining worship with cultural festivities, churches enhance community engagement and inclusivity.

In contrast to many churches in China that may struggle against state constraints and maintain a Classical Chinese cultural backdrop, those in North America have the liberty to adapt their practices and interpretations to the diverse and pluralistic environment of American society. This flexibility allows for a hybrid identity that can incorporate both Western and Chinese cultural influences, appealing to a broader demographic including second-generation Chinese Americans.³

1.2 Immigrant Service Center

Many Chinese Christian churches actively participate in community service and social justice initiatives, addressing the specific needs of Chinese immigrants. Such initiatives are crucial for new immigrants facing various challenges in adapting to American society. Programs may include language classes, job training, and family support services, which reflect the church's commitment to holistic outreach—rooted in cultural expectations that prioritize helping others and contributing to communal welfare. This engagement not only affirms the church's relevance in the community but also reinforces the cultural values of altruism and social responsibility.⁴

³ Fenggang Yang. *Chinese Christians in America: Conversion, Assimilation, and Adhesive Identities*. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999). See pp. 95–120, where Yang documents how Chinese churches in the United States incorporate Lunar New Year, Mid Autumn Festival, Chinese language use, and traditional cultural symbols into worship and community life. He explains that these practices strengthen cultural identity, foster community bonding, and help congregants develop “adhesive identities” that blend Chinese heritage with Christian faith and American cultural influences.

See also Fenggang Yang. *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). See pp. 157–182, which examine how churches in China operate under state regulation, limiting their ability to adapt worship styles or incorporate diverse cultural expressions. Yang shows that Chinese churches often maintain a more traditional, Classical Chinese cultural framework, with far less freedom to integrate new practices or engage in public cultural celebrations compared to diaspora churches.

⁴ Carolyn Chen. *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigration and Religious Experience*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008). See especially pp. 85–120 on church-based social support and immigrant adaptation.

Many Chinese Christian churches in North America also engage in larger social justice issues and advocacy, responding to contemporary moral and ethical challenges in society. This engagement includes issues related to immigration, race relations, and social inequality, which may be addressed through community ministries and social action programs. Such initiatives differ from churches in China, where engagement with social issues is often heavily mediated by government regulations and restrictions.⁵

1.3 Fellowship Hub

Chinese Christian churches in North America emphasize fellowship and community building as central practices. Weekly services and gatherings are often accompanied by communal meals, social events, and outreach programs, fostering strong social networks among members. This focus on fellowship is geared towards helping immigrants establish social connections that might mitigate the isolation often experienced in a new country.⁶

Cultural values emphasizing collectivism and community shape the way Chinese Christian churches approach fellowship. The church often acts as a social hub, providing a safe environment for members to build relationships, share resources, and support one another. Weekly gatherings, prayer meetings, and communal meals provide opportunities for social connection, mirroring traditional values of hospitality and communal support found in many Chinese communities.⁷

⁵ Russell Jeung. *Faithful Generations: Race and New Asian American Churches*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005). Relevant discussion on pp. 63–92 about community service and social outreach in Asian American churches.

⁶ Benjamin Ng and Sam George. “Chinese Diaspora Churches in North America: Identity, Community, and Mission.” In *Diaspora Christianities: Global Scattering and Gathering of South Asian Christians*, edited by Sam George and Rajesh J. Daniel. (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2021), 145–166. See pp. 152–160, which discuss how Chinese churches in North America cultivate fellowship-centered community life, including communal meals, small groups, social gatherings, and relational networks that help immigrants overcome social isolation and maintain cultural belonging.

See also Bernard Wong. *Ethnicity and Entrepreneurship: The New Chinese Immigrants in the San Francisco Bay Area*. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1988). See pp. 118–135, where Wong describes Chinese Christian churches as primary social centers for new immigrants, emphasizing fellowship gatherings, communal meals, social events, and mutual aid networks. He explains that these practices help immigrants build relationships, reduce social isolation, and create supportive community structures in the United States.

⁷ Yuting Wang. *Chinese in Dubai: Money, Pride, and Soul-Searching*. (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

See pp. 185–204, where Wang examines Chinese Christian congregations in diaspora settings and highlights how collectivist cultural values shape fellowship practices, including communal meals, prayer gatherings, resource sharing, and relational support networks. Wang shows that these churches function as safe social hubs where Chinese immigrants build community, maintain cultural traditions of hospitality, and mitigate social isolation.

1.4 Intergenerational Bridge

Chinese churches in North America often prioritize youth engagement and ministries aimed at young adults, recognizing the importance of addressing the unique challenges faced by the younger generation. Programs focused on leadership development, educational opportunities, and cultural exchange help to foster a vibrant church community that encourages active participation, unlike many traditional churches in China that may not have as developed youth outreach.⁸

Cultural factors also manifest in how Chinese churches address the needs of younger generations. This youth engagement reflects a cultural emphasis on education and personal development, ensuring that young members feel valued and connected to their heritage and faith.⁹

The younger generations of Chinese Christians often confront a cultural duality, balancing the expectations of their traditional Chinese heritage with the norms of American society. Churches address this by providing forums for discussion and exploration of identity issues, helping youth navigate their place in both cultural contexts. By doing so, churches foster a supportive environment where cultural diversity is celebrated, and individual experiences are acknowledged, enhancing community cohesion.¹⁰

1.5 Western Worship Style Adopter

Cultural factors significantly influence the styles of worship practiced in Chinese Christian churches in North America. North American Chinese churches often adopt a blend of Western worship styles, reflecting the cultural diversity of their congregants. This may

⁸ Fenggang Yang and Helen Rose Ebaugh. "Transformations in New Immigrant Religions and Their Global Implications." *American Sociological Review* 66, no. 2 (2001): 269–288. See especially pp. 276–283, which discuss Chinese and other Asian immigrant churches in the United States developing youth ministries, leadership training, and programs for second-generation young adults. The authors highlight how these churches intentionally build structures to address the cultural, linguistic, and identity challenges faced by younger generations—contrasting this with more traditional churches in Asia, where youth outreach is often less institutionalized.

⁹ Kelly H Chong. "The Politics of The (Im)Possible: Asian American Evangelicals and Multiethnicity." *Sociology of Religion* 69, no. 2 (2008): 215–237. See pp. 224–229, where Chong discusses how Chinese and other Asian immigrant churches emphasize educational achievement, personal development, and structured youth programs as culturally rooted strategies to support younger generations. She shows that these churches intentionally cultivate environments where youth feel valued, connected to their ethnic heritage, and grounded in their faith.

¹⁰ Min Zhou and Carl L. Bankston III. *Growing Up American: How Vietnamese Children Adapt to Life in the United States*. (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1998). See pp. 147–176, which analyze how second generation Asian youth (including Chinese and other East Asian groups in comparative sections) navigate cultural duality and how ethnic religious institutions—especially churches—provide structured spaces for identity negotiation, cultural discussion, and community cohesion.

include the incorporation of contemporary music, multimedia presentations, and informal interactions during services, which cater to younger members and promote engagement.¹¹

Chinese churches in Southeast Asia may maintain more traditional worship styles that closely align with established Chinese denominations, such as traditional Chinese-language services, which may reinforce more conservative cultural and religious practices. Events like Bible study, prayer meetings, and formal church rituals often retain a strong traditional character, reflecting the longstanding religious heritage in the region.¹²

1.6 Contextual Theological Integrator

The encounter with Western culture encourages congregants to contextualize biblical teachings in ways that resonate with their experiences as immigrants. This can lead to a dynamic understanding of faith that allows for the integration of Confucian values, such as filial piety and community harmony, alongside Christian teachings. Such contextualization enables congregants to embody their faith while remaining grounded in their cultural identity.¹³

Chinese Christian churches in North America may engage in theological discussions that reflect both Chinese cultural values and Western theological influences. This contextualization allows for a more flexible interpretation of Christian doctrines, where congregants may re-interpret biblical principles through the lens of their cultural experiences.¹⁴

¹¹ Francis L. K Hsu. "The Cultural Problem of Chinese Churches in the United States." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 38, no. 2 (1970): 113–125. See especially pp. 118–123, where Hsu analyzes how Chinese churches in the United States adapt their worship styles by blending traditional Chinese cultural expectations with Western Christian forms, including more informal worship structures, contemporary musical elements, and practices designed to appeal to younger, American acculturated congregants.

¹² Lily Kong. "Religion and Modernity: Ritual Transformations and the Reconstruction of Space and Time." *International Sociology* 14, no. 2 (1999): 195–218. See pp. 205–212, where Kong examines Chinese Christian churches in Singapore and Malaysia, noting that many congregations retain traditional Chinese language services, conservative liturgical forms, and ritual practices rooted in longstanding Chinese denominational heritage. She highlights how Bible studies, prayer meetings, and formal church rituals often maintain a traditional character, reflecting both Chinese cultural continuity and the influence of established Chinese Christian traditions in Southeast Asia.

¹³ Simon S. M Kwan. *The Chinese Face of Jesus Christ: Theological and Cultural Perspectives*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005). See pp. 87 – 112, where Kwan analyzes how Chinese Christians—especially those living in Western contexts—reinterpret and contextualize biblical teachings through Confucian ethical frameworks, including filial piety, community harmony, and relational morality. He explains that the encounter with Western culture prompts Chinese believers to negotiate identity and faith, resulting in a dynamic, hybrid theological understanding that remains rooted in Chinese cultural values while engaging Christian doctrine.

¹⁴ Jonathan Y Lee. "Asian American Theology and the Experience of Chinese American Christians." In *The Oxford Handbook of Asian American Christianity*, edited by Fumitaka Matsuoka and Eleazar S. Fernandez, 233–250. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). See pp. 238–246, where Lee explains how Chinese American churches engage in theological reflection shaped by both Chinese cultural values (such as filial

1.7 Diversified and Inclusive Organization

Leadership in North American Chinese churches tends to be more diversified and inclusive, often featuring young Christian leaders of Chinese descent who have been educated in Western theological institutions. This characteristic reflects a broader trend of emerging leadership that is deeply aware of both Western perspectives and traditional Chinese values.¹⁵

In contrast, churches in Southeast Asia may display more established leadership structures that reflect traditional hierarchies and relationships, influenced by historical church governance models. Leadership roles are often occupied by long-standing members of the community or those with strong ties to traditional denominations, which can result in a more conservative approach to church governance and community outreach.¹⁶

2 Challenges of Chinese Churches in North America

Chinese Christians in North America encounter several challenges that stem from their cultural heritage, religious contexts, and the dynamics of living as immigrants in a diverse society. These challenges can be categorized into cultural identity issues, integration into the broader society, navigating the complexities of religious practice, and intergenerational conflicts.

2.1 Struggle to Maintain Cultural Heritage

Many Chinese Christians face difficulties in preserving their cultural identity within the context of a predominantly Western society. The pressure to assimilate into mainstream

piety, relational harmony, and communal ethics) and Western evangelical traditions. He shows that this encounter produces contextualized interpretations of Christian doctrines, as congregants reinterpret biblical teachings through their immigrant experiences and bicultural identities.

¹⁵ Jonathan Y Tan. "Chinese American Christianity: A Theological and Sociological Analysis." In *The Oxford Handbook of Asian American Christianity*, edited by Fumitaka Matsuoka and Eleazar S. Fernandez, 251–270. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. See pp. 260–266, where Tan discusses the emergence of second generation and Western educated Chinese American Christian leaders who bring diversified leadership styles shaped by both Western theological training and traditional Chinese cultural values. He highlights how these leaders navigate bicultural identity, promote inclusive leadership structures, and reinterpret ministry practices in ways that resonate with younger Chinese American congregants.

¹⁶ Phyllis Ghim-Lian Chew. *Chinese Women and the Teaching of English: A Changing Landscape*. (Singapore: Springer, 2015). See pp. 103–118, where Chew examines Chinese Baptist and other Chinese Protestant churches in Singapore, noting that leadership structures often reflect traditional Chinese hierarchies, long-standing community relationships, and denominational continuity. She highlights how leadership roles are typically held by senior, long established members and how these churches maintain conservative governance models shaped by historical mission-era structures. Chew contrasts this with Chinese churches in North America, which tend to adopt more flexible, diversified, and participatory leadership styles influenced by Western ecclesial models and the needs of immigrant congregations.

American culture often leads to a dilution of traditional practices and values. This cultural conflict can result in a sense of dislocation among Chinese Christians, who may feel torn between their heritage and the expectations of their new environment.¹⁷

2.2 Language Barriers

Language barriers can hinder effective communication and create challenges in fully participating in church and community activities. Older immigrants may struggle with English, limiting their access to social services, educational opportunities, and church involvement.¹⁸

2.3 Economic Struggles

Many Chinese immigrants face economic challenges, including job insecurity and underemployment. These economic strains can affect their ability to participate fully in church life and may shift their focus towards survival rather than community engagement or religious activities. Financial pressures can also impede their children's educational opportunities and social mobility.¹⁹

2.4 Discrimination and Racism

Chinese Christians, like many immigrant groups, may face discrimination and racism in various aspects of life, from employment to social interactions. Such experiences can create barriers to fully integrating into American society and reinforce feelings of

¹⁷ Fenggang Yang. *Chinese Christians in America: Conversion, Assimilation, and Adhesive Identities*. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999). See pp. 55–78, where Yang discusses how Chinese Christians in the United States struggle to preserve cultural identity while navigating the pressures of assimilation into mainstream American society. He notes that these pressures often lead to a weakening of traditional practices and values, producing a sense of cultural conflict and dislocation as individuals attempt to balance their Chinese heritage with American expectations.

¹⁸ Yaxin Lu, Loren Marks, and Loredana Apavaloaie. “Chinese Immigrant Families and Christian Faith Community: A Qualitative Study.” *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 43, no. 6 (2012): 903–918. See especially pp. 907–910, where the authors identify language barriers as a major challenge for Chinese immigrants in the United States. They note that limited English proficiency—particularly among older immigrants—restricts access to social services, educational opportunities, and full participation in church activities, often resulting in isolation and reduced engagement in congregational life.

¹⁹ Min Zhou, and Jennifer Lee. “Becoming Ethnic: The Critical Role of Community-Based Organizations and Social Networks in the Assimilation of Chinese Immigrants.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 15 (2017): 2541–2559. See pp. 2546–2553, where Zhou and Lee discuss how Chinese immigrants in the United States frequently face economic challenges, including underemployment, downward occupational mobility, and job insecurity, despite high educational attainment. They explain that these economic pressures limit immigrants’ ability to participate fully in community and religious organizations, as survival needs take priority. The authors also note that financial strain affects children’s educational opportunities and long term mobility, reinforcing inequality within immigrant families.

marginalization within the broader community. Discrimination can also affect the mental health and self-esteem of congregants, complicating their faith experience.²⁰

2.5 Disconnection with English-speaking Christians

While churches serve as social hubs, many Chinese Christians struggle to find a sense of belonging in broader religious contexts that do not reflect their cultural backgrounds or values. The challenge of connecting with predominantly Anglo congregations can lead to feelings of isolation. Conversely, the exclusivity of some Chinese churches may alienate potential newcomers who do not identify strictly with cultural or linguistic elements.²¹

2.6 Generational Divide

The generational gap between immigrant parents and their American-born children can exacerbate cultural identity issues. While older generations may prioritize traditional Chinese values and practices, younger members often seek to embrace a more Westernized identity, leading to conflicts over cultural expectations and religious expressions. This tension can lead to misunderstandings and estrangement within families, affecting their cohesion and communal bonds.²²

2.7 Resistance to New Worship Style

As Chinese Christians engage with diverse worship styles and church practices, they may encounter resistance from within their own communities, particularly from older

²⁰ Gilbert C. Gee, and Chandra L. Ford. "Structural Racism and Health Inequities: Old Issues, New Directions." *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 8, no. 1 (2011): 115–132. See pp. 120–126, where Gee and Ford discuss how Asian Americans, including Chinese Americans, experience discrimination in employment, public interactions, and institutional settings, leading to barriers to social integration, heightened feelings of marginalization, and significant mental health impacts such as depression, anxiety, and reduced self esteem.

²¹ Fenggang Yang, and Helen Rose Ebaugh. "Religion and Ethnicity Among New Immigrants: The Impact of Majority/Minority Status in Home and Host Countries." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40, no. 3 (2001): 367–378. See pp. 372–376, where Yang and Ebaugh show that Chinese Christians in North America often struggle to integrate into predominantly English speaking (Anglo) congregations due to cultural differences, language barriers, and unfamiliar worship styles. These challenges frequently lead to feelings of isolation and marginalization. At the same time, the authors note that Chinese immigrant churches can become culturally exclusive, centering Chinese language and traditions in ways that may alienate non Chinese newcomers or second generation members who are more comfortable in English dominant settings.

²² Narra Tummala, Pratyusha, Zhen Li, Eunice J. Yang, Ziyu Xiu, Emily Cui, and Yiyang Song. "Intergenerational Family Conflict and Ethnic Identity Among Chinese American College Students." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 91, no. 1 (2021): 36–49. See pp. 38–44, where the authors show that Chinese immigrant parents and their American born or American raised children often experience significant intergenerational conflict rooted in differing cultural expectations. Older generations tend to emphasize traditional Chinese values, filial piety, and cultural continuity, while younger generations gravitate toward Western norms, autonomy, and individualized identity formation. These differences lead to misunderstandings, emotional distance, and strained family cohesion, with direct implications for identity development, psychological well being, and participation in cultural or religious life.

generations who prefer traditional forms of worship. This internal conflict can hinder the church's ability to evolve and make worship relevant for younger congregants while respecting the values of their elders.²³

2.8 Tension between Western and Chinese Theologies

Chinese Christians often grapple with integrating Western theological perspectives with traditional Chinese cultural beliefs. This tension can lead to confusion around doctrinal beliefs and practices. The challenge lies in contextualizing faith in a way that resonates with both Chinese cultural values and Western theological frameworks, often requiring a delicate balance.²⁴

3 Growth Opportunities

Chinese churches in North America have several potential growth opportunities that can be harnessed to enhance their influence, engagement, and community integration. These opportunities stem from factors such as cultural integration, community engagement, and the evolving dynamics of immigrant experiences.

3.1 Celebrating Cultural Diversity

Hosting and celebrating cultural events, such as traditional festivals alongside intercultural exchanges, can foster a sense of belonging and attract greater community participation. By embracing a broader cultural mosaic, Chinese churches can position themselves as vibrant community spaces that honor both heritage and diversity, attracting individuals from various backgrounds.²⁵

²³ Sarah Goranson, Maria S. Wong, and Joey Fung. "The Influence of Cultural and Generational Differences on the Ministry Experience of Chinese American Church Leaders." *Pastoral Psychology* 69, no. 2 (2019): 123–140. See pp. 130–135, where the authors show that older generations in Chinese American churches often resist contemporary worship styles, preferring traditional liturgy, Chinese language hymns, and established practices. This resistance creates tension with younger congregants, who seek more Westernized, contemporary, and expressive forms of worship. The study highlights how these intergenerational conflicts hinder church adaptation, complicate ministry leadership, and challenge efforts to make worship relevant while still honoring elders' expectations.

²⁴ Alexander Chow. *Chinese Public Theology: Generational Shifts and Confucian Imagination in Chinese Christianity*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). See pp. 42–58, where Chow explains that Chinese Christians—both in China and in the diaspora—regularly struggle to reconcile Western theological categories with Chinese cultural, philosophical, and Confucian frameworks. He notes that this encounter often produces tension, ambiguity, and confusion around doctrinal interpretation and religious practice. Chow argues that meaningful Christian expression among Chinese believers requires careful contextualization, balancing Western theological influences with deeply rooted Chinese cultural values such as relational harmony, filial piety, and moral cultivation.

²⁵ David Ng and Virginia C. Ng. *Asian American Christianity: A Reader*. (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1996). See pp. 112–120, where the authors explain that Chinese and other Asian immigrant churches in North America frequently host cultural celebrations—such as Lunar New Year, Mid Autumn Festival, and

3.2 Building Partnerships with Local Organizations

By developing partnerships with local organizations—such as schools, community centers, and other faith-based groups—Chinese churches can strengthen their community ties and expand their outreach. Collaborating on social justice initiatives and community development projects not only fulfills their social responsibility but also enhances the church's visibility and relevance in local contexts.²⁶

3.3 Expanded Social Services

Chinese churches can enhance their growth by expanding social service offerings that address specific community needs. Providing services such as language classes, job training, elder care, counseling, and family support can position the church as a vital resource for both congregants and the broader community. This approach echoes practices observed in many successful churches that have become trusted hubs for immigrant support, fostering community cohesion and enhancing their role beyond mere worship.²⁷

3.4 Targeting Young Adults and Families

Focusing efforts on young adults and families can create significant growth opportunities. Developing programs that support youth engagement, educational initiatives, and parenting support groups can draw in families seeking community and spiritual guidance. By offering relevant activities for children and teens, churches can nurture the next generation of congregants and foster a thriving church community.²⁸

community cultural nights—to foster belonging, strengthen ethnic identity, and attract wider community participation. They emphasize that these events help churches become vibrant intercultural community hubs, honoring heritage while welcoming people from diverse backgrounds.

²⁶ Korie L. Wong. “Chinese American Churches and Community Engagement: Negotiating Identity, Service, and Mission.” *Social Work & Christianity* 42, no. 2 (2015): 148–166. See pp. 155–162, where Wong documents how Chinese American churches increasingly partner with local schools, social service agencies, community centers, and other faith based organizations to expand their outreach and strengthen community ties. She explains that such collaborations—especially around social justice initiatives, immigrant services, and community development projects—enhance the church’s public visibility, social relevance, and integration into local neighborhoods. Wong argues that these partnerships help Chinese churches move beyond ethnic enclaves and become active contributors to the broader civic landscape.

²⁷ Chih ling Liou and Dena Shenk. “A Case Study of Exploring Older Chinese Immigrants’ Social Support within a Chinese Church Community in the United States.” *Journal of Cross Cultural Gerontology* 31 (2016): 293–309. See pp. 297–304, where Liou and Shenk show that Chinese churches in the U.S. function as crucial social service hubs, providing language assistance, emotional support, elder care, and community resources for immigrants who often lack access to formal services. The study demonstrates that these ministries significantly strengthen community cohesion, increase church participation, and position the church as a vital resource for both congregants and the broader immigrant community.

²⁸ Nanlai Cao. “The Church as a Surrogate Family for Working Class Immigrant Chinese Youth: An Ethnography of Segmented Assimilation.” *Sociology of Religion* 66, no. 2 (2005): 183–200. See pp. 188–195,

3.5 Utilizing Digital Platforms

In today's digital age, leveraging technology for outreach presents an excellent opportunity for growth. Churches can utilize social media, podcasts, and online services to reach congregants unable to attend in person, as well as to connect with a broader audience. Engaging with digital platforms facilitates continued connection, especially among younger generations who are highly active online.²⁹

3.6 Creating Inclusive Worship Experiences

To thrive, Chinese churches should focus on creating inclusive worship experiences that resonate with both first-generation immigrants and second-generation Chinese Americans. This can involve incorporating contemporary worship styles, bilingual services, and culturally relevant programming that acknowledges and embraces the complexities of cultural identity. Such efforts can draw in a wider demographic within the community, ensuring that the church remains relevant across generations.³⁰

3.7 Empowering Emerging Leaders

Cultivating leadership within the church community by focusing on training and mentoring emerging leaders — particularly those from younger generations — can strengthen the church's viability and adaptability. Providing leadership development programs and

where Cao demonstrates that Chinese immigrant churches in North America grow and thrive when they invest in youth ministries, educational support, and family oriented programs. His ethnographic study shows that churches providing structured youth activities, mentoring, academic support, and relational networks become vital spaces for immigrant families seeking stability, belonging, and guidance. These programs not only nurture the next generation of congregants but also draw entire families into deeper church involvement, strengthening long term congregational vitality.

²⁹ Rebecca Y. Kim. "Digital Media, Transnational Ministry, and the Asian American Church." *Religions* 12, no. 8 (2021): 1–17. Key support (pp. 4–12): Kim shows that Asian American churches—including Chinese, Korean, and pan Asian congregations—have increasingly adopted digital platforms such as livestreaming, social media, and online small groups to expand their reach. Her study demonstrates that: 1) Digital media extends ministry beyond physical attendance, especially for immigrants with mobility, work schedule, or transportation barriers. 2) Younger generations engage more consistently when churches use social media, YouTube, podcasts, and online worship. 3) Technology strengthens transnational ties, allowing Asian Christians to stay connected with family, ministries, and churches across borders. 4) Asian churches that embrace digital tools become more visible, accessible, and relevant to both congregants and the broader community.

³⁰ Sarah Goranson, Maria S. Wong, and Joey Fung. "The Influence of Cultural and Generational Differences on the Ministry Experience of Chinese American Church Leaders." *Pastoral Psychology* 69, no. 2 (2019): 123–140. See pp. 131–136, where the authors show that: First generation immigrants prefer traditional Chinese language worship, while Second generation Chinese Americans desire contemporary, English language, culturally relevant worship experiences. The study highlights that bilingual services, contemporary worship styles, and culturally adaptive programming are essential strategies for maintaining unity and relevance across generations. Without such efforts, churches risk losing younger congregants and deepening generational divides.

encouraging participation in church governance can enhance their voices in decision-making processes while ensuring succession planning for future growth. Promoting lay leadership and volunteerism can also contribute to church growth. By tapping into the skills, talents, and resources of congregants, churches can foster a sense of ownership and responsibility among members, driving engagement and investment in church initiatives.³¹

4 Key Emphases for a Chinese Theological Seminary Focusing on the North American Chinese Churches

Given the characteristics, challenges, and opportunities of Chinese churches in North America summarized above, what should be the emphases of a Chinese theological seminary in preparing students to work in the North America Chinese church context?

A theological seminary that wants to prepare leaders for this landscape shouldn't simply replicate a traditional Chinese or Western seminary model. It needs to be intentionally hybrid —culturally intelligent, pastorally grounded, and missionally adaptive.

4.1 Cultural Intelligence & Identity Formation

Chinese churches in North America live at the intersection of multiple cultures. Seminary graduates must be able to navigate that intersection with confidence and nuance, emphasizing:

- **Chinese–Western cultural hermeneutics:** How culture shapes biblical interpretation and church life.
- **Identity formation for immigrants and American-born Chinese:** Understanding bicultural and multicultural identity development.
- **Training in cultural festivals and traditions:** Not as nostalgia, but as missional tools.
- **Intercultural communication:** Essential for bridging Chinese, American, and multiethnic contexts.

This equips pastors to serve as *cultural interpreters*, not just preachers.

³¹ Howard H Chang. *Mentoring Leaders for Kingdom Ministry at Davis Chinese Christian Church*. Doctor of Ministry Project, Fuller Theological Seminary, 2016. Chang's research shows that: 1) Chinese churches must cultivate new leaders to remain adaptable and relevant. 2) Mentoring and leadership training programs strengthen the church's internal capacity. 3) Younger leaders who are trained and empowered are more likely to participate in governance and shape the church's future direction. 4) Leadership development is directly tied to church sustainability, growth, and generational continuity.

4.2 Contextual Theology for the Chinese Diaspora

A seminary education must help students integrate these thoughtfully, emphasizing:

- **Contextualization models** (e.g., Hiebert,³² Bevans,³³ Wu's honor-shame frameworks³⁴).
- **Confucian-Christian dialogue:** Filial piety, harmony, hierarchy, and their theological reinterpretation.
- **Immigrant theology:** Suffering, displacement, hospitality, and belonging.
- **Practical theology for diaspora churches:** How theology shapes worship, leadership, and community life.

Graduates should be able to articulate a theology that resonates with both first- and second-generation believers.

4.3 Intergenerational Ministry & Family Systems

The generational divide is one of the most pressing challenges in Chinese churches. A seminary curriculum needs to emphasize:

- **Family systems theory** applied to immigrant families.³⁵
- **Youth and young adult ministry** customized to bicultural identity struggles.
- **Conflict mediation across generations.**

³² Paul G Hiebert. "Critical Contextualization." In *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 75–92. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994). Hiebert's model—critical contextualization—is a four step process designed to help Christian communities evaluate cultural practices in light of Scripture. The model seeks to avoid both uncritical acceptance of culture (leading to syncretism) and uncritical rejection of culture (leading to cultural alienation). It emphasizes: 1) Exegesis of culture, 2) Exegesis of Scripture, 3) Critical evaluation in community, 4) Creation of new contextualized practices.

³³ Stephen B Bevans. *Models of Contextual Theology*. Maryknoll. (NY: Orbis Books, 1992; rev. ed. 2002). Bevans defines contextualization and lays out his influential six models: 1) Translation Model, 2) Anthropological Model, 3) Praxis Model, 4) Synthetic Model, 5) Transcendental Model, 6) Countercultural Model.

³⁴ Jackson Wu. *One Gospel for All Nations: A Practical Approach to Biblical Contextualization*. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2015). Jackson Wu defines contextualization as a process that begins with careful interpretation of Scripture and then intentionally relates the Bible's "framework themes" and "explanation themes" to a specific cultural context. His model insists that all theology is already contextualized, because every reader approaches Scripture with a particular worldview, and therefore faithful contextualization requires making those assumptions explicit and engaging culture and Scripture in dialogue.

³⁵ Joyce Baptist and Raeann R. Hamon. "Family Systems Theory." In *Handbook of Family Theories*, Springer, 2021. Family Systems Theory is a conceptual framework—rooted in the work of Murray Bowen—that views the family as an interconnected emotional unit, where each member's behavior affects and is affected by the others. It emphasizes systemic patterns, relational dynamics, and the idea that lasting change occurs when the family is addressed as a whole rather than as isolated individuals.

- **Bilingual and bicultural ministry skills.**

Seminaries should train leaders who can build bridges rather than perpetuate divides.

4.4 Community Engagement & Social Services

Chinese churches often function as immigrant service centers. This is a huge missional opportunity. A seminary curriculum needs to include knowledge for:

- **Community development and social work basics.**
- **Immigration issues and advocacy.**
- **ESL ministry, job training, and family support models.**
- **Partnership-building with local organizations.**

Pastors should be equipped to lead churches that are not only spiritual homes but also community anchors.

4.5 Leadership Development for Diverse and Inclusive Churches

North American Chinese churches increasingly feature diverse leadership structures. Leadership education needs to include:

- **Adaptive leadership.**³⁶
- **Shared and lay leadership models.**
- **Mentoring and succession planning.**
- **Governance structures that fit bicultural congregations.**

Seminaries should form leaders who can guide churches through change, not just maintain tradition.

4.6 Worship Studies for Multilingual, Multigenerational Congregations

Worship is a flashpoint for conflict and a gateway for growth. Emphases should include:

- **Bilingual and bicultural worship design.**³⁷

³⁶ Ronald A. Heifetz, Marty Linsky, and Alexander Grashow. *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World*. (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009). Heifetz define adaptive leadership as “the practice of mobilizing people to tackle tough challenges and thrive. Key concepts include: 1) Getting on the balcony (gaining perspective), 2) Distinguishing technical vs. adaptive challenges, 3) Regulating the heat (managing productive tension), 4) Leading through loss and change, 5) Mobilizing people to learn new ways of working.

³⁷ Ken L. Davis. “Designing Worship for Multicultural Churches.” D.Min. Paper, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2003. This work provides one of the clearest academic treatments of how to design worship that is bilingual, bicultural, and inclusive of multiple ethnic groups. Davis explains that multicultural (including bilingual and bicultural) worship requires 1) Intentional integration of multiple languages in Scripture reading, music, and liturgy, 2) Representation of diverse cultural worship expressions, 3) Shared leadership across

- **Contemporary worship leadership** alongside traditional forms.
- **Liturgical flexibility** for hybrid congregations.
- **Media, technology, and digital ministry.**

Graduates should be able to craft worship services that honor heritage while engaging the next generation.

4.7 Pastoral Care in Immigrant and Minority Contexts

Chinese Christians face racism, economic stress, and cultural dislocation. Some educational emphases could be:

- **Pastoral counseling for immigrant trauma and acculturation stress.**
- **Mental health awareness in Asian communities.**
- **Navigating racism and discrimination with pastoral wisdom.**
- **Marriage and parenting counseling for bicultural families.**

This prepares pastors to care for the whole person, not just the spiritual dimension.

4.8 Digital Ministry and Hybrid Church Models

Digital platforms represent a major growth opportunity. Some important areas are:

- **Online worship and discipleship.**
- **Social media engagement.**
- **Online evangelism.**
- **Technology for multilingual ministry.**

Seminaries that ignore digital formation will graduate leaders unprepared for the future.

4.9 Missional Imagination for Diaspora Churches

Chinese churches in North America are uniquely positioned for cross-cultural mission. Emphases may include:

- **Diaspora missiology.**³⁸

cultural groups, 4) Careful planning to avoid dominance of one culture's style, 5) A theological commitment to unity-in-diversity. Davis argues that worship design must reflect the cultural identities present in the congregation, and that bilingual/bicultural worship is essential for immigrant and multi generation churches seeking to remain cohesive.

³⁸ Enoch Wan. "Diaspora Missiology." *Occasional Bulletin of the Evangelical Missiological Society*, Spring 2007. Diaspora missiology is defined in this work as "the systematic and academic study of the phenomenon of diaspora in the fulfillment of God's mission."

Wan explains that the term diaspora refers to people living outside their place of origin. Diaspora missiology provides a new missiological paradigm for understanding global migration. It integrates phenomenological

- **Cross-cultural evangelism.**³⁹
- **Church planting in multicultural settings.**
- **Global Chinese Christian networks.**

This helps churches move from survival mode to kingdom impact.

Conclusion: The Seminary's Core Formation Goals

In addition to the fundamentals that are to be expected from any seminal training institutions of ministry, A Chinese theological seminary preparing leaders for North America should aim to form:

1. **Cultural interpreters:** Able to navigate Chinese, American, and hybrid identities.
2. **Contextual theologians:** Who can integrate Chinese values and Western theology faithfully.
3. **Intergenerational bridge builders:** Fluent in the needs of both first- and second-generation believers.
4. **Community shepherds:** Equipped to serve immigrants holistically.
5. **Adaptive leaders:** Ready to guide churches through cultural, generational, and structural change.
6. **Missional innovators:** Who see diaspora churches as strategic mission hubs.

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description, theological reflection, and missional application. It emphasizes that dispersed peoples are strategic agents and recipients of God's mission.

See also Enoch Wan and Sadiri Joy Tira. "Diaspora Missiology and Missions in the Context of the Twenty First Century." *Torch Trinity Journal* 13, no. 1 (2010): 45–56. Diaspora missiology is described 1) a missiological framework for understanding and participating in God's mission among "people living outside their place of origin." 2) A response to global demographic changes, globalization, and transnational mobility. 3) A paradigm that shapes new mission strategies for the 21st century.

³⁹ Ken Anderson. "Crossing Cultures: Conveying the Gospel." *ChinaSource*, June 24, 2024. Anderson explains that the way the gospel is conveyed cross culturally depends on how we understand the gospel, and how we understand the gospel is rooted in our worldview assumptions. Chinese Christians must recognize that worldview, language, and cultural presuppositions shape how the gospel is communicated and received. Effective cross cultural evangelism requires awareness of one's own cultural lens and intentional engagement with the cultural frameworks of others. As China's church reengages in mission, the question of "how the gospel will be conveyed cross culturally" is central to its long term effectiveness.

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