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NEGOTIATING IDENTITY: Exploring Tensions between Being Hakka and Being Christian in Northwestern Taiwan

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**NEGOTIATING IDENTITY:
Exploring Tensions between Being
Hakka and Being Christian in
Northwestern Taiwan.** By Ethan
Christofferson. Wipf & Stock, 2012. 316
pages. Paper. \$29.60.

Ethan Christofferson is one of a group of sensitive, insightful missionaries of the Lutheran Brethren International Mission, whose ministry has been largely among the Hakka people of Taiwan. (The Hakka are a subgroup of Han Chinese, living largely as an ethnic minority in southern China, including Taiwan, whose tight solidarity is expressed in their own distinct Chinese culture, including language.) Christofferson introduces his study as an outgrowth of his own missionary experience: “What tensions exist between being Hakka . . . and being Christian” (11). With a set of interview questions (287–290), he pursues his quest with thirty-six Hakka informants—both non-Christians and Christians—filters the interviews through a social constructionist paradigm, and offers some interesting proposals.

Several issues stood out as most impactful. One is the historical reality of Hakka people being an ethnic minority, culturally suppressed by Japanese colonial powers before and during World War II and by the Chinese Nationalist government after that war. Response to suppression ranged from defensive withdrawal into a conclave to assimilation with dominant cultures. Recent political openness in Taiwan has invited continued assimilation: As Hakka people have moved into largely non-Hakka communities, and have intermarried with non-Hakka

people, the emphasis on speaking Hakka is diminished and the old traditions and customs have less relevance. Even defining what makes a person Hakka is difficult if language, region, and pedigree are increasingly marginal and if the process of blending cultures is still an active trend. Therefore, when Christofferson speaks of the Hakka people, he prefers more malleable descriptors such as “being Hakka” or “doing things in the Hakka way.” This, in turn, expresses the frustration Christofferson felt in his own ministry, working hard for fluency in the Hakka language, but discovering that not all of the Hakka he was speaking to were as comfortable in, or even loyal to, the ancestral language.

Another major issue is the perception held by many non-Christian Hakka that Christianity is a foreign religion, not proper for Hakka to consider. For those who are more conservative, Christianity is seen as at odds with Hakka history, religious devotion, ancestors, cultural legacy, and family solidarity. One informant observed that for a Hakka to become Christian would demand “the faith of a martyr” (109). For others, Christianity may be proper, even good for Western people, but not for Hakka: “it’s like the difference between a . . . cow and a water buffalo” (181), both good but not interchangeable.

These issues and others suggest to Christofferson that in a society as increasingly mobile as Taiwan’s, identifying and focusing on a “homogeneous people group” such as the Hakka may be anachronistic and extremely confining. While Donald McGavran’s insight that “people like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers”

(14) serves as an important reminder that a missionary be sensitive to the cultural heritage and make-up of a people, the reality is that people are on the move, and the traditional culture (even language) may not always be the sole or even primary context of daily life. Specifically, the social movement of recent decades in Taiwan seems toward a multicultural society, sensitive to converging strands, but not reinforcing divergence. Missionary strategy needs to be responsive to changing cultural contexts, whether blending or declining, so that cultural immersion ministry may reflect the life situation of a variety of Hakka: those at the center of Hakka life, those moving to the margins, and those outside the margins but affirming their roots.

The relevance of Christofferson’s analysis of a fluid-society Taiwan, and implications for mission outreach to a specific cultural group in that fluid society resonated perfectly with observations for ministry in a Hoklo context—Hoklo refers to an ethnic group loosely called by many, “Taiwanese.” Though the Hoklo are the dominant subgroup in Taiwan (70 percent) which would suggest greater ethnic stability, the movement toward multiculturalism is blurring cultural lines among them also, likely exacerbated in earlier days by decades of Nationalist government repression of Taiwanese language and culture, and more recently by Taiwan’s increasing movement toward the economy and world of China.

If there is one methodological blip that occurs to this reviewer, it is the limited size of the interview group. Admittedly, Christofferson explained his efforts to diversify by gender, age, education, location, and religious affiliation. However, when an observation is attributed to an unidentified informant, this reader wonders how widely representative

that observation might be (idiosyncratic? or widely representative?), and thus how much weight to put on the observation.

Though this book arises in the narrowly defined cultural context of the Hakka people in Taiwan, the phenomena described and the conclusions drawn have relevance in much wider circles. The corrective it offers to the church growth movement’s insight of the “homogeneous people group” is pertinent, challenging, even liberating. This reviewer appreciated also the focus on the question of the role of a missionary in a fluid society. Is it to conserve traditional culture? Is it to facilitate blended or assimilated culture? A likely follow-up question is, how many languages does a missionary need to be relevant to a fluid culture? (Christofferson has added remarkable fluency in Mandarin to his initial fluency in Hakka, and can rattle off a smattering of Taiwanese as well.)

Henry Rowold