

# PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN TAIWAN (PCT) IN DIASPORA

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## Abstract

The geography of religion is a branch of cultural geography (Bottiglioni, 1954; Levine, 1986; McDavid Jr, 1986; Park, 2005). Since the 1980s, relevant research in Taiwan has focused mainly on the traditional religious sphere, lacking studies on foreign religions and the relationship between religions and languages. This study believes that language and religion are closely related. The primary reason for the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan's (PCT) use of Taiwanese as its mission language at the initial period of its missionary work was that most people in Taiwan at that time did not know Han characters. After teaching them simple Roman scripts, they could read the Romanized Bible. However, following the end of World War II in 1945, Taiwan was ruled by the Kuomintang (KMT), and the language had been changed from Japanese and Taiwanese to Mandarin. The language policy in the 1970s even prohibited the use of Taiwanese. Since PCT continued to use Taiwanese, it had become a language island in Taiwanese society, which in turn affected its religious situation.

**Keywords:** Presbyterian Church; Taiwan (PCT); Diaspora

## Introduction

This study focuses on language use in church spaces and discusses from the theological perspective why the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan (PCT) insisted on using indigenous languages for its missionary work. The primary reason for the PCT's use of Taiwanese as its mission language at the initial period of its missionary work was that most people in Taiwan at that time did not know Han characters. After teaching them the simple Roman alphabet, they could read the Amoy Romanized Bible. In such a context, missionaries translated the Bible into the Peh-oe-ji edition. Represented by Reverend William Campbell and Thomas Barclay in southern Taiwan, Campbell edited the *E-mng-im Sin Ji-tian* (*A Dictionary of the Amoy Vernacular Spoken throughout the Prefectures of Chin-Chiu, Chiang-Chiu, and Formosa*) and further developed the modern education system with language, including the first Peh-oe-ji edition of *The Principles and Practice of Nursing* (Campbell, 1889, 1910). Meanwhile, Barclay started from the translation of the New Testament. In the 1930s, both the Old and New Testaments were translated and are still passed down to this day (Band, 1936). Later, because of the increase in the literacy rate and the gradual decline of the older generation who had received their education using the Roman phonetic alphabet, the younger generation could no longer read the Amoy Romanized Bible smoothly. In 1996, the PCT General Assembly changed the Amoy Romanized Bible to the Taiwanese Han character edition, hoping young people could continue to inherit the Taiwanese language. Han characters and Roman scripts are also juxtaposed in the hymns. However, the slideshows during meetings use mainly Han characters. This phenomenon is related to the government's vigorous policy to suppress Taiwanese in the 1970s (Chiung, 2017; Wu in Lau, 2019; Wu, 2011). On the other hand, it is also related to education levels and the "Mandarinized" society. Evidence of such a relationship can be found from another perspective. Peh-oe-ji was the language used in the meeting minutes of the PCT and in the publications of Taiwan Church News in the early days. It was not until 1970 that they started to use Mandarin Han characters. The above demonstrates the decline of the Peh-oe-ji and the growth of the Mandarin Han characters. In addition, school education was offered in Mandarin, and people who spoke their mother tongues would be punished. As a result, the mother tongue inheritance was gradually broken (Chiung, 2001; Sandel in drugi, 2006; Tien, 2009). The Bible currently used by the PCT was completed by the missionaries in 1930. The language expressions

are still those being used in the 1930s. Many of them are less used today, and some of these expressions relating to cultural or theological background can only be understood by people in the church circle.

Humanistic geographer Yi-fu Tuan claimed that religion is developed by human beings in pursuit of the ultimate sense of security (Tuan, 2012). This argument is similar to the ultimate concern proposed by Western theologian Paul Tillich (Tillich, 1965). Tuan believed that place is in the scope of geography, while placelessness is in the scope of religion. Since religion is a part of a culture, religious geography should also be a part of cultural geography, and both pursue a better society. However, modern people put too much emphasis on places and rituals, such as religious buildings and the order of rituals, losing the religions' compassion and sympathy toward people. This is true of all religions in the world. Tuan took Buddhism and Christianity as examples to illustrate that all religions are pursuing global truth. As a result, the missionary has become a task of religion. Its scope is both global and geographical. For Tuan, everything that happens in the ritual space of the church, including the church's (religious) buildings, is also part of the culture. Through this, religion is connected to places. He also observed the rise of modern science and the decline in the number of people participating in religious activities (especially in Europe and America), which he believed was only a superficial phenomenon, but that religion has already entered the place and culture (Tuan, 2009). That being the case, the close relationship between religion and language cannot be avoided. In his book published in 1979, Tuan mentioned that language is exclusive to human beings and is also social (Tuan, 1979; Tuan, 1976, 1991). When the PCT chooses to use the Taiwanese language, it must face the language transformation.

The Presbyterian church's mission to Taiwan was carried out under the umbrella of imperialism. On the other hand, influenced by the Edinburgh Missionary Conference in 1910, the participants believed it was necessary to preach actively to the outside world. The gospel of Matthew 28:19- 20 contains what is called the Great Commission: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you, and surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Another passage in the Acts of the Apostles 1:8 is also understood as part of the Great Commission: "But

you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere-in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Therefore, at that time, Western Christian sects tried their best to send missionaries abroad. The missionary cause in the early stages even needed the protection of the Western home country. For example, when the church was damaged due to opposition to Christian mission in the early days, the Qing Dynasty government had to compensate the damaged church. Some people even joined the church to seek protection from foreign religious forces. Later, the church's mission began to be based on medical care and education and attracted followers at the same time. Taking Mackay in the Yilan area as an example, the Pingpu people who were healed by him changed their surnames into Chieh (偕) (Mackay in Macdonald, 1895).

In the 1970s, the KMT implemented a strict national language policy. Instead of switching to Mandarin, the PCT gradually developed a local theology with its own characteristics and firmly identified the relationship between language and local culture until today.

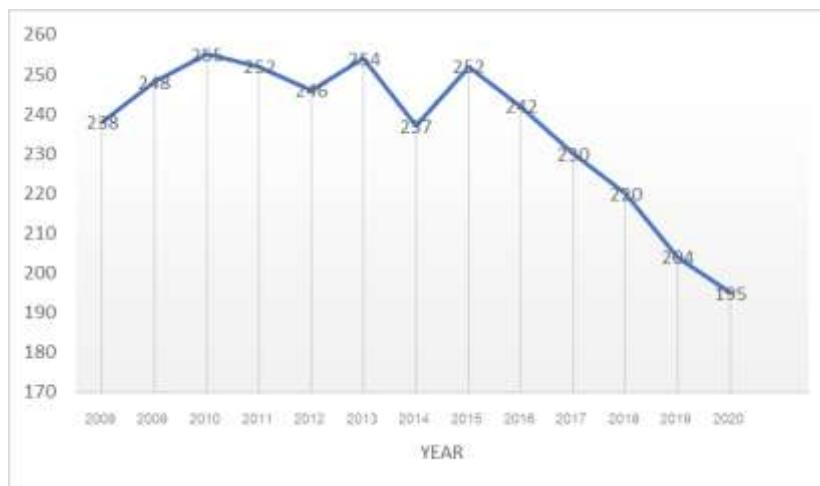
## **Impact of Language on the PCT**

This qualitative research uses ethnography and historical methods, supplemented by church-related data. Through interactions and interviews with church members and our own participation, the language used in a single church was used as the starting point for the investigation. The PCT Dongning church in Tainan City was selected as the research subject. The investigation started by interviewing its members. The 25 church members who accepted interviews included major subgroup leaders in the church, such as fellowship leaders, presbyters/deacons, pastors, and several current members, and two members who have transferred other churches. When asked why they continue to stay at Dongning church, the most common answers were that their relatives and friends are all there, they grew up there, and are used to this place. From this, it can be found that the members' incentive to congregate at the church came from relatives and friends in their circles. On the other hand, it can also be seen from the composition of church members that they belong to several families. The elders of those families were all young people when the church was founded in 1965, and most of them are related to Dongning church. Consequently, the new generations of those families accounted for a considerable portion of the PCT.

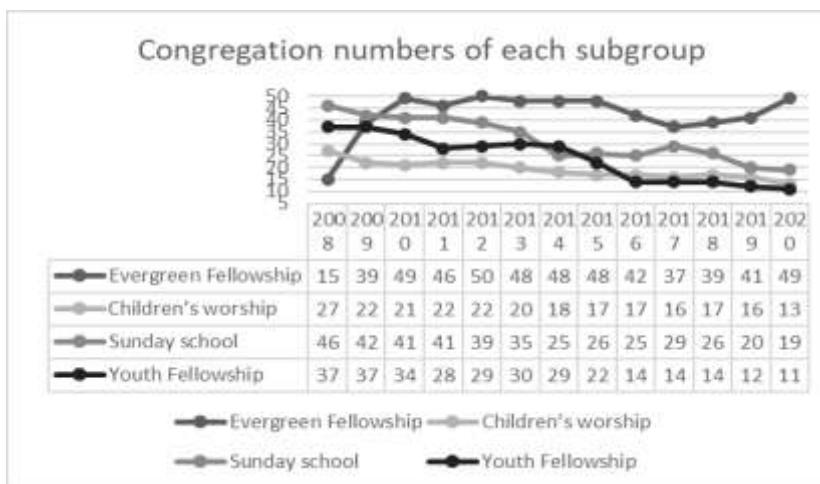
The two members who left and congregated in other churches shared similar backgrounds. They came to Dongning church to congregate when they were studying in junior/senior high schools, due to geographical proximity or invitations of classmates. Interestingly, their ancestral homes were in Mainland China. One said that the liturgy of the Presbyterian church was too rigid; therefore, he transferred to a nearby charismatic church. Another one left because he could not agree with the pastor's sermon.

Another focus of the interview was why church attendance is decreasing. In addition to language issues, the elder deacons mentioned the low birthrate. Most of the younger interviewees cited external factors; for example, the nearby Mandarin-speaking charismatic church was more attractive.

On the other hand, regarding the changes in the number of church members, we obtained the data of the number of Sunday service attendees and the major subgroups of the church for analysis and illustration. The data, which were collected between 2008 and 2020, indicated the average attendance over 52 weeks in a year. Before 2007, the church only counted the attendance for Sunday service. Therefore, in order to compare with each subgroup, data between 2008 and 2020 was used. There were four subgroups in the church, namely Sunday Children's Worship (children in elementary school who attend the Sunday service), Sunday School (children in elementary school, who attend meetings on Saturday nights), Youth Fellowship (the youth from junior and senior high schools, who attend the meetings on Saturday nights), and Evergreen Fellowship (members over 60 years old who stayed for meetings after Sunday service). In terms of Sunday worship attendance, although the number fluctuated slightly before 2015, it has plummeted from 252 people in 2016 to 195 people in 2020 (See Figure 1). As for the subgroups, except for the Evergreen Fellowship which grew rapidly from 2008 to 2010, the others showed a downward trend. From 2008 to 2020, the children's worship attendance dropped by 14 people, which was the lowest. Meanwhile, Youth Fellowship and Sunday School attendance declined by 27 people and 26 people, respectively (See Figure 2).



**Figure 1:** Sunday worship attendance 2008–2020.



**Figure 2:** Congregation numbers of each subgroup 2008–2020.

The hymn currently used by the church is the 2009 version. The hymn that had been previously used included four versions: the 1900, 1926, 1936, and 1964 versions. The older generation is more familiar with the 1964 version. Therefore, this version is still being used for prayer meetings on Wednesday night as most participants are over 60 years old. Although the elder deacons continued to encourage young people to participate in the prayer meeting, they did not take into consideration how many members aged 35 to 50 years old needed to take care of children. Furthermore, going out at night may cause trouble. None of the attendees were under 35 years old. We asked why the new

generation did not participate in the weekly prayer meeting during the interview. The answers cited mostly language and music barriers. On the other hand, the interviewees also mentioned that they needed to pray for elderly members who were sick in bed or live in a nursing home. The prayer list for these members contained approximately 20 people. The younger generation said that they did not know them. Due to these factors, their willingness to participate has been reduced.

Another weekly activity of the church is Bible study which is held on Friday nights. This activity is usually led by a pastor or a more senior presbyter who sets a schedule to read a book in the Bible, such as Genesis or Matthew. The cultural context of each chapter and section and their significance in today's life will be explained and discussed. In principle, it should be a training of the church to promote its central tenet. The average number of participants was approximately ten, and most of them were over 60 years old. Young people did not participate. The interview results suggested that they found it difficult to understand Bible explanations in Taiwanese. On the other hand, as mentioned above, weekly activities can impact families with children and, as a result, their participation rate is low.

The most important routine of the church is the worship service scheduled on Sundays at 9:30 a.m. Its form follows that left by missionaries more than a hundred years ago. It is almost the same as the service of the Scottish Presbyterian church today. The Taiwanese language is used throughout the worship process. To cater to young people, the church arranged Mandarin interpreters. Members in need can take wireless earphones to listen to the Mandarin translations. However, through observation, we found that the frequency of its use was not high. The only option for worship songs was the 2009 version of the hymn, which was different from the praise and worship songs preferred by the charismatic church. On the other hand, the pastor's sermons were mostly in the form of message delivery. The center of the whole service was the pastor's sermon, which was the characteristic of traditional preaching—the interactions between the pastor and the members were limited, and the messages were unilaterally delivered. The Charismatic church service is centered on praise and worship. The pastor's sermon is much briefer and is even delivered in short talks between songs. The service was centered on music, and the members must interact with the song-leading group on the stage. The priest

would also adjust the songs according to the atmosphere of the scene. There have been considerable discussions and controversies in the internal publications of the Presbyterian church as to whether the form of worship needs to be updated. In fact, when interviewing young people, they all complained about the traditional method of worship. They believed it needed to be changed to a praise and worship style.

The pastors of the PCT are cultivated by three seminaries – the Taiwan Theological College and Seminary in Northern Taiwan, the Yushan Theological College and Seminary in East Taiwan, and the Tainan Theological College and Seminary in Southern Taiwan. Among them, it is the Yushan Theological College and Seminary which primarily cultivates indigenous pastors. To obtain pastoral qualifications, the Master of Divinity graduates cultivated by the three seminaries must go through a preaching career for one to two years and pass the thesis and language examinations. If a church is willing to hire them, they need to go through an ordination ceremony required by the church or institution before officially obtaining the pastor qualification. In recent years, because the Taiwanese language proficiency of the younger preachers was not as good as those before, it is quite difficult for them to pass the traditional mother tongue test. Consequently, such a system has also been questioned. Subgroups within the church include Sunday School (children in elementary schools and kindergartens), Children's Fellowship (junior and senior high school students), Youth Fellowship (college students), and Young Professional Fellowship (college graduates under the age of 40). We observed their meetings and found that the content was delivered in Mandarin, especially in Sunday school. The children can no longer understand Taiwanese, let alone learn Taiwanese Roman scripts. In such context, the decline of the use of Taiwanese in the church is inevitable. Although older pastors insist on holding events such as Taiwanese Bible reading and Taiwanese storytelling competitions, they still cannot resist the language transformation in society. For older followers, using Taiwanese during meetings is their tradition and habit. However, for young people, this will lead to the inability to understand and absorb the preaching of the pastor. They will thus leave the church or transfer to Mandarin-speaking charismatic churches.

Congregations of growing churches attribute the growth to internal factors, whereas those of declining churches attribute the decline to external factors (Flatt in drugi, 2018). Research participants believed that both factors were involved. In terms of the number of congregations, the decrease of 43 people in Sunday service from 2008 to 2020 can be explained by the reduction of 67 people in children's worship, Sunday school, and youth fellowship. However, the congregation of the Evergreen fellowship has increased rapidly from 2008 to 2010. Since Evergreen fellowship is formed with members over 60 years old, it can be inferred that those newcomers were born in the 1950s. The church was founded in 1965; therefore, these members joined the church when they were students. The church continued to teach Taiwanese Roman scripts until 1970 and then stopped due to the national language policy. On the other hand, with the education and language oppression after the 1970s, Taiwanese gradually became the language of the middle and lower classes and was even considered undignified (Su, 2008). In this context, the Taiwanese language environment for children to use and listen to gradually disappeared for those born after the 1970s (Baran, 2005; Heylen, 2005). When they established families, the language they used at home had also gradually changed into Mandarin. The next generation of children was born in around 1990 to 2000. They were almost unable to use Taiwanese as their parents speak Mandarin. This partly explains the rapid decline in the congregation of young subgroups in the church around 2010.

## Why the Presbyterian Church Insists on Using Taiwanese

Language is an essential tool for delivering messages. The PCT insists on using the local language in its liturgy and even establishes the Promote Taiwan's Mother Tongues Committee at its general assembly level. Preachers must also pass a mother tongue exam before serving as a pastor; nevertheless, Mandarin was exempted from the definition of mother tongues. In this context, the use of Taiwanese (or indigenous languages) has become the Presbyterian church's resilience.

In the 1970s, the KMT launched a strict national language policy. While being suppressed, the Taiwanese language had become a symbol of identity in the PCT and further became the Taiwan value that the PCT insisted on. In the 1970s, the PCT declared that it advocated Taiwan's independence (Katz in Rubenstein, 2003; Rubenstein, 2001) and also began to establish local theology

to explain the reasons for insisting on the use of Taiwanese. The concept of local theology was first proposed by Coe, who was born in Taiwan under Japanese colonization. He received Japanese education and later went to the United Kingdom to study theology. He could not return to Taiwan after graduation due to World War II. After the war, he returned to Taiwan to teach at a seminary. In 1965, he left Taiwan due to political pressure and was blacklisted. He was unable to return to Taiwan until he died in the United Kingdom in 1988. Coe suggested that it was sad to be a Taiwanese. His name was never Ng Chiong-hui in Taiwanese, but Japanese pronunciation of Han characters Shoki Ko and Chang-Huei Hwang (C.H. Hwang) in Mandarin. He pointed out that Taiwan is constantly being colonized by foreign regimes without its own sovereignty and statehood. Theology must consider the situation of the local people, which he called contextual theology (Coe, 1973, 1976, 1977). Under his influence, Taiwan's local theology began to develop in the 1980s (Kwan, 2020; Wheeler, 2002; Woods, 2017). The younger generation of theologians started to develop localized theology based on Coe's contextual theology (Chen, 2003; Huang, 2002; Wang, 1988). All of these have strengthened the Presbyterian church's idea of using Taiwanese, and the language used in the church has gradually been isolated from society.

## Conclusions

With respect to liturgy and music, praise and worship have become the mainstream of the new generation of church (Berhó, 2020; Ocran, 2019), not only in Taiwan but all over the world. Faced with this transformation, how the PCT should modify its liturgy or language to respond to external changes has become an important issue for it. Most research on religious language and rituals is based on the diaspora of ethnic groups and churches (Dreisziger, 2018; Han, 2019; Wu, 2016). The PCT is in diaspora on its own land because of language. The relationship between its worship language, theology, and society is more worthy of in-depth research.

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