

Between Two Worlds: Identity-Theological Reflections of Second-Generation Chinese Christians in Germany—A Case Study

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Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, October 2025

Abstract

This article explores the identity-theological dynamics of second-generation Chinese Christians (ZGCC) in Germany by examining two contrasting congregational models in two major cities. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork—including participant observation and ten interviews with youth, parents, and church leaders—the study investigates how ZGCC navigate their bicultural heritage within the Chinese Christian diaspora and in relation to the German Christian context. Conceptually grounded in research on migration and diaspora, as well as on congregational typologies, the study reveals that Chinese identity plays a crucial yet ambivalent role in shaping ZGCC’s self-understanding, communal belonging, and theological reflection. The article analyzes structural church models (Transfer vs. Duplex), linguistic and generational tensions, and hybrid faith expressions. It argues that the ZGCC embody a distinct form of contextualized faith that resists binary identity frameworks and instead integrates Chinese and German elements in a theologically meaningful way. Possible implications for church structure, leadership development, and intergenerational integration are discussed. The study concludes by proposing further avenues for theological and missiological research on this topic.

Key Words: second-generation Chinese Christians, bicultural identity, Chinese churches in Germany, intergenerational tensions, cultural hybridity, identity-theological reflection, Duplex church model, Diaspora Theology

Introduction

The Chinese Christian church in Germany (Ma, 2025; Ma & Chen, 2025a, 2025b)¹ is a diasporic phenomenon that has grown since the late twentieth century, giving rise to congregations of first-generation Chinese immigrants and now their German-raised children. These second-generation Chinese Christians (ZGCC) occupy a bicultural space (Benet-Martínez et al., 2002; Berry, 1997; Bhabha, 2012; LaFromboise et al., 1993)—often born or brought up in Germany while rooted in Chinese heritage—and they navigate between Chinese church traditions and the German societal context.² This study explores how Chinese ethnic identity intersects with the Christian faith of the ZGCC. In particular, this article asks: *What significance does Chinese identity hold for the Christian faith of second-generation Chinese Christians? Further, how is cultural identity perceived by ZGCC within the diasporic Chinese-Christian context, and how is it negotiated within the German Christian context?*

These questions probe the heart of a hybrid identity: ZGCC must reconcile the cultural heritage and social present in their spiritual lives. In practical terms, many Chinese diaspora churches in Germany are wrestling with generational transitions—the “intergenerational tensions” that emerge as the German-raised youth develop different perspectives on faith and community than their immigrant parents (H.-S. Lee & Kim, 2014, pp. 106–107). The implications of these dynamics are far-reaching: unresolved tensions could lead to a “generational break” or even a “silent exodus” (H. Lee, 1996) of youth from the immigrant churches, while successful integration of the second generation could transform these communities into bridges between Chinese and German Christian worlds. By examining identity and theology (and setting aside for now practical missionary strategies), this article

aims to shed light on how being Chinese shapes the faith of the second generation, how young Chinese Christians perceive their cultural-religious identity in diaspora, how they negotiate that identity in the German context, and what these processes could mean for the future of Chinese churches in Germany.

Research Focus and Method

This study focuses exclusively on the identity and theological self-understanding of second-generation Chinese Christians in Germany (ZGCC), setting aside detailed discussions of church programs or outreach strategies. While practical ministry questions are acknowledged as important, this article prioritizes the underlying dynamics of cultural and spiritual identity as a necessary foundation for future applied work. The central aim is to examine how bicultural individuals navigate notions of faith, church, and belonging under the dual influence of Chinese heritage and German socialization.

Methodologically, the research combines qualitative ethnography with selected quantitative support (Girtler, 1984; Mayring, 2023, pp. 81–83). Fieldwork was conducted over four years in two Chinese migrant congregations in Germany, involving participant observation in worship services, youth meetings, and informal gatherings. Ten semi-structured interviews were carried out: six with second-generation youth (late teens to early thirties), two with first-generation parents, and two with ministry leaders. Interviews were held in German, Chinese, or both, depending on the participants' preferences, and were transcribed and translated into English for analysis. To preserve anonymity, interviewees are referenced by category rather than name. In addition, data from a prior nationwide survey of 83 ZGCC respondents complement the qualitative material.

The two congregations represent contrasting approaches to second-generation ministry. The first, a small church in central German (hereafter “CG”; 20 members), adopts a “Transfer model,” encouraging its youth to join German-speaking churches after adolescence. While CG offers Chinese-language services for the first generation, it provides minimal youth programming of its own. In contrast, the larger church in northern Germany (hereafter “NG”; 60 members) implements a “Duplex model” with parallel structures: a German-language youth service runs concurrently with the Chinese service, both under shared leadership. These two models—one emphasizing external integration, the other internal bilingual differentiation—form the comparative framework for this study.

Interview data were analyzed thematically across both cases, focusing on such dimensions as self-identification, language use, perceived community belonging, and theology. For instance, participants were asked how they define being both Christian and Chinese, how they experience God across cultural boundaries, and how they relate to their congregation and the wider German society. By foregrounding theological and identity-oriented themes, rather than programmatic outcomes, this study seeks to uncover the implicit narratives that shape second-generation Christian formation.

Due to the limitation of scope to two congregations, this study does not claim to represent the entirety of second-generation Chinese Christians in Germany; rather, it should be regarded as a foundational contribution within a broader research framework, offering preliminary insights into a complex and evolving field.

Macroscopic Perspective: Chinese Churches in Germany and Generational Challenges

Chinese immigrant churches in Germany, though generally small and scattered, form a resilient and culturally significant part of the religious landscape. Unlike their often larger, well-resourced counterparts in North America, most Chinese congregations in Germany have fewer than 30 active members and were founded by first-generation migrants in the 1980s and 1990s.³ Today, over 70 fellowships and churches are linked through *the Forum für Mission unter Chinesen in Deutschland* (FMCD), yet only a few congregations exceed 100 attendees (Chinesische Leihbücherei, 2025; Ma & Chen, 2025b, p. 241). In this fragile institutional context, the rise of a German-raised second generation presents both a challenge and a chance for renewal.

For the first generation, churches serve as spiritual homes and cultural enclaves, preserving Chinese language, values, and traditions (Kang, 2021, pp. 97–99). However, this ethnic-centered structure increasingly clashes with the lived reality of second-generation members, who are shaped by German education, language, and social norms. As one interviewee noted, “The young people don’t show the same respect for authority; they question things we never questioned,” reflecting generational gaps in worldview and behavior. These tensions surface in disagreements over worship styles, leadership, and definitions of community.

If unresolved, such tensions risk leading to generational attrition. Although Germany’s Chinese churches have not experienced the scale of the North American “Silent Exodus,” there are signs that youth disengage. As another interviewee mentioned: “the youth either join the majority German church, form their own [German-speaking] groups, or turn away from church altogether.”

Yet this second generation also offers unique promise. As bicultural, bilingual individuals, they could become cultural bridge-builders between the Chinese church and German society. Some congregations have responded by launching bilingual services or youth-specific ministries. However, as I, the author, caution elsewhere (Ma, 2025, pp. 10–12), an overly inward, ethnocentric orientation may isolate rather than empower young believers. A missionary working among the second generation summarized the dilemma: “they [the second generation] move in two worlds and could be bridge-builders, but in ethnically closed-off congregations they often hit boundaries.”

In sum, Chinese churches in Germany are navigating a critical juncture. Whether they remain inward-facing or embrace intercultural potential will shape their relevance and survival in a pluralistic society.

Mesoscopic Perspective: Congregational Models (Transfer vs. Duplex)

Zooming in to the congregational level, our two case study churches—CG church and NG church—can be placed within the typology of immigrant church models outlined by Shin and Silzer (2016, pp. 7–30), which uses housing metaphors to describe structural dynamics. Initially, both churches resembled the “Room-for-Let” model, where limited space is allocated to the second generation—a temporary arrangement meant to delay generational disengagement (Wong, 1998). Over time, however, the two congregations developed along diverging paths. NG church progressively transitioned into what Shin and Silzer define as a “Duplex” model—offering a parallel German-speaking ministry under the same roof. In contrast, CG church followed a markedly different trajectory, which I refer to in this study as a “Transfer model”: here, the spiritual formation of the second generation is intentionally entrusted to local German congregations outside the ethnic church. While the Duplex model is

a recognized category within Shin's typology, the Transfer model emerges inductively from empirical observation and represents a practical, context-specific adaptation not formally captured in existing frameworks. This divergence highlights both the fluidity of real-life congregational responses and the need to refine and expand immigrant church typologies accordingly.

In the CG church, with roughly 20 members, youth ministry is minimal due to lack of a critical mass. Children attend Chinese Sunday school, but as they reach adolescence they are encouraged to join youth programs in nearby German evangelical churches. As one elder explained, "We don't have the teachers or resources for a youth program, so it's better if our teens join the German church." This model delays defection, but it ultimately externalizes spiritual formation. A second-generation member reflected, "When I started going to the German church, I suddenly felt like a guest in my parents' church." While this "Transfer model" bears resemblance to the "Hotel" model described by Shin and Silzer (2016, p. 18)—where youth transition out into majority-culture churches—it is distinct in its reliance on small, local German congregations rather than large churches. This situation in the CG church highlights the identity cost: the young people lose regular involvement in their ethnic church, which may weaken their connection to their Chinese Christian heritage. Moreover, for the Chinese church, this model fails to cultivate future leaders.

By contrast, NG church has around 60 members and has intentionally developed a parallel German-speaking ministry under one roof. This approach aligns with the "Duplex" model, in which two language-based congregations coexist within a shared governance structure. A dedicated youth pastor leads German services while the first generation maintains Mandarin worship. Both groups share facilities and occasionally join for retreats or combined services. This model seeks to retain the second generation by offering culturally relevant ministry. As one 22-year-old said, "I love that I can worship in German with friends who are also Chinese—we understand each other's situation." Parents also value the proximity: "We're still one church family—we just have two [heart] languages now."

The Duplex model offers advantages: youth benefit from the church's infrastructure, shared budget, and relational proximity. In NG church, first-generation members often cook lunch for both services, encouraging cross-generational interaction. A few second-generation leaders now serve on the church board, indicating emerging leadership. However, the model is not without tension. Major decisions remain under first-generation control, which can frustrate youth leaders. One noted: "We wanted to invite a German worship band... but the elders didn't approve the expense." Shin (2016, pp. 10–12) warns that such imbalance risks stifling long-term development if the second generation is not prepared for eventual leadership. Furthermore, the structural division may foster segregation. As a missionary working in the NG observed, "You get two mini-churches that don't interact much... it can unintentionally foster an us-vs-them mentality."

Despite efforts to bridge the divide through combined services and mentoring, cultural tensions persist. Elders worry that youth are becoming "too German," while younger members push back against conservative traditions. The Duplex model holds these dynamics in creative tension—it offers contextualized ministry but under shared authority.

Neither model is a panacea: The Room-for-Let preserves ethnic identity in the parent generation but risks losing the youth; the Transfer model enables resource-sharing from the German mainstream, but it weakens the ethnic identity associated with the migrant church; the Duplex model retains the youth but struggles with autonomy and power-sharing. A potential middle path is Shin's "Townhouse model," where second-generation ministries become equal

partners or spin off into independent congregations while maintaining relational ties. With a view to the future, the NG church's youth wing might evolve from the Duplex model into a Townhouse model. The CG church may continue toward mono-generational decline within the ethnic congregation, but through the Transfer model it facilitates the integration of the second generation into the German mainstream, both ecclesially and culturally. In sum, both the Duplex and the Transfer model reflect distinct theological and pragmatic responses to bicultural ministry. Their trade-offs illustrate how structural choices shape the identity formation and ecclesial belonging of second-generation Chinese Christians in Germany.

Microscopic Perspective: Identity and Faith in the Voices of the Second Generation

At the heart of this study are the personal experiences and reflections of second-generation Chinese Christians themselves (alongside perspectives of their parents and pastors). The interviews enable delving into how these individuals articulate their self-identity, cultural tensions, sense of community, and theology as Chinese-German Christians. Several key themes emerged, which presented below with illustrative quotes. These narratives illuminate how the second generation perceives their Chinese identity in relation to their Christian faith, and how they negotiate that identity within both the Chinese church milieu and the broader German context.

Bicultural Self-Perception

The second-generation interviewees overwhelmingly described themselves as living in-between Chinese and German cultures. There are no fundamental differences in the research results of the two congregations. Rather than choosing one culture over the other, most embrace a hybrid identity. "I see myself as both Chinese and German," said a 21-year-old university student. "With my family and at church I'm Chinese; with my school friends I'm German. Honestly, I'm a mix." This sense of being a "mix" or *mélange* was common—they feel simultaneously 100% Chinese and 100% German, depending on context. Interestingly, many youth leaned toward identifying as Chinese in certain aspects. Some mentioned that their values or outlook felt culturally Chinese due to their upbringing. "Deep down, I think I'll always be somewhat Chinese—it's in my upbringing and how I approach life," noted one young professional, "even though Germany is my home." This self-assessment aligns with survey data: a majority of Chinese diaspora youth in Germany identify as bicultural, with a notable portion feeling "more Chinese than German" in identity.

Yet there is a perception gap: church leaders often assume the youth see themselves primarily as German. One parent admitted, "I thought my daughter was basically German now, but she actually cares a lot about being Chinese." This observation was borne out by responses indicating that young Chinese Christians have a strong desire to remain connected to Chinese culture. For example, several interviewees said they want to uphold their heritage (language, festivals, food, etc.) as part of their identity. However, they also described a feeling of liminality. A 19-year-old second-gen who attends a German school and a Chinese church laughed, "I'm not sure if I'm a fake German or a fake Chinese. I'm somewhere in between – a real 'banana'!" (using the colloquial term for someone yellow on the outside, white on the inside). Such humorous labels aside, there is sometimes an underlying anxiety about not fully belonging to either world. This tension does not necessarily weaken their faith, but it does frame it: their Christianity becomes a space where dual identities meet. As one young man put it, "Being both Chinese and German is part of how God made me. I think God wants to use that somehow." In this way, a bicultural self-perception is being integrated into their understanding of vocation and identity in Christ.

Heart Languages and Worship Preferences

Language plays a crucial role in the spiritual life of second-generation Chinese Christians. They often speak of having different “heart languages” (German: “Herzenssprache”) from their parents (M. K.-Y. Lee, 2025, p. 52). Most youth are significantly more fluent in German than in Mandarin or Cantonese, which directly affects how they relate to church. “I pray and think about God in German,” one interviewee explained, “because that’s the language of my everyday life.” Others described difficulty engaging with Chinese-language Bibles, preferring German translations or Christian podcasts in German for deeper understanding. A teenager from CG church, for example, recalled: “The Chinese service was in Mandarin—I hardly understood the sermon. At the German youth group, I finally understood the message and could sing worship songs in my own language.”

To meet these needs, many Chinese churches offer bilingual or German-language youth programs. NG church’s parallel German service was created in response to this linguistic reality. One second-gen leader noted, “When Bible study was in Chinese, half of us were lost. Now in German, everyone can participate.”

Yet, Chinese remains emotionally meaningful. A 25-year-old shared: “Singing in Mandarin sometimes touched me deeply... because I know my parents and grandparents sang these hymns.” Some youth describe their spirituality as bilingual—worshiping in Chinese with family and in German with peers. However, language barriers can still alienate them from the main congregation. As one 17-year-old admitted, “During the Chinese sermon, I mostly sit politely and daydream.”

Parents recognize this tension. One mother from NG church expressed concern: “My son didn’t follow the Chinese sermon. I worried church feels irrelevant to him.” Such concerns have prompted some churches to hire bilingual pastors or provide either a sentence-by-sentence on-site translation of the sermon or simultaneous interpretation, bridging generational and linguistic gaps.

Interestingly, youth from CG church—despite their congregation’s Transfer model—sometimes expressed more emotional connection to Chinese language worship than their NG church peers. Meanwhile, NG church youth, with regular intergenerational contact, tended to show higher Chinese proficiency. However, such patterns are shaped by multiple factors, including family life and education, not only congregational structure.

In sum, language is not only a practical issue but a theological one: it determines whether youth feel church is truly “for them.” Most navigate a bilingual faith, expressing themselves most fluently in German while treasuring aspects of Chinese-language worship that connect them to family and heritage.

Cultural Tensions and Church Life

Nearly all second-generation interviewees reported experiencing cultural tension in church and family life, often around leadership styles and generational expectations. A key friction point is authority. Chinese churches, shaped by Confucian values (Berling, 2015; Liu et al., 2010; Park & Müller, 2014), often emphasize hierarchical respect, while youth influenced by German egalitarianism expect participatory roles. “In German circles, you can challenge your leaders,” noted one NG church youth, “but in the Chinese church, contradicting an elder—even respectfully – is just not done.” After voicing disagreement in a meeting, this youth’s parents scolded him for being disrespectful. Another interviewee shared: “Our parents want us to lead, but then we’re not given real authority or trust.” From the first-generation side, a father

explained, “In our culture, young people should be humble and learn first. The Western way is everyone speaks up, but that can cause chaos.” These differing assumptions often stifle youth initiative.

Worship styles also reflect this divide. A 16-year-old said, “The Chinese service is very traditional... I prefer the youth service with music and small groups.” Some elders, in turn, criticize youth worship as “too loud” or irreverent. Cultural differences also shape community dynamics. One respondent reflected: “Chinese church is like family, but it can feel invasive—everyone knows your business. German fellowship gives you more space.” This difference in how communal life feels reflects a deeper negotiation between collectivist and individualist values. Second-gen youth try to respect their heritage while seeking authenticity.

These cultural clashes extend to theology and ethics. Parental expectations around dating, career, or church involvement often combine Chinese values with Christian teaching. One youth explained: “My parents’ faith includes Chinese ideas of honor. I respect that, but sometimes I need to follow God in my own way.” Another was discouraged from dating a non-Chinese Christian due to cultural concerns. This dual pressure—meeting family standards while living out a personal faith in a Western context—can cause internal conflict.

Interestingly, youth in CG church (Transfer model) reported fewer tensions. Immersed in German church life, their ethnic identity remains important but less conflictual. NG church youth (Duplex model), still sharing space with first-generation members, reported stronger cultural friction—highlighting how structural proximity can heighten generational and cultural tensions.

Community and Belonging

A core question for second-generation Chinese Christians (ZGCC) is where—and with whom—they feel they truly belong in the body of Christ. Many interviewees expressed deep appreciation for the Chinese church as an extended family and cultural home. “At Chinese church, people get my background,” shared one NG church youth. Another noted, “In school I was the only Chinese kid, but at church I’m not different—I’m just me.” Familiar celebrations, bilingual conversation, and shared meals contributed to a sense of rootedness. For youth in congregations with structured youth ministries (like NG church), this cultural-religious environment fosters sustained belonging.

Yet tensions persist. In smaller churches like CG church, youth often feel isolated due to a lack of peers. “I had no friends at church. I only went because of my parents,” said one. Such youth frequently find fellowship in German churches, where they can participate in age-relevant and linguistically accessible ministries. While they report feeling welcomed, subtle reminders of otherness—such as questions about their ethnicity or stereotypical comments—can surface. As one observed, “I’m still Chinese in a German space.” Belonging, then, becomes layered: rooted in multiple contexts, none of which feel fully complete.

Some ZGCC ultimately relocate spiritually. A young woman shared, “I still visit my parents’ Chinese church, but I don’t feel I belong there anymore—I’m more of a guest.” Her story reflects a shift toward a primary identity in a German church, while retaining cultural ties to the Chinese community. Others voiced a longing for integration. “It would be great if Chinese and German churches did more together. Then I wouldn’t feel like I live two church lives,” said one CG church member.

Despite these complexities, many youth embrace the in-between space. Their bilingual, bicultural capacities allow them to act as bridge-builders, translating not only language but also

values and expectations. “I’ve realized I have two homes in God’s family—and maybe I’m meant to link those homes together,” reflected one interviewee.

The two church models foster different patterns. CG church’s Transfer model encourages full integration into German churches, often at the cost of ethnic ties. NG church’s Duplex model maintains connection to the heritage community, producing hybrid identities that navigate between cultural belonging and spiritual independence.

Theological Identity and Hybrid Faith Expressions

An important aspect of identity is how ZGCC understand and express their faith theologically in light of their bicultural background. While they largely share the evangelical beliefs of their parents, they often emphasize or reinterpret aspects of theology in ways shaped by their dual cultural lens.

One recurring theme was community and church life. While first-generation teachings emphasize collective identity and sacrificial loyalty to the church as family, second-gen believers often reframe this corporate emphasis through a more participatory ecclesiology. “Biblical community isn’t one-sided obedience; it’s about each part contributing,” said a youth leader from NG church, advocating for balanced roles and individual spiritual agency within the body of Christ.

A major shift is also visible in their understanding of mission. First-generation churches often focus on reaching Chinese migrants. In contrast, second-gen Christians envision broader engagement. “I believe God wants me to serve beyond the Chinese circle,” said one CG church interviewee. This bicultural awareness fuels a more integrative theology of mission—one that includes both Chinese and German contexts. As one leading missionary among the ZGCC put it, “The younger Chinese Christians in Germany have a potential to be ‘bicultural missionaries’—reaching Chinese and Germans alike. Their theology of mission is less narrow; it’s not just saving Chinese students: it’s about being a witness in German society too.”

In personal spirituality, many ZGCC describe a synthesis of Chinese and German Christian influences. One young woman reflected: “From the Chinese side, I learned disciplined prayer. From the German side, I learned to ask tough questions. Together, they make my faith stronger.” Others spoke of bilingual Bible studies where differing cultural metaphors led to richer understanding, such as linking grace to both filial piety and forgiveness in school.

This theological hybridity (Liu et al., 2010) is often intuitive rather than systematic. Still, some are starting to voice the need for a contextual theology. “We need a theology for us—Asian Germans,” said one seminary student. Rather than choosing between Chinese or German models, many seek to hold both in tension, integrating elements such as honoring elders, personal discernment, traditional values, and expressive worship.

In sum, ZGCC are not simply inheriting faith—they are rearticulating it. Their emerging theology reflects their lived experience of hybridity. As one participant put it: “Jesus is the same for everyone, but He made me Chinese in Germany for a reason. My way of following Him will have both flavors. And I think that’s beautiful.”

Conclusion

This study has examined how second-generation Chinese Christians in Germany understand their faith in relation to their bicultural identity. The findings reveal that Chinese identity remains a meaningful, though complex, dimension of their Christian discipleship. Rather than choosing between Chinese and German identity, most second-generation believers embrace a

hybrid sense of self. Their bicultural faith is expressed in bilingual worship, intercultural ministry engagement, and an evolving theology shaped by both heritage and local context.

The two congregational models studied—CG church's Transfer model and NG church's Duplex model—illustrate contrasting approaches to second-generation identity formation. The Transfer model supports smoother cultural integration into German churches but weakens continuity with the ethnic congregation. The Duplex model fosters bicultural engagement within the Chinese church yet introduces tensions around leadership and intergenerational dynamics. Both trajectories underscore the need for context-sensitive strategies that support resilient bicultural faith.

Second-generation Christians often act as bridges—navigating both Chinese and German communities, translating between cultures, and serving in both spheres. Their dual perspective enables them to envision a more inclusive, intercultural church. If Chinese churches adapt by empowering youth and fostering shared leadership, and if German churches embrace partnerships, new hybrid congregational forms could emerge that enrich the wider Christian landscape in Germany.

Ultimately, cultural identity is not a hindrance but a resource for theological reflection and mission. For ZGCC, being both Chinese and German is not a contradiction but a calling. As these believers articulate faith in both idioms, they model what it means to live as disciples across cultures. Future research should further explore these hybrid ecclesial forms and deepen theological understanding of diaspora identities—so that the churches may more faithfully support their next generation at the intersection of heritage and hope.

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¹ While numerous works have been published on the Chinese diaspora and Chinese migrant communities, particularly in the context of the United States, explicit scholarly contributions on this topic within the German context remain scarce. A few of the existing studies have been authored by the writer of this article: Ma (2025); Ma and Chen (2025b, 2025a).

² Although there has not yet been an in-depth scholarly study on the second generation of Chinese Christians in Germany, there are nonetheless comparable investigations focusing on other East Asian communities, such as the Korean: M. K.-Y. Lee (2025); Lim (2020).

³ For a detailed account of the historical origins and development of Chinese migrant communities in Germany, see Ma and Chen (2025a, pp. 113–119). A comprehensive discussion of the key differences between the U.S. and German contexts can be found in Ma and Chen (2025b, pp. 240–242).