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Ministering to New Face of Migrants From China

Monica Almeida/The New York Times

Members of the Mandarin Baptist Church, which helps new immigrants from China navigate American life.

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ALHAMBRA, Calif. — Juan Du and her husband had good jobs in China. But in a country increasingly engaged in a capitalist free-for-all, they worried about being laid off. They worried too about whether their teenage daughter, faced with a fiercely competitive exam system, would get into college.

So the family headed to the United States last year and settled in this predominantly Asian suburb east of Los Angeles, though they had no work lined up and spoke little English.

Ms. Du then did something she had never done in China: She went to church.

Ms. Du, who is not Christian, became a regular in the newcomers' group at the Mandarin Baptist Church, where fellow immigrants chauffeur her to appointments and, she said in Mandarin, make her feel as if she is part of a "big family."

"It's like living in a closed bottle," she said of finding her way in her adopted country. "If you don't know the language, you can't figure out how to do anything."

Alhambra, neighboring Monterey Park and the surrounding suburbs, home to the nation's oldest and largest suburban Chinatown, were once known as Little Taipei and Chinese Beverly Hills for the Taiwan and Hong Kong natives who streamed in with enough cash to buy a house and a Mercedes.

Now the typical newcomer arrives from an obscure corner of mainland China, well educated but with no English skills and just a few hundred dollars. Like Ms. Du, many do not even have a car.

But they do have local Chinese churches. If a newcomer needs a ride to the hospital and an English speaker to help translate, someone from Mandarin Baptist's congregation steps forward. Newcomers are eligible for emergency grants, known as "love gifts," and the church's 1,600 members are a ready source for job referrals.

"We welcome all sorts of people with any kind of motive," said the Rev. Joshua Ting, a pastor at Mandarin Baptist, a Southern Baptist congregation founded in 1963 by Chinese

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immigrants. "Of course, we always challenge them to really consider seriously about faith. But we will not turn anyone away because they come in and ask for certain resources."

Those resources are often basic necessities. Chinese churches are filling a void left by underfinanced social service agencies, a role that American religious institutions have played for other immigrant groups for centuries.

Mirroring the demographic shifts here, most longtime members of Mr. Ting's congregation are from Taiwan, while at the newcomers' group, business is conducted in the brogues of far-flung mainland provinces. (Ms. Du's family is from Shandong Province in eastern China, overlooking the Korean Peninsula.)

For those who were white-collar workers — Ms. Du was a public transit manager — the climb to an equivalent occupation here is arduous, often requiring years of waiting tables or sewing at a garment factory while studying English in precious spare time.

"I didn't know English, and everything is according to ability here, so I could only do menial work," said Rong Chen, who earned a master's degree in mathematics in China and was a high school principal there.

When she arrived here five years ago, Ms. Chen started on the immigrant ladder's lowest rungs, working as a live-in caretaker for the elderly. She married an American and now earns $8.50 an hour as a hospital security guard.

The emotional toll of adjusting to a new life can be enormous, and some immigrants who never gave a second thought to religion are attracted to the surrogate families the churches provide.

"The church is one of the most convenient sources to look to for socializing as well as mutual aid," said Peter Kwong, a professor of Asian-American studies at Hunter College who is an expert on Chinese immigrants. "A lot of people convert after they arrive."

An estimated 250,000 to 300,000 Chinese are in the United States illegally, according to the Pew Hispanic Center.

That is a small fraction of the country's 11 million or so illegal immigrants, but their problems are ever-present at a church like Mandarin Baptist, where newcomers are asked no questions about their status but sometimes confide in fellow churchgoers about it. Those who choose to be baptized are now required to take a three-month Bible course first, a condition adopted after some new converts asked for signatures on religious asylum papers, then disappeared.

"A lot of them have immigration issues," said Frank Ho, the chairman of the newcomers' group. "We'll pray with them and tell them it's up to God."

Alhambra is often just the first stop on the way to somewhere else. In a year's time, church leaders say, few of the 50 or so people who show up for the regular newcomers' sessions will still be attending the church. Some will have no more patience for sermons. Others will have moved on in search of better jobs and a cheaper cost of living.

But the congregants persist with their good works, out of compassion and on the chance, leaders say, that they may save a soul.

Ms. Du says she is starting to explore Christianity, though another, perhaps more pressing concern is learning English, so she can work at an office job again.

She is unemployed, and her husband, who was a government clerk in China, is a handyman. But they look forward to something better. "It just takes time," she said.

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