

MIAMI WORD
syncretism / contextualization in
Worship Life

SYNCRETISM/CONTEXTUALIZATION IN WORSHIP LIFE

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In the interest of providing an underlying basis of understanding for how Chinese culture affects Christian worship, it would seem to be in order to briefly explore a number of the main precepts which influence the lives of the Chinese people. We might first begin with:

The Five Relationships

From ancient times, the Chinese have tended to view all human relationships as falling into five categories. These relationships are outlined in the Book of Mencius¹ as being:

1. Between sovereign and subject
2. Between father and son
3. Between husband and wife
4. Between brothers
5. Between friends

A passing glance at the this list will yield several observations: 1) God is missing. To be sure there are many gods that are worshipped by the Taiwanese, but these are either placated in times of calamity or supplicated for blessings rather than being perceived as beings with whom you enter into any kind of relationship. 2) All but the last relationship is hierarchical in nature. 3) Three of these relationships involve the family.

From this latter observation comes the first of the precepts which has influenced Chinese culture for thousands of years, that of:

Filial Piety

To illustrate the degree this concept has come to dominate the Chinese psyche, you are invited to respond to this dilemma, taken from the Filial Piety Classic, as a test of your concept of filial piety. One middle aged husband lived with his wife and his old mother. They were very poor. A baby was born but there was not food enough for it to eat. The husband and wife:

- A) Borrowed money from friends and/or the local government so they could buy extra food to more properly feed the old mother;
- B) Decided to bury the son alive so that the food now available would be adequate to maintain his mother's food rations, with some small portion left over for him and his wife;
- C) Tightened their belts so the existing quantity of food would serve to feed the old mother.

If you picked B, congratulations! You have begun to understand the concept of filial piety. When the father was digging the grave, he found a pot of gold. This was heaven's reward for his filial conduct.

Filial conduct might be described in this way: If our parents had not given us life, we would not exist. Parents have given us everything we have, therefore we should give them total obedience, honor, and respect. We should cherish their memory after they pass away, and carry on the family name by having male heirs. If our ancestors had not created our parents, none of us would exist, hence by extension it became/is completely natural to worship our ancestors.

The concept and practice of filial piety climbed to the highest rung of moral and ethical conduct. Honoring and obeying your parents took precedence over virtually anything or anyone else, including the government, your spouse, and as seen in the above illustration, caring for your own children. The words of the Filial Piety Classic say: "Among the five punishments, which amount altogether to three thousand articles, no crime is more grave than that of filial impiety." Hence filial piety evolved into the "state religion" of China.

The Group Mentality

Sociologists tell us that as human beings grow up they are pulled between two competing human needs. The first is the need to be included, the second is the need to be independent. Some have suggested a 30% need for being included and a 70% need for being independent as a fair description of the western personality. For the Chinese, however, the ratio seems to be the exact opposite, a 70% need for being included (which means being part of the group), and a 30% need for being independent.

This is reflected in a variety of ways in Chinese society. Since the family you belong to is more important than you as an individual, Chinese will always give their last names first. When eating, the more the merrier is the rule. And rather than receiving individual plates or portions in a restaurant as in the West, the food is instead put in the center of the table from which the individual people help themselves--one common plate serves all. Another illustration is the Chinese penchant for travelling in herds whenever they go on vacations or sight-seeing trips.

Thus, the individual Chinese does not find himself in distinction from the group, rather he finds himself within and among the group. His individual needs and desires are subservient to that of the larger group. This puts intense pressure on a Chinese who may be the only Christian member of his family. He may become alienated from the group which counts the most: his family and relatives.

Reverence of the Past

The Chinese in general feel that the glories of Chinese culture past are at the pinnacle when compared to any other culture of any other time. Its greatness can be seen in the fact of its longevity: Chinese culture is the oldest on the face of the earth, having a continuous history of thousands of years. This is also reflected in the name of China itself, which literally means the "Central Kingdom." The Chinese regard themselves as being at the center of civilization.

As a consequence of this, the Chinese prefer to follow the ways of the ancestors, and dislike making a deliberate and forceful break with the past. They have to a large degree idealized the past and consider the ways of the ancients sacrosanct. Rather than to initiate or to force change, the Chinese tend to allow things to change slowly over generations without conscious decisions to do so. This is augmented by the Taoist philosophy which might be summarized by "Do nothing, and all things will be done." In practical terms this means fitting into the established order of things, whether that be in nature or the family or your cultural heritage.

Thus, in response to the typical western question of "why" in relation to the practice of some custom the Chinese would in effect reply, "Since we have done it this way since the beginning of recorded history, it is natural to do it this way." Since ancestor worship is an integral part of Chinese history, to cease honoring your ancestors is not only a forcible break with the past, but also a seeming rejection of that which is most characteristically Chinese.

Face

Somewhat related to a person's reputation, face has to do with your standing in the eyes of others. You gain face by some kind of situation which is favorable to you, and which has come about, perhaps by your own doing, perhaps by someone else's in front of others. You lose face through some kind of unfavorable situation which has come about, most commonly through someone else's doing, but sometimes through your own doing, in front of others. In a culture where everyone is concerned about what everyone else thinks, the concept of face has fertile soil in which to grow.

Sometimes face is in line with reality. For example, there was a man once won \$500.00 U.S. and then to celebrate, invited his relatives and friends to a banquet--the total cost of which was \$600.00. Although he spent more than he won, he nonetheless gained much face because of his generosity.

At other times many Chinese will feel face must be maintained in spite of the truth. For example, a Chinese professor was once lecturing and had his dates mixed up. A student raised his hand and said as much. This remark lost face for the professor, because it broke the false mask of expertise and competence. To the extent that you can keep up an image in front of a group, you have face. Whether that image is true or not is not all that important. If you lose this image, you have lost face. Adherents to the face-saving mentality would rather be all wrong in a harmonious fashion than be all right in a disharmonious fashion.

The image which one wishes to cultivate is that defined by Chinese culture and tradition. This would include generosity, power, wealth, fairness, raising successful children, being open-minded, open to suggestions, above corruption, etc. Failure to follow traditional custom, especially when it comes to important things, like filial piety and ancestor worship, is often directly seen as a serious loss of face, not only for the "guilty" individual, but for the whole family as well.

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Ancestor Worship

Why is ancestor worship so important? Let's take a brief look at Chinese "theology." Now at the outset it should be pointed out that the Chinese are not at all concerned about conflicting or even mutually exclusive doctrines or practices. There is therefore no more or less universally recognized set of truths when it comes to such things as life after death.

Nevertheless, I shall attempt to communicate some of the more widely held beliefs. The three traditions of Buddhism, Taoism and folk religion have all contributed heavily to Chinese religious life. Buddhism teaches that after a person dies, his soul goes to hell, where he is punished for his earthly transgressions and is then reincarnated to try again.

At the same time both Taoism and folk religion seem to have joined to promote a second theory. After death the soul continues life in the world of the shades, a ghostly dimension, invisible to mortals, yet having connections with the world of the living. Their existence can be comfortable if they are well provided for by their descendants with food offerings and money. If the dead has no descendants to provide him with offerings as the years go by, he is reduced to dire poverty and in desperation and rage he attacks human beings to get fulfillment of his needs or at least to win attention to his plight. Such souls become known as ghosts or hungry ghosts.

Thus, it is absolutely crucial as to whether a person has descendants. If he does, and if they worship him and provide him with sacrifices, he lives a fairly content life as an ancestor in a shadowy afterworld. If he has no descendants, or if the unfilial wretches fail to provide for him, he lives in the same shadowy underworld as a miserable and starving ghost.²

Syncretism

There are, of course, many more things that may be said in regard to the religious beliefs of the Chinese, but those that deal with ancestor worship are by far the most important. This is the supreme difficulty when it comes to converting to Christianity. A fair number of Chinese do not have all that much difficulty in accepting that in addition to the many gods of their folk religions, there is another one, the Triune God, or even that this one God, in distinction to all the rest, is the true one. The major issue is that of giving up ancestor worship.

Our experience in Taiwan is that when a person becomes a Christian, there is not a great deal of carry over from past religious associations. This is perhaps aided by living in a modern society, where especially the younger, more educated generation is becoming somewhat skeptical of the old superstitious beliefs. Thus, worship to other gods, or past rituals that may find their way into our worship services are virtually non-existent.

The same is not true in regard to ancestor worship. There is great pressure to continue honoring your dead ancestors even after you become a Christian. If Christianity would make room for ancestor worship, growth of this kind of "Christianity" would be a lot more vigorous. In fact, this

was attempted in the modern missionary era of China. The Jesuits entered mainland China through Portuguese owned Macao, a small territory close to Hong Kong, in the late 1500's. The Jesuits were prepared to allow the practice of ancestor worship after conversion. However the Dominicans pressed hard to have it eliminated. Eventually, by papal decree, the Dominicans won out.³ Since that time, conversion to Christianity has meant giving up the practice of ancestor worship, a practice insisted upon by both Roman Catholic and Protestants alike.

And here lies the rub. Many Chinese don't have major objections with a member of the household converting to Christianity until they hear that it means giving up ancestor worship. There is then tremendous pressure to either compromise or to give up the Christian faith. If we think back to the points raised above, filial piety, the group mentality, reverence of the past and face, these all bring tremendous pressure to bear on the individual. Not to worship your ancestors makes you unfilial, excludes you from the most important group (your family), radically breaks with the past and brings a tremendous loss of face--all at the same time.

This is the major syncretistic issue that we are facing, not really within our worship services per se, but as an adjunct to family rituals. This is especially true at such times as Tomb Sweeping Day, when dead ancestors are sacrificed to. Ancestor worship at once forms the major obstacle to becoming Christian and is the hardest practice to abandon once you do convert. As such, it arises with routine regularity, within and without the church.

There is one other lesser syncretistic tendency that is an offshoot of the group mentality and face. The Chinese find it somewhat difficult to exclude non confessional members from Communion. The reasoning is: are they not Christian brothers and sisters and therefore one with us? How can we exclude them and risk causing them loss of face? The group mentality concept also is a factor in our members taking part in other Christian organization's activities and prayer. Since Christians are such a small minority in Taiwan and at times face much social pressure from non believers, and since the group mentality would argue that Christians should hang together, there is a tendency to do just that, regardless of any violation of fellowship principles.

CONTEXTUALIZATION

How the above mentioned Chinese customs affect Christian worship in a neutral or positive fashion is what we will take up next.

1) The Chinese are used to strong leadership. For most of their history the Chinese have had autocratic leadership. This is still true of the mainland. Only recently has democratization made some healthy strides in Taiwan with much more needing to be done. The subject-sovereign relationship model outlined above has always been a hierarchical one. This has followed through into the church in Taiwan. Prosperous churches have strong Chinese leadership, something which we are seeking to develop.

2) In absence of any divine-human relationship in the Five Relationships given above, many have suggested including God under the Father-son relationship model. In addition, he might be put forward as our Ultimate Ancestor to whom all honor, glory and worship are properly due. It is interesting that some Chinese are fond of referring to our Lord as their "Heavenly Father." This concept, which is found in both testaments, is one that we could perhaps emphasize more, both in evangelism and worship.

3) One curious development which flows from the group mentality concept is found in prayer. During the monthly house-worship service held in rotating fashion at the members homes which belong to the congregation I serve, there comes a time for group prayer. However, the leader does not lead with everyone else silently praying along. Rather, everyone prays out loud at the same time. Generally, everyone runs out of gas before the leader and he ends up winding the whole thing up. The first time I heard it I thought of Babel. I know that in at least one other Taiwanese church (not of our denomination) use this practice to confess their sins. As you might imagine, very few speak loudly enough so that they are overheard by curious ears.

4) While on the subject of prayer, Rob Siirila has started something which nicely incorporates the group mentality concept. After the worship service the congregation meets for joint prayer. Concerns and problems are shared and prayed for. There are also some small group prayer circles which are being fostered by our missionaries, which are starting to bear some rewarding fruit.

5) With the Chinese penchant for eating with lots of people for any occasion--real or imagined, two of our Taipei churches have a fellowship meal once a month after the service. This would again be an offshoot of the group mentality concept. It is also not uncommon for smaller groups of people to head out to a local restaurant after the worship service for a meal.

6) I remember in the States sometimes when a stranger walked in to one of our worship services, beyond the few helpful hints from an usher, he was often left to fend for himself. One gratifying custom in Taiwan is that when a first-timer comes to one of our worship services, one of the members immediately goes over to sit with them to help them. Who goes to help depends on who comes in. It will usually be someone of the same sex and of approximately the same age. After the worship service, the newcomer is always introduced, followed by a round of applause from the members. In this way strangers are made to feel comfortable and appreciated.

7) My feeling is that we should do more to emphasize Communion in relationship to the group mentality concept. Paul picks this up nicely in Corinthians when he speaks of the one loaf/one cup aspects of Communion as he pleads for unity among the members of the church at Corinth. Our current practice is to offer Communion once a month. I for one would like to see this upped to at least every other week with a specific emphasis on the communion, both vertical and horizontal, that takes place within the Sacrament.

8) Picking up on another aspect of the church at Corinth, we find that many of our members comprise only half of the husband/wife team. Frequently the wife will be a member and the husband not. Because the husband-wife relationship of the Five Relationships is still quite hierarchical (women's lib is on the rise but not nearly as developed as in the West), there are times when a husband will interfere with his wife's Christianity and worship. One husband in Taipei routinely forbids his wife to come to worship. Someone from the church goes to see her weekly to study the Bible with her, pray and give her Communion.

9) Another thing that interferes with regular worship attendance, especially in the Summer, is the family connection. The family is usually quite close-knit, and the parents like to go on outings with their children. For the most part, Taiwan still has a six day work week so that means that Sunday is the only day to go on family excursions. This problem, however, is not unique to Taiwan!

10) There are several contextual worship issues that do not directly flow from the Five Relationships Model or the unique aspects of Chinese culture listed above. The first of these is our page 5 and 15 liturgical order of service. This is quite alien to the Chinese who have very little if any similarities to our style of liturgy in their pagan worship rituals. For that reason, most of the worship services at our churches include hymns, confession of sins, Scripture readings, the sermon, prayers, and, depending on the occasion, the Sacraments--without much in the way of a developed liturgy.

11) As in other places around the world, the Chinese idea of punctuality does not necessarily strictly adhere to the advertised and scheduled times which are posted for various and sundry activities. This also holds true in the church. Probably the best illustration is our village church in central Taiwan which routinely starts most everything about a half an hour later than what is stated. Flexibility is the key here.

12) Perhaps the greatest single recent development that is sweeping through almost every church in Taiwan is that of Christian contemporary music. Those of you who know the mini-essayist at all will appreciate that he is not at all unhappy about this turn of events. Let me clarify what I mean by Christian contemporary music. It not so much a variety of artists cutting tapes and CDs for personal listening, but rather a recent proliferation of modern Oriental/Chinese hymns.

Up to quite recently, most of the hymns sung were from hymnbooks which contained hymns translated from western Christendom. The translations are not always able to fit the melody very well, and the tunes of the hymns often do not readily penetrate the Chinese heart to really speak to them. There has been a call for more contextualized hymns.

The phenomenally active Christian church in South Korea has answered the call. Modern hymns have literally come flooding from churches there, and South Korean missionaries are carrying them at least to Taiwan, and I suspect many other places as well. They are then translated into Chinese, with the translation being effected much more smoothly than with western hymns. The hymns are simple, praise oriented, and are usually repeated at

least 3 times. The people of our churches love them because, quite simply, they are contextualized. The words are Oriental in concept as is the melody, although the melodies of many hymns do contain some western influences. What is contemporary about it is that a good share of the hymns are somewhat bouncy and have a beat. So that you can get a first hand feel for at least the music, in closing, I am going to play a typical example of just such a hymn.

BAN GOK LONG DEE-OH LIE O-LO TSU

Ban gok long dee-oh lie o-lo Tsu,
(All nations come and praise the Lord)

Ban bin long dee-oh lie o-lo Tsu,
(All peoples come and praise the Lord)

Geng-bai Ia-ho-hwa, gim si ng E lie hoan-ho,
(Worship Jehovah, sing songs, shout for joy to Him)

O-lo Ia-ho-hwa, ban bin long kwai-lok hoan-ho.
(Praise Jehovah, all peoples be happy, shout for joy)

Geng-bai o-lo Ia-ho-hwa,
(Worship and praise Jehovah)

Oo het-key a long dee-oh o-lo E.
(All who have life come and worship Him)

Geng-bai Ia-ho-hwa, o-lo Ia-ho-hwa
(Worship Jehovah, praise Jehovah)

Lan lang wah-deh si beh lai geng-bai o-lo E.
(We people have life to come worship and praise him)

Footnotes

- 1) Hartzell, Richard W., Harmony In Conflict, Caves Books, Ltd., Taipei, 1988. All quotes from Chinese sources and some summary descriptions in the text come from this book.
- 2) Jordan, David K., Gods, Ghosts and Ancestors, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1978.
- 3) Latourette, Kenneth S., A History Of Christianity (Vol. II), Harper and Row, New York, 1975.