Corporate Personality and the Chinese View of Self

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The concept of corporate personality in the Old Testament has been debated by scholars since first introduced by H. Wheeler Robinson in 1935. While not ignoring the criticisms of the concept, Nancy Porras maintains that aspects of corporate personality, narrowly defined and carefully applied, are indeed prevalent in the Hebrew culture of the Old Testament, and, moreover, have significant implications for the presentation of the Gospel among Chinese.

The notion of a group-oriented identity has long been regarded as a prominent characteristic of Chinese culture. Foundational in the Chinese worldview, this orientation colors every aspect of life. Therefore, any serious attempt to interact with Chinese must be accompanied by a thorough understanding of how Chinese view individuals within larger social units. Furthermore, anyone wanting to present the Christian faith to Chinese people must be able to recognize what implications this worldview has on their reception of the Gospel. Ideally, this perspective will be utilized to *enhance* comprehension of the Gospel.

To this end, what follows presents the concept of "corporate personality" among the ancient Israelites as an aid to highlighting the relevance of the Old Testament text for the Chinese reader or hearer. After this concept has been discussed, its similarities to the Chinese perspective on the individual will be examined. Finally, the significance of these similarities for the presentation of the Gospel will be briefly addressed.

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CORPORATE PERSONALITY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Corporate personality is a concept made popular by H. Wheeler Robinson in 1935. He describes it as a phenomenon whereby a "group possesses a consciousness which is distributed amongst its individual members and does not exist simply as a figure of speech or as an ideal" (Robinson 1935:30). His citation of Smith provides a more complete definition of the concept in terms of "kin":

> A kin was a group of persons whose lives were so bound up together... that they could be treated as parts of one common life. The members of one kindred looked on themselves as one living whole... of which no member could be touched without all the members suffering (1935:28).

The above should not be construed to suggest that "there was little or no consciousness of the individual; the point is rather that the individual was... more conscious of being one of the group" (Robinson 1935:45). Robinson goes on to use the concept of corporate personality to explain events in the Old Testament, such as the national punishment suffered for Achan's sin and the guidelines for levirate marriage. Three aspects of corporate personality, as described by Robinson, bear further description in this study.

The first aspect relates to how those maintaining a corporate personality view themselves and their community. Rooted in their understanding of their identity is the necessity to always define it in relationship to others in their family and/or clan. This viewpoint results from the larger idea that "the relation of the individual to the species is not, as it were, an isolated section, but a specimen, in which the kind presents itself" (Pedersen 1926:110). Thus, the "specie", i.e., the whole, is represented by one individual, rather than the specie consisting of the product of a mass of individual parts. Johannes Pedersen explains this idea well when he states, "The individual Moabite is not a section of a number of Moabite individuals, but a revelation of 'Moabithood'" (1926:110). Therefore, to properly identify oneself necessitates including others so that the specie to which one belongs is made clear. Furthermore, characteristics that are common to all of the

group will be those most readily provided as points of identification because these are the characteristics which best describe the nature of the group (Mowinckel 1962:43,44). These tendencies are nicely illustrated in the geneology of 1 Chronicles 4:21:

> The sons of Shelah son of Judah: Er the father of Lecah, Laadah the father of Mareshah and the clans of the linen workers at Beth Ashbea, Jokin, the men of Cozeba, and Joash and Saraph, who ruled in Moab and Jashubi Lehen.... They were the potters who lived at Netain and Gederah: they stayed there and worked for the king.

Note that virtually every man is identified in terms of another person or persons, and often with added information about the common trade.

Corporate personality is quite evident when considering the Israelites' sense of family. The family consisted not only of the husband and wife (or wives), sons, daughters, and sons' wives, but also the property of the household, e.g., slaves and animals. This is the unit to which all persons were inextricably bound. The family also falls into the "specie" line of thought developed earlier, as described by Pedersen:

> Man is only what he is as a link in the family.... That which is in the family is shared by all members, but not in such a manner that each has a shape of the whole. The family is embodied in every man, with all its blessing, all its substance... (1926:259,277).

The family or household, then, is the first and most significant group within larger groups (e.g., the clan) through which each person views him/herself.

A second important aspect of corporate personality is the ease with which members of the group can move from thinking in terms of themselves as individuals to thinking in terms of the larger group of which they are part. Robinson argues that this "fluidity" is what allows the Israelite to "enlarge his own consciousness" to accept one individual (e.g., the prophet or priest) as an equitable representation of all the Israelites (Robinson 1935:46). It also helps to explain the change of pronouns in texts such as Psalm 44, which seems to

make use of "I" and "we" as if the two were one and the same. The psalm begins with "We have heard with our ears," three verses later states "You are my King and my God," and two verses later records "I do not trust in my bow." These changes are typical of the "communal" identity of the Israelites.

A third aspect of corporate personality, inherent to even the narrowest definition of the concept, is possibly the most significant for the Chinese. To this point, corporate personality has been discussed from what could be called a "horizontal" perspective of the group. This perspective covers all members of the group living during the specified time period, for example, those Israelites alive during the time of the writing of Psalm 44, mentioned above. For a complete understanding of corporate personality, however, a "vertical" perspective should be considered as well. A vertical view includes members of the family or group who came before those presently living and those who will come after. Robinson cites such phrases as "being gathered to one's fathers," or "going to one's fathers," or "to one's kindred" as evidence of the ancestral line included in the family or group (1935:27). Sigmund Mowinckel decribes the ancestor in this way:

Corporate personality can be understood from both "horizontal" and "vertical" perspectives.

> The ancestor represents the clan or tribe, and embodies its life in himself.... The character and will of the ancestor, his "soul," live in all his descendants. They all bear his stamp, are revelations of him and of the sociological unity which he represents (1962:43).

The individual Israelite, therefore, saw him/herself not only in relation to his/her present relatives and household, but also in relation to the ancestors that preceded him/her.

This understood unity between ancestors and the present generation is exemplified in Deuteronomy. Throughout the book Moses speaks to the "new" generation of Israelites as if they were the former generation that had witnessed the exodus and died in the wilderness. For example, Moses says in Deuteronomy 1:26: "But *you* were unwilling to go up.... *You* grumbled and said 'where can *we* go?'... Then I said to *you*..." [emphasis mine]. The text does not seem to suggest that this was a peculiar way to address this generation of

Israelites; apparently they were considered an embodiment of the former generation.

Robinson also states that corporate personality extends into the future as well. He argues that this is the reason for the extreme importance of the male child to the Hebrew. Without this child to carry on the "soul" of the family, the family would cease to exist (1935:28). This cessation is "regarded as the greatest disaster which can befall a man...." (Johnson 1961:2,3). The male child, on the other hand, provides a short-term guarantee of the continuance of the group, and because of this continuance, death is merely "a kinsman pass[ing] from one department of the family to another" (Pedersen 1926:496). Thus, one may think of him/herself as representing a lineage which begins in the past and lives on into the future.

Acknowledgment must be made of the criticism which Robinson's theory has received. J. W. Rogerson contends that Robinson never provides a clear definition of the term "corporate personality," and thus contributes to its faulty application in areas it was never intended to address (1970:2). He also asserts that the anthropological data which Robinson relies on for his theory has been disproven (1970:7ff). Prior to Rogerson's criticisms, J. R. Porter made a strong case against the use of Robinson's term in the legal arena, showing likely alternative explanations for situations Robinson uses corporate personality to explain (1965:361-80). Porter's work persuaded this author to limit application of the concept of corporate personality to areas outside the legal realm.

Despite these criticisms, Robinson's theory has been utilized here because those aspects of it which have been presented are undeniably evident in the life of the Israelites of the Old Testament. As a result, narrowly defined and carefully applied, the concept of corporate personality is a valid theory useful for gaining insight into the world of the Old Testament.

THE CHINESE VIEW OF SELF

The Chinese perspective on the individual corresponds closely to the ancient Israelites' sense of corporate personality as described above. These similarities will now be discussed, following the general categories used earlier. The first of these is self-identification in relation to the group.

According to Arthur A. Hummel (1960:13), the Chinese say that "to live at all... is to live in relations," i.e., in relationship to other people. Traditional Confucianism contains the notion of *li*, "a process by which man becomes more human as he enters into relatedness with others in a spirit of reciprocity" (Sawatzky 1980:324).

Interestingly, contemporary Chinese scholars have come closer to the Hebrew concept of corporate personality in their positions on identity than traditional Chinese thinkers have. For example, Neo-Confucianism believes that man's identity is made up of the "duties and expectations" he understands to be appropriate for a person in his social position and the "sentiments" toward those he interacts with (Munro 1977:18). Also implied is an inability of man to separate himself from those to whom he is familially or socially related (Munro 1977:18). In addition, contemporary Chinese philosophers and psychologists argue that

Israelite corporate personality finds its counterpart in Chinese "mutual dependence."

> *Individuals derive the major features of their identities from the group to which they belong....* To say, as the Chinese do, that the group cannot be considered a collection of individuals is to underscore the point that [certain] psychic traits... have no existence independent of any group (Munro 1977:16, emphasis mine).

Thus, taken as a whole over the centuries, the Chinese perspectives on identity are not necessarily an exact replica of the Israelites' sense of corporate personality, but can be safely considered the Chinese cultural equivalent. A concept often used to describe this cultural equivalent is "mutual dependence." This understanding focuses on the mutual need of self for society and society for self, so that the two form a "dynamic process" rather than a dichotomy (Sawatzky 1980:323).

As in the Hebrew culture, the family is the most significant social unit and provides the first example of mutual dependence among the Chinese. Francis L. K. Hsu states that the Chinese are "embedded in their kinship framework" (1953:405), and Hugh D. R. Baker asserts that a Chinese person's actions are "geared to the requirements of the family"

(1979:27). Therefore, a Chinese person is dependent upon his/her family unit to develop his/her "inner stature as well as his social status" (Moore 1967:531). Like the Israelites' idea of family, the Chinese word for family is better translated "household," because of its reference to that which is in the house, including animals and property (Dawson 1978:137). A Chinese individual can even improve his social status by simply being associated with a household of higher standing (e.g., through employment or marriage), because the concept of the family extends to all those involved with it (Hsu 1953:299).

The second major aspect of corporate personality examined earlier is fluidity of thought, or that which enabled the Israelite to easily transfer his/her identity from singular to plural terms. Taoism, the religion exercising the most influence upon the Chinese masses, has affected Chinese thought in this area. According to Hsu, "within the Tao [considered Ultimate Reality], all things are equal, and the one and the many need not be distinguished" (1953:380). Furthermore, Donald J. Munro states that Chinese writers, in a manner similar to the psalmist's use of "I" and "we," "often use the term social nature interchangeably with personality" (1977:18). Thus, the Chinese also have an identity more loosely defined than a simple, individualistic use of the word "self."

The "vertical" perspective of corporate personality is the final point of comparison. Recall that this perspective includes ancestors and the unborn in its view of the family or clan. At the heart of the Chinese view of ancestors is the concept of mutual dependence (Hsu 1953:252). This is a large reason why ancestor worship plays such a significant part in the lives of many Chinese. Hsu writes:

> ... the departed ancestors continue, as in life, to assist their relatives in this world just as their living descendants can also lend a hand to them.... The strength of this belief in a continuing "social tie" is attested to by many popular tales (1953:249).

Not only do the ancestors assist the living, but any accomplishments earned by the living serve as proof of one's

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ancestors' "high moral worth" and are also a credit to their memory (Hsu 1953:248).

The male son of a Chinese family plays a role similar in prominence to that of the Israelite son, although for a slightly different reason. While the Chinese heir is important because he, like the Israelite, continues the family line, he is also significant because he will be the main provider for the parents after they die and cross over into the spiritual realm (Hsu 1953:248). Without a son, parents are doomed to an existence of spritual vagabondage and poverty. A son not only promises a future for the lineage but provision in the afterlife as well.

In tones reminiscent of Moses' Deuteronomic address to the Israelites, Baker argues that "in a way, the individual *was* the family, just as he *was* his own ancestors and his own descendants" (1979:27). Thus, to say that the Chinese live in the "shadow" of their ancestors (Hsu 1953:248) is unquestionably accurate.

IMPLICATIONS FOR GOSPEL PRESENTATION TO THE CHINESE

One of the largest obstacles to evangelization of the Chinese has been and continues to be ancestor worship. This practice is far more complex than has been presented above and is deeply rooted in the entire worldview of many Chinese. This article has shown, however, that ancestors were equally important to the ancient Israelites, even though this importance was not demonstrated through ancestor worship. A presentation of the Gospel which points out this similarity *from the beginning* might hold immediate relevance to a Chinese person.

Furthermore, the Old Testament in general presents a world of reasoning familiar to Chinese. Chinese people, for example, can easily identify with the Israelites' sense of unity (both as a family and a people), their group orientation, and their emphasis on geneology. The Chinese may also find special interest in the Israelites' view of a "vertical" lineage. In any case, what should be clear to the reader is that a very poor starting place in presenting the Gospel to Chinese is a Scripture passage such as Luke 14:26, which quotes Jesus' words, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father

and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sister... he cannot be my disciple."

An area not addressed in this article, but of obvious consequence, is the relationship between corporate personality, or mutual dependence, and one's view of God. In other words, if a person sees him/herself in a non-individualistic way, is this "communal" identity projected onto God? Does such a viewpoint aid in understanding the Godhead, as suggested by Aubrey R. Johnson (1961:16)? A better understanding of this relationship would no doubt provide additional insight for an improved presentation of the Gospel to the Chinese.

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