

# Contextualizing Ancestor Veneration: An Historical Review

by *David S. Lim*

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In many cultures of Asia today, ancestral veneration remains the biggest hindrance in evangelizing their vast populations. As we seek to form Christ-centered communities, we're confronted with how the gospel can be contextualized in cultures that venerate ancestors. Most recently Asian Evangelical/Pentecostal theologian Simon Chan devoted one chapter of his book to highlight ancestral veneration as a key theological issue in Asia (Chan, 2014). Though I approach this issue from my particular ministry among ethnic Chinese in the Philippines, I believe that its relevance extends to ministries among other peoples whose cultures include ancestral beliefs and practices. This could include all other "folk Buddhists" among the Japanese and Koreans, and "folk religionists" in India, Africa, and across the globe.

Chinese Christians have been called "traitors" (bad Chinese) and considered "outcasts" (non-Chinese, or anti-Chinese) by compatriots whose ethnic and/or cultural identities are essentially defined by filial piety as the supreme virtue in their moral hierarchy of human relationships. In Taiwan, as in most overseas Chinese communities, many who are interested in Christianity, but who were raised under a strong Chinese religious influence, have been reluctant to commit their lives to Christ unless they are allowed to retain their ancestral tablets on the altar in the living room. A Japanese minister confessed that he could not win his eldest brother who said, "If I were to become a Christian, all memory of our honored ancestors will perish" (McGavran 1985:314).

Ancestor veneration, with its moral and cultural implications, presents Christianity with a great conflict far beyond the churches. To non-Christians, Christians disrespect their departed family members; they have lost interest in and are disloyal to family traditions. Christians have been criticized and persecuted (and even disowned) by their families, not so much for religious but for moral reasons. It raises the question as to whether Christians can develop

Christ-centered communities that honor their ancestors more than their non-Christian neighbors.

### ***Ancestor Veneration Defined***

Ancestor *vereneration* may convey a more accurate sense of what practitioners are actually doing than when ancestor *worship* is assigned to these rituals in Buddhist-influenced and Confucian-influenced societies. The translation “worship” is in many ways a misnomer that causes misunderstanding. In English, the word “worship” usually refers to the reverent love and devotion accorded a deity or divine being. However, in these cultures, these acts of supposed “worship” do not confer any belief that the departed ancestors have become some kind of deity. For these cultures, ancestor practices are not the same as the worship of the gods. The purpose of ancestor veneration is to do one’s filial duty. Many of them believe that their ancestors actually need to be provided for by their descendants; and others do not believe that the ancestors are even aware of what their descendants do for them, but that their expression of filial piety is what is most important. Whether or not the ancestor receives what is offered is not really the issue.

Rather, the act is a way to respect, honor and look after ancestors in their afterlives, as well as to insure their continuous good relations with living descendants. In this regard, similar practices exist among many of these cultures and religions. Some may visit the grave of their parents or other ancestors, leaving flowers and praying to them in order to honor and remember them, while also asking their ancestors to continue to look after them as their descendents. However, they would not consider themselves as worshipping them.

Chinese ancestral veneration (*jīngzǔ*; and *bàizǔ*) seeks to honor the deeds and memories of the deceased. This honor is a further extension of filial piety for the ancestors, the ultimate

homage to the deceased, as if they were actually alive. Instead of prayers, joss-sticks are offered with communications and greetings to the deceased. There are eight qualities of *De* (“virtue”) for a Chinese to complete his earthly duties, and filial piety is the foremost of those qualities. The importance of paying filial duties to parents (and elders) lies with the fact that all physical bodily aspects of our being were created by our parents, who continued to tend to our welfare until we became adults, and then even beyond. The respect and the homage to parents reciprocates these gracious deeds in this life and after. This filial piety is the ultimate homage. Thus traditional Chinese ancestral veneration should be



understood as a fusion of the classical ethical teachings of Confucius and Laozi, rather than a religious ritual that worships deity.

Ancestral practices are modes of communication with the spirit world. Food “sacrifices” are offered to “feed” the deceased. It also includes visiting the deceased at their graves, and making offerings to the deceased in the *Qing Ming*, *Chong Yang* and Ghost festivals. All three are related to paying homage to the spirits. For those with deceased relatives in the netherworld (or hell), elaborate or even creative offerings such as toothbrush, comb, towel, slippers, and water are provided so that the deceased will be able to have these

items in the afterlife. Often paper versions of these objects are burned for the same purpose, and may even include paper cars and TVs. *Spirit money* (also called “hell notes”) is burned as an offering to the dead in their afterlife. The living may regard the ancestors as “guardian angels,” perhaps protecting them from serious accidents, or guiding them in their path of life.

How then do we contextualize in such cultures that venerate ancestors? I believe that contextualization must involve three major procedures: First, we need to do historical and cultural research on how the general population and Christians regard this phenomenon. Then, we must do a thorough survey of what the Bible says about this issue theologically and missiologically. And last, we can recommend how contextualization could be helpful in the development of theology and spirituality in this socio-religious milieu. I will focus only on the first of these in this article, by giving an historical perspective on how ancestor veneration has been interpreted in the Christian movement.

### ***Historical Differences***

In my historical research, I found that when Christianity was propagated in such countries as China, Japan and Korea, ancestor veneration was condemned as “idolatrous” in most instances. While in earlier times Christian churches may have taken a favorable attitude toward ancestral practices, or seen it as a desirable socio-cultural custom, most missions and churches that came later were very critical and viewed “ancestor worship” as idolatry.

Christianity entered China during the Tang dynasty. According to the Nestorian Monument (erected in AD 781), the Nestorians looked favorably upon Chinese “ancestor worship.” They taught the importance of properly treating the dead and caring for those who had passed away. The limited record shows that their evangelistic efforts brought forth significant fruit.

The Jews entered China during the Song and Yuen dynasties. At that time the city of Kai-Feng had China's largest Jewish population. The Jewish Monument (erected in 1489) shows that worship of heaven was not complete if one did not also worship ancestors. This was done twice a year, once in the spring and once in the fall. The Jews believed that one must serve one's parents in the same manner after their death as when they were living by showing respect and offering food and other goods. Another Jewish monument dated 1663 actually described the meaning of the word worship: "the expression of one's uttermost respect and sincerity," or "the expression of one's deep gratitude and desire to repay kindness bestowed upon him." The food offered was clearly intended to express gratitude.

The Jews in Kai-Feng not only worshipped Yahweh, but they also conducted "Ji" worship, and the "Zai" ceremonies of self-cleansing and preparation. The purpose of these practices was to express gratitude to the ancestors. And in addition to the synagogue, the Jews in Kai-Feng erected another building to place ancestral tablets. They made tablets for such ancestors as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses. According to Jewish tradition, they offered vegetables and fruits because they believed that meat could be offered to God alone and only at the temple in Jerusalem (Lin 1985:149-150). It appears that Judaism as practiced in China basically accepted the Chinese traditional view of heaven, Confucianism, and certain ancestor practices. They seem to have seen no conflict between Chinese and Jewish beliefs.

### Roman Catholics

When the first Roman Catholic missionaries of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) arrived, mainly identified with the initiatives of Matteo Ricci, they also took a favorable attitude toward the deep-rooted Chinese tradition of ancestor practices. From the beginning of the 17th century this would continue

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for about 100 years, and their churches increased significantly. But from the beginning of the 18th century the church took a critical attitude for the next 200 years, and churches declined and almost disappeared.

This change occurred when the Dominicans and the Franciscans came to China in the mid-17th century. They disagreed with the Jesuit perspective and fought fervently against the Chinese traditional "worship" of Confucius and the ancestors. In 1704, Pope Clement XI approved a decree (*Ex illa die*) which totally forbade ancestor (and Confucius) worship, and this was officially delivered to China in 1715, and then finally translated into Chinese in 1720. Emperor Kang Xi of the Ching dynasty, who had previously held a favorable attitude toward Roman Catholic beliefs, was greatly angered by this papal decree. Earlier in 1692 he had written an imperial decree stating that ancestral veneration is a civic ceremony and not a religious ritual, but now in anger he signed a decree forbidding all Roman Catholic activities in China. All succeeding emperors followed this position. As a result, Roman Catholic work, which had been prospering during the Ming and Ching dynasties, came to a halt. This was the greatest setback since the church's failure to respond to the request of Kublai Khan (conveyed by Marco Polo in 1271) to send 100 "teachers of science and religion" to reinforce the Nestorians.

In 1742, Pope Benedict XIV decreed *Ex quo*, which forbade even the discussion of such matters among believers, and rescinded the "Eight Special Permissions" originally given to the Jesuits. This rejectionist stance lasted for 200 years. Then in 1939, Pope Pius XII reversed and decreed the removal

of *Ex quo*. The pope accepted Chinese traditional "worship" of Confucius and the ancestors, for he viewed these ceremonies as mere expressions of respect for the dead, and he believed that these rituals helped teach the younger generations to respect their own culture. He considered it right for the believers to bow or to practice other forms of rituals before a dead person, an image or tablet of a dead person. This remains the official Roman Catholic position to this day.

In 1979 Cardinal Yu-Bin promoted the "worship" of heaven and the ancestors among Roman Catholic believers in Taiwan. He officiated at large-scale ceremonies, thus eliciting some public positive reaction. Unfortunately, the ceremonial rituals were not fully understood so the actual impact of Catholic mission there remained negligible.

### Protestants

The early Protestant missionaries took a critical attitude from the start, most probably influenced by the rejectionist view of their Roman Catholic contemporaries. Although they produced a good number of conversions, these converts were rejected by the Chinese, especially by the intelligentsia, for they regarded missionaries as imperialistic enforcers of a sweeping disapproval of Chinese culture. And when some missionaries took a favorable attitude, they hardly influenced the stance of Chinese believers.

Those who opposed "ancestor worship" were especially those of the China Inland Mission (CIM), the largest Protestant mission group. They had received basic theological training and brought with them not only their Christian beliefs but also Western social and cultural symbolism. Although the CIM was able to take on the

indigenous appearance of the Chinese, they sincerely believed that only their religious system was appropriate to express the true Christian faith, and they failed to understand the deeper values and orientation of Chinese culture. They simply believed that “ancestor worship” was idolatrous.

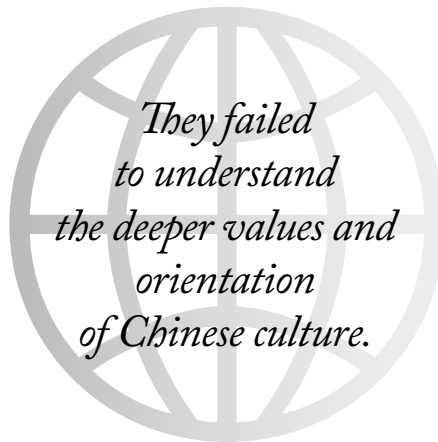
Those who supported “ancestor veneration” included such missionaries as William Martin, Allen Young, Joseph Edkins, Alexander Williamson, Timothy Richard and others, most of whom belonged to an academic study group called Guang Xue Hui. They had received a university education, and thus were more sensitive toward social and cultural realities. They knew that evangelism could not be a mere transmission of ideas and concepts. If Christianity were to be rooted in China, it also must become a vital part of Chinese social structure. If the Christian faith were to truly transform Chinese people for God’s kingdom, it would not only be accepted conceptually, but culturally and socially as well.

Therefore, these Protestant missionaries also sought appropriate forms and symbolism for expressing Christian faith in daily living. They believed that Chinese believers must develop their own sets of meaningful forms and symbols. They saw little contradiction between Christian and Chinese beliefs, considering the Christian faith to be compatible with Confucian teachings and filling the areas which were not covered by Confucianism. These missionaries believed that socio-cultural forms must not become obstacles for the upper class and intellectuals. Therefore, they had greater respect and appreciation for Chinese cultural traditions. These missionaries considered Chinese “ancestor worship” to have two major functions: (1) people expressed their reverence as well as feelings of closeness toward the deceased; and (2) as a nation, China maintained “ancestor worship” as a form of education: veneration of ancestors taught honor

and respect for parents and elders, and veneration of Confucius taught the importance of education.

#### *The Protestant Debate*

“Ancestor worship” was highlighted during the Second Conference of Protestant missionaries in China in 1890, to follow up previous debate at the First Conference in 1877. William Martin presented a paper entitled “The Worship of Ancestors – A Plea for Toleration,” which affirmed the educational and moral values in “ancestor worship,” and suggested that missionaries refrain from speaking against Chinese traditional practices, and instead trust the Holy Spirit and God’s Word to transform the hearts of



Chinese people. The truth would influence them and naturally bring about the necessary changes.

This ignited a big debate. Hudson Taylor (CIM) and C.W. Mateer (Presbyterian) led the opposition. They rejected Martin’s viewpoint regarding the three elements of “ancestor worship.” They pointed out that Martin only observed the aspect of respect and commemoration and failed to detect the element of idolatry. They claimed that if there were an element of idolatry in China, it would surely be found in the practice of “ancestor worship,” and thus insisted that tolerating it would ruin Christianity. They quoted many Scripture verses and totally rejected any possibility of

toleration. Taylor averred that every detail of the “ancestor worship” ceremony was idolatrous.

The conference ended with the overwhelming victory for those who opposed “ancestor worship.” Led by Taylor, almost all the delegates at the conference stood to their feet demonstrating their total opposition to ancestor worship. It must be noted that no Chinese representative was at those two conferences.

Since then, Chinese Protestantism’s mainstream has been officially against “ancestor worship.” After the Communist takeover of China, this issue became irrelevant with the banishing of all religions. No discussion also means that the Protestants of both registered and unregistered churches in China continue to hold the prevailing rejectionist view.

In Taiwan, people were receptive to this early Protestant rejectionist view so that “ancestor worship” was not a problem. But in the 1960s the island nation enjoyed great economic progress, rekindling their national and cultural pride, and this caused a decline in the growth of the church. Facing the decline, church leaders became aware of the importance of the Christian faith being rooted in Chinese culture. This movement called “Searching for Roots” began to re-evaluate the signs, forms, and symbolism used in Chinese folk religion. Once again the issue of “ancestor worship” had surfaced, but again, it had no significant effect on the common rejectionist view.

#### *Recent Re-examination*

There have been recent attempts among Protestant theologians and church leaders to re-examine the rejectionist stance, but unfortunately there has been no significant breakthrough to reverse or modify it. The call for this reevaluation comes from two main sources. First, pastors realize that in spite of official prohibitions the majority of their church members still practice ancestor veneration, albeit in

different degrees and forms. Secondly, researchers have discovered that these practices are still quite prevalent, even in a Japanese village that has had a relatively large number of Anglicans (38.9%) over three generations (1887-1975) (Berentsen 1985b:289-290).

The Asia Theological Association (ATA) sponsored a "Consultation on the Christian Response to Ancestor Practices" in Taipei in December 1983, with 98 participants from nine Asian countries, including those with significant overseas Chinese minorities. They issued a "Working Document" which still reiterated a consensus for evangelical Protestants to maintain the rejectionist view (ATA 1985:3-10), though the papers were more open to contextualization. The Northern Synod of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan also co-sponsored a seminar on ancestral veneration led by scholars and clergy in November 2002, which highlighted the contrast between the Chinese and the Western worldviews in relation to ancestors (TCN 2002:1). There may have been other such conferences, but there seems to have been no significant shift from the official rejectionist view.

There is a general sense that a gradual process of "natural accommodation" happens through both secularization and "Christian influence" (especially through education of the young in Christian schools). It supposes that when the dead and the spirit world fade away from daily significance, so will ancestral veneration fade away as a Chinese tradition. Yet, the "internet age" has achieved the opposite and given birth to new forms of ancestral veneration: for Koreans, "cyber ancestral worship" is available online ([www.memorial-zone.or.kr](http://www.memorial-zone.or.kr)) for descendants to view pictures and videos of ancestors and their graveyards, to listen to their voices, to read their biographies and accomplishments, and to submit commemorating messages.

Today's converts within Protestantism have hardly changed their Chinese worldview and value system.

*"Cyber ancestral worship" is available online for viewing videos of ancestors, pictures of their graveyards, and for listening to their voices.*

Attracted by the claim of superior efficacy in Christianity, some Chinese who had been practicing traditional religion turned to Christ in crises, whether due to illness, the identity crisis of teenagers, or the needs of new migrants to cities. Their ready acceptance of Christianity was facilitated by certain similarities between these two traditions. Deities, rituals, and other manifestations of their former religion were consciously rejected, and they devoted themselves to the individual and communal practices of this new faith; but, their acceptance of any Protestant practice was based on and informed by the ideas, categories, conceptual scheme, and value system of the religious tradition they consciously rejected. Their socio-religious worldview continues to be operative in helping them to understand and appropriate the new religious tradition. With regard to healing and exorcism, Jesus is a more powerful and promising deity, a more efficacious alternative to the traditional gods in a world constantly intruded by demons and evil spirits. With regard to morality, they interpret and appropriate Christian moral teachings in a Chinese way, upholding filial piety and family harmony in the same manner as their former religion. With regard to divine-human relationships, they relate to their Christian God with ideas of retribution and reciprocity which are essential elements in Chinese popular religion. All these are not a simple mixing of elements of Protestantism and Chinese religion, nor are these a simple acceptance of one religious tradition and rejection of another (Yip 1985). This "natural accommodation" may be viewed as the actualization of Protestantism in a Chinese worldview. This actualization is not static; it will surely develop new innovations within

the slowly changing boundaries of socio-religious traditions, especially in a day of postmodernism that encourages tolerance and accommodation towards new worldviews and other religious movements.

#### *Reviewing Christian Innovations*

Yet the gap between the socio-religious traditions of Protestantism and Chinese religion remains very wide, and Christians are still perceived as anti-cultural, anti-family, separatist or isolationist. Hence, several suggestions of more deliberate accommodation by Christians using "functional substitutes" have emerged. Many of these have been implemented, but hardly on an official or large scale, and consequently have had hardly any social impact.

Some have sought to transform traditional Chinese funerals into Christian Chinese funerals. For example, in Taiwan, where a memorial table is traditionally established for friends and relatives to show their concern for the mourning family by burning incense sticks for the deceased, some Christians have urged the setting up of a similar table. This is to show respect for the deceased and their love and concern for the family members. The Taiwan Presbyterian Church has endorsed hanging on the central wall a picture of Christ, the Ten Commandments, and Bible verses on large sheets of paper that are carefully framed. An enlarged and framed photo of the deceased is also hung in a prominent place in the house, but not on the spot once occupied by the ancestral tablets.

Traditionally the Taiwanese hire professional mourners for the funeral procession; they regard those who die without people to mourn (and wail) as being most unfortunate. Thus they see Christians as those who "die without

people mourning.” So it has been suggested that Christians should weep and cry at the death and funeral of a family member, but without wailing speeches. They should wail or cry aloud, possibly with such words as “Lord, be with us and comfort us”; “Lord, guide so-and-so to heaven safely and into your bosom”; or “Lord, may so-and-so rest in heavenly peace.”

In Taiwanese tradition the family holds a total of seven memorial services, one every seven days after burial. The purpose of these services is to venerate the deceased, and usually a Taoist priest or Buddhist monk leads the relatives in the rituals. These services serve the purpose of gradually relieving the bereaved of their emotional burden. Thus Christians have been encouraged to also have memorial services during which the family can sing Christian songs and share the message of the Bible, and thus serve evangelistic purposes as well. Usually it takes place once a year on the anniversaries of the day of death, and the local pastor is asked to preside over it. This is also done in Korea, but the form and content are so very “Christian” that non-Christians hardly consider these ceremonies as honoring their ancestor.

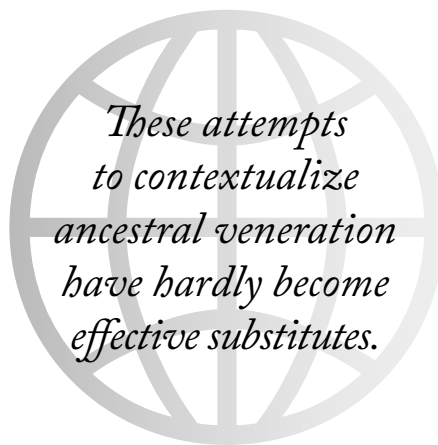
Some Christians say they continue to go to the annual meetings where people of common lineage come together to offer traditional sacrifices to ancestors. Christians do not participate in the sacrificial offerings, but the purpose of their presence is to maintain fellowship with the relatives and to show them that they have not forsaken the ancestors.

Christians are encouraged to prepare their own family records similar to those possessed by clan leaders. One publisher in Taiwan has made blank forms of family records available for use by Christians. Hakka ministers are especially anxious to get Christians to prepare such records in order to show non-Christians their regard for their glorious ancestry. In Taiwan and in the Philippines, some give donations

in memory of the departed loved ones, and these are given for Christian work or to charitable institutions.

Above all, during the *Qing Ming* Festival, Christian families have been encouraged to visit and clean their ancestors’ graves, and the head of the family can lead a Christian memorial service as a substitute for offering sacrifices to the ancestors. With flowers, hymns and short devotionals, Christians can show love and respect to the deceased. The elders in my Chinese church in the Philippines chose to lay flowers on the graves of deceased church members every All Saints’ Day, but not during *Qing Ming*.

Yet these attempts to contextualize ancestral veneration have been



individual and piece-meal, and have hardly become effective substitutes. Invitations to attend memorial services hosted by Christians have been avoided by non-Christian relatives, and some have been threatened with harm. The latter consider Christian funeral rites to be devoid of proper respect and decorum, and thus their dead loved ones are buried “like rats.” This bad reputation before the community is mainly due to Christians trying to contextualize in their own terms and understanding, rather than from the viewpoint of these other contemporaries. The general (and quite accurate) popular perception is that these Christian innovations are no real change from its rejectionist stance.

I believe the pressure of church tradition has made it difficult to successfully contextualize within a socio-religious milieu which prioritizes ancestor veneration. I hope this historical review has sufficiently introduced the kind of pressure any innovation must consider. In the forthcoming installment on this theme, I will offer my own survey of what the Bible says about this issue of ancestor veneration both theologically and missiologically. And then, hopefully, we can recommend an appropriate contextualization of ancestor veneration for future mission efforts. **IJFM**

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