

THE GOSPEL-CULTURE ENCOUNTER
AT CHINESE FUNERAL RITES

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1. Introduction

Missiological studies would remind us time and again of the importance of the cultural contexts. We need to be mindful of not just the culture of the recipients of the gospel, but also the missionary's own culture, and the culture of the Bible. The aim of missions is to plant or to transplant the *seed* (the gospel or the word of God) onto "foreign soil," but not to do so with a *potted plant* (the gospel with the cultural context of the missionary or even that of the biblical world). However, almost invariably, in bringing the gospel trans-culturally there will be some conflict between the gospel and the culture (i.e., that of the recipient). Arthur Glasser states categorically, "When you step into the world of the Bible, you find a measure of conflict. Right from the start, the Gospel is the opponent of all Religion."¹ The reason is that "the heart of every culture, in fact, is the religious component: *the relationship of the people to that which they regard as the ultimate*, whether it's demonic, many gods or whatever." This missiological observation or principle has unmistakably been experienced in the life of my wife, Carol, and myself. In particular, we would relate the Chinese funeral rites of her deceased parents as the cultural occasion that would highlight this gospel-cultural clash. Evidently, this encounter of ours is far from being a unique one; it has also been experienced by households of many local Christians in the

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¹ A. F. Glasser, "The Gospel versus Religion," in *First Things: Integrated Readings*, eds. W. L. Osborne & R. D. Winter (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1994), vol. 2, 58A-1.

various countries in the East Asian region and for many years since the introduction of the gospel.

In the following chapter of this paper, we shall first identify the occasion when this gospel-culture encounter took place in our lives. Secondly, we shall discuss some of the significant religious beliefs behind these Chinese funeral rites. Thirdly, we shall bring the authority of the scriptures to “judge” the moral validity of these various rites, especially from the perspective of the Chinese Christian in the Malaysia-Singapore cultural setting.

It is to be unequivocally stated that there are two premises, upon which the following chapters are to be discussed and the conclusions are to be derived.² First is the high view of the Bible on faith and practice. It is the final authority, i.e., *Sola Scriptura*, as with the Reformers’ declaration. The second is the conviction that in every culture there is something in it that is divine (via God’s general revelation when they are in resonance with the *Imago Dei*), demonic, as well as neutral. Therefore, to quote the Lausanne Covenant, “Culture must always be tested and judged by Scripture. Because men and women are God’s creatures, some of their culture is rich in beauty and goodness. Because they are fallen, all of it is tainted with sin and some of it is demonic.”³

2. Identifying the Specific Cultural Occasion

This problem happened some twenty-five years ago, but it has continued to be an aching one for me and for my wife, Carol, in particular. Time has healed much of the hurt in us, but the occasional flashbacks or reminders to it still cause distress and no small degree of pain within us.

I am a third generation Christian from Penang, but Carol is a first generation Christian from Singapore. Of the seven siblings in her family, only she and another sister are professed, baptized Christians. Her parents practiced the traditional Chinese ancestral worship diligently. There were three altars in the small apartment home of my parents-in-law. Carol recalls putting joss sticks and filling up the small wine cups at the

² L. Tan, *The Christian Answer to Ancestral Worship* (Singapore: Asian Beacon, 1978), pp. 1-2. This is comparable with the presuppositions of Tan.

³ “The Lausanne Covenant,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, eds. R. D. Winter and S. C. Hawthorne (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1981, rev. ed. 1999), pp. 759-63 (762).

altars on a regular and frequent basis. Carol became a committed Christian and after her secondary school education, she went on to study in the Baptist Theological Seminary in Penang, where we met, courted and eventually decided to be married. So I like to believe that the good Lord called and brought her to me all the way from Singapore. I was then doing my internship in the General Hospital in Penang.

It was about three years after we have been married when Carol's father suddenly died of a myocardial infarct (heart attack), complicating his diabetes mellitus. I had just commenced my private medical practice in Penang. Therefore, partly because of the concern for my newly established practice, partly because of the anticipated tension with my Christian faith if I were to attend the funeral with its associated ceremonies, but perhaps mainly because of my ignorance of how a Christian ought to behave in such a complicated situation, that I decided not to go down with Carol to Singapore.⁴ Neither was Carol any more knowledgeable or experienced as to how a Chinese Christian ought to conduct oneself under such circumstances. She however, as a daughter, devotedly went down to Singapore to pay her "last respects" to her father. Her traditional Chinese roots and her newfound but established Christian faith clashed within her. She was caught in a very difficult and unguided situation and I was not there with her! The filial piety elements within her conflicted against her commitment not to worship any other (god, human or spirit) but the one true God that she has known in and through Christ. Yet the Singapore-Chinese part in her yearned to respect and to demonstrate that respect within her for her deceased father.

The gospel-cultural tension rose within her because of the false traditional Chinese cultural beliefs, as portrayed by the funeral rites. How far could she participate in those funeral rites to respect her deceased father and not be compromising her Christian faith? What sort of Christian witness would she be projecting to her mother and siblings and also to her friends, both believers and non-believers? On the other hand, if she were to be "righteous" in her Christian stand and have a complete hands-off posture towards all these funeral rites, how would her grief-stricken mother in particular, view her and her faith? These were the prominent thoughts of conflict/tension that ran through her Chinese

⁴ B. S. Poh, *The Christian in the Chinese Culture* (Seri Kembangan: Good News Enterprise, 1986, rev. ed. 1989), p. 56, "Many Christians are blissfully ignorant of the various rites carried out during a Chinese funeral. When a death occurs in the family of the believer, he is caught off guard and does not know what he should or should not do."

Christian mind and heart during those days of her father's funeral in Singapore.

What did she do *then*? She wore the sackcloth and cap as her given mourning attire. This did not seem to pose difficulty to her Christian conscience. However, she had to sit and walk round the coffin repeatedly with the Taoist monks, who were performing their ritualistic chants. Whilst doing so, she did hold joss sticks in her hands at times. She also joined in with the relatives to burn the symbolic paper money, car, etc. as "offerings" to her late father. In her heart she did not believe that any of these rites conveyed any meaningful truth at all. Yet she did them out of respect for her family members and out of love for her mother in particular. Needless to say, performing these rites did cause a great deal of anxiety and tension within her.

About nine months later, her mother died and quite suddenly as well. This time, we went down together. I too participated in some of the rites that she did on the occasion of her father's funeral. It was then that I personally experienced some of the agonies and tensions that battled within Carol's soul earlier on, rather than just hearing about them from her.

3. Some Significant Religious Beliefs behind the Chinese Funeral Rites

The cult of Chinese funeral rites and the closely associated ancestor worship tradition have been derived from debased Confucianism. It has also incorporated beliefs from animism, Buddhism and Taoism.⁵ Obviously the meanings behind the ceremonies had once been more important than the forms. However, the forms had undergone various changes over time and with different dialect groups. Nowadays, Chinese funeral services consist of various outward complex forms but the participants often lack a true positive appreciation of their meanings.⁶ Bearing this complexity in mind and with the constraint of time and space for this essay, I shall limit my discussion of the religious beliefs behind the Chinese funeral rites to *four significant topics*. Hopefully, they will be able to help us to have a better understanding of the significant meanings of the mosaic forms observable in traditional Chinese funerals.

⁵ Tan, *Christian Answer*, p. 2.

⁶ Lukas Tjandra, "Folk Religion among the Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia" (D.Miss. dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1988), p. 61.

3.1 Filial Piety to the Dead

It is this Confucian concept that underlies the cult of Chinese ancestral worship that is so significant during the funeral rites. Tjandra noted, "...these concepts of ancestor worship and filial piety have been knitted together and cannot be separated."⁷ Confucius taught that when parents are alive, the children are to treat them with respect. When they die, the children are to mourn for them and to give them an honorable and respectful burial. Later on, the children are to sacrifice to and to worship their spirits.⁸ Various postures and gestures of filial piety are to be demonstrated during the funeral days. These include bowing, kneeling and prostrating before the coffin, and even crawling backwards from it!⁹

The rationale for the Confucian filial piety is not only for the respect of parents and ancestors. It is also for the governance of the country with the system based upon filial piety, and also for the building up of an individual's character. (It is to be noted that originally Buddhists did not subscribe to ancestor worship.)

3.2 What Happens to the Dead

The basic Chinese belief is that *the soul never dies*, and the person who dies *becomes a good or an evil spirit*. A good person will become a good spirit when he/she dies. However when a wicked person dies, especially in an unnatural manner, he/she is likely to become an evil spirit instead. "Generally speaking, the good spirits are responsible for all fortunes, health... The evil spirits are responsible for misfortunes, sickness and every kind of calamity."¹⁰ Furthermore, the spirits of ancestors are considered to take vitally important positions in relationship with the lives of descendants left behind. Without the favorable authority of the ancestors, the order of the whole community cannot be sustained. Hence Tey commented that the ancestor is regarded as a god by his family, and is believed to be still looking after the welfare

⁷ Tjandra, *Folk Religion among the Chinese*, p. 73.

⁸ David Hock Tey, *Chinese Culture and the Bible* (Singapore: Here's Life Books, 1988), p. 136.

⁹ Tan, *Christian Answer*, p. 8.

¹⁰ C. S. Yang, "The Power Encounter with Animism in the Mountain Tribes of Taiwan," in *God in Asian Contexts*, eds. B. R. Ro and C. Albrecht (Taichung, Taiwan: Asia Theological Association, 1988), pp. 192-206 (194).

of the family.¹¹ Again, if the spirit of the ancestor is not duly worshipped, it will become “evil” and cause harm to the descendants instead!

In addition, Taoism has contributed to the Chinese belief system that when a person dies he/she goes on *a journey involving ten different judgments or obstacles*, before he/she reaches the destiny of either “heaven” or the other world.¹² Thus the living has the task to help the deceased ancestor along in his spiritual journey. If inadequate steps are taken to facilitate the journey, the deceased may not depart, but remain on earth, bringing evil and harm to the living.¹³ Examples of these efforts are: placing a pearl in the mouth to invoke a bright journey; positioning the coffin so that the deceased faces the front door for facility of departure; covering of mirrors and reflecting glasses with paper or cloth so as to prevent the deceased from residing in the glass instead; and closing the cover of the coffin with due care lest the deceased spirit were to escape “back.” Quite inexplicably, the Chinese also subscribe to the belief that at death, the soul of the deceased ancestor resides in three places, *viz.* in heaven, in the grave and in the ancestral tablet or shrine.¹⁴

Another feature of the Chinese belief concerning life hereafter is that it *corresponds closely to life on this earth*. The deceased spirit has still the same needs, e.g., house, car, color television, money and transport. Usually on the night before the body is to be taken to be buried (or on the burial day, at the graveside itself), these objects in paper forms will be burned as offerings for the deceased.¹⁵ These days, I have also witnessed paper computers and jumbo jet planes being offered up to the ancestor spirits! Likewise, with the help of the Taoist priest, foods are offered by the family members so that there will no be lack in provisions for the departed soul in his/her life hereafter.

3.3 Placating the “Gods” and Spirits

Chinese funeral rites take into account the pantheon of gods and spirits of the other world.¹⁶ They are to be appeased so that the soul of the

¹¹ Tey, *Chinese Culture*, p. 135.

¹² Tey, *Chinese Culture*, p. 135.

¹³ Tan, *The Christian Answer*, p. 4.

¹⁴ W. H. Chua, “The Worship of Ancestors,” *The World’s Religions: A Lion Handbook*, eds. Beaver, Bergman and others (Oxford: Lion, 1982), p. 247.

¹⁵ Tjandra, *Folk Religion among the Chinese*, p. 69.

¹⁶ Tan, *Christian Answer*, p. 6.

deceased will not be excessively obstructed by them in his/her spiritual journey. There are many maneuvers that seem to be comprehensible only to the Taoist or Buddhist priests invited to help out in these rites! Examples of some of the more understandable ones are the wailing, the loud music and the scattering of the paper money.

Loud wailing is encouraged in order to demonstrate to the gods and spirits of the other world that this deceased ancestor is highly esteemed and missed. In a rich family, professional mourners are sometimes hired to mourn for this very purpose.¹⁷ To me, it is more like deceiving the spirits and gods than of placating them.

One of the distinctive feature of the Chinese funeral is the deafening noise of the music, accompanying the procession of the to the burial/cremation site. The noisy gongs and other percussion instruments are used to either drive away the evil spirits,¹⁸ or to announce to the spirits of the other world, bidding them to welcome the soul of the deceased into their midst. This usually precedes the hearse carrying the coffin, which in turn is followed by the family members wearing sackcloths and relatives and friends, roughly in order of their relationship to the deceased. Also during the procession, paper money is scattered along the route to "pay" for the right of way in view of the spirits, which need to be appeased.

3.4 The Two Way Merit System

This is another perspective of the Chinese belief system behind the funeral rites.¹⁹ By this is meant that merit is being achieved for the deceased by the ritual deeds done for him by the living family members.²⁰ In addition, the living descendants can also earn merits, blessings and favors, etc. in dutifully performing the cultic demands. But C. S. Song is probably more correct in observing, "...in most cases the spirits of the dead are not worshipped as transcendental powers. They are objects to be feared and placated."²¹ The relations between the living and the dead are believed to be continued on in the affairs of the living. Therefore in meeting these funeral cultic obligations, the descendants

¹⁷ Poh, *The Christian in the Chinese Culture*, p. 57.

¹⁸ K. C. Tham, *A Proposed Conceptualizing Theology on Selected Aspects of Chinese Cultural Practices in Malaysia* (Penang, Malaysia: MBTS, 1988), p. 52.

¹⁹ Tan, *Christian Answer*, p. 2.

²⁰ See above.

²¹ C. S. Song, *Third-Eye Theology* (New York: Orbis, 1979), p. 154.

hope to merit a favorable response (or a less adverse one) from the deceased ancestors, who are now believed to have more authority and power than the living.

The spirits of the ancestors would normally be expected to protect and bless their descendants. However, they would also punish their evil deeds, as well. Through time, convoluted teachings and human weaknesses, the ancestors have been elevated to divine status and worship is therefore demanded from the living. In Chinese religion, as highlighted with the funeral rites, the worship of ancestors has largely replaced the place of worship of the heavenly god.²²

4. The Funeral Rites as Judged by the Scriptures

As we bring the word to bear upon the Chinese funeral rites, let us be reminded of a few important gospel-cultural principles. Christianity with its “missionary” form(s) cannot avoid cultural reconfiguration in its new cultural setting. However the gospel and the truths in the word must not be changed. On the other hand, the Asian cultural elements within us may need to be deleted, or transformed when judged by the Bible. However, there may be some elements that could be affirmed or consolidated, when they are consistent with the truths revealed in the Bible.

The Bible in the Decalogue (Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16), in Proverbs (e.g., Prov 6:20-23) and also in the New Testament is very clear about the honoring of parents. In Ephesians 6:1-3, Paul reminds the Christians that this is also the first commandment with a promise. In Colossians 3:20, he instructs children to be obedient to their parents “...in everything, for this pleases the Lord.” Therefore, as Christians, we should *affirm and establish the Chinese elements of filial piety within us*. However, in respecting, obeying and adoring our parents and ancestors, it is important to distinguish that our motives, beliefs and actions are *not tainted with ancestor worship*. This is because the scripture is emphatically clear that we are to have no other gods before him, because he is a jealous God. Although formulated at Sinai, this demand runs throughout God’s covenantal relationship with humankind and with Israel from the pages of Genesis to Revelation. Therefore, during the course of the funeral rites, we are not to deem our deceased parent as a “god” who has some sovereignty over us in any way. God may certainly

²² Tjandra, *Folk Religion among the Chinese*, pp. 64-65.

bless us because we honored our parents when alive, but the blessings come from God alone in his sovereign riches and power.

The other scriptural teaching that bears upon the Chinese funeral rites is that we should *not be in communication with the spirits of the departed*, as implicitly taught in the narrative account of Saul's attempt to communicate with Samuel through the medium of Endor (1 Sam 28).²³ Many of the ceremonies performed for the deceased ancestor before the burial and the memorial services after the burial fall into the category of necromancy and being in contact with the spirits. These are also explicitly forbidden in the Bible (Lev 19:31; 20:6; Deut 18:9-14). Whether we are actively practicing or more passively joining in on these "spirit" activities, we indicate a corresponding failure to trust the Lord with his sovereignty over our lives. Indeed people who are knowledgeable of the occult and demon possession would point out that the practices mentioned in Leviticus and Deuteronomy have led many into satanic bondage.²⁴

The questions that arose in our minds at the time of the funeral of Carol's father still need to be resolved. How far could we participate in Chinese funeral rites to respect our deceased parents and *not* be compromising our Christian faith? What sort of Christian witness would we be projecting to family members and also to our friends, both believers and non-believers with our participation in the funeral rites? On the other hand, if we were to be "righteous" in our Christian stand and have a complete hands-off stance to all these funeral rites, how would our grief-stricken family members view us and our faith? In Christ we have been set free from these bondages of Satan and his demonic spirits upon our lives. We know the truth in Christ and indeed the truth has set us free (John 8:32). Jesus said these words in the context to distinguish between the true children of Abraham and the children of Satan. Yet our freedom is not license for any and every activity. In 1 Cor 10:23-33, Paul teaches Christians to be considerate with their newfound liberty in Christ. Helpful questions to determine the morality of our actions are: Are they beneficial and constructive? (v. 23); Are they glorifying to God? (v. 31); Will my actions cause another brethren to stumble? (v. 31); and Am I seeking only my own good or the good of many? (v. 33).

²³ "A Working Document towards a Christian Approach to Ancestor Practices," in *Christian Alternatives to Ancestor Practices*, ed. Bong Rin Ro (Taichung, Taiwan: Asia Theological Association, 1985), pp. 3-11 (8).

²⁴ J. S. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* on CD-ROM (Oak Harbor: Logos Research System, 1996).

We shall now consider a few specifics in the Chinese funeral rites as illustrative examples of how the gospel ought to express itself in and through our cultural context.

Family members and close relatives are expected to wear sackcloth with cap and armband, or black and white color clothing.²⁵ Old Testament mentions of the Israelites being commanded by God or his prophets to wear sackcloth on occasions of grief, sorrow or repentance. Death of an elderly member of the family is certainly a time of grief and sorrow, and it would be appropriate and biblical for us to do so. Black and white clothing is fairly “universal” mourning attire, and is a cultural rite that Christians can abide by to show our love and respect to our deceased ancestor.

Bearing in mind the significant belief systems behind the Chinese funeral rites and the biblical injunctions above, let us now consider the matter of *bowing* and the use of *joss sticks*. In the Bible, bowing is often used in the context of worship, but not always. It also occurs in the context of honoring or paying respect to another human (e.g., Exod 11:8). Also in the Chinese and other East Asian settings, bowing is a very cultural way of paying respects to someone who’s elderly or in authority and even as a form of greetings. Not surprisingly, therefore, the opinions of various Christian writers on this aspect are also divided. They would discourage Christians from doing so, “One of the ways Chinese show respect to the deceased is by bowing before the picture. However this has the semblance of idolatry (even if not so, in fact).”²⁶ Tan is firm that the Chinese Christian should “refrain from doing anything that will give the impression that they are worshipping the dead as in bowing before the coffin, offering food, pouring wine, burning joss sticks...”²⁷ On the other hand, Poh states, “A Christian...may show his last respect by standing in front of the coffin and bow forward slightly, once.”²⁸ With regards to the matter of holding joss sticks at the funeral service, there is more concurrence here that it is to be avoided, from all that have been mentioned (biblically and otherwise). “In the Oriental context...joss-sticks or incense have always been used when communicating with the

²⁵ Tey, *Chinese Culture*, p. 138.

²⁶ Tey, *Chinese Culture*, p. 139.

²⁷ Tan, *Christian Answer*, p. 14.

²⁸ Poh, *The Christian in the Chinese Culture*, p. 56.

gods or in the worship of the deceased as a family protector...the religious element is very strong."²⁹

Thirdly, let us consider the involvement of Taoist or Buddhist priests in the funeral rites. They are "invited" because of the Chinese belief with regards to what happens to the dead, the need to appease the gods and the spirits, and the two-way merit system mentioned above. There are no biblical bases for them and their contributions are to be "deleted" as they are almost certainly demonic in origin and not just derived from Chinese culture. (This, of course, is only possible if the majority of the family members are Christian or is not so "traditional" anymore in their Chinese roots because of education, etc.) The rites, officiated by the priests for the deceased person, are very elaborate and complicated. Tan states firmly, "it would be best for a Christian not to be involved in the calling of the Taoist or Buddhist priest, and definitely not at all in complying with his instructions."³⁰ The priests are engaged to chant prayers to the spirits and gods to facilitate the "salvation" of the deceased. Our biblical understandings are unambiguous that these efforts are not of any avail. Furthermore, as pointed above, the scripture prohibits any attempt to communicate with the spirits of deceased, and therefore Christians should not participate in any of these ceremonies.³¹

4. Conclusion

The well-known historian Kenneth Scott Latourette observed and concluded:

It is significant that in the only countries where Christianity has triumphed over a high civilization, as in the Mediterranean world and the Nearer East, it has done so by *conforming* in part to older culture. Whether it can win to its fold a highly cultured people like the Chinese without making a similar adaptation remains an unanswered question.³²

Indeed the gospel encounters cultures and is often in conflict with them. I agree that Christianity (i.e., the external form) certainly needs to

²⁹ Tan, *Christian Alternatives*, p. 221.

³⁰ Tan, *Christian Answer*, pp. 13-14.

³¹ Bong (ed.), *Ancestor Practices*, p. 8.

³² K. C. Latourette, *A History of Christian Missions in China* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), p. 154. Italics are mine.

“conform” to the recipient cultures, *but* not so with the gospel, the Bible or Christology. In fact, the cultures should conform and be transformed by the gospel instead, as we have deliberated from an understanding of the belief systems in Chinese funeral rites and from the scriptures. Except for the concept of filial piety itself, Chinese Christians should transform or reject most of the cultic practices at the funeral.

Carol and myself look back to our personal experiences with regrets. Had we been less ignorant and had we been better supported morally, we might have conducted ourselves differently. This does not diminish our need for repentance and God’s forgiveness.

The ancestor worship issue, especially in an emotionally charged situation, as in the funeral of one’s parent, is a difficult and thorny one. There are no easy solutions. It is easier said (or written), than done. Good rapport with the family members of one’s Christian faith, and evident affection and respect for one’s parents when they are alive should be well in place before the inevitable event(s). These, together with an informed understanding of these rites and the moral support from pastor, Christian leaders and friends, would go a long way in helping us to conduct ourselves with a clear conscience before God and humanity. Notwithstanding, the pressure can be so overwhelmingly intense when the Chinese Christian stands under the scrutiny of siblings and relatives during those times. “It is not for us to criticize or condemn a brother who is forced to comply. If anything, such a brother needs our love and understanding all the more.”³³

The thinking and the research into this paper is likely to serve as a springboard for me to be more sensitive to the Asian cultural elements within me, my family members and other Asian Christians. This is in the hope that through a deeper understanding of our cultural heritage as Asians, we could better appreciate, and also more effectively lead others to come to a saving knowledge of the Originator of all peoples with their diverse cultures and ancestors. Amen.

³³ Poh, *The Christian in the Chinese Culture*, p. 58.