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Resources for Further Reading on Contextualization

Editorial

Contextualization—a Broader Perspective

By Jackson Wu, Guest Editor



Conversations about contextualization often do not go far enough. Many people have a narrow perspective on contextualization supposing it merely refers to how we communicate or apply the biblical message. In fact, contextualization begins with interpretation. We are tempted either to oversimplify contextualization or to make it too complex. Effective contextualization is not primarily about methodology and strategy; rather, it concerns perspective. How do our cultural experiences cause us to read the Bible in fresh ways? How does a robust biblical perspective shed light on needs and values of culture?

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to effective contextualization is the frequent tendency to sharply dichotomize culture and the Bible. However, the Bible and culture are entwined for two reasons. First, God revealed himself through ancient, Near Eastern cultures. Second, God calls his people to embody the gospel in cultures throughout the world. In short, genuine biblical truth is not an abstraction. For these reasons, this current issue of *ChinaSource Quarterly* is dedicated to the topic of contextualization. The articles survey a range of topics relevant to contextualization among Chinese.

The first set of articles comes from a Chinese missionary and a Chinese pastor. In the first essay, “Ella,” a Chinese Christian woman, shares her experience serving among minorities in western China. She helpfully introduces a range of issues that she and other workers face when crossing cultures even within their own country. Many minority groups are considered to have “fear and power” cultures. By contrast, most Chinese Christians live in the country’s eastern provinces. Traditional concerns for honor and shame (e.g., face and *guanxi*) are increasingly wed with influences from Western culture. Accordingly, I interview “Peter,” a pastor in a large eastern city. His responses cover an extensive range of topics, providing insight into how contextualization can equip the average Chinese church.

The second group of articles considers the unique needs for contextualization in western and eastern China. Barnabas Roland offers suggestions for how we might contextualize among Chinese “fear-power” cultures. Of course, most people in China are Han Chinese who live in the eastern portions of the country. While many have written about Westernization in China, Danny Hsu reminds us of important ways that traditional Chinese culture still affects younger generations.

The following two articles contribute to the task of theological contextualization. Everyone familiar with Chinese culture understands the importance of *guanxi* (“relationship”). As Wendel Sun notes, far fewer people realize the significance of “union with Christ” in the New Testament and its relevance to Chinese culture. In addition, Gregg Ten Elshof’s essay revisits a well-known debate among Christians in China; yet, he does so with crisp clarity and creativity. He poses a provocative question: “Might Christians and Confucians actually agree about human nature?”

Some readers will scratch their heads when they turn to the final section of this issue. They will ask: “Why do you review a book of Chinese science fiction? What does it have to do with contextualization?” In one respect, Carrie Hudson’s book review is one of the most practical articles in this issue. She demonstrates practically how to analyze contemporary literature as a way of understanding key themes and ideas within a culture. Finally, Brent Fulton offers a few concluding thoughts on contextualization in Chinese culture.

These contributors draw from a wealth of experience and study. My hope is that their insights and suggestions will spur earnest conversation about contextualization in Chinese culture. No one-size-fits-all method exists to address the various challenges we face when ministering among the Chinese. Rather, we need to seek biblically faithful and culturally meaningful ways to contextualize the gospel for all peoples. This task requires humility, intentionality, and the gifts of the entire church.

Jackson Wu (pseudonym) has a PhD in Applied Theology from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, having earned an MDiv (Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary), MA (Philosophy, Texas A&M), and a BS (Applied Mathematics, Texas A&M). He has worked as a church planter and now teaches theology and missiology for Chinese pastors. In addition to his published journal articles, he maintains a blog at jacksonwu.org.

An “On the Ground” Perspective

Advance and Retreat:

Opportunities and Challenges of Han Mission Work among Ethnic Minorities

By Ella

China is home to many ethnic groups. Officially, China recognizes 55 ethnic minorities, but in reality, there are far more ethnic groups. Some groups do not even know their own origin, nor do they have their own written language. As a result, although these peoples are still an ethnic group, they may speak the language of other groups, or maybe just Mandarin.



夕雾 Evening fog by randomix via Flickr.

As someone who grew up in the coastal cities of southeast China, I was mostly surrounded by Han Chinese and perhaps a few scattered members of ethnic minorities who have completely assimilated with Han society. Growing up in such a homogenous culture, I knew nothing of conflicts caused by different cultures or religions of other ethnic groups. In recent years, I began to serve among ethnic minority groups. Moving to the Northwestern Plateau, I, as a Han Chinese, have now experienced firsthand the difficulties of serving among ethnic minorities. I do not attempt to speak for all Han Chinese since even Han in the northeast are very different from Han in the southeast. However, I will share some of my feelings as a southeastern, coastal, Han Chinese.

The Context of Ministry among Ethnic Minorities

First, let us talk about evangelistic opportunities. In the eyes of northwestern minorities, central and coastal people tend to be better off. Many who come to the Northwest are business men. The minorities think that by befriending these business men, they will have opportunities to do business with them. For Han missionaries, business provides an identity and a good opportunity to build relationships with local people, assuming you are indeed doing business there and doing it honestly. Otherwise, the local people will become suspicious of you since they watch the way you live.

Young people and children of ethnic minorities generally receive a Han-style education. That is, they have become partially or completely “Han-ified.” Children watch Han television from a young age and unconsciously learn Mandarin. Not only can the young people speak Mandarin, but unlike older people, they more readily accept change. They willingly accept new things and enjoy exploring the outside world. Since they speak Mandarin better than their own dialect, the Han can communicate at a deeper level with them since there are no linguistic obstacles. Some of the young people go elsewhere for work. This causes changes in their lifestyle so that they better understand Han culture. Thus, for the missionary, the linguistic challenge is becoming less and less. However, this is no excuse for not learning a minority dialect since most people are still unable to speak Mandarin.

As education continues to develop in their areas, ethnic minorities are extremely willing to welcome teachers and volunteer university students. So, along with others, I can position myself locally as a volunteer teacher and build deeper relationships with local people while learning their culture and language.

Children have a purity of heart, and when they feel truly loved, they are more open to the gospel. Since volunteer teachers usually stay for longer periods of time, they can be there for the children in more meaningful ways. Parents of children, colleagues at school, and other leaders see how volunteer teachers live and work as Christians. It is this kind of solid testimony that expresses the reality of the gospel.

Unlike foreigners, Han Chinese living in ethnic minority areas do not need visas, nor do they need to report to the local police. Thus, they have greater freedom including mobility and manner of living.

Three Obstacles to Ministry

While I do not wish to be overly negative, there are obstacles to serving among ethnic minorities.

I think the greatest obstacle faced is *a lack of unity among workers and teams*. Chinese factionalism is very obvious in the mission field. Although everyone knows of one another’s existence, there is no working together. This splinters, even wastes, already scarce resources. Some mission fields, which former teams established through tremendous labor, have now been torn down by other teams. This is truly heartbreaking.

Chinese also tend to be less accepting of others. I have seen foreign mission groups pray together and partner with each other across denominations and country borders. For many years, they have prayed that the Chinese would take up the burden of missions. Yet, the Chinese are still afraid of contacting foreigners and drawing the attention of the government. God challenges us Chinese to have a kingdom mind and a unified heart. Without unity on the mission field, we will not see results. Mission work among ethnic minorities is very difficult because we, the workers, do not have a unified, accepting heart.

The ability to travel across China using Mandarin is indeed a convenience for Han Chinese. However, this becomes an excuse so that many Han mission workers *avoid learning the local language*. Many reasonable excuses abound, such as being too old to learn, lack of education, and the local language being too difficult. Some mission workers have been on the field for eight or ten years but are still able to have only basic conversations—or even none at all. Therefore, they focus their ministry on students who speak Man-

darin.

Nevertheless, many people neither speak nor understand Mandarin, and language becomes an obstacle to their hearing the gospel. A people's spirit and wisdom reside in their language. Only when their language is understood can their worldview be comprehended. Only then can one share the gospel in a way they will grasp. Otherwise, it is like holding the wrong key—one cannot open the door.

Some Han mission workers, especially women, are *unable to adjust to life among the minorities*. They may rent a house in the city and buy a car but only take a little time each month for mission work in the villages. Of course, village life is more difficult. Some places have neither electricity nor heating. Water needs to be fetched from the river, candles or kerosene lamps lit at night, and cow dung burned for warmth. Such a life is a great challenge for people who grew up in a city. There is also an issue of hygiene. Some workers are unable (or unwilling) to sleep on the villagers' beds, use their blankets, or eat their food.

Consider what our Lord Jesus did: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14, ESV). Likewise, we should live among the minorities as our Lord lived among us. We need to live out the fullness of a Christ-like life. As we live like the locals, they will begin to accept us, respect us, and be willing to be friends with us. They will see our unusual lives and be attracted and transformed. The so-called hard conditions will no longer be big issues. May God help us and be gracious to us as we seek to serve him in this way.

The Necessary Theological Preparation for Serving Ethnic Minorities

We should be prepared to face a few theological issues. First, the locals might be a nomadic people who live a pastoral lifestyle. In their lives, they have experienced much of the lifestyle of the Old Testament. For example, following their exodus from Egypt, the Israelites roamed in the wilderness—pastoral areas with few people. In order to pastor their flocks, they had to walk over many mountains. Their cattle might wander off or be torn by wild beasts. The locals understand better than we do how the ancient Israelites lived.

Second, local minorities take sin very seriously. Because they are afraid of sin and its consequences, they constantly live in fear which affects their attitudes toward life. When they encounter misfortune, they think they deserve it and are unable to change it. This is a very negative perspective. For families that are well off, they think their fortune is the result of the virtues of the past generation, not the fruit of hard work.

To store up merit, these people will engage in various religious behaviors so as to gain merit and cancel out sin. The doctrine of "justification by faith" is unthinkable for them; their lives are constantly focused on salvation by works. So, we Chinese should help them see the hope that justification by faith brings. As a result, they will no longer be bound by their actions, thinking that only religious acts can save them from karma—their fate in a future existence.

Due to animism or pantheism, local minorities have difficulty accepting the concept of a one true God. They "believe" in Jesus and are very happy to treat him as one of many gods, but they find it quite difficult to think of him as the only true God. Only by helping them see and experience the power of God can they comprehend that God is greater than all the false idols.

Creation is another important area to consider. On the one hand, minorities are very superstitious. On the other, they believe science and think the world originated according to the Big Bang theory. On this point, we can, of course, use science to argue against their naturalistic beliefs concerning the world's origins.

For all missionaries, Chinese or from any nation, the apostle Paul says: "And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment" (Philippians 1:9 ESV). Love comes first. Only as we love these minority people will they see from us, as Christians, a different kind of life.

The above comments cannot completely express all my observations. Because of our inadequacies and weaknesses, we need the Lord Jesus to mold us. May the Lord help each of us, Chinese and foreign, to be his servants as we work with ethnic minority groups. I truly desire that the day will come quickly when all nations will worship the Lord.

"Ella" is a pseudonym for a Chinese missionary living among minorities in Western China.

An “On the Ground” Perspective

A Pastoral Perspective on Contextualization

An Interview by Jackson Wu

Jackson Wu conducted an interview with “Peter,” a pastor in eastern China, asking about the following issues dealing with contextualization in China.

Wu: Do Chinese feel a tension between Christianity and being Chinese? Does becoming a Christian imply greater difficulty in being Chinese?

Peter: One definitely feels tension and stress. Looking at traditional Chinese society, Christianity forbids things like burning paper to, kneeling before, and otherwise worshipping ancestors. Many Chinese people see Christianity as “Western” and in conflict with Eastern culture. So, they feel that we Chinese must defend and uphold Eastern civilization.

People naturally see Christianity as a Western religion because it was brought to China by Western missionaries. Obviously, Christianity and Chinese culture are not truly in conflict; it only seems so superficially. However, this is not something most unbelievers ever think deeply about.

So, a misunderstanding exists on two levels. First, because of Christianity’s historical expansion, people believe it is a Western religion. Second, Chinese people are not accustomed to the way Christians express their faith. Christians do not engage in tomb-sweeping, paper burning, or other activities associated with idol worship. They seem to have no filial piety. To Chinese, Christians’ behavior makes the whole family lose face. On top of that, Christians appear unpatriotic when they prioritize faith over country. The overall effect is that some Chinese see Christians as a threat.

Wu: How familiar are Chinese church leaders with the concept of “contextualization”? What are their impressions?

Peter: The average Christian is probably not familiar with the word “contextualization.” Only those who have studied theology understand it. For the latter, they see it as “localization” and “indigenization.” In general, they see it, not as changing the truth, but as adapting how we transmit the truth to fit the local culture. People tend to ignore contextualization and simply copy Western theology wholesale. I believe that contextualization transforms every aspect of theology and practice, as we’ve seen recently with Jayson Georges’ book *The 3D Gospel*.¹

Wu: Do you think Chinese Christians have developed contextualized, Chinese theology? Or do you think theology among Chinese believers remains largely Western?

Peter: Our theology is still Western as Chinese Christians don’t yet have the ability to develop Chinese theology. We are still in the learning and accumulation stage which means we have largely just copied Western theology.

How is theology in China still Western? For one, we express the concept of sin in guilt/justice terms and ignore shame and honor. There are few Chinese scholars with any significant understanding of theology, so Chinese Christians remain unable to develop Chinese theology. That’s not even to speak of normal believers, who have no concept of “Chinese theology.”

Foreigners can catalyze contextualization and help Chinese people see its value. People need to be trained in such things as theology, exegesis, preaching, how to respond to culture, and so on.

Wu: What are some obstacles to Chinese contextualization?

Peter: Too few people understand, are capable of, or even value contextualization. It’s neither important nor urgent to them. So many people believe sharing the gospel is the important thing while contextualization merely is a matter of packaging. What they don’t realize is that contextualization actually gives us a more robust understanding of the gospel. So, we have an issue of numbers—not enough people are promoting contextualization. On top of that, people misunderstand contextualization. They accuse those who do contextualization of changing the gospel or embracing heresy.

Wu: What do Chinese need to learn about contextualization to serve as effective missionaries?

Peter: They need to know the importance of culture in missions, to better understand their own culture, and to respect other people’s cultures. Chinese Christians generally stress evangelism and not contextualization, viewing culture as a mere add-on. They do not understand the good and bad things in their own culture nor how their culture inclines them to view issues from a certain viewpoint yet overlook others’ perspectives.

Chinese people have a bit of a superiority complex—they feel proud of their own culture’s 5000-year history and can look down on other cultures. They see anything different as wrong or bad. For instance, many Chinese people believe that people who eat with their hands are disgusting and crude. How does one disrespect another’s culture? You do it by believing your own culture is the best, and anything that differs is bad.

Wu: How can foreigners contribute or hinder contextualization in China?



Peter: Foreigners can try to develop contextualization in China, but they must be diligent not simply to import content from their own culture. For instance, some missionaries strongly emphasize denominationalism. In China, they simply replicate their denomination's traditions, doctrines, and practices. However, much of those things are simply Western cultural traditions, not biblical mandates. This is not to say that Western theology is wrong, only that those things are their own traditional practices.

How can foreigners initiate contextualization with Chinese? I think two steps are (1) to do more training (in contextualization, hermeneutics, biblical theology, etc.) and (2) to write and translate more high-level theological books.

Wu: Suppose a distinctly evangelical, Chinese theology existed. What biblical and cultural themes would it address?

Peter: Of course, it would include sin, the law, the gospel, forgiveness, salvation, and atonement. Chinese theology would generally work from an honor/shame perspective (face, face-saving, etc.) as shown in Georges' *The 3D Gospel*. Other crucial themes would include group identity, collectivism, and the spirit world.

Wu: What do you think foreigners misunderstand about the needs of the Chinese church?

Peter: Foreigners mistakenly believe that the Chinese church is poor and needs money. When foreigners continue to give money to Chinese churches, those churches become dependent on foreigners rather than self-supporting. They take less responsibility and are less willing to sacrifice and follow God themselves. This cannot be a good thing for the localization of Chinese churches. Chinese people already are enamored with money, so giving excessive money will only poison believers' spirits.

Do you know how foreigners could really help the Chinese church? People need standardized theological training. I want to see foreigners publish deeper, theological literature that goes beyond topics like leadership, prayer, marriage, and family. Additionally, Chinese people need to develop the ability to think critically, instead of accepting wholesale everything their denomination says and opposing the different views of other denominations. They need the humility to realize that not all of their denominations' views may be correct. "Different" does not automatically mean wrong. I want to see them listen to each other with humble and open attitudes, even being willing to cooperate and serve together. Foreigners can help equip Chinese churches to go out and spread the gospel to other countries and peoples.

Some missionaries who come to China are not well equipped for the work. Perhaps, they are just average churchgoers who were driven by love and dedication to share the gospel in China. That love is, of course, valuable, but because they lack formal training, they are limited in language, theology, and various other aspects related to their mission. They will often simply preach their own denomination's viewpoint without giving a fair and objective perspective. What happens? The believers simply mold to that denomination and do not think for themselves.

Another problem is that some missionaries minister to meet their own needs. That is, a missionary comes to build his own church. He gathers believers who revolve around him rather than helping believers give themselves to the Chinese church. As a result, when he leaves, many believers go astray and are dejected. Or, they become an isolated church disconnected from other bodies of believers.

Wu: Thank you for sharing with us your understanding and suggestions regarding contextualization in China.

¹ See the [Resource Corner](#) for a link to information about this book.

Jackson Wu (pseudonym) has a PhD in Applied Theology from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, having earned an MDiv (Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary), MA (Philosophy, Texas A&M), and a BS (Applied Mathematics, Texas A&M). He has worked as a church planter and now teaches theology and missiology for Chinese pastors. In addition to his published journal articles, he maintains a blog at jacksonwu.org.

Cultural Contextualization in China

Communicating the Gospel with Power among China's Animistic Peoples

By Barnabas Roland

Global missions' researchers, like those of the Joshua Project, do not often use the term "animism" to describe a group's primary religion. Instead, they typically say something along the lines of "ethnic religions." Perhaps this is partly due to the fact that people have never quite been satisfied with common definitions of animism. Many definitions are superficial or vague.

Missiologists observe a historical trend: "The great mass movements into the church have, generally speaking, involved people of broadly 'animistic' background" (Stott and Coote, viii). Something deeper than mere traditional beliefs shape the cultures of animistic peoples. We must be careful that shallow terminology (e.g., "ethnic religions") does not blind us to better ministry practice.

What definition, then, might highlight fundamental aspects of animism? Animism is the belief that spiritual beings or forces must be appeased because they have power over human affairs through curses, blessings, and oppression. We must understand what animistic people are thinking in order to communicate the gospel so they can hear the gospel and be transformed.

Animistic People Groups of China

The most obvious animistic people groups in China are well-known. Such peoples have shamans and ritual practices to drive away demons. Most of these groups are in China's south and southwest regions. The larger groups include the Zhuang, Yi, Miao, Dong, Naxi, Bai, Li, Lingao, Buyi, and Yao.

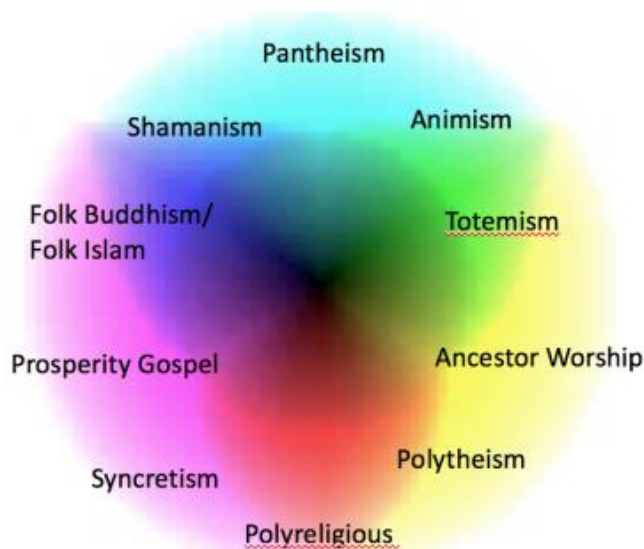
Some minority peoples are less obvious, such as the Buddhist groups. These include the Tibetan and Mongolian peoples, who are further north and west, as well as other Buddhist groups like the Dai in southwest China. These peoples are also strongly animistic in that their rituals and concerns are not part of their pure Buddhist beliefs but resemble other animistic groups. Even the Han, Muslims, and some Christian peoples, located all across China, have strong currents of animism in their folk practices.

In these groups, power and fear are primary concerns. In Asian collectivistic societies, the influence of honor and shame is pervasive. However, with certain groups, peoples' daily concerns are shaped by a worldview that emphasizes religious practice and is more akin to the worldview of traditional African religions. In short, shades of animism exist.



[Joann Pittman](#)

Shades of Animism



This article primarily engages those groups that are predominantly animistic. That is, power-fear is the deepest answer to their "why?" questions, even if, on the surface, their more immediate concerns seem to be social and expressed in honor-shame language. Further, their faith practices seek to manipulate spiritual beings and forces in order to gain their desired type of blessing. Hence, even the prosperity gospel falls strongly into the "shades of animism" paradigm.

Recognizing the Anxieties of Animistic Peoples

Animistic peoples desire security and blessing, but they live in uncertainty and fear. Their concerns are:

- Blessing
- Safety/protection
- Health
- Children's future
- Ancestors
- Relationships

Although these are the same general concerns as many other people groups, animistic peoples have a distinctive way of addressing these issues. Because of their “power and fear” perspective, the perceived means of solving their problems is directly related to the unseen world.

If outsiders speak about these matters from their own perspective, animists will miss what the outsiders are saying. For example, imagine that you talk about fear by giving an exact personal example, such as nuclear holocaust, one of my own fears before becoming a Christian. In that case, you would completely misunderstand the nature of animistic thinking. Instead, such people fear evil spirits that attack victims outside at night and when they are dreaming. Their fear is the uncontrolled impact of the spiritual realm.

Applying the Gospel to Animism: Three Suggestions

1. Evangelism

How do we communicate the power of gospel truth to animistic peoples? When Paul and Barnabas preached the gospel in Lystra (Acts 14:8–23), they spoke to polytheistic animists. Naturally, their evangelistic approach differed from their prior approach when they spoke to the Jews and God-fearers at the synagogue. They could not begin by quoting the Scriptures. Their time in Lystra was difficult. The people of Lystra did not perceive miraculous healing from the Jewish perspective, e.g., as a sign of the Messiah. Rather, their animistic perspective caused them to perceive Paul and Barnabas as power-wielding gods.

When we share the Creation-to-Christ story, animistic people's ears perk up during the first section of the story which speaks about the origin of spirits. God is the creator of all things—even the spirits. These powerful beings are often on an animist's mind. So, biblical phrases like “the Most High God” seem to resonate with them as it must have done in the Old Testament context of polytheism that surrounded ancient Israel. Tearing down idol shelves and refusing to do shamanistic rituals are important points of conversion for animistic people who choose to follow the Most High God only.

But power and fear do not explain every aspect of their problem. Being weak and needy is not enough motivation for a lasting heart conviction. Animists need to understand their sin as dishonoring God and disobedience to God. While the Ten Commandments are useful to speak of God's commands at the surface level, we have found other helpful approaches. Among some groups, following Jesus' tactic in the Sermon on the Mount truly hits people at the heart level. For example, they easily understand that murder and stealing are wrong. But when we ask non-Christian animists in more racially divided regions, “Have you ever hated a Han person”? they are immediately convicted of their own sin and bow their heads in shame.

Animists need to understand the character of God is different from their traditional gods and spirits, who are impersonal, vindictive, or easily manipulated. It is only by sharing more of God's story that people will understand a glorious God who is powerful, loving, righteous, and forgiving.

A power-fear perspective of the gospel is one that drives people to understand that their anxieties and uncertainties are only relieved when they “learn to fear the Lord your God always” (Deuteronomy 10:28). Christians do not need power, control, or manipulation because they only need trust in the power of God alone apart from other futile methods. The gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ for their redemption and the glory of God. We ought to desire the most powerful God rather than power over God.

2. Discipleship

Animists who turn to Christ need time to grasp what it means to live out the gospel. This is especially true after they have for so long attempted to manipulate higher powers. Perhaps this is why pseudo-Christian sects, such as the 门徒会 (the Disciples Sect), so easily invade animistic areas. The prosperity gospel has corrupted churches whose members have come from animistic backgrounds. Manipulation is a difficult practice to break.

The story of King Saul (1 Samuel 9–31) is a negative example of a follower of God who lost his way and veered towards what looks more like animism. The Spirit of God was clearly on Saul (10:10; 11:6) during the time of his anointing and at his first battle where he proclaimed that “the Lord has worked salvation in Israel” (11:13). Before a later battle, however, Saul placed more value on the sacrifice itself as a means of securing God's favor and ignored the Most High God's command to wait on the prophet Samuel to offer the sacrifice (13:8–14). In 1 Samuel 14:24–26, he sinned by sparing the Amalekites because he feared the people rather than heeding the word of God. Saul's spiritual descent spiraled out of control. The severity of his condition became evident in his unlawful séance with a medium in effort to bring Samuel's spirit back from the dead (28:1–25). The monotheist had become a functional animist.

For animists to learn that “to obey is better than to sacrifice” (1 Samuel 15:22), they need to have Scripture in languages and forms

that they can understand and apply. Didactic passages are not enough. They need concrete examples of the narrative passages of Scripture. Such texts illustrate what it looks like to fear God above all. Vivid examples show the consequences of not fearing God.

Animist background believers can compare proverbs from their own traditions with Scripture. In this way, they can see which proverbs accord with the Scripture and which ones do not. Some people have grown up with proverbs like the Yi saying: “Don’t tell truths to your wife while you are alive, for after you are dead she will be the wife of another.” Surely these people will need time to rethink such proverbs in light of the Bible. They will assume the truth of their original worldview at any point there is a void of Christian teaching.

How has the gospel transformed people’s lives? Along with others, I have seen believers forsake traditional animistic practices. For example, they will no longer join their family at annual shamanistic practices or ancestor veneration. This is an ongoing struggle for some believers. People often deal with this situation at the surface level saying that they are acquiescing to family pressure.

However, when we finally see people boldly refuse to participate in the old religious practices, we notice a common pattern of expressing themselves. They speak of complete trust in God. They confess that previously they had to “cover their bases” just in case. Their experience arises from overwhelming wonder at the grace of God and without any motive to manipulate God. Discipleship should use the gospel to address the root issues of fear and manipulation.

3. Theological formation

Both advanced theological education and informal pastoral training are important, yet they often overlook crucial areas for pastors and churches within animistic contexts. If we are to reach the animist peoples for Christ, we must help local leaders deal with questions that are important for them. These include:

- What/who causes a woman to be barren and how are we to deal with her?
- What is a biblical theology for the role and status of our ancestors?
- How do Christians help a church member whose grandfather passed away but their non-believing relatives demand a traditional funeral with shamanistic rituals?

Most often, teachers from Western backgrounds have never thought about how to address these concerns. They are not prepared to answer these pastoral questions.

Animistic background Christians in China have used at least three effective ways to deal with these types of issues. They include (1) worldview discussions, (2) Culture Meets Scripture workshops, and (3) songwriting.

First, activities that raise worldview questions have been very simple to apply. Recently, leaders from one people group thoroughly enjoyed spending two days discussing a long list of worldview questions about their own culture and later discussing how these particular elements relate to the truths of particular Bible stories. Second, a Culture Meets Scripture workshop is a more advanced option, yet it helps to identify immediate actions for dealing with a few specific parts of culture, e.g., funeral rites. Third, many people groups in China write their own songs that deal with funerals and holidays. More importantly, the songs of Scripture become more memorable and are repeated more than any of the sermons. The songs are the theology of the churches.

Conclusion

To effectively reach the animistic people groups in China, we must bring a robust message of the gospel. We must go beyond what works for our own culture without reducing everything to a power-fear perspective. The well-rounded gospel also has elements of innocence-guilt and honor-shame perspectives (Georges, 12). However, we should use a power-fear perspective to understand animistic peoples and communicate gospel truth in our evangelism, discipleship, and theological training. When these peoples learn to properly fear the Lord like king David did, perhaps they can teach us, in return, if we will listen (Psalm 34:11).

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Cultural Contextualization in China

Traditional Culture's Effect on China's Younger Generations

By Danny Hsu

When it comes to youth and culture in today's China, there is simply no one-size-fits-all approach. The practices and beliefs of Chinese—urban and rural—born after 1980 are increasingly shaped by a plurality of cultural forces (e.g., urbanization, commercialization, and globalization) mixed with the continuing influence of aspects of traditional Chinese culture. Given this messy reality, answering the question, “How does traditional culture affect younger Chinese?” requires careful thought, especially with regard to contextualization of the gospel. We should not assume that Chinese, at some mysterious core level, remain singularly and pristinely “traditional” despite the massive changes that have swept the country since 1978.

A more useful approach, I think, is to recognize that as cultures change, traditions inevitably are contested, get reworked, and take on new shades and tones. Moreover, as mounting research on culture priming shows, people rarely, if ever, live out their “traditional” values in consistent and broad general terms (Wyer, Chiu, and Hong, 2009). Various contextualization efforts extrapolate from generalized—even if sometimes overly idealized—understandings of face, *guanxi*, and family.

As helpful as they are, what new missiological spaces open up when we shift to a more “on-the-ground” perspective? How are these concepts actually refracted and negotiated amid the pressures of life confronting different groups of young people? This article argues that the influence of traditional culture on young people should be understood as but one important factor in the larger complex, cultural environment of China today.

While Chinese youth today face a bewildering assortment of options, they nevertheless continue to experience the tug of traditional culture in important ways. What we need to understand is that abiding imperatives such as filial piety and family, to highlight just two important examples, now operate in tension with other perceived “goods” in life, whether non-traditional and/or culturally non-Chinese. It is simply not the case that today's youth understand the idea of family and strive to be filial in the same fashion as prescribed in the *Analects*, or even as their predecessors did just thirty years ago.

Filial Piety

So how do young people grapple with the continuing demands of filial piety? On the one hand, some undoubtedly feel helplessly enslaved by their parents who demand submission and loyalty and expect academic or professional success. On the other hand, it is also true that parents today often bend over backwards to give their children the “good life.” This includes spending exorbitant sums of money for education and even to purchase a flat. In fact, parental demands for academic and professional success have actually encouraged many to view the pursuit of personal success and self-fulfillment as the key to filial duty (Hanson and Pang 2010, Yan 2011).

What often results is that youth find themselves caught between competing pressures. While the weight of obligation to their parents is real, youths also recognize that their academic and professional aspirations open for them new possibilities and lifestyles (including premarital relationships) that are at odds with their parents' wishes. As a result, the maintenance of “face” in real life can take some interesting turns. While the pressure to maintain face may result in children slavishly obeying their parents, it can just as well result in children distancing themselves from their parents, visiting home less often, and lying in order not to hurt their parents' feelings (Bregnbæk 2016).

These examples highlight the difficulties of maneuvering between two seemingly different worlds without a greater moral compass to guide one's decision making. In other words, many people sense that something is awry with the level of control parents wish to exert on their lives; however, few have a clear vision of what a rightly ordered relationship with their parents might look like.

One goal of contextualization is to present the Bible's answers to pressing cultural questions. For Chinese youth, there are few better places to start than with the Bible's perspective on what it means to honor and obey one's parents. This is especially true since the New Testament's teachings on this matter presumed a cultural context where parental authority was absolute. This type of contextualization, however, does not usually lend itself well to quick-and-tidy, ten-minute presentations. It requires time and energy.

Because love and respect for parents remains such a deeply ingrained cultural script, many youths do not readily volunteer information about their struggles in this area. However, time and again, I have seen many—in fact, too many—college students move beyond their initial sanitized story to reveal more discontent, brokenness, and hurt than they ever thought possible to share openly and honestly. Once a relationship of trust and care is established, it is then possible to introduce the whole range of biblical teaching on parent-child relationships. Such ideas include not only what it means to honor and obey, but also the meaning of blessing and instruction as well as the idea of leaving and cleaving. Of course, the goal of this contextualization is not just restoring families, however worthy a goal that is. The larger picture that animates these ideas is the redemption and restoration made possible through God's kingdom.

Contextualization is even more powerful when ideas are fleshed out with real-life testimony. This is why I point out here that the Asian-American Christian community has long grappled with cultural issues of filial piety and family. What does living out the biblical vision of honoring and obeying one's parents actually look like? What does it mean to honor one's parents but not obey every single one of their demands? Is honorable disobedience even possible? People interested in this topic would benefit greatly from the work of people such as Ken Fong, Tim Tseng, and Peter Cha, to name just a few.



Michael Coghlan via Flickr.

Marriage

Much like filial piety, marriage looms large for young people. It requires them to negotiate the cross pressures of traditional familial obligation and the quest for love as endless passionate feeling. The older generation's more traditional and utilitarian approach pressures children to just get married, hopefully to someone rich or at least equal to their socio-economic status, and have a child. Conventionally, marriage aims to satisfy economic needs and perpetuate the family line.

This traditional perspective now coexists or contends with visions of heart-pounding romance hawked by popular culture. Soon after the wedding ceremony, many young marrieds come to see how woefully inadequate both of these views are for meeting the challenges of actual married life. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that divorce and extramarital affairs have steadily risen since 2003, just as the post 1980s generation began to come of marriageable age.¹

Love and marriage are universally popular topics. Yet, in China's current context, numerous young people have either seen (through their parents' struggling efforts) or experienced the tough realities of marriage. Therefore, they are quite open to learn what the Bible says about this aspect of life. This is possible precisely because young people at once sense the inadequacy of traditional Chinese views of marriage and are frustrated by the fleeting nature of passionate romance.

Among Chinese young people, few better ways exist to present the gospel in an engaging and relevant way today than through the topic of marriage. As Tim Keller explains so well, marriage was designed to reflect the saving love of God in Jesus Christ, and "that is why the gospel helps us to understand marriage and marriage helps us to understand the gospel" (Keller 2011: 8).² Effective contextualization via the topic of marriage also presupposes a safe environment and a relationship of trust. Furthermore, nothing speaks as powerfully as seeing husbands and wives who actually seek to honor the Bible's vision of marriage.

When discussing contextualization, much of our emphasis typically falls on crafting good answers and finding the right metaphors to help people cognitively understand the gospel. A good part of what I propose here has followed this premise. However, I have also tried to emphasize the importance of action. In other words, talk by itself is cheap. As many religion scholars note, the West's religious experience often places great emphasis on correct thinking (orthodoxy), yet China's religious experience has placed great importance on correct practice (orthopraxy). In Confucianism, the ideal man presupposes that we only become fully human through our interactions with one another. The ideal man is represented by the Chinese character *ren* (仁) which is composed of the symbol of man 人 and the number two 二. Accordingly, how a person interacts with others is every bit as important, if not more so, than what he or she says.

This aspect of traditional Chinese culture is still operative in many ways, including the valorization of moral exemplars in Chinese education and society (Kipnis 2011). How does this impact the contextualization of the gospel? One important way is that many non-Christians are not drawn much to fancy talk; rather, they desire genuine Christian living and relating. For many young Christians who struggle to share the gospel with their family, their parents are not looking for a slick gospel presentation sprinkled with clever references to classical Chinese ideas. They often raise this question to their kids: "If this new faith of yours is true, then why haven't you changed your bad habits?" I also know someone from a very traditional *Hakka* Chinese family who eventually helped a majority of his family members set aside their hostility and become Christians. For this person, the turning point came when he stopped talking and started to serve his family in loving ways that spoke powerfully to them about his newly transformed life.

Obviously, much more could be said than is possible here. In this article, I hope I have shown that while traditional Chinese culture still influences young people, it does not do so in a vacuum. Rather, it belongs to a complex, cultural environment that pushes and pulls people in a variety of directions. Many young people grow tired of balancing these cultural pressures. They are left with a sense that things are disordered and with no clear idea of how to bring about a better order. The key to contextualization, then, is to show how the gospel charts a better path through both word and deed.

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¹ "China's Growing Divorce Rate Dilemma." *Global Times*. July 8, 2015. Online: <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/930916.shtml>. Accessed on November 2, 2017.

² In fact, Keller's book on marriage has been translated into Chinese. In my experience, it quite effectively contextualizes the gospel in a very accessible way for many young people.

Danny Hsu received his PhD in Chinese History from UCLA. He is interested in many things including religious history, youth culture and spirituality, and one day completing a 5.11 climb.

Theological Contextualization in China

Union with Christ and Contextualization in China

By Wendel Sun

The faithful and meaningful communication of the gospel is of great concern to all who minister cross-culturally. Most desire to accurately convey the content of the gospel from the Scriptures while simultaneously couching the message in terms understandable in the target culture. This can be a difficult task as it demands a deep understanding of both the biblical message and the host culture. Unfortunately, cross-cultural workers sometimes fail in one or both of these requirements.

Fortunately, the Bible itself is filled with many theological themes; some of these themes inevitably connect with certain cultures better than others. For example, Westerners have historically grasped and gravitated toward forensic, judicial categories more readily than people from other parts of the world. In this article, I want to suggest that the concept of “union with Christ” is not only a significant theological theme in the New Testament, but it also naturally connects with Chinese culture.

In what follows, I first briefly show the importance of “union with Christ” in the New Testament, especially in Paul’s letters. Second, I show some of its connections to Chinese culture. For the sake of brevity, we will limit most of our biblical discussion to Ephesians, though many other passages could be mentioned. I will conclude that “union with Christ” provides a helpful entryway to evangelism and discipleship in China.

Union with Christ

While “union with Christ” themes are found in other parts of the New Testament,¹ Paul’s letters are the most abundant source for understanding the significance of this concept. While the term “united to” with reference to Christ occurs only in Romans 6:5, the idea is prevalent in all Paul’s epistles. Paul typically communicates “union with Christ” via prepositional phrases such as “in Christ,” “with Christ,” “into Christ,” and “through Christ.”

In addition to prepositional phrases, Paul also uses a number of images to highlight the theme, such as the body of Christ and clothing metaphors. These and related phrases and metaphors are found hundreds of times in Paul’s writings, leading Constantine Campbell to conclude that “union with Christ” is the “web” that holds all of Paul’s theology together. He writes: “Every Pauline theme and pastoral concern ultimately coheres with the whole through their common bond—union with Christ.”²

One example will suffice to demonstrate the significance of “union with Christ.” In Ephesians 1:3–14, one of Paul’s most complete single statements on salvation, he says that believers in Jesus receive “every spiritual blessing . . . in Christ” (v. 3); are chosen “in him” (v. 4); are “predestined for adoption through Jesus Christ” (v. 5); are blessed “in the beloved” (v. 6); have redemption “in him” (v. 7); have inheritance “in him” (v. 11); have hope “in Christ” (v. 12); and are sealed by the Holy Spirit “in him” (v. 13). Clearly Paul believes that union with Christ is central to salvation! Though but one example, this text is representative of a number of similar Pauline passages.³

The exact nature of “union with Christ” is a complex matter that lies beyond the bounds of the present discussion. A brief definition will have to suffice. “Union with Christ” is best understood as “*a covenantal bond on the basis of faith that results in the spiritual joining of believers to Christ and one another via the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.*”⁴ The covenantal nature of union with Christ is of primary importance for the purposes of this article. In short, “union with Christ” is Paul’s central theme for defining the new covenant people of God.

Again, Ephesians is particularly clear: “But now, in Christ Jesus, you who were once far away, have come near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, the one who makes the two one and destroys the dividing wall of hostility in his flesh” (2:13–14). Just prior to these verses, Paul explicates the beauty of the gospel of God’s grace received through faith (2:1–10). This message is for all and makes those who were strangers to the covenants into people of the covenant (2:11–12). Following the quoted verses, Paul shows that the law, which divided Jew and Gentile, is no longer the identity marker of God’s people: God has created a new humanity in Christ (2:15). Those once separated are, through the cross, joined together as the household of God, his temple (2:16–22). All of this takes place in Christ. Thus, the new covenant people of God are those, Jew and Gentile alike, slave and free, rich and poor, male and female, united to one another in Christ.

Intersections with Chinese Culture

The above observations hardly do justice to the richness of “union with Christ” themes in the New Testament. Nevertheless, the significance of “union with Christ” should be clear. We have emphasized “union with Christ” as the primary identity marker of the new covenant people of God. In this section, we move to a brief analysis of two aspects of Chinese culture that intersect with the concept of “union with Christ.”⁵ This cultural analysis will also help further elucidate “union with Christ.”

Guanxi

First, those with any knowledge of Chinese culture understand the importance of relationship (关系; *guanxi*) in all areas of life. While *guanxi* is not monolithic—there are different types⁶—in many ways, *guanxi* is what makes Chinese society tick. One’s identi-



ty, place in society, and ability to flourish often hinge on the quality and quantity of one's relationships. Moreover, decision-making is normally based on the perceived effects on relationships. Many people will choose that which causes the least amount of relational friction, even if the decision leads to personal loss.

The connection to "union with Christ" should be clear: *union themes emphasize the intimate relationship between God and humanity in Christ*. Paul's oft-employed metaphor of the body displays the beauty of this reality. Believers in Jesus are the body of Christ, implying an intimate relationship between the church and her Lord. Jesus is the head of the church, which is his body (Ephesians 1:22–23). Being a member of the body of Christ means, among other things, that believers are spiritually and inseparably bound to Christ. In Ephesians 5, Paul again uses the body metaphor alongside the marriage metaphor to explicate the relationship between Christ and the church. As the husband-wife relationship is the closest among human relationships, so the connection between Christ and the church is real and intimate. In short, the church, as the body of Christ, highlights the relationship between humanity and God via union with Christ.

Not only does the body metaphor draw attention to the relationship between Christ and the church, it also explains the relationship between believers. In Ephesians 4:15–16, Paul wraps up his discussion of unity in Christ, drawing again on the body metaphor. This time, he reaffirms Christ as the head of the church and emphasizes the purpose of individual gifting—the building up of the body of Christ. This follows his well-known proclamation of the church as "one body" (Ephesians 4:4). Significantly, the unity of the church in Christ does not destroy the individuality of the members. Rather, the members work together for mutual benefit (Ephesians 4:16). Nevertheless, it is important to remember that "union with Christ" is primarily a corporate concept. That is, *the individual members gain full identity only in relation to Christ and one another*.

As an aside, this aspect of "union with Christ" also meshes well with another feature of Chinese culture: collective identity. That is, many (most?) Chinese understand their identity within a certain network of relationships, beginning with the family.⁷ Likewise, "union with Christ" provides the fundamental Christian identity in relation to Christ and the church.

Harmony

Second, Confucian principles emphasize the importance of harmony (和谐). Within the Confucian tradition, harmony is the aim in all areas of life—personal, social, ethical, and political.⁸ Related to the concept of *guanxi*, harmony emphasizes peaceful relations between people. In fact, harmony can be said to be the key ingredient to the good life.

While few in contemporary Chinese society might identify themselves as Confucian, harmony remains a driving force in social relationships. Indeed, "harmonious society" is touted as important for the international advancement of China; it is one of the eighteen "Core Values of Socialism" posted in every Chinese city. Of course, one can always speculate as to the exact meaning of "harmony" when the term is used in government advertisements.⁹ Nevertheless, the concept itself remains important, particularly in interpersonal relationships. Of course, other aspects of culture are closely related, such as filial piety. Yet, harmony remains a relational goal.

The connections in Ephesians are again clear. Most poignantly, Paul writes in Ephesians 2:14 that "he himself is our peace." There are two particularly significant points for our purposes. First, the "our" in this verse includes Jews and Gentiles—those typically not at peace. Jesus himself is the peace that brings divided people together. Second, Paul probably has in mind the Old Testament concept of peace (*shalom*), which emphasizes the completeness of all things. In other words, in Christ, God's world and God's people find true *shalom*, harmony in being truly whole. The peace between people naturally considered enemies (Jews and Gentiles) takes place in union with Christ. As noted above, this peace in Christ creates one's most fundamental *guanxi* and therefore creates the only truly harmonious society—the church. Then, in Ephesians 2:17–18, Paul reiterates the point, again focusing on peace and unity. Peace, he says, was preached to all—Jew and Gentile alike—resulting in the joining together in one Spirit all those who are united to Christ.

To apply this to the contemporary church in China, the gospel creates a harmonious society (i.e., the church) in which one gains a new primary identity. This new society includes all—rich and poor, Han and minority—in Christ. This body works together, each member serving the others for the good of the body (Ephesians 4:4–16). No longer do diverging groups need to battle one another for face or fortune. Rather, in Christ, believers together put on the armor of God and together battle the true enemy of peace (Ephesians 6:10–20).

Conclusion

Other cultural themes could be mentioned. For example, the restoration of glory in Christ parallels the Chinese search for face. These examples show the potential use of this important biblical theme within Chinese culture. Specifically, "union with Christ" themes could be used to shape contextualized gospel presentations. One could move through the biblical story highlighting the creation of harmony in the beginning, the destruction of *guanxi* and harmony through sin and rebellion, the failure to achieve harmony through Israel's history, and the true harmony found in *guanxi* with Christ. Likewise, discipleship should be grounded in the new identity of those in Christ. In Christ, we are no longer *fundamentally* Han, minority, foreigner, rich, or poor, but "one new humanity" (Ephesians 2:15). Following and serving Jesus in China must flow from this new identity.

¹ See Grant Macaskill, *Union with Christ in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

² Constantine R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 441.

³ For example, Romans 8; Galatians 3; and Colossians 2–3.

⁴ Wendel Sun, *A New People in Christ: Adam, Israel, and Union with Christ in Romans* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, forthcoming).

⁵ Note that these are initial suggestions; as such, the implications cannot be teased out in detail.

Theological Contextualization in China

Might Christians and Confucians Actually Agree About Human Nature?

By Gregg Ten Elshof

It is commonly thought that Christians should be wary of the influence of Confucian ideas on the grounds that Confucianism is too optimistic about human nature and inconsistent with the Christian understanding of sin. What follows is a reflection on that worry.

A Parable

A well-known puzzle in theoretical physics concerns the fact that some properties of light suggest that it is wave-like while others suggest that it is particulate.

Wayne has spent the better part of his now-decades-long career working with a large research group aimed at reconciling these two seemingly opposed characteristics of light. Early on, a fundamental methodological split emerged in his group. Some in the group (Wayne among them) emphasized more heavily the wave-like characteristics while trying to do justice to the data suggesting that light is particulate. Others emphasized more heavily the particle-like characteristics while trying to account for the data suggesting that light is wave-like. What has always unified the group, though, is the attempt to do justice *both* to the evidence suggesting that light is wave-like *and* to the evidence suggesting that light is particulate. The work of the group is animated by a certain conviction. They believe conversation between researchers on both sides of this methodological divide will conduce to a theoretical reconciliation that accommodates all of the data.

One day, Wayne runs into Patricia and learns that she too has spent the better part of her now-decades-long career working with a large research group on this same problem. He learns, moreover, that Patricia's group is divided along the same lines as his own. Some emphasize the wave-like characteristics of light and some emphasize the particle-like characteristics. However, Patricia's group is less evenly divided. While there are voices on both sides of the divide, the most promising and prominent research has emphasized more heavily the particle-like characteristics of light—all the while trying to do justice to the data suggesting that light is wave-like.

Patricia, enthusiastic to learn about the work of Dave's research team, suggests that the two groups meet and collaborate. Since they have worked independently on the same problem for decades, they might learn from one another. Perhaps one, or both groups, have discovered things that have escaped the notice of the other. But, having learned that the most promising and prominent research coming out of Patricia's group emphasizes the particle-like features of light, Wayne declines the offer. He insists that the emphasis on the particulate features of light, which dominates Patricia's group, represents so fundamental a flaw as to make unlikely the prospects of a fruitful collaboration.

Patricia is understandably confused. Why, she wonders, is Wayne so sanguine about collaboration in his own group, where there is a long-standing split along these methodological lines, but so pessimistic about collaborating with her research group? Doesn't it stand to reason that the two groups, which have worked independently on the same theoretical problem for decades, might have things to learn from one another?

Christianity

For millennia, Christian thinkers have labored to reconcile two families of ideas. Both are very clearly articulated throughout the Christian scriptures.

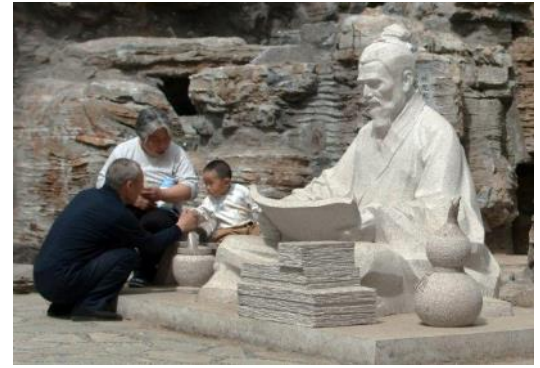
On the one hand, the Christian tradition has been unambiguously committed to the idea that there is something unspeakably good, beautiful, and valuable about human persons. We bear the image of the God of the universe, a fact that confers upon each and every human person an unspeakable value. As image bearers, we manifest an untrained recognition of good *as* good and evil *as* evil. In our hearts, we tacitly perceive the attribute of the eternal God. It is this image of God resident in the human being that underwrites the possibility of redemption and the possibility of glorious union with the Divine.

On the other hand, the Christian tradition has been unambiguously committed to the idea that something has gone terribly wrong with the human race. We are broken, twisted, and badly in need of rescue, redemption, and repair. As a consequence of our brokenness, we seem impulsively bent away from the good and capable of the most despicable mistreatment of one another.

Christian theologians have long wrestled with the problem of reconciling these two streams of thought. They have tried, that is, to craft a coherent and comprehensive view of the human person that does justice to these two facts:

1. There is something unspeakably good, beautiful and valuable about the human person; something redeemable in the human person that recognizes, reflects, and reaches out for good.
2. Something in human persons is terribly broken, twisted, and in need of repair since folks seem impulsively bent away from the good.

The Christian witness is not uniform, though, when it comes to the details of this attempted reconciliation. Some streams of Christian



Les Whittle

thought seem to emphasize (1) more strongly than others, all the while trying to do justice to (2). In the Protestant traditions, perhaps Wesley and those in his intellectual wake can be fairly described this way. Other streams of Christian thought, though, seem to emphasize (2) more strongly, all the while trying to do justice to (1). In the Protestant traditions, perhaps Calvin and those in his intellectual wake can be fairly described in this way.

What has always unified the group, though, is the attempt to do justice *both* to the Christian doctrine of the Imago Dei *and* to the doctrine of the Fall. The historical Christian discussion is animated by a fundamental conviction. Christians have believed that conversation between thinkers on both sides of this difference in emphasis will conduce to a reconciliation of these theoretical differences. They seek to accommodate the whole of the biblical witness as well as our experience of ourselves as, at once, glorious and broken.

Confucianism

For millennia, Confucian thinkers have labored to reconcile two families of ideas. Both are very clearly articulated in the classical Confucian canon. On the one hand, the Confucian tradition is unambiguously committed to the idea that there is something unspeakably good, valuable, and beautiful about human persons. There is something about the human condition that grounds the possibility of discovering and living into a Way (道) of harmony, peace, justice, and goodness.

On the other hand, the Confucian tradition has been unambiguously committed to the idea that something has gone terribly wrong with the human race. We are broken, twisted, and badly in need of rescue, redemption, and repair. As a consequence of our brokenness, we seem impulsively bent away from the good and capable of the most despicable mistreatment of one another.

Confucians have long wrestled with the problem of reconciling these two streams of thought. They have tried to craft a coherent and comprehensive view of the human person that does justice to these two facts:

1. There is something unspeakably good, beautiful and valuable about the human person, something redeemable in the human person that recognizes, reflects, and reaches out for good.
2. Something in human persons is terribly broken, twisted, and in need of repair since folks seem impulsively bent away from the good.

The Confucian witness is not uniform, though, when it comes to the details of this attempted reconciliation. There are streams of Confucian thought that seem to emphasize number (1) more strongly than others, all the while trying to do justice to number (2). Mencius can fairly be described this way.¹ A dominant metaphor in Mencius for moral formation is that of the sprout. All humans have in them sprouts of goodness that incline them to the Way. But these sprouts are fragile. They require protection and cultivation, the absence of which is responsible for the broken state of the human condition.

Other streams of Confucian thought, though, seem to emphasize number (2) more strongly, all the while trying to do justice to number (1). Xunzi can fairly be described this way.² A dominant metaphor in Xunzi for moral formation is that of crafting a straight wood pillar. While the wood has within it the potential to be a straight and strong pillar, it will not grow that way on its own no matter how well protected and cultivated. It must be pressed and straightened *against* its natural inclinations. It must be formed by forces wholly external to itself.

While there are voices on both sides of this divide in the Confucian tradition, the more prominent thread has been that of Mencius and those in his intellectual wake. They have emphasized the spark or sprout of goodness in the human heart while also trying to do justice to the radical brokenness of the human condition.

Parable Redux

Cal has been a Christian for decades. Familiar with the broad strokes of the Christian intellectual tradition, he recognizes the division in that tradition adumbrated above. Some Christian theologians emphasize the twisted broken condition of the human heart while trying to do justice to the claim that we retain (even in our fallen condition) the Imago Dei. Some, on the other hand, emphasize the glorious potential of human persons (even in their fallen state) insofar as they retain the Imago Dei, while trying to do justice to the radical brokenness of the human condition east of Eden. Cal finds himself more sympathetic with the former threads in the Christian tradition, those emphasizing the twisted broken condition of the human heart.

He recognizes, though, that what has always unified the tradition is the attempt to do justice *both* to the Imago Dei *and* the doctrine of the Fall. He is hopeful that conversation between Christian thinkers on both sides of this difference in emphasis will conduce to a theoretical reconciliation that accommodates the whole of the biblical witness as well as our experience of ourselves as, at once, glorious and broken.

One day, Cal meets Merci, a life-long devotee of Confucianism. In conversation with Merci, Cal learns that the Confucian tradition, much like the Christian tradition, has, for millennia, attempted to reconcile the unspeakable goodness, value, and beauty of the human person with the radical brokenness of human life as we experience it in ourselves and in others. He learns that the Confucian tradition, like his own, has had some voices that emphasize the former and others that emphasize the latter. Moreover, he learns that while both voices animate the historical Confucian discussion, the dominant voice in the Confucian tradition has been the one that emphasizes the goodness and potential of the human person.

Merci, enthusiastic to learn from the millennia-old Christian discussion of this tension, suggests that they form a group comprising

[Continued on page 17](#)

Further Reflections

Book Review

Invisible Planets

Invisible Planets: An Anthology of Contemporary Chinese SF in Translation

Edited by CiXin Liu

Reviewed by Carrie Anne Hudson

Why review a science fiction (SF) book in a journal about contextualization? Contextualization is partnered with worldview. The stories in *Invisible Planets* uncover the dreams and realities of the Chinese that are not often expressed in everyday life. We need to listen as the authors present Chinese worldviews through science fiction.

China has had a love/hate relationship with SF—breaking up and getting back together again. The tenuous relationship stems from Chinese scholars not wanting SF to overshadow real science. For years, Chinese SF readers devoured translated works by Jules Vern and Isaac Asimov. These guys were dreamers. SF inspired fantasies of modernization and globalization. So, “In 1983, the anti-spiritual pollution campaigns wiped SF from the map again.”¹ Today, with China’s rapid modernization and globalization, writers have taken ownership over their dreams, expressing them in the genre of Chinese SF.

Invisible Planets is a collection of short SF stories from various authors. The themes and purposes of each story are as vast as the Chinese population. Summarizing such an array of writers is not possible here. However, this anthology contains various moods, tones, and reflections that are important for Western readers to understand.

The authors, either consciously or unconsciously, include within their stories numerous elements and themes that reflect a contemporary worldview. Weaving together Chinese ghost tales, technology, community, globalization, and modernization, Chinese SF has taken its own form. As I read *Invisible Planets*, several prominent themes emerged.

1. Parent/Child Relationship

Multiple stories highlight the relationship between parent and child. In “Flowers of Shazhui,” we are tortured alongside a desperate father who threatens his employer with self-immolation in exchange for a pay-off of his daughter’s school tuition. In “Folding Beijing,” a man faces the danger of traveling to First Space, risking his life to earn the money needed to send his daughter to school. A woman in “A Hundred Ghosts Parade Tonight” sells off her body piece by piece to save her ailing children.

Great sacrifice for one’s children is the power that drives many of these stories. This is a basic obligation a parent feels towards his or her child. This is how parents express their love and keep the familial bonds tightly in place.

2. Societal Revolution

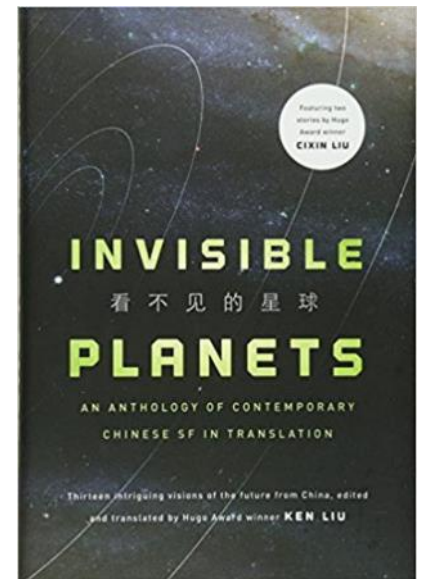
In many stories, one way or another, characters are caught in a difficult situation. They are trapped behind the constraints of technology or censorship; they look for a placebo to help them through the pain of each day. Whether it’s the companionship of a robot named An Fu in “Tong Tong’s Summer” or the secret talking meetings orchestrated in “The City of Silence,” people look for peace amidst oppression.

As a Westerner, I found myself telling the characters, “Rise up! You don’t have to live like that!” But for Chinese readers, going off as a rogue individual to revolutionize society is undesirable folly. In “Stanley Chan,” a character quips, “If someone would just get a revolt started, I’m sure all of us together can whip him.” There’s the sense that, in a revolution, either the group joins, or nobody joins. Most Western literature and movies exalt the lone individual who breaks from the group. Additionally, in these Chinese short stories, the goal of revolution is to bring people together rather than tear them apart. Societal harmony remains a core value even in Chinese SF.

3. Connection with Nature

In Western SF, the setting is typically industrial, planetary, or cosmic. While there are trace elements of such settings in these Chinese stories, most of them take place on earth and in a society struggling to function in some capacity. Man-made technology is interwoven with the technology of creation. Readers never get a sense that the earth has abandoned its people; rather, it makes them remember their humanity. For example, in “Flower of Shazhui,” the setting is described as a bodily system, apartments with alleyways that snake like capillaries.

The authors have a cautious appreciation for technology. Each story seemingly regards technology as a necessary evil. From time to time, technology even longs for the breath of a human being instead of the hum of an invention. Modernization is desirable but not at the expense of community. Discussion about the role of empathy among technology consistently shapes various plotlines. “The Year of the Rat” leaves readers feeling the need to control technology because of its inability to show empathy. In one instance, a robot rat kills a group of adult rats trying to help one of their babies.



4. Inevitability of Time

One final theme is noteworthy—the inevitability of time. In “Night Journey of the Dragon-Horse,” “Fish of Lijiang,” “Tong Tong’s Summer,” and “Taking Care of God,” readers are reminded that the end of time is inevitable. While seemingly fatalistic, most of the stories leave us with the sense that immortality should help us appreciate the present.

Xia Jia aptly ends her essay “What makes Chinese science fiction Chinese?” with this:

At this critical moment, I am even firmer in my faith that reforming reality requires not only science and technology, but also the belief by all of us that life should be better—and can be made better—if we possess imagination, courage, initiative, unity, love, and hope as well as a bit of understanding and empathy for strangers. Each of us is born with these precious qualities, and it is perhaps also the best gift that science fiction can bring us (p. 383).

While we can benefit from reading books on contextualization, nothing replaces our reading Chinese works themselves. We need to experience the textures and contours of Chinese literature first hand. The fluidity with which these SF authors move between ancient and modern culture leaves the reader with a richer understanding of Chinese worldviews. It is tempting to see the stories in *Invisible Planets* as social commentary. I caution against painting current politics onto the canvas of these stories. While each story could be summarized with broad strokes of political rhetoric, we would miss the intricate cultural brushstrokes that make each story a masterpiece.

¹ Regina Kanyu Wang, “A Brief Introduction to Chinese Science Fiction.” *Mithila Review* 9. Online: mithilareview.com/wang_11_16. Accessed 1 Dec 2017.

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Confucians and Christians to discuss this issue. Since their respective traditions have worked independently on the same problem for millennia, they might be able to learn from one another. But having learned that the dominant voice in the Confucian tradition is the one that emphasizes the goodness and potential of the human person, Cal declines the offer. He insists that this emphasis on the goodness and potential of the human heart represents so fundamental a flaw as to make unlikely the prospects of fruitful collaboration.

Merci is understandably confused. Why, she wonders, is Cal so sanguine about the value of discussion between Christians on both sides of this split but so pessimistic about the prospect of fruitful dialogue with Confucians? And doesn’t it stand to reason that two groups that have worked independently on the same theoretical problem for millennia might have things to learn from one another?³

¹ Mencius (372–289 BCE) is sometimes called the “second sage” of Chinese philosophy behind Confucius.

² Xunzi was one of China’s most influential philosophers from the Warring States period (479–221 BCE). He was one of the first people to help consolidate Confucian teachings into a distinct tradition.

³ I am very grateful to Jackson Wu for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this reflection.

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Further Reflections

ChinaSource Perspective

Contextualization Mediates History and Meaning

Brent Fulton, Editor

As Wendel Sun writes in this issue of *ChinaSource Quarterly*, most Christians serving cross-culturally have a strong desire to faithfully and meaningfully communicate the gospel. To accurately convey the truth of the gospel in terms that are understandable in the target culture, one needs a deep understanding both of Scripture and of the culture in which one is working.

Culture is shaped by history. The Scriptures that convey the gospel have a particular historical context. Likewise, our understanding of the gospel is, in turn, shaped by our own culture and history.

In Danny Hsu's article on contextualization and contemporary Chinese culture, he points out that merely understanding the historical antecedents of Chinese culture is insufficient for effectively communicating in today's cultural context. This context comprises elements both of China's Confucian tradition as well as the forces of modernization shaping urban China. Filial piety, for example, may still be a strongly held value, but its practical application in today's culture looks very different from what it did in previous generations.

Similarly, in her reading of Chinese science fiction literature, Carrie Anne Hudson cautions against making too literal a connection between the themes in the stories and specific social or political events in contemporary China. The themes may provide clues into the values and aspirations imbedded in the culture, but we should not jump to conclusions about how they play out today.

Instead, as Hsu writes, the "messy reality" that the Chinese worldview is shaped by a plurality of cultural forces, both historical and contemporary, requires flexibility in understanding how historical values such as harmony, filial piety, *guanxi*, and "face" are interpreted on the ground in China today.

We need to also recognize that the history of the gospel itself—and how it has been transmitted through the generations—colors the reception of our message within the culture. When interviewed for this issue, Pastor Peter comments that Christianity is commonly viewed as a Western cultural incursion, both due to how it came to China as well as its ignorance of traditional Chinese practices. The resulting cultural clash causes Chinese to "lose face" and to see Christianity as a threat.

Ultimately, the veracity of the message will be judged by the quality of its messengers. Danny Hsu notes, "the West's religious experience often places great emphasis on correct thinking (orthodoxy), yet China's religious experience has placed great importance on correct practice (orthopraxy). In Confucianism, the ideal man presupposes that we only become fully human through our interactions with one another."

Relating the biblical concept of union with Christ to the Chinese concept of *guanxi*, Wendel Sun asserts that the traditional goal of harmonious society finds fulfillment in the church. Here the historical divisions are broken down in favor of a collective identity defined by the relationship between Christ and the members of his body, the church. In this new relationship, there is no room for factions or fighting. All work together for the good of the body.

Contextualization goes beyond sound theology and deep cultural understanding. Christ physically entered the context of an alien culture in order to communicate God's love. He calls and equips his followers to do the same.

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⁶ See Chao C. Chen, Xiao-Ping Chen, and Shengsheng Huang, "Chinese *Guanxi*: An Integrative Review and New Directions for Future Research," *Management and Organization Review* 9.1 (March 2013): 167–207.

⁷ For a helpful overview of Chinese collective identity, see Kwang-Kuo Hwang, "Chinese Relationalism: Theoretical Construction and Methodological Considerations," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 30.2 (2000): 155–178.

⁸ See Xin Zhang Yao, "The Way of Harmony in the *Four Books*," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 40.2 (June 2013): 252–268.

⁹ One might say that the Communist Party is "contextualizing" the Confucian principle.

Wendel Sun (pseudonym), PhD, serves as President of International Chinese Theological Seminary. He is the author of A New People in Christ: Adam, Israel, and Union with Christ in Romans, forthcoming from Pickwick Publications. He blogs at wendelsun.com.

Further Reflections

Resource Corner

Resources for Further Reading on Contextualization

Contextualization (General)

[Contextualization in the New Testament](#) (by Dean Flemming)

[Local Theology for the Global Church](#) (edited by Matthew Cook)

[Misreading Scriptures with Western Eyes](#) (by Randolph Richards and Brandon O'Brien)

[One Gospel for All Nations](#) (by Jackson Wu)



Contextualization (for Chinese Cultures)

[Jesus: The Path to Human Flourishing](#) (by I'Ching Thomas)

[Saving God's Face: A Chinese Contextualization of Salvation through Honor and Shame](#) (by Jackson Wu)

[Telling the Gospel through Story](#) (by Christine Dillon)

[The 3D Gospel: Ministry in Guilt, Fear, and Shame Cultures](#) (by Jayson Georges)

[The Chinese Way—Contextualizing the Gospel for the Chinese](#) (by Hann-Tzuu (Joey) Tann)

Honor-Shame Cultures

[Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture](#) (by David deSilva)

[Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures](#) (by Jayson Georges and Mark Baker)

[The Global Gospel](#) (by Werner Mischke)

Selected Blogs and Articles (available online)

[HonorShame.com](#) (A website that offers practical tools and training for Christians ministering in honor-shame contexts.)

[JacksonWu.org](#) (The website of Jackson Wu who teaches theology and missiology in an Asian seminary.)

[“Rewriting the Gospel for Oral Cultures: Why Honor-Shame are Essential to the Gospel Story,”](#) by Jackson Wu in *Beyond Literate Western Contexts: Honor & Shame and the Assessment of Orality Preference*, edited by Samuel Chiang and Grant Lovejoy.

[“Does the ‘Plan of Salvation’ Make Disciples? Why Honor and Shame are Essential for Christian Ministry,”](#) by Jackson Wu in *Asian Missions Advance*, January 2016.