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Dr. Andrew Chiu is president of Concordia Theological Seminary and of the Lutheran Church, Hong Kong Synod. p. 225

Christianity Encounters Ancestor Worship in Taiwan

Lim Guek Eng

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This article is based on a term paper presented at the China Evangelical Seminary, Taipei. The author shows that ancestor worship among the Minnan Chinese of Taiwan has its roots in primitive animism (rather than in Confucianism). Using a theological analytical approach she suggests some functional substitutes for Christian Taiwanese.

(Editors)

The aim of this article is to develop a more adequate approach to Taiwanese ancestor worship. It rests upon the assumption that ancestor worship in Taiwan has never been effectively encountered by Christianity and hence continues in its current virile form as a major roadblock to the growth of the Church especially in rural villages.

ANCESTOR WORSHIP IN CURRENT TAIWANESE SOCIETY

Chu Ming-ching has remarked that 'Ancestor worship is still the most vital factor in Taiwanese folk religion: It continues to hold a position of much consequence in the religious and social life of the people'.¹

Whether theistic or atheistic in thought, we find that most Chinese families have ancestor tablets established in their homes for the convenience of worshipping their ancestors regularly. The rituals associated with it are *complex* and they involve ceremonies at death, burial, mourning, worshipping of the ancestral tablets at home, in the ancestral temple (hall) and at the tomb of the deceased.

Ancestor Worship in Private Home: In the Chinese mind, it is believed that ancestor spirits live in the 'other world' as much as they did while on earth. Hence they must be fed, cared for and propitiated. If these needs are not met the ancestors will be hungry and dissatisfied and in a sense, they will become malevolent spirits who roam around and cause trouble, disease and calamities upon the family as well as the neighbourhood. In order to avoid such dangers, the family of the deceased sets up a tablet on the table of the family altar which symbolizes the articulation of the spirit with the human world.

Ancestor Worship in Temples (Halls): Ancestral temples in Taiwan p.226 began to appear only during the later stages of the development of the cult—in the late Ching and Japanese occupation period. Chinese clan or lineage began to develop based either on a common surname or origin or a descendent-group propagated by a founding father who immigrated to the area in the early days.

Usually in a clan, the annual rites of ancestor worship and the communal feasts are held in their ancestor hall according to their background and economic situation. 'The activities of ancestor worship help to provide the necessary group solidarity, strengthen their internal unity and co-operation against pressures from the outside especially in times when the social situation is unabatable.'²

Ancestor Worship in Tombs: The worship at the tomb of the ancestors includes two aspects: sweeping the tombs of the ancestors and the management of the bones of the ancestors, usually called geomancy.

During the tomb-sweeping festival, people who follow the old Chinese customs worship their ancestors and the gods in the hope that their fields will bring a good harvest. All members of the family are expected to visit their forefathers' tombs which are swept and cleaned once a year. Then paper money is hung on the tomb remembering their ancestors. Sacrifices are offered when the first baby boy is born in the family or when a son is married during the year.

Geomancy (Wind and Water doctrine) indicates the climate and the law of nature that control atmospheric conditions which bear a strong influence over the fate of a person. The central concept is to teach men where and how they ought to bury their dead so that as far as possible, the dead, the gods and the living may be situated in the most suitable places to benefit from the auspicious influence of nature.

ANALYSIS OF CHINESE ANCESTOR WORSHIP

¹ Chiu M. C., 'Two Types of Folk Piety: A Comparative Study of Two Folk Religions of Formosa', PH.D. dissertation, University of Chicago (1970), p.226.

² K. T. Liao, 'A Study from a Theological Perspective of the Religious Element in Chinese Ancestor Worship as Practised in Contemporary Taiwanese Society', Taipei (1979). M.Th. dissertation, p.84.

The essence of ancestor worship in current Taiwanese society is *primitive animism* which centres on the worship of supernatural ghosts and ancestors. Because of the belief that ancestor spirits live in another world, a man must marry and bear a male heir to provide the needs of this spirit community. If the line of a male heir is broken, Minnan-Chinese have designed supplementary methods to prevent these spirits from becoming hungry ghosts: he may adopt a child from his brother or from another family which is usually in a poor economic situation, or bring a daughter's husband into the family by marriage. It **P. 227** is most important to set up a new family to continue the patrilineal line so that the ancestors will always have incense burned in their honour and offerings made to nurture them.

Most of the Minnan Chinese firmly believe that the soul of a person exists eternally in another world after death so that food offerings and incense burnings are a must to prevent a painful existence for the dead in the other world.

Theories as to the location of the departed are not uniform, but it is generally believed that the soul of a deceased person is to be found in three places at once, or perhaps more correctly, that each man has three souls: the soul that goes to the future world to be judged and is assigned either to a heaven or to a hell; the soul in the grave and also in the ancestral tablet.

Filial piety is the hallmark of Chinese society. In the homes of the eldest son and often of the other sons is a tablet to a deceased father, and on it as well, is the name of the mother (and perhaps the names of the sons). Before these tablets, incense may be burned daily and offerings of food placed on stated occasions. Important family events such as betrothals are announce to them, and at a marriage, the wedding couple make their kowtow before them. Prayer may be offered to them for help in emergencies and lots may be cast before them in making important decisions.

As mentioned, the Chinese believe that the soul exists in a spirit community after death. A man is thus supposed to marry to establish a family and to have children in order to meet the ancestor's needs for life after death. In fact, we find that the concept of the family as indispensable for the transmission of life as well as for the maintenance of life eternal is deeply rooted in the minds of the Chinese. Moreover, ceremonies in honour of ancestors have a decided utility in helping to tie together the family and the clan. Their maintenance depends upon a mixture of motives, although respect and affection to the deceased may be the predominant one.

Many other practices are associated with the concept of familiism. About New Year's time, the dead member of the family may be welcomed to the homes from the ancestral temples and tombs, and then a few days later, formally sent back to their customary abodes. At Ching Ming, the great spring festival, the graves are cleaned and repaired and offerings made of food, flowers and incense. Other occasions, such as the birthday of the deceased, might also be commemorated by a special ceremony and offering.

On the whole, we find that since one's own offspring are the most dependable persons to be entrusted with the duty of caring for the **p. 228** ancestor's needs, ancestor worship is rooted in the institution of the traditional Chinese family.

In view of what has been discussed, it can be readily seen that the ancestral cult has important social results. As Latourette put it, 'It forms a bulwark of that outstanding social and economic unit, the family; it makes for the conservation of much of the past; it is the means of moral and social control, and it acts as a check on individualism. As a factor in moulding Chinese thought and life, it can hardly be exaggerated'.³

³ K. S. Latourette, *The Chinese: Their History and Culture*, 4th ed., New York: Macmillan, 1962, p.540.

However, such a social structure has religious implications too, in view of the fact that the essence of ancestor worship is primitive animism. In speaking of the peculiar domain of animism in its most indigenous forms in Taiwanese religion, Gates identifies the animistic corpus as consisting of two realities combined: 'the souls of the individual creatures (ancestors) capable of continued existence after the death or destruction of the body ... and all other spirits, upward to the rank of powerful deities'.⁴ In other words, worship of ancestors involves the polytheistic dimension of Taiwanese folk religion.

A THEOLOGICAL-ANALYTICAL APPROACH

The Animistic-Polytheistic World of Ancestor Worship Encountered: Addison has pointed out that a missionary's approach to other religions will be determined by his understanding of their nature and origin: 'Who is responsible for the beliefs and practices of these alien peoples—God or Satan? How you will act when confronted with them will naturally depend on what answer you give'.⁵

However, the answer in the case of ancestor worship is relatively complex. Gates has attributed the nature and origin of ancestor worship to 'the Powers' which were overthrown in the death and resurrection of Christ, and will be finally defeated in the parousia.⁶

We find that even as Christ disarmed the principalities and powers through His resurrection, and forced them to participate in his victory procession, so Christians are called today to go forth in His name and power and do likewise, wherever these powers still hold men under their dominion ([2 Cor. 2:14–17](#)).

In the Old Testament we find a few references to Satan and the [p. 229](#) powers but no clear formulation as to how Yahweh would provide eternal salvation for His people. However, in the New Testament, one finds not only a fuller revelation of God in Christ, but also a more concrete unveiling of Satan and the powers. Narrative accounts of demonic activity are varied. Jesus encountered two demon-possessed men in a graveyard ([Matt. 8](#)); the disciples struggle unsuccessfully to deliver a demon-tormented boy ([Matt. 17](#)); the sons of Sceva are overcome by demonic powers ([Acts 19](#)); and the apostle Paul exorcises the python spirit from the Philippian slave girl ([Acts 16](#)). Moreover, the New Testament confronts the animistic aspect of ancestor worship with the fact that Christ, in rising from the dead, has disarmed the powers and triumphed over them ([Col. 2:15](#)). He has entered the strong man's house and dealt Satan the decisive blow. As a result, all who are indwelt by the Spirit of the mighty Christ are under the protection of God. No created power in heaven, earth, or under the earth is able, henceforth, to separate those who are 'in Christ' from the love of God ([Rom. 8:39](#); [Jn. 10:28](#)).

As the fear of spirits is replaced by the experience of liberation and blessing, the redeemed Taiwanese becomes aware of the dynamic possibilities of his new orientation to all of reality in Christ ([2 Cor. 5:17](#)). His new relationship with God means the possibility of entirely new approaches to his culture, especially in relation to honours to ancestors and the whole system of family and life associated with it.

We have much to learn from the apostle Paul in the area of spiritual warfare and the appropriation of power which is ours through Christ. In [Ephesians 6:11, 12](#) we read, 'Put

⁴ Alan F. Gates, *Christianity and Animism in Taiwan*, San Francisco: Chinese Materials Centre (1979), p.240.

⁵ J. T. Addison, 'The Changing Attitude Toward Non-Christian Religions', *International Review of Missions* (1938), No.27 p.110–21.

⁶ Gates, *op. cit.*, p.199f.

on the whole armour of God that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places’.

Gates asserts that in the Apostle Paul’s teaching, when the powers are resisted in this way, several things happen: ‘(i) Their true nature is unmasked. They are seen for what they really are—self-vaunting intelligences desirous of being gods, not servants, and determined on a mission of deceiving men and keeping them in alienation from God ([Col. 2:20, 21](#); [Rom. 8:35](#)). (ii) The illusory nature of the powers is also brought to light. In exalting themselves and desiring to be like God, they have created the impression of greatness and unlimited power. When encountered and resisted in the mighty name of Jesus Christ, all their semblance of greatness fades away ... they cannot go beyond limits set by God ([Acts 4:28](#))’.⁷ p. 230

This brings us to one active dimension found in Paul’s instruction to the Church. The individual Christian as well as the collective body of believers have an offensive as well as a defensive strategy. The believer’s prerogative is to speak the word of faith. The ‘preaching of the cross’ is the ‘power of God’ unto salvation ([1 Cor. 1:18](#)). Thus when Christ is ‘lifted up’, the powers scatter, for the cross has disarmed them. As they have once been led in His victory procession, paraded as conquered beings by the Son of God who came back from the dead ([Rom. 1:4](#), [Col. 2:15](#)), so God’s children clad in the armour of God and indwelt by His spirit can by their testimony and His blood overcome them ([Rev. 12:11](#)).

We have just dealt with the animistic aspect of ancestor worship which is really its *essence* as a religious cult. We shall now go on to discuss the other minor issues which confront us, namely, the concept of eternal life, filial piety, familiism with its social implications, and attempt to give a theological perspective on these.

The Concept of Eternal Life Encountered:

In the Minnan Chinese concept of eternal life, it is believed that when a man dies, his soul goes to three places, and in order to prevent the dead from a painful existence, sacrifices and incense are offered. The question one must consider here is ‘Can Christians offer incense and sacrifices to their dead? Can such rites be accommodated?’ In keeping with what we have observed about the animistic polytheistic world of ancestor worship, we may use [1 Corinthians 10:21](#) for a reference. Here Paul says, ‘You cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the table of the Lord, and the table of demons’. Paul relates idols and demons by teaching that sacrificial offerings made to idols are made ‘to demons and not to God’. He is speaking here about the ordinance of Holy Communion. The argument is that if one would participate at the Lord’s table, he cannot offer sacrifices to idols. Sacrifice means communion and determines the communion (*koinonia*) to which one belongs. Hence it is obvious that Christians are not to accommodate the rites of sacrifices and incense to one’s dead.

To the question, whether it is possible, as the Minnan Chinese believe, that one can have communion with the living spirit of the departed, we find that the theological consideration is a little more difficult. In [Ecclesiastes 9:4–10](#), we read that ‘the dead do not know anything, nor have they any longer a reward, for their memory is forgotten. Indeed their love, their hate, and their zeal have already perished, and they will no longer have a share in all that is done under the sun ... There is no activity or planning or wisdom in Sheol where you are going’. The answer here seems clear that the dead do not know it even if the living strives on earth to ease his painful existence in another world,

⁷ Ibid., p.229.

or ask his opinion regarding important matters, and further more they cannot provide any prosperity coveted by the worshipper.

Conversely, it is difficult to conceive of the ancestor cult as having survived these thousands of years if it did not involve the reality of some form of spirit communion between the living and what is regarded as the spirits of the dead. The account of Saul and the witch of Endor ([1 Sam. 28:8–10](#)) provides a clue, though one is reluctant to be dogmatic. On the surface, it would seem that Saul truly conversed with the spirit of Samuel. But one hastens to point out two things: first, the possibility of a counterfeit. Saul did not see Samuel. The woman saw someone but called him a 'god' ([28:13](#)). Was this really Samuel? Second, this was not a form of ancestor worship. There was no kinship relation between Saul and Samuel, nor was Saul's purpose in coming that of worship. This is a poor model upon which to establish the possibility of actual communion with the spirit of one's ancestor.

Although this incident has little similarity to ancestor worship as such, it does present a form of behaviour which is frequently associated with ancestor worship in Taiwan, namely calling upon the dead for information relating to an unsolved problem. The reply received usually relates the problem to the neglect of the ancestor by the living descendants.

The appearance of Elijah and Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration is related to the power of God and offers even less evidence to substantiate real communion between living and dead kin. What Beyerhaus has asserted seems rather compelling:

It is the unanimous consensus of Rabbinism, the New Testament and the Church Fathers that the spiritual forces behind mediumistic and occult phenomena are not the souls of the departed but the power of the fallen angels or demons who are masters of disguise.⁸

We conclude that in Taiwanese ancestor worship involving worship, prayer and sacrifice, some form of spirit contact takes place, but the spirits involved are other than those of the departed.

In view of this conclusion, we would do well to teach the Christian concept of eternal life. [John 5:24](#) posits faith in Christ as the inseparable p. 232 concomitant of life so that 'He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life' ([1 Jn. 5:12](#)). The emphasis here falls on the interconnection of faith and life, so that eternal life for the Christian begins the moment one believes and accepts Christ as Lord and Saviour, and that although spiritual life is imparted to men in this life, physical death still comes. But the Bible has adequate assurance for the believer: 'to die is to gain' ([Phil. 1:21](#)), and there is the calm assurance that 'the Lord will rescue me from every evil and save me for his heavenly kingdom' ([1 Tim. 4:18](#)). A new Taiwanese convert with ancestor worship background needs to realize that it is the Lord Himself who will ensure real 'peace and Prosperity' (irregardless of circumstances) in this life, and not the spirits of his dead ancestors.

The Concept of Filial Piety Evaluated:

The tenet of filial piety has always held a most important place in Chinese ethics and also in the Chinese cultural tradition as a whole. This ethical teaching of filial piety encourages offspring to show their love to their ancestors by placing the ancestral tablet in the eldest son's home and perhaps of the other sons as well.

We find that the Bible does tell the Christian to respect his parents (cf. [Ex. 20:12](#); [21:17](#); [Dt. 5:16](#); [Prov. 30:11](#), [17](#); [Eph. 6:2](#)).

⁸ Peter Beyerhaus, 'The Christian Approach to Ancestor Worship', *Ministry*, Vol.6, No.4 (1966) p.137–145.

We find that the Biblical teaching of filial piety set against the ethical teaching of Chinese filial piety, gives one the conviction that only the born-again believer who has appropriated the power of the Holy Spirit will be enabled to show true love and honour to his parents. Again we find that rather than teaching God's laws for meaningful living on earth, Minnan Chinese parents teach their children to worship them when they pass into the other world. It is not amazing to find that in Taiwan, this is one of the main reasons why parents adamantly forbid their children to become Christians.

The Concept of Family Evaluated:

As mentioned earlier, this concept of the Minnan Chinese rests on the transmission of life from generation to generation, with a decided utility to tie the family and clan together, and a check on individualism. While one may not agree to the kind of superstition that is being practised especially in relation to the 'adoption of sons' to carry on the family tree, a believer may still want to follow the custom of remembering their dead on New Year's Day and All Soul's Day (Ching-Ming). This is to be thought of strictly in the sense of *remembering* rather than worshipping or even in terms of inviting them from the tomb to the [p. 233](#) home to celebrate the New Year festivities with us (as an obligation to ease their painful existence in the other world).

While we find that in the Western world, the family gathers together for Christmas, here in the East and especially in Taiwan, the family members make it a point to get together for Chinese New Year. It does not seem necessary that the custom of meeting together for New Years should be changed to Christmas the moment the family become Christians. After all, the Bible does not in any way indicate that such an accommodation should not be made. We should also allow for a visit to the grave of the ancestor during the period of the family reunion, and in keeping with this, the cleaning and repair of the tomb as well as decoration of fresh flowers. We may even add the additional element of praying to God at the tomb-site for the rest of the family members who are alive, especially for a fresh awareness of the meaning of life and the wisdom of living it under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

We may bring in the point here that familiism may be thought of in terms of 'God's forever family' for a wider perspective. As the household of God, the emphasis is on the fact that Christians have been born into God's family, and therefore stand in a special relationship to Him as well as to one another. [Gal. 6:10](#) admonishes: 'So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith'. Here Paul refers first of all, to the doing of good to all men, that is, those within God's family and those that are outside. More than that, we find members of God's family are given the primary task of evangelism by the risen Christ ([Mark 16:15](#); [Luke 24:45-47](#); [Acts 1:8](#)). The whole Church is called upon to share in the God-given task of preaching the Gospel to all men everywhere.

FUNCTIONAL SUBSTITUTES FOR TAIWANESE CONVERTS

Ancestor worship was thought of by missionaries in the Christian Mission only in negative terms, and they did not grapple seriously with the cultural and spiritual void which must be filled should any considerable segment of the population turn to Christ.

It would seem appropriate at this point to bring up some proposals toward adequate functional substitutes for new Taiwanese converts who have a background in ancestor worship.

In Private Homes: Often the experience of Chinese families who were ancestral worshippers is to have a certain sense of insecurity and fear of the unknown when their ancestral tablets are removed from the altar of their living room, when they decide to become Christians. p. 234 Rather than leaving it empty, a tablet of approximately the same size may be put in place of it. This latter tablet has a design with the symbol of the Cross in the middle, probably a picture of Jesus' praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, and Bible verses filling the sides of the tablets, such as [Acts 16:31](#), 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved, you and your household'; or [Joshua 24:15](#), 'But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord'. In the place where originally names of ancestors were inscribed, the words, 'Honour your father and mother, that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth' ([Ex. 20:12](#); [Deut. 5:16](#); [Eph. 6:2, 3](#)) may be inscribed.

In addition, family prayer meetings may be held once a week under the guidance of the pastor at first, with the leadership being shifted to the head of the house (father or grandfather) as soon as he is capable of being independent in his faith in God and has sufficient knowledge of the Bible and its application. While the new tablet may be thought of as a means to help the family affirm their faith during the interim period of their new found faith in Christ, family prayer meetings may be thought of as a regular event.

Christian Memorial in Place of the Ancestral Temple: This proposal implies the need for the construction of a Christian Memorial designed according to Chinese architecture in order to serve the need when large segments of the rural village are won to Christ. The Memorial may be used to conduct memorial services at the time of death, during All Soul's Day Chinese New Year and other occasions, such as birthdays when the folk people remember their dead. Solomon said that 'The memory of the righteous is a blessing' ([Prov. 10:7](#)).

Ancestral temples tend to be symbolic of the Taiwanese sense of historic ethnic identity as well as religious identity. A Christian Memorial could very well help these former animistic folks to realize that they now have a new religious identity in Christ even as they have been 'transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light' ([Col. 1:13-14](#)).

In speaking about the function of animistic folk religion in Taiwan, Gates observes that 'What lends cohesive quality to the Taiwanese as a people is the deep religious feelings which are visualized and experienced in the ceremony ...'.⁹ When memorial services are conducted in the proper manner and exhortation is given in the power of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit will certainly bring about a deeper quality of cohesiveness among His people. Not only exhortations such as 'The eternal p. 235 state of the dead, and the resurrection of believers' may be given, but testimonies relating to faith and trust in God, as well as experiences of God's comfort and guidance for the future may be given to stimulate identification as a people who have experienced new life in Christ.

Visitation of the Tombs: We have found that apart from ancestral worship in the temples and private home, such a practice also occurs at the tombs. The question as to how Christians are to accommodate to such practices has already been dealt with. While we will not compromise with worshipping the deceased and the offering of sacrifices and prayers to them, the other non-animistic aspects may be incorporated into the Christian practice.

CONCLUSION

⁹ Gates, *op. cit.*, p.145.

In review, we find that ancestor worship, especially in relation to its animistic-polytheistic world, is too massive and powerful an entrenchment to be taken by any blind 'general assault'. In our discussion of the social and religious implications of ancestor worship, we find that ancestor worship as an animistic folk religion more or less functions as the centre of life and the common factor which integrates the variegated aspects of peasant life into a coherent whole.

Gates has given us the important insight that little significant encounter has taken place between the Lordship of Christ and the 'powers' of the air, with respect to past dealings in this area. But while he develops his thoughts a great deal in relation to the encounter, he does not tell us how to deal with the situation of contextualization in the event that great numbers of rural folks respond to his kerygmatic approach.

The theological-analytical approach to ancestor worship developed in this article serves only as a guideline for further thought and action, as do the proposals for an adequate functional substitute to fill the spiritual and cultural void that is experienced by those who make their commitment to Christ.

ADDITIONAL ARTICLES ON ANCESTOR WORSHIP

Hung, Daniel M. (1983) 'Mission Blockade: Ancestor Worship', *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 19:1:32-40.

Hwang, Bernard (1977) 'Ancestor Cult Today', *Missiology* 5:3:339-365.

Tung, Feng-yuen (1977) 'An Assessment of the Catholic "Ancestor Worship" Movement in Taiwan' *Ching Feng* 50:16-26.

Lim Guek Eng and her husband are undertaking graduate studies at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, USA. p. 236

Ancestor Worship in the Korean Church

Myung Hyuk Kim

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This article was presented as a paper at the Consultation on A Christian Response to Ancestor Practices, December 26-31, 1983, Taipei, Taiwan. The author outlines the history of Korean Churches' response to ancestor worship and he discusses the future possibilities in the light of the growing secularization of Korean society.

(Editors)

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