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Chinese Death Rituals: Upholding the Value of Filial Piety within the Christian Faith

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Introduction

Singapore is a small island city-state. With an area of approximately 72.1 kilometers and a population of about 5.7 million people, it serves a vibrant melting pot of cultures, languages, and religions. Despite its small size, Singapore has made a global mark as a financial, economic, and technological hub. Because of its strategic location along major trade routes, nestled at the crossroads of Southeast Asia, Singapore began as a trading port. Over the years, its dynamic governance and pro-business policies have fueled remarkable economic growth.

The nation's population comprises a diverse mix of ethnic groups—Chinese, Malay, Indian, and other backgrounds, with the Chinese as the clear majority. Not only is Singapore multi-ethnic, it is also multi-religious. The major religions are Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Taoism.¹ According to the 2020 “Census of Population” report from Singapore’s Department of Statistics, Christians make up 18.9 percent of the country’s population. Among the Chinese religions, Buddhism holds 31.1 percent while Taoism stands at 8.8 percent.²

Ingrained at the core of all these Chinese religions is the practice of ancestor worship. To many Chinese, it is easier to give up the worship of their pantheon of gods than it is to forego ancestor rites. To turn away from ancestor worship is to face the consequence of being ostracized from the family and the community. With this tight hold on the Chinese

¹Joseph Chinyong Liow, “Managing Religious Diversity and Multiculturalism in Singapore,” in *Navigating Differences: Integration in Singapore* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2020), 19.

²“Census of Population 2020 Statistical Release 1: Demographic Characteristics, Education, Language and Religion” (Department of Statistics, Ministry of Trade & Industry, Republic of Singapore, 2020), <https://www.singstat.gov.sg/-/media/files/publications/cop2020/sr1/cop2020sr1.ashx>.

culture and way of life, ancestor veneration is thus recognized as one of the greatest obstacles to the spread of Christianity.³

The notion that Christianity is commonly viewed as a Western religion among the Chinese population in Singapore holds merit within the cultural and historical context of the region. The introduction of Christianity to Asia was often associated with Western colonial expansion and missionary activities, leading to the impression of it as a foreign import. This perception can indeed create certain barriers to evangelization, particularly when it intersects with deeply entrenched traditional practices such as ancestor worship, which are integral to Chinese cultural identity. Furthermore, the impact of Westernization on Singaporean society has naturally brought about changes in cultural values and norms, potentially contributing to a sense of disconnection from traditional Chinese roots, especially among the younger generation.

Many new Chinese converts to Christianity face the tension between their new faith and the traditional family rituals. The interval between the time of their conversion and their water baptism can sometimes be long because of the fear of objections and repercussions from family members, especially with regard to the expectation to continue the rites of ancestor worship. Without a fuller understanding and appreciation of the social aspect of ancestor worship, Christianity can oftentimes dismiss it too casually, contributing to the tension and disconnect for new converts.

Death, together with the rituals associated with it, is not just a collection of events and activities. It is meaningful and expressive and helps the family members to make sense of life.⁴ Death is the beginning of the tradition of ancestor worship. For a new Christian, the death of a family member is a traumatizing and stressful event. Not only do they have to deal with the loss, but they will also be faced with the tension of whether it is permissible for a Christian to participate in Chinese funeral rites without violating their Christian beliefs and values. The animistic nature of ancestor worship, where “spirits depend on human care and need to be propitiated with offerings and rites lest they cause

³James Thayer Addison, “Chinese Ancestor-Worship and Protestant Christianity,” *The Journal of Religion* 5, no. 2 (1925): 143.

⁴Chee Kiong Tong, *Chinese Death Rituals in Singapore* (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2004).

misfortune, illness, and disaster,”⁵ is the usual motivator for ancestor worship. Undergirding this is the Chinese value of filial piety, which is the cornerstone of Chinese culture and tradition. In a funeral setting, all these elements come into play and often put the Christians in a dilemma as to how they can respond sensitively to family and friends.

Thesis Statement

This paper aims to help Christians come to an understanding of the various beliefs and values underlying Chinese funeral rites so that they can meaningfully express the value of filial piety and respect within their Christian faith.

Scope and Limitations

The scope of this paper will focus on the Chinese community in Singapore and the Taoist funeral rites practiced by them. Through this examination of how a Christian can respond to ancestor worship in a funeral context, it is hoped that Chinese Christians will be encouraged in their commitment to their faith and discover how their rich heritage can profoundly enhance and enrich their faith journey.

The study's primary focus on the Chinese community in Singapore and Taoist funeral rites as practiced by them restricts the generalizability of the findings. Chinese funeral traditions can vary significantly across different regions and even within the same country. Therefore, the findings and recommendations of this paper may not fully apply to Chinese Christians in other cultural or geographic contexts. This limitation could be addressed by acknowledging the need for further research in other Chinese communities to explore the diversity of beliefs and practices related to filial piety and respect within Christianity. Due to the page limitations of this paper, the theological issues are not discussed thoroughly and will need further development.

Filial Piety

The earliest appearance of the word for filial piety or *xiao* (孝) is on a bronze vessel that can be dated to the very last years of the Shang

⁵Kirsten W. Endres and Andrea Lauser, “Engaging the Spirit World: Popular Beliefs and Practices in Modern Southeast Asia,” in vol. 5, *Asian Anthropologies* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 1.

dynasty or the earliest years of the Zhou, that is, roughly around 1000 BC.⁶ From antiquity, the concept of filial piety denotes an extreme devotion to parents and is reflected in the daily lives of the people.⁷ It involves how families act, the rituals they follow, their feelings, and thoughts related to taking care of and respecting their parents, older family members, and ancestors, whether they are alive or have passed away.

Filial piety has its roots in Confucian ideas and is a valuable quality to possess in Confucian philosophy. It is cultivated when a person develops a deep love and care for their parents, revering them with honour and respect. Not only does it bring pride to the parents, but this devout loyalty in turn also enhances the children's dignity and identity.⁸ Filial piety as expressed in the *Analects*,⁹ is considered the most important virtue,¹⁰ and Confucius considers it as mankind's highest and central value. It not only expresses itself towards living parents, but filial piety also continues in the form of reverent funeral and memorial rites for deceased parents.¹¹

This aspiration is a cultural value among the Singaporean Chinese and a moral virtue endorsed and promoted by the Singapore government. "The ideas of respecting the elderly and of children looking after their aged parents remain strong as an ideal among the Chinese in Singapore."¹² However, with its fast economic growth, urbanization drive, and modernization of Singapore, the government was concerned that the ethnic group was becoming "westernised" and losing their culture. In the 1970s, the government implemented an educational policy that taught Confucian ethics together with other mainstream religions

⁶Donald Holzman, "The Place of Filial Piety in Ancient China," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 118, no. 2 (1998): 186, <https://doi.org/10.2307/605890>.

⁷Holzman, 190.

⁸Phua Voon Chin and Jason Loh, "Filial Piety and Intergenerational Co-Residence: The Case of Chinese Singaporeans," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 36, no. 3/4 (2008): 660.

⁹The "Analects" (Chinese: 论语, *Lünyü*) is a collection of sayings and ideas attributed to Confucius (Kong Fuzi or Kongzi), an influential Chinese philosopher and teacher who lived during the Spring and Autumn Period of ancient China (around 551-479 BC). The *Analects* is one of the most important texts in Confucianism and Chinese philosophy.

¹⁰Ryan Nichols, "The Origins and Effects of Filial Piety (Xiao): How Culture Solves an Evolutionary Problem for Parents," *Journal of Cognition & Culture* 13, no. 3/4 (September 2013): 204, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685373-12342092>.

¹¹David Moonseok Park and Julian C Müller, "The Challenge That Confucian Filial Piety Poses for Korean Churches," *HTS Theological Studies* 70, no. 2 (2014): 3, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i2.1959>.

¹²Voon Chin and Loh, "Filial Piety and Intergenerational Co-Residence," 664.

in secondary schools.¹³ To promote strong family and intergenerational ties, the government launched a Family Values campaign in 1994. The “Five Shared Family Values” clause that would enhance the well-being of families and undergird the progress of Singapore were identified as:

- (1) love, care and concern
- (2) mutual respect
- (3) filial responsibility
- (4) commitment
- (5) communication.¹⁴

Embracing these five values would not only enhance a family’s well-being but would also serve as the foundation to facilitate Singapore’s continued progress. The ideas of respecting the elderly and of children looking after their aged parents remain strong as an ideal among the Chinese in Singapore.¹⁵

Besides running campaigns and educating the younger generation on cultural values, a filial piety law was passed in Singapore that states:

Any person domiciled and resident in Singapore who is of or above 60 years of age and who is unable to maintain himself or herself adequately (called in this section the parent) may apply to the Tribunal for an order that one or more of the person’s children pay him or her a monthly allowance or any other periodical payment or a lump sum for his or her maintenance.¹⁶

Two customs that are traditional yardsticks used by the Chinese to express filial piety are co-residence and monthly allowance.¹⁷ In traditional Chinese families, the eldest son will usually take on the responsibility of looking after his aged parents by staying together under one roof, together with his own family and children. This will create a three-generational family household that is the ideal symbol of social

¹³Terence Chong, “Christian Activism in Singapore,” in *Navigating Differences: Integration in Singapore* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2020), 39-40.

¹⁴Ah Keng Kau et al., *Understanding Singaporeans: Values, Lifestyles, Aspirations and Consumption Behaviours* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2006), 17.

¹⁵Voon Chin and Loh, “Filial Piety and Intergenerational Co-Residence,” 664.

¹⁶“Maintenance of Parents Act 1995 - Singapore Statutes Online,” <https://sso.agc.gov.sg:5443/Act/MPA1995>. (accessed September 9, 2023)

¹⁷Voon Chin and Loh, “Filial Piety and Intergenerational Co-Residence,” 669.

family success and self-fulfilment.¹⁸ Because of the scarcity of land in Singapore, most families stay in public housing or HDB flats (apartments) built by the Housing and Development Board (HDB), Singapore's public housing authority. With an exploding population, most of these flats are small, comfortable living spaces for small families. To encourage the extended family unit to stay together, several incentive schemes by the HDB were launched. Married children applying for new government housing were given incentives to choose the location of their new homes to be near to their parents. This model will help families stay in close proximity and promote bonding where children can easily return to their parents' home for meals, or grandparents can be tapped upon to babysit the grandchildren. "Many practices may demonstrate filial piety but inter-generational co-residence remains as an ideal because of its history as the main manifestation of filial piety."¹⁹ Besides staying near to one another, adult children will usually give a monthly allowance to their parents as a sign of honour and filial piety. "Other forms of expression include bringing goods when visiting parents, taking them on family trips locally or abroad, taking them out to eat, meeting to have long conversations, and simply being together in a house."²⁰ "Regardless of whether filial piety is practised or is merely symbolic, or that its practised form varies, filial piety serves as the 'glue' that binds the family together."²¹

Ancestor Worship

Ancestor worship has been around since ancient China, shaping thought and behaviour for millennia. Evidence of ancestor veneration rituals and activities has been discovered in archaeological sites dating as early as the Neolithic period. These artifacts point to an evolution from group ancestor veneration to individual ancestor worship.²²

Such practices are also closely intertwined with the classical Confucianism value of filial piety, which emphasizes respect, obedience, and care for one's parents and ancestors. Within Confucianism's system of ethics and philosophy, ancestor worship is recognized as an expression of filial piety.²³ The significance of ancestor worship in Confucianism lies

¹⁸Ibid., 662.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid., 670.

²¹Voon Chin and Loh, 671.

²²Li Liu, "Who Were the Ancestors? The Origins of Chinese Ancestral Cult and Racial Myths," *Antiquity* 73, no. 281 (September 1999): 602-3.

²³Chee-Beng Tan, "Chinese Religion in Malaysia: A General View," *Asian Folklore Studies* 42, no. 2 (1983): 222, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1178483>.

in its role in fostering family unity, social regulation, and the enduring connection between the living and the dead.

Confucius was known to be an agnostic and indifferent to the religious beliefs and the supernatural while at the same time, preoccupied with upholding codes of etiquette.²⁴ He believed perfect harmony and equilibrium in society could be achieved when the relationship and behaviour towards one another are correct. Especially in the paired relationships:

1. Father to son (kindness from father/piety from son [*filial piety*])
2. Elder brother to younger brother (gentility from elder/humility from younger)
3. Husband to wife (righteous behavior from husband/obedience from wife)
4. Elder to junior (consideration from elder/deference from junior)
5. Ruler to a subject (benevolence from ruler/loyalty from a subject)²⁵

Remembering and representing one's ancestors therefore demonstrates deep respect and devotion to one's lineage, serving as a way of maintaining strong connections to one's roots.²⁶ Traditional customs associated with ancestor worship bring entire families together, enabling them to express their collective identity. These rituals address the social and psychological needs of individuals and provide a way to instil moral values which in turn reinforce proper behaviour. In this way early ancestor worship was more of a family institution and social custom verses a religion; for the living rather than the dead.²⁷ Only after the death of Confucius did his disciples gradually mix his teachings with the religious practices already existing in China. Therefore today, Confucius is deified and worshipped as one of the many Chinese deities.²⁸

²⁴Garry R. Morgan, *Understanding World Religions in 15 Minutes a Day* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2012), 126.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 128–129.

²⁶Seok-Choon Lew, Woo-Young Choi, and Hye Suk Wang, "Confucian Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism in Korea: The Significance of Filial Piety," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 11, no. 2 (2011): 175.

²⁷Henry Newton Smith, "Chinese Ancestor Practices and Christianity: Toward a Viable Contextualization of Christian Ethics in a Hong Kong Setting" (Ph.D. diss., Fort Worth, TX, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1987), 78-79.

²⁸Tan, "Chinese Religion in Malaysia," 223.

Today, the rituals and practices associated with ancestor worship are more religious than veneration. Soul or *ling-hun* is “central to the study of Chinese folk religion.”²⁹ The underlying belief behind these rituals is that the souls of the deceased continue their existence after death as ‘ancestors’ and are able to interact with and influence the lives of their descendants. “The ancestors behave, in certain contexts, much as normal living people are expected to behave, and they have distinct personalities within the bounds of this normality, as do the living.”³⁰ Ancestral rites are necessary and must be carried out by family members to ensure the continued well-being of ancestors as well as to secure blessings and favour for themselves. Ancestors are viewed as having the power to influence, protect, bring good luck, help friends, and harm enemies.³¹

Different cultures have different sets of criteria to define ancestorhood. In Chinese folk religion, ancestors are seen as the souls of one’s paternal forebears. If the deceased were exceptionally powerful or praiseworthy in life, their soul could become a deity. Otherwise, if they lacked descendants or died a violent death, then their soul would become a ghost.

The ancestral worship and filial piety landscape in Singapore is transforming due to several influential factors. The relentless emphasis on education in Singapore has propelled many individuals, including the Chinese population, towards a more secular and critical-thinking mindset. As the country continues to urbanize and modernize, traditional practices often associated with rural settings are gradually giving way to contemporary urban lifestyles. Secularization, in tandem with globalization and cultural adaptation, has led to a shift in priorities, with some individuals placing less emphasis on ancestral worship and more on secular values. This evolving landscape is particularly evident in the generational divide, where younger Singaporean Chinese tend to adopt more modern and secular worldviews compared to their elders. Despite these changes, it’s important to note the coexistence of traditional and contemporary practices as a hallmark of Singapore’s multicultural society. Therefore today we see many individuals and families choosing to blend elements of both old and new in their expressions of filial piety and ancestral reverence.

²⁹Stevan Harrell, “The Concept of Soul in Chinese Folk Religion,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 38, no. 3 (1979): 519, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2053785>.

³⁰Harrell, 527.

³¹Park and Müller, “The Challenge That Confucian Filial Piety Poses for Korean Churches,” 2.

Taoism

Taoism, as we understand it today, encompasses a multifaceted realm within Chinese culture and spirituality. This term carries a dual connotation, referring either to the Taoist religion or the Taoist school of philosophy. In the context of this paper, we will specifically focus on Taoism as a religion.

The origins of Taoism as a formalized religion can be traced back to a period coinciding with the spread of Buddhism in China. At first, Taoist religion and Buddhism reinforced one another mutually. Buddhist concepts were expressed in Taoist terms while Taoist religion incorporated many ideas from Buddhism.³² Taoism also emerged from the rich tapestry of indigenous beliefs and mystical practices that characterized ancient China, including astrology, almanac studies, geomancy (Feng Shui), and divination. What sets Taoism apart is its syncretic nature, as it readily incorporates elements from other belief systems, particularly Buddhism, along with various folk religions. Central to Taoism is its main concern over immortality and the avoidance of death. Within the realm of Taoism, a pantheon of deities takes centre stage, and those who dedicate themselves to its practices are commonly referred to as Taoist priests.

In Singapore, most Taoist priests are not formally trained but learn the trade from their fathers or from other Taoist priests who have taken them as disciples. Without formal training, most Singaporean Taoist priests lack the theological aspect of the religion and tend to be more superstitious and materialistic. Most of them are also part-timers.³³

One of the distinctive features of Taoism is the highly personalized nature of its religious expressions. The sacred text that serves as the foundational guide for Taoism is the *Dao De Jing* (道德经). However, it is essential to acknowledge that Taoism is not a monolithic or homogenous faith. Rather, it thrives on diversity, with different Taoist priests offering their interpretations of this revered text. Each Taoist priest, guided by their individual beliefs and spiritual journey, forms a unique connection with a specific set of patron deities. As a result, Taoism exists as a complex tapestry of beliefs, practices, and rituals, marked by a remarkable degree of fluidity and individuality.³⁴ In essence, Taoism is a religion that does not fit neatly into a box. There is not one

³²Tan, "Chinese Religion in Malaysia," 224.

³³Vivian Lim Tsui Shan, "Specializing in Death: The Case of the Chinese in Singapore," *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 23, no. 2 (1995): 72.

³⁴Tan, "Chinese Religion in Malaysia," 228-32.

Taoist sect, but many. This religion is as diverse as the immense number of deities it includes.

In Singapore, Taoism is listed as one of the country's major religions, among Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Although Taoism and Buddhism are listed as distinct religions, most Chinese practice a mix of both in their religious rituals. However, those groups professing Taoism as their religion have the lowest adherents and in my observation, their percentage has been on the decline for many years. This waning could be due to the influence of several factors such as modernisation, secularisation, higher education, changing worldviews, and generational differences.

Taoist Funeral Rites

Death Rituals

Death is a profoundly distressing occurrence, and if not managed appropriately, there can be negative consequences. Funerals or death rites are therefore needed to help families get through the separation and make sense of the meaning of life and death. According to Hiebert, Shaw, and Tienou, the tradition of death rites serves several purposes:³⁵

1. It makes sense of the loss and gives direction for the next steps.
2. It provides a set of rituals that help the family to mourn, grieve, and continue the relationship with the deceased.
3. It helps to define the new social order for familial relationships.
4. It transforms the deceased into ancestors, to continue the mutual benefits for the living and the dead.

According to Howell and Paris, rituals can be classified into three significant categories—rites of intensification, rites of affliction, and rites of passage. Rites of intensification involve making aspects of society, beliefs, values, or behaviours more vivid, heightened, or authentic than they are in everyday life. Conversely, rites of affliction are rituals aimed at easing suffering or solving a problem. Finally, rites of passage or life-

³⁵Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 102–3.

cycle ceremonies transition individuals or groups from one stage of life to another.³⁶

Funeral death rituals are rites of passage and are important because, in the uncertainty of life after death, these rituals can bring family members a sense of security and predictability. Through religious rituals, people can then make sense of the world around them.³⁷ In the case of the departed loved ones, funeral death rituals transit the departed from parents or elders into the higher hierarchy of ancestors. And as long as the descendants continue to remember and represent their ancestors, the eternal existence of ancestors is confirmed.³⁸

Preparation for Death

Although discussion of death is a taboo topic in Chinese culture, it is not uncommon for families to purchase and reserve popular spaces with “good fengshui” in temples, clan ancestral halls, or funeral homes to house ancestral tablets. This practice is popular in Singapore today as the family homes are very small apartment spaces. Most families have difficulty fitting a family altar table in the main living room. As daily offerings or sacrifices to the ancestors are required, the younger generation often prefers to turn these rituals over to specialists such as temple monks and funeral home staff. They ensure daily rituals are kept up and even organise important ancestral veneration and worship events on important days such as the Qingming festival and the death anniversaries of loved ones.

As the loved one nears death, family members are expected to be present to bid their final farewell to them. Not being present connotes the idea of being unfilial. Even children who are out of the country are expected to return in time. However, pregnant women are not required to be at the bedside of the dying for fear that the spirit of the dead might enter the unborn child and possess it.³⁹

Preparation of the Body

As with Taoist customs and tradition, it is usually the eldest son and daughter-in-law who will do the ritual cleansing of the body. “This ritual

³⁶Brian M. Howell and Jenell Williams Paris, *Introducing Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 189-91.

³⁷Howell and Paris, 183.

³⁸Lew, Choi, and Wang, “Confucian Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism in Korea,” 175.

³⁹Tong, *Chinese Death Rituals in Singapore*, chap. 2, under “Preparation for death.”

washing is to purify and prepare the dead for their journey through hell and their final passage to heaven.”⁴⁰ The blessed water for cleansing is to be purchased from the Earth Deity using joss paper.⁴¹ The deceased is then brought to the funeral home for the embalming process. The children will choose the deceased’s best set of clothes for the deceased to wear. Red colour will usually be omitted as red is meant for auspicious and joyous occasions. Alternatively, in some dialect traditions, a “longevity costume” (寿衣) is used to dress the deceased. This is to show that the deceased lived a long and good life. The body is then placed in the coffin together with personal articles that they would usually wear or carry around (spectacles, dentures, comb, etc.). A mirror guides their way, a bag of rice ensures they won’t go hungry, and paper money (joss paper) for use in the Netherworld all accompany the departed. To further prevent them from becoming a hungry spirit, the eldest son symbolically feeds the deceased a spoonful of rice. Additionally, a pearl is gently placed in their mouth to protect their journey into the afterlife. The encoffining process concludes with the lid of the coffin secured by four nails. A fifth nail, known as the “posterity nail,” is then added by the eldest son atop the coffin, symbolizing that the departed will have many generations of descendants who will continue to honor and remember them.⁴²

Funeral Wake

Once the loved one has passed on, the funeral home from which the family has engaged will handle all funeral arrangements. This will include the three, five, or seven nights of the funeral wake where family and friends are given the opportunity to come and pay their final respects to the deceased and to show support and express condolence to the grieving family members. Traditionally in China, the wake could potentially last for years and an auspicious date and place had to be selected for burial. Today, however, due to various economic and social reasons, wakes are typically between three to seven days. In Chinese belief, even numbers signify completeness and odd numbers signify continuity. Hence odd number of days are selected for the duration of the wake to show that

⁴⁰Chee Kiong Tong, “The Inheritance of the Dead: Mortuary Rituals among the Chinese in Singapore,” *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 21, no. 2 (1993): 133.

⁴¹Tong, chap. 2, under “Preparation for Death.”

⁴²Tong, “The Inheritance of the Dead,” 133-34.

the deceased loved one will continue to “live” on and perform important roles in the family.⁴³

The average Chinese individual believes in the existence of three souls for each person. Through funeral rites, one of the souls of the deceased is assisted in their journey to purgatory. This is achieved by burning paper replicas of material objects to help the deceased reduce their suffering, through bribery of hell officials and by procuring a better future life for them. A second soul resides with the dead body and receives special attention during major festivals such as Qing Ming. The third soul resides in the ancestral tablet placed on the home altar, where it enjoys regular care as part of the family.

A reciprocal connection is established between the living and the deceased, wherein both are interdependent. The underlying reasons that propel these rituals are a general fear of the dead, the hope of receiving blessings, and a wish to guarantee the well-being of those who have passed on. Respect, appreciation, and love for deceased parents along with a longing to perpetuate their legacy and memories all serve as powerful motivators behind the customs of venerating ancestors. Furthermore, the conviction in the ancestors’ reliance on their living descendants for sustenance in the afterlife significantly underscores the nature of these ceremonial practices. All of these constitute an expression of continued filial piety. For the living, the desire to concretely express their love, compassion and remembrance of the departed loved ones is motive for participating in these funeral rites as well as ancestral sacrifices.

Mourning Clothes

The moment following the death of the parent or elder, immediate family members have to don mourning clothes. All the family members will don either black or white tops and pants. On the sleeve of each top, a small square piece of cloth will be pinned on for the entire duration of the funeral wake. From the differentiated colour of the cloth patch, outsiders will be able to determine the relationship of the family member to the deceased. On the final night of the wake, more elaborate mourning clothes will be worn. Outerwear made of coarse materials will be worn on top of the T-shirts and pants. Again, differentiated coarse clothing will be given to different members of the family to denote their relationship to the deceased. A sash will be tied around the waist of the family members.

⁴³Chee Kiong Tong and Lily Kong, “Religion and Modernity: Ritual Transformations and the Reconstruction of Space and Time,” *Social & Cultural Geography* 1, no. 1 (January 2000): 40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649369950133476>.

This sash cannot be knotted but tucked into the garment as the belief is that a knot will signify that the deceased will be trapped and unable to complete their journey.⁴⁴

During the wake, Taoist monks will also be engaged to perform religious services to help the dead transit to the afterlife. Services are carried out with family members to transfer merit to the deceased spiritual account and assist their progress through purgatory. With the belief that the deceased still needs the usual necessities of life, burning paper replicas of the goods needed to ease one's sufferings in the underworld is done during the funeral service: houses, servants, cars, clothes, money, handphones, aircon, television and so forth.

Burial and Cremation

On the final day of the funeral wake, friends, family, and relatives get ready to send the deceased on the final journey to the grave site or columbarium. Usually, a Taoist priest will be present to perform the burial rituals. Together with a short period of chanting, food offerings will be placed on the altar in front of the coffin. The eldest son will kneel and offer each dish of food to the deceased to eat before the journey. Then the family will kneel beside the coffin while the rest of the friends and relatives pay their final respects to the deceased. The procession of walking behind the hearse begins as it slowly moves out of the funeral site. One superstition is that any person other than the family who touches the coffin will be struck with bad luck.⁴⁵ That is why all the people will avert their faces and not look at the coffin as it is being placed into the hearse. In Singapore, most of the deceased will be cremated and the ashes put into an urn to be kept in a columbarium, temple, clan hall, or at home.

Biblical/Theological Issues

Can the Dead Return?

In Chinese beliefs, ancestors have the power to influence (either good or bad), can eat the sacrificed food, and their spirits can reside

⁴⁴Smith, "Chinese Ancestor Practices and Christianity: Toward a Viable Contextualization of Christian Ethics in a Hong Kong Setting," 33-34.

⁴⁵Tong, *Chinese Death Rituals in Singapore*, chap. 2, under "The Process of Death."

in the ancestral tablets. Fear of this power to harm and desire for their power to bless are motivating factors for ancestor worship.

In Christianity however, God is the sovereign power over all creation. He who gave life is the only one who can take life. After death, Christians are immediately brought into the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 5:8). For the wicked, they will enter the underworld called Sheol in the Old Testament (hades in the New Testament). There they will suffer in torment until the final judgment where they will be raised to stand before Christ. Ultimately, they will be cast into Gehenna, the lake of fire.⁴⁶

Therefore, the dead are cut off from the living without any connection between them and no power to curse or bless the living. They cannot return. We are also not to be in communication with the departed. “Many of the ceremonies performed for the deceased ancestor before the burial and memorial services after the burial fall into the category of necromancy and being in contact with the spirits.”⁴⁷ But God can sometimes bring them back for his specific purpose. For example, the raising of Lazarus in John 11:38-44 and the spirit of Samuel in 1 Samuel 28.⁴⁸ For the Christians, we await the blessed return of our Lord Jesus Christ that will signify the time of reunion for all the saints of God, the living and the resurrected dead. Our ancestors might not be with us now but eventually, there will be a great reunion in the new heaven and new earth.

Biblical filial piety

“Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you” (Exodus 20:12 NIV 2011). Honour is filial piety and scriptural filial piety is directed towards the living and not the dead. Both the Old and New Testaments talk about honouring parents and the results that follow. Unlike ancestor worship, the motives, beliefs, and actions that undergird biblical filial piety are love and respect. For Chinese Christians, there is the same need for a concrete expression of remembering and representing their loved ones

⁴⁶Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “Dead, Abode of The,” in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), 591-593.

⁴⁷Jeffrey Oh, “The Gospel-Culture Encounter at Chinese Funeral Rites,” *Journal of Asian Mission* 4, no. 2 (2002): 197.

⁴⁸Dave Johnson, *Theology in Context: A Case Study in the Philippines* (Baguio City, Philippines: APTS Press, 2013), 112-14.

and especially showing their filial piety even after death.⁴⁹ Often, the pressure from family members, shame, and guilt drive Christians to participate in the funeral rites and ancestor worship rituals.

Power Encounters

“At their core, folk religions are human efforts to control life.”⁵⁰ The purpose of ancestral worship is to gain the power to manipulate outcomes in life, to trade sacrifices and offerings for blessings and well-being, and to have control over one’s enemies.

For the Christian believer, there is a need to understand the concept of power in God’s Kingdom. How the world views power is in opposition to God’s view. The world desires power to demonstrate superiority and overcome resistance. Sometimes Christians, in their zeal to show God’s superiority through powerful encounters with demonic forces in the form of healing and deliverance, forget that his power is based on his love. The Cross is a good example of this. Instead of hate and retribution, love and redemption powerfully overcome the enemy. When there is a need to have powerful encounters with Satan and his cohorts, God will empower Christians with the necessary gifts and resources. Under submission to God, the believer can confidently manifest God’s power without fear. The only caution to heed is not to go after the sensational and use this power of God for one’s personal glory and prestige.⁵¹

Bridging the Cultural Differences

In today’s context, ancestor worship is becoming more of a social ritual supporting the Chinese sense of tradition. Although it still carries religious elements and superstitious practices, the social element of the ritual is the main draw for families to come together, especially during major festivals.

Before examining the re-interpretation and recommendations for the Christian response to the funeral rites as discussed above, one must first look at the four adaptation theories proposed by Smith.⁵²

⁴⁹Alexander Jebadu, “Ancestral Veneration and the Possibility of Its Incorporation into the Christian Faith,” *Exchange* 36, no. 3 (2007): 278-79.

⁵⁰Hiebert, Shaw, and Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices*, 371.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 373-4.

⁵²Smith, “Chinese Ancestor Practices and Christianity: Toward a Viable Contextualization of Christian Ethics in a Hong Kong Setting,” 90-163.

The Displacement model strongly believes that ancestor worship is wrong, viewing it as idolatry or influenced by evil forces. According to this view, Christians should completely reject all ancestor-related practices. It suggests that Western Christian civilization is superior to Chinese culture and argues that fear drives people to perform ancestral rituals to avoid misfortune and divine punishment. This model encourages a confrontational approach, insisting on the absolute authority of Christ.

The Substitution model recognises the social and emotional value of ancestor worship but still sees it as incompatible with Christianity. It suggests replacing certain aspects of ancestor worship with Christian-friendly practices. For instance, instead of traditional offerings, Christians can visit and tidy the graves of their ancestors during festivals like Qing Ming, placing flowers on the graves and observing a moment of silence. However, critics worry that these substitutes might become shallow and miss the deeper meanings of the rituals.

The Fulfilment model takes a different approach. It believes that Christian faith can complement and fulfil the positive aspects of ancestor worship while discarding the superstitious elements. This model emphasizes finding common ground between Christian values and aspects of ancestor worship, such as the importance of virtuous living, the Golden Rule, and filial piety. It aims to enrich and complete the meaning behind these rituals and sees continuity between Christian ethics and Chinese values.

The Accommodation model views ancestral practices as primarily social and ethical rather than religious. It seeks to understand and appreciate different cultures without imposing Christian values. This model emphasizes the ethical motives behind ancestral rites and looks for commonality with Christian principles. It promotes respect and tolerance for other cultures and allows Christians to participate in some traditional practices while avoiding syncretism (blending different religious beliefs). However, it's cautious about practices that may still carry religious connotations, as they could lead to confusion or idolatry.

Reinterpretation of Funeral Rites

The approach that will be best suited for responding to the Chinese funeral rites and ancestor worship is one of contextualization. In the biblical and theological context, Christianity and culture are not exclusive entities; rather, they intersect and intertwine in profound ways. The Bible itself reflects the idea that faith is lived out within cultural contexts. Throughout Scripture, we find instances of God engaging with diverse cultures, speaking to people in their languages and through their unique

traditions. The incarnation of Jesus Christ, who lived as a cultural being in his time, further illustrates this point. The Apostle Paul's teachings emphasize the transformative power of Christ's message within various cultural settings. He famously stated, 'I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some' (1 Corinthians 9:22). This verse highlights the adaptability of Christianity to different cultures while preserving its core truths. Thus, the Bible suggests that Christianity, far from excluding culture, can thrive within it, embracing the richness of human diversity while conveying eternal truths.

As the loved one approaches death, it is important that the Christian family member be present, especially if it is one's parents or grandparents. It is a tremendously sad and stressful time for the family and might be a fearful time for the dying family member. If the majority of family members are of a different religion, it is best to be respectful and begin to internally pray for the peace of God to reign in the place, among the family, and especially for the one who is dying. As for the belief that pregnant ladies cannot be around the dying for fear of the spirit going into the unborn child upon death, the response to this will depend upon the context. If she is a Christian and is the daughter or granddaughter of the dying person and has a close relationship, she cannot be denied the opportunity to be with her loved one. As Christians, we believe that the child is a gift of God and as the Holy Spirit is in the mother, the child is protected as well and no evil can come upon either of them without God's permission.

In the preparation for death, if the family opts for a Taoist funeral, then most of the elements involved in preparing the dead will be religious and should be avoided by the Christian. However, the Christian can still participate by helping to choose the favourite clothes to be worn by the deceased and accompanying the family in selecting the coffin and photograph. Should the Christian be the eldest son of the deceased and be expected to perform the religious cleaning of the body, they can respectfully explain and decline and give the right to the alternative person.

During the funeral wake, the Christian should participate in non-religious elements. In the Old Testament, God commanded his people to wear sackcloth on occasions of grief, sorrow, and repentance. The death of a loved one is an occasion of grief. "Black and white clothing is fairly 'universal' mourning attire and is a cultural rite that Christians can abide by to show our love and respect to our deceased ancestor."⁵³ Black or white tops and pants can be worn and the cloth patch pinned on the

⁵³Oh, "The Gospel-Culture Encounter at Chinese Funeral Rites," 198.

sleeve is permissible as these have no religious connotations except the designation of how the family member is related to the deceased. This is to help those coming to pay their respects to family members during the wake. The elaborate course outerwear is to be avoided as these are worn for the final night's funeral rituals conducted and led by the Taoist priests. Christian members should not participate. Instead, they can still express solidarity with the family by offering to take care of the guests at the wake.

Bowing in Chinese and other East Asian settings is an act of paying respect and showing honour or greeting someone who is older or in a higher authority. During a funeral wake and especially during the religious portion of the wake service conducted by the Taoist priests, bowing is a form of worship to deities and the deceased. However, there are other occasions during the funeral wake when bowing is devoid of religious components and is in the context of paying respect—when visitors come and pay their final respect, they will typically stand in front of the coffin and bow their heads slightly. Holding or offering joss sticks or offering of joss sticks are also to be avoided as this is intimately associated with idolatrous worship of gods and the deceased.⁵⁴

Because of the folk belief that the spirit of the deceased is still residing in the physical body and that the spirit has to be helped into the other world through religious rituals, Christians should silently pray for their living family members, that God's benevolence and kindness will help to preserve them and allow opportunities in the future for them to respond to the Gospel.

Conclusion

Churches should continue to explore, examine, and find points of connection between Christianity and Chinese culture. However, simply prohibiting ancestral worship is to leave a vacuum without solving the problem. Efforts must be made to help Chinese Christians perpetuate the values of filial piety, remembrance of the dead, and unity of the family.⁵⁵

As a start, the church should encourage its members to continue participating in the family's commemorative rites concerning the departed loved one. As death is always a time of great emotional stress and anxiety, the Christian must develop a sensitivity to the family's need to express grief in tangible actions. To help Christians express filial piety wholeheartedly and without being burdened by ignorance of

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Addison, "Chinese Ancestor-Worship and Protestant Christianity," 147.

Christianity's beliefs and values, the church must help contextualize and provide clear guidelines.

Through continued study and examination of Scripture and Singaporean Chinese culture, greater clarity and guidance will help Chinese Christians navigate this very important value of filial piety within their culture and tradition, especially in times of great emotional stress and grief from the passing on of loved ones. A sensitive Christian approach to funeral rites with a clear understanding of what is religious versus what is cultural can lovingly bridge the gap between the Gospel and ancestor worship.

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