

Probing the Grassroots of Mission in Asia

I didn't immediately notice certain Asian realities when I first encountered them. My roommate during seminary was a brilliant student from a Buddhist family, Hwa Chen, who was preparing for ministry in the Methodist church of Malaysia. I recall how we would pray together for his Buddhist father, and how years later the news arrived that Chen's father had turned to Christ just before he died. I was unable to sit with Chen and confirm any of this before he tragically died in an automobile accident. I now see that Chen's prayers were interlaced with Asian values of family, the role of a father, and realities surrounding the honor given to one's lineage.

Chen's sensibilities about his father, although transformed by his Christian faith, might have resonated with some of the same ethical intensity common to Asian ancestral regard. His brother, Yung, who now serves as bishop of the Methodist church in Malaysia, might have represented Chen's perspective on ancestral veneration when he wrote:

Chinese ancestral rites have both a religious and social significance. To participate in it in its original form does involve a religious act which, as it appears to me, would conflict with the demands of the gospel. But to neglect it all together would rightly incur cultural condemnation of being disrespectful to parents.¹

Hwa Chen would most likely have experienced the conundrum Yung so candidly illustrates:

...often the [Christian's] lack of overt mourning, within a culture that demands it, has led to comments, actually overheard at a funeral, like: "It is better to die as a dog than as a Christian."²

The Asian authors in this issue readdress the realities that persist around these ancestral rites. They want to explore how we might reinterpret the religious, social and spiritual realities behind these rituals. The first installment of David Lim's article gives a concise history of this controversy in Christian mission, which then provides the backdrop for Mantae Kim's bold reevaluation of how these rites are viewed in Protestant Korea. We also include Mitsuo Fukuda's broader perspective on the way we engage the spiritual realities of Japan (p. 139). These three articles were originally presentations at the annual meetings of the Asia Society for Frontier Mission (ASFM), and each stretches our more traditional paradigms—beware the easily offended!

There are good reasons why these ASFM presentations ought to be heard. First, traditional religious rituals are always affected by deeper changes in a society's

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consciousness. The pace of secularization goes unabated in East Asia, evident in the great rise of atheism. The taken-for-granted notions of reality behind these Asian religious traditions are under great stress from a modernizing world, such that we should expect a "struggle for the real" on all religious fronts.³ There's a common struggle to maintain one's traditional religiosity, yet, alternatively, statistics indicate that there's a rise in participation at ancestral rites over the past few decades.⁴ We recognize these reactions to secularization in other current events, how it stimulates violence and catalyzes new fundamentalisms. As secular forces continue to impact the religious consciousness of Asia, they create a gradual drift into less vital "religious-mindedness" or a radicalization of threatened traditions. How Asia responds to this crisis of worldview will determine the grip of any socio-religious ritual like these ancestor rites.

Secondly, fresh "self-theologizing" is appearing in Asia. It was Chen's brother, Yung, who originally called for an exegetical and theological reexamination of the "hidden presuppositions" behind the elite Western theologies transposed

onto Asia.⁵ But it's Simon Chan's recent book, *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up*,⁶ that outlines a new theological method for appreciating the grassroots religiosity of Asian family life, and leads him to reorient how we view the supposed stumbling block of ancestral rites (see Editorial Reflections). All to say, this ferment among Asian theologians runs in tandem with the missiology of these *IJFM* articles.

A third reason is simply that the Asian churches are taking some bold intrepid steps to reach beyond their traditional worlds. Herb Hofer reminds us that we can so easily marginalize the primary communal realities which segment traditional religious worlds (p. 147). It's a timely reminder when considering the value of family at the base of ancestor rites. Paul Pennington reflects Hofer's point in his case study of the church crossing into another religious world (p.129). He offers a new apostolic paradigm which challenges how we have traditionally understood Christian identity within Hindu families and communities. It's a must read, and its original presentation

at this year's ISFM was powerful. Wish many of you could have been there.

We commend the ASFM to you as readers, and their dedication to foster new Kingdom perspective on these old issues (ASFM Report, p. 138). John Kim, the present director, will continue to support a platform that speaks to the unresolved issues of reaching the vast peoples of Asia, and that association will push for missiological paradigms that will bear fruit beyond traditional Christendom. We're blessed by their partnership.

In Him,



Brad Gill
Senior Editor, *IJFM*

Endnotes

¹ Hwa Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?* (Wipf and Stock: Eugene, OR 1997) p. 229.

² *Ibid.*, 229.

³ Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed* (University of Chicago Press: 1968) pp. 90–117.

⁴ Chuck Lowe, *Honoring God and Family* (Billy Graham Center: Wheaton, IL 2001) pp. 26–27.

⁵ Hwa Yung, p. 232.

⁶ Reviewed in *IJFM* 31:3 (2014), p. 158.

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- ☞ promote intergenerational dialogue between senior and junior mission leaders;
- ☞ cultivate an international fraternity of thought in the development of frontier missiology;
- ☞ highlight the need to maintain, renew, and create mission agencies as vehicles for frontier missions;
- ☞ encourage multidimensional and interdisciplinary studies;
- ☞ foster spiritual devotion as well as intellectual growth; and
- ☞ advocate "A Church for Every People."

Mission frontiers, like other frontiers, represent boundaries or barriers beyond which we must go yet beyond which we may not be able to see clearly and boundaries which may even be disputed or denied. Their study involves the discovery and evaluation of the unknown or even the reevaluation of the known. But unlike other frontiers, mission frontiers is a subject specifically concerned to explore and exposit areas and ideas and insights related to the glorification of God in all the nations (peoples) of the world, "to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God." (Acts 26:18)

Subscribers and other readers of the **IJFM** (due to ongoing promotion) come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Mission professors, field missionaries, young adult mission mobilizers, college librarians, mission executives, and mission researchers all look to the **IJFM** for the latest thinking in frontier missiology.