

AUTHORITY IN A COLLECTIVIST CHURCH:
IDENTIFYING CRITICAL CONCERNS FOR A CHINESE ECCLESIOLOGY

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How might different cultural conceptions of authority or leadership shape one’s ecclesiology?

The differences between China and the West are well known. It is inevitable that cultural perspectives of authority will affect how churches are formed and led. Western Christians face the potential of ignoring important features that mark a collectivistic, honor-oriented society like China. While many today talk about contextualization and theology, very little has been written to explore the potential opportunities and challenges that this eastern context affords the Church. If one is not careful, either cultural presuppositions on authority will be uncritically absorbed into the Chinese church or western ecclesiologies and views of leadership will prevail without careful consideration for the costs. It should be recognized that because the Chinese context shares so much in common with the biblical cultures, examining and further developing a Chinese, collectivistic ecclesiology would highlight important biblical themes that may otherwise get minimized by more individualistic churches and missionaries. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to identify critical issues related to authority and leadership within a Mainland Chinese church.¹ The findings of this research, as starting points, can set an agenda to orient ongoing dialogue and the development of a Chinese ecclesiology. Readers should be careful not to confuse other meanings of “collectivism” with what is discussed here. We do not

¹ This paper will primary talk about Chinese house churches, though at times the government sponsored, TSPM (“Three Self”) Church will be mentioned. Of course, it too may at times face similar issues.

refer to any mandated economic system; nor does this necessitate the abuse of individuals for the sake of the group. These are non-essential uses of the concept.

Potential applications for this study are manifold. First, Chinese church leaders can become more conscious of their decisions in light of western influences and their own cultural assumptions. Second, missionaries can assess their strategies and better serve Chinese churches. Third, such reflections offer a richer reading of the biblical text. All readers have certain presumptions that influence their interpretations of the text. Fourth, our process should exemplify a dialogical, integrative approach to contextualization that takes seriously both the Bible and culture.

A few important points must be noted about methodology. Because so little has been written relating Chinese views of authority and ecclesiology, various methods should be used to address the problem. Literature on Chinese culture and leadership are plentiful. This is foundational. Many insights about leadership practices within the Mainland Chinese church are gained through a survey of various treatments on Chinese Christianity in general. In addition, this writer can draw from years of serving in China as a church planter and a teacher of theology in local seminaries. Additionally, some of the experiences from the Chinese Diaspora add a layer of depth to our analysis. Finally, literature and websites on mission efforts in China further color our picture of Chinese ecclesiology and authority.

We begin with culture, attempting to gain insight as to possible values and assumptions Chinese Christians hold about authority in a local church. With this perspective, we will explore some aspects where biblical teachings and cultures overlap with traditional Chinese views of community. Upon these theoretical foundations, the last section identifies a number of practical

considerations for leadership development and the formation of a Chinese ecclesiology. Our purpose here is not to construct theology but rather to identify the most critical contextual issues.

Authority in a Confucian Context

Though a generalization, China is famously Confucian. We must observe a number of characteristics of Confucianism. Most notably, it is socially hierarchical, dividing society along five key relationships: ruler-subject, father-son, elder brother-younger brother, husband-wife, and friend-friend. All social interactions are regulated by the principle of the subordinate deferring to the superior.² Thus, authority is central to ethics, values, and identity. Moral imperatives are determined by one's role in a relationship.³ Moreover, it is through one's presence in community, having relationships in society, that one is truly human.⁴ Therefore, Confucian thinking emphasizes social ethics and is more concrete than abstract. In this collectivism, individual distinctives are secondary to group conformity.⁵

Traditional Chinese thought sees the family as the most fundamental social unit, not the individual. Kang summarizes, "The family is considered, therefore, to be a model for all human social organization, including government."⁶ Hwang argues the Chinese ontology is not centered upon a "transcendent creator"; "Instead, they recognized a simple fact on the basis of Chinese cosmology: individuals' lives are the continuation of their parents' physical lives. Confucian

² Kwang-Kuo Hwang, "Filial Piety and Loyalty: Two Types of Social Identification in Confucianism," *J Soc Psychol* 2 (1999): 167, 169.

³ Russell Arben Fox, "Activity and Communal Authority: Localist Lessons from Puritan and Confucian Communities," in *PHILOS EAST WEST* 58, no. 1 (January 2008): 46–47.

⁴ Hwang, "Filial Piety and Loyalty," 166.

⁵ Of course, degrees of collectivism and individualism vary with context and person; why scholars debate the meaning and scope of these categories, they nevertheless serve a helpful for depicting a broad array of characteristics, not intending to ignore the ever evolving nature of cultures.

⁶ Nam-Soon Kang, "Confucian Familism and Its Social/Religious Embodiment in Christianity: Reconsidering the Family Discourse from a Feminist Perspective," *AJT* 18, no. 1 (April 2004): 173.

advocacy of filial piety is premised upon this indisputable fact.”⁷ Confucians have likened the family to a body; thus in the *Confucian Rites*, we read, “Father and son are one body; husband and wife, brothers, are all one body. The relationship between father and son is like that between head and feet. Husband and wife are a combination of two separate parts of one body; brothers are the four limbs.”⁸ The father is the unquestionable head of the family. Children owe complete loyalty to their parents through whom they received life. In return, it is expected that children, in particular the first son, will care for his elderly parents; all children however must respect and honor the family name. Confucius himself is thought to have said, “Filial piety is the root of all virtue.”⁹ In fact, the highest of filial duties is perpetuating the family name through male progeny.¹⁰ Economically, socially, and politically, traditional Confucian society pushes every individual “into a situation of familial dependence.”¹¹ The family is so important that both the state and the country at large are often called a “family,” connoting *mutual* obligation between the superiors (fathers) and inferiors (sons).¹² Yet, it is the family that is responsible for socialization, providing welfare for its members, and thus stability for the state.¹³ As expected, a high value is placed on loyalty and interdependence.¹⁴ This is evidenced by studies showing how European American mothers see love as a means of building a child’s self-esteem; this contrasts Chinese mothers who stress love for the sake of nurturing “harmonious” and “enduring parent-

⁷ Hwang, “Filial Piety and Loyalty,” 169.

⁸ N. H. Ko, “Familism in Confucianism” (paper presented at the International Conference of Women’s Global Connection, San Antonio, Texas, 2004), 4.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Kang, “Confucian Familism,” 173.

¹¹ Antonion L. Rappa and Sor-Hoon Tan, “Political Implications of Confucian Familism,” *ASIAN PHILOS* 13, no. 2–3 (2003): 92.

¹² Rappa and Tan, 93.

¹³ Ibid.,

¹⁴ Hwang, “Filial Piety and Loyalty,” 179, 181.

child relationships.”¹⁵ Strict parental oversight and the use of shaming are seen as loving, especially in the sphere of a child’s education.¹⁶ The stress on family-identification is more than social theory, as is illustrated by the fact that in 2011, the Civil Affairs Ministry to China’s State Council proposed as law whereby “adult children would be required by law to regularly visit elderly parents. If they do not, parents can sue them.”¹⁷

Authority resides not merely in a person or an abstract law, but more so in the collective norms, typically oriented around honor. Group harmony is maintained through the exchange of favors (*renqing*), which is a Chinese expression for social reciprocity (*bao*).¹⁸ Repayment is certainly expected, but it is not intended that they permanently pay off their social debt; otherwise, the relationship is broken.¹⁹ Chan notes that repaying *renqing* is more important than paying monetary debts.²⁰ The exchange need not be individualistic. He adds, “the return of *renqing* does not have to be directed towards the original giver; it can be directed towards other family members or even close acquaintances.”²¹ Within one’s vast network of formal *and* informal relationships (*guanxi*), a person’s value and identity accord with her public honor or “face.” Therefore, every transaction is governed by authoritative standards of honor, as set by the group. “Face” is the currency of power. Hwang summarizes, “. . . doing face work is an important way of showing off one’s power. Face work is also a method of manipulating the

¹⁵ Ruth Chao and Vivian Tseng, “Parenting of Asians,” in *Social Conditions and Applied Parenting* (vol. 4 of *Handbook of Parenting*; 2d ed.; ed. M. H. Bornstein; Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002), 64, 67–68.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 75–76, 79–83.

¹⁷ Sharon Lafraniere, “In China, a Move to Mandate Closer Families,” *The New York Times*, January 29, 2011, World / Asia Pacific, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/30/world/asia/30beijing.html?_r=2&scp=1&sq=%20%22Civil%20Affairs%20Ministry%22%20&st=cse.

¹⁸ Kwang-Kuo Hwang, “Face and Favor: The Chinese Power Game,” *AJS* 92, no. 4 (January 1987): 956.

¹⁹ Lawrence Hsin Yang and Author Kleinman, “‘Face’ and the Embodiment of Stigma in China: The Cases of Schizophrenia and AIDS,” *Soc Sci Med* 30 (2008): 4–5.

²⁰ Alvin M. Chan, “The Chinese Concepts of *Guanxi*, *Mianzi*, *Renqing*, and *Bao*: Their Interrelationships and Implications for International Business” (paper presented at the Australian and New Zealand Marketing Academy Conference, Brisbane, Queensland, 2006), 3.

allocator's choices of allocating resources to one's benefit."²² Chinese often "behave either in accordance with, or in contradiction to, the social demands, depending on the perceived power structure in the external situation."²³ Scholars have distinguished between at least two kinds of "face," *mianzi* and *lian*. The former is gained through personal success and individual distinctives; thus it is more volatile and relative to others. However, *lian* is the public judgment of a person's moral character. In the Chinese mind, *lian* is far more important than *mianzi*.²⁴

It is key to understand that honor and shame are *moral* categories. Why? Individuals do not exist apart from a web of relationships. Hence, outsiders, including people without *guanxi* or family, may be less socially restrained and so open to suspicion. To be "shameless" means one has no conscience, no sensitivity to those around him. Moreover, an individual's face bears on the whole community, thus either creating or limiting opportunities for group members to have economic benefit, social standing, and access to resources or education.²⁵ "Any individual's failure to act appropriately implies that the associated social circle (e.g., parents, teachers, even an entire village) has not provided proper guidance. [Therefore] Everyone in a network supervises the actions of others and these standards of obligation are internalized as following one's heart and mind."²⁶ Shame disrupts social harmony, perhaps the supreme goal of Chinese thinking. Philosophically, ". . . maintaining one's place in the social hierarchy is a duty which is connected to moral belief since the social hierarchy is part of the natural cosmic order."²⁷

²¹ Chan, "The Chinese Concepts," 3.

²² Hwang, "Face and Favor," 962.

²³ *Ibid.*, 960.

²⁴ For a fuller discussion on these points, see Kwang-Kuo Hwang, "Moral Face and Social Face: Contingent Self-Esteem in Confucian Society," *IJP* 41, no. 4 (2006): 276–81. Also, see Chan, "The Chinese Concepts," 2–3.

²⁵ This theme is pervasive in Yang and Kleinman, "'Face' and the Embodiment of Stigma in China," 1–11.

²⁶ Yang and Kleinman, "'Face' and the Embodiment of Stigma in China," 3.

²⁷ Olwen Bedford, "Guilt and Shame in American and Chinese Culture" (PhD diss., University of Colorado, 1994), 73.

Contemporary Perspectives on Chinese Leadership

To some degree, Chinese Christians will draw from cultural norms and prevailing views of leadership when pastoring and planting churches. Therefore, it is important that we consider some of the views shaping contemporary Chinese practice. To be clear, we must not confuse Western and Chinese concepts of leadership. Whereas westerners link leadership with competency or ability, in China, authority is closely aligned with position, regardless of ability.²⁸ In business, leadership is usually authoritarian, using a “top-down” approach, micro-management, and limiting communication with others on a “need to know” basis.²⁹ Whether they are seen as “emperors” or “parents,” business leaders can expect their subordinates to go to great length to express loyalty.³⁰ Because the culture is inherently conservative, change is very slow. Chinese leaders try to keep the long-term in view. Yet, it can be hard to distinguish between patience and reticence to risk. Two similar phrases are frequently contrasted with each other: The more conservative or fearful person says, “*man man lai*” (“slowly, slowly go”). To this the more visionary voice encourages, “*yi bu, yi bu lai*” (idiomatically, “do one-step at a time”). The desire for honor and conformity can make leaders averse to risk and unwilling to be assertive.

The cultural proclivity towards the concrete and relational no doubt influences the way leaders process decisions.³¹ There is a greater appreciation for practical application than abstraction. Appeals to analogy, tradition, higher authorities and metaphor generally hold greater weight than logical analysis. One study on management theory finds two common western

²⁸ Zhang HaiHua and Geoff Baker, *Think Like Chinese* (Sydney: Federation Press, 2008), 50–51.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 53–56.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

³¹ Kan-Cheung Wong, “Chinese Culture and Leadership,” *Int J Leader Educ* 4, no. 4 (2001): 314–15. Also, Edward C. Stewart, *American Cultural Patterns: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press: 1972), 23.

models, transactional leadership and Management by Objectives, are “not applicable in China.”³² The former relies on rewards and punishment. The latter emphasizes cooperative goal setting and measurement of actual performance against those goals. Yet, in China, these strategies can feel dehumanizing, task oriented, highly individualistic, and make one too vulnerable to public critique.³³ In short, these approaches are in tension with the family-model for social organizations. The Confucian ideal is that an authority leads by moral example;³⁴ the superior’s concern for the inferior should balance strong authoritarianism with personal benevolence.³⁵

Perspectives on authority and identity are highly contextual. For instance, stronger traditional familism is more likely to be found when people are in positions not of their own choosing, like family or ethnicity. While bloodline intimately binds Chinese together, “. . . *construction* of relationships through interactive ethical practices has always played an important role in Confucian societies.”³⁶ Also, in voluntary organizations, “members are not required to give up their individual identity . . . Consequently, cooperation and self-reliance are more valued.”³⁷ Similarly, in more urban, wealthy, and educated settings, one sees a loosening of traditional authoritarianism, identification with parents, and ties to ancestral land; on the other hand, modernization is strengthening the importance of benevolent leadership, marriage, mobility, an individualized identity, and the need for joining volunteer organizations.³⁸ Simply

³² Alecia Hennig, “Confucianism as Leadership Strategy?” *CBR* 7 (2010): 4.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Wenquan Ling, Rosina C. Chia, and Liluo Fang, “Chinese Implicit Leadership Theory,” *J Soc Psychol* 140, no. 6 (2000): 736.

³⁵ Bor-Shiuan Cheng et al. “Paternalistic Leadership and Subordinate Responses: Establishing a Leadership model in Chinese Organizations,” *AJSP* 7 (2004): 93, 97.

³⁶ Rappa and Tan, “Political Implications of Confucian Familism,” 92.

³⁷ Chi-Yue Chiu, “Normative Expectations of Social Behavior and Concern for Members of the Collective in Chinese Society,” *J Psychol* 124, no. 1 (2001): 109.

³⁸ Bor-Shiuan, “Paternalistic Leadership,” 93, 97. Charles C. Helwig et al. “Chinese Adolescents’ Reasoning About Democratic and Authority-Based Decision Making in Peer, Family, and School Contexts,” *CHILD DEV* 74, no. 3 (May/June 2003): 783–800; Finally, see Wenxin Zhang and Andrew J. Fuligni, “Authority,

“being Chinese” is critically important for many, especially those in the Chinese Diaspora. This becomes a highly exclusive ordeal in the respect that “one cannot become Chinese if not *born* Chinese.”³⁹ As a result, the Christian feels great pressure to reconcile being Chinese *and* Christian; then Chinese face the question how to divide loyalty amid the many, overlapping, even conflicting spheres of authority in which one lives.⁴⁰

For our purposes, we should focus on one of the most important authorities found in Chinese life, perhaps second only to a father—the teacher, whom Xunzi called a root of social order.⁴¹ Fundamentally, it is thought, “education is the acquisition of correct knowledge, not the discovery or generation of new knowledge,” hence, “the teacher is the repository of knowledge, to be passed onto his students.”⁴² Teachers show “affection” via strict, uncompromising discipline, in the past often leading to severe physical punishment.⁴³ “Uniformity, rather than individualization, is sought.”⁴⁴ Creativity seems in tension with authoritarian instruction in that it encourages independent thought, leads to questioning the teacher. Group harmony is threatened when this door is opened for both teacher and student losing face.⁴⁵ Classrooms are primarily managed through criticism not encouragement; this is meant to spur diligence and submission to the teacher. In my daughter’s school in China, her class was constantly taught to recite, “My teacher is like my mom.” The great respect afforded teachers is matched by the common

Autonomy, and Family Relationships Among Adolescents in Urban and Rural China,” *JRA* 16, no. 4 (2006): 535–36.

³⁹ Tong Chee-Kiong and Chan Kwok-bun, “One Face, Many Masks: The Singularity and Plurality of Chinese Identity,” *Diaspora* 10, no. 3 (2001): 369.

⁴⁰ This struggle is seen in many places. One pronounced autobiographical example is K. K. Yeo, *Musing with Confucius and Paul: Toward a Chinese Christian Theology* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2008), xv–25.

⁴¹ Rappa and Tan, “Political Implications of Confucian Familism,” 97.

⁴² David Yau Fai Ho and Rainbow Tin Hung Ho, “Knowledge is a Dangerous Thing: Authority Relations, Ideological Conservatism, and Creativity in Confucian-Heritage Cultures,” *J Theor Soc Behav* 38, no. 1 (2008): 78–9.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 73–76.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁴⁵ Ho and Ho, “Knowledge is a Dangerous Thing,” 80, 82.

expectations laid upon them. For example, Chinese friends tell us that even today teachers can lose their jobs if students get into trouble *outside* the school, since the teacher presumably bears responsibility for the child's moral development. Many of these themes converge in the very act of writing Chinese characters. Many believe one can judge a person's character by how well she writes. In addition, persistence and proficiency in memorization is developed due to the lack of an alphabet and the need for extensive practice in reading and writing Chinese characters even into higher-grade levels. On the flip side, the effort expended on just learning the Chinese language restricts opportunities for creativity and analysis, socializing a child to value conformity and self-control. Here moral, social, and cognitive development converges.⁴⁶

Ecclesiology with Chinese Characteristics

Chinese believers commonly ponder a number of questions including, "What does it mean to be Christian and Chinese at the same time? If I follow Christ and become part of his church will I lose my 'Chineseness'? Does following Christ mean I have to reject my culture?"⁴⁷ This affects ecclesiology and authority in a few regards. First, believers may think it necessary to mentally position Chinese authorities against western teachers. Second, the Church has struggled with the issue of contextualization, how to develop a Chinese Christian theology that breaks from western patterns of thought. This matter will influence how leaders are trained. In addition, elders (pastors) are responsible for a church's teaching ministry; accordingly, what theology to teach is a central concern. Third, loyalty and quality relationships emerge from a sense of group

⁴⁶ These connections are further discussed in detail in Wang Fengyan, "Confucian Thinking in Traditional Moral Education: Key Ideas and Fundamental Features," *J Moral Educ* 33, no. 4 (December 2004): 429–47.

⁴⁷ Bruce J. Nicholls, "Contextualisation in Chinese Culture," *ERT* 19, no. 4 (October 1995): 370. For a range of perspectives, see Miikka Ruokanen and Paul Huang, eds., *Christianity and Chinese Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010); Donald Leroy Stults, *Developing an Asian Evangelical Theology* (Mandaluyong, Manila: OMF, 1989); Wing-Hung Lam, *Chinese Theology in Construction* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1983).

identification. A long time motto of the government TSPM church is illuminating. Notice the order: “*Loving country*, loving the church, glorifying God and serving people” [my emphasis].⁴⁸

David Wong contrasts Chinese and Western leaders.⁴⁹ Though his article is laden with caricatures, nevertheless certain characteristics are noteworthy. In the West, church leadership is often based on organizational skills, charisma, and academic credentials. Most elders (pastors) are male, value efficiency and pragmatism, frequently change churches due to a sense of calling. By contrast, Chinese elders usually lack formal training, are often bi-vocational, are not public figures, experience persecution from the government and/or family, and commit themselves intimately to a particular congregation. G. Wright Doyle, Director of the Global China Center, is more critical in his article, “Cultural Factors Affecting Chinese Church Leaders.”⁵⁰ The lack of theological training, peer accountability and the pressures of traveling between churches often leave elders with a stagnant prayer life and shallow teaching, making churches vulnerable to heresy or cults. Additionally, he identifies more serious concerns, like the fact that many leaders neglect their families for the sake of ministering to the church “family.” The culture encourages authoritarian leadership and an unwillingness to show weakness, fostering pride and mean spirits. Also, he points out that most grow up in one-child homes with “Aloof or absent fathers, and overworked mothers,” resulting in “spoiled” and “emotionally starved” elders. The Chinese education experience stresses memorization and rules, breeding moralism in churches. Finally, a

⁴⁸ Manhong Melissa Lin, “Toward a Chinese Christian Ethic: Individual, Community and Society” (PhD diss., Graduate Theological Union, 2007), 204.

⁴⁹ David Wong, “Church Leadership: Contrasts Between China and the West,” *ST* 20, no. 4 (1992): 11–12.

⁵⁰ G. Wright Doyle, “Cultural Factors Affecting Chinese Church Leaders,” n.p. [cited 3 Feb 2011]. Online: <http://www.globalchinacenter.org/analysis/christianity-in-china/cultural-factors-affecting-chinese-church-leaders.php>.

gender imbalance favoring women distorts perceptions of church. David Aikman estimates that up to 80% of “China’s Protestant Christian house church members are women.”⁵¹

The Chinese Church divides along a few lines. Organizationally, there is the government-led TSPM (Three-Self Patriotic Movement) Church and “underground” house church. The latter includes both the unregistered and the registered house church (a more recent phenomenon). It is quite normal for distrust and accusation to plague the relationship between TSPM and house church Christians. The central controversy concerns rightful authority—whether or not the state can run the church. Jesus said, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's.”⁵² Depending on one’s vantage point, the accent of Jesus’ statement falls on either the first or the second clause. Today, Christians occupy every sphere of society. With increased exposure comes scrutiny and opportunity. As a result, elders need to be savvy to handle a range of ethical, political, economic, social, and theological problems. Divisions within the church are not merely organizational; age and economic status also divide. Arguably the two largest segments of Chinese Christians are quite different—urban intellectuals and the rural poor. Also, many older believers tend to minimize the potential of younger Christians to minister and lead in a local church. Typically, this stems from a cultural supposition that age and education are the basis of position and authority. Accordingly, younger believers feel disrespected, discouraged, and eager to exchange the older congregations for a younger one. It is apparent that how one thinks of a “church” impacts perceptions on authority and self-identity. If Christians

⁵¹ David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2003), 98. An excellent analysis of this imbalance is taken up in G. Wright Doyle, “Gender Imbalance in the Chinese Church: Causes, Consequences, and Possible Cures,” n.p. [cited 3 Feb 2011]. Online: <http://www.globalchinacenter.org/analysis/christianity-in-china/gender-imbalance-in-the-chinese-church-causes-consequences-and-possible-cures.php>.

⁵² David Adney, “Division Time in China: To Join the TSPM or Not,” *EMQ* 19, no. 3 (July 1983): 200–204, 229. He cites this as a kind of motto with Chinese Christianity (presumably TSPM). For a broad survey of this

sees the church as a volunteer group rather than a family, they will more likely value independence and self-reliance.⁵³ Hence, ecclesiology and perhaps soteriology influence how people respond to authority. For example, one might wonder whether more Reformed views of God's sovereignty may alter one's sense of identity in comparison to non-Reformed theologies, since the former claims that God "chooses" or "elects" the believer. This seemingly mirrors the previous discussion how being born Chinese is *ultimately* out of a person's control.

Missionaries and the variety of Chinese church networks can have different visions of church leadership. Networks are a bit different than western denominations. Whereas ecclesiology partitions much of western Christianity, Chinese networks tend to distinguish themselves more in accordance with soteriology, Pentecostalism, or simply regional location. In addition, missionaries from different cultures, denominations, or philosophies of ministry continually market new methods for church ministry. Upon visiting the leaders of a church planting movement in south China, I learned of their exasperation and distrust of outsiders who had so many conflicting ways of interpreting the Bible. Lacking theological training, they could not sort out truth from error. Some churches pool funds to send younger workers overseas to receive accredited seminary instruction. Besides the great expense, however, these leaders leave their context and relationships for 3–4 years. Many may not return to China. Though many schools are attempting distance-learning approaches, the lack of mentoring, personal interaction, and contextualized teaching limits the benefit. There are many underground, unaccredited seminaries in China; yet, having taught in these places, I can attest how traditional pedagogical and cultural constraints undermine their ability to do exegesis, think critically, and communicate

relationship between church and state in China, see Tony Lambert, "Church and State in China: A Sixty-year Saga," *Connections* 8, no. 3 (December 2009): 13–16.

⁵³ Here, human experience is supported by empirical studies: see Chiu, "Normative Expectations," 109.

theologically. Despite great efforts, this preparation ill equips Christian leaders due to busy daily schedules, isolation, lack of assessment, an emphasis on memorization, the paucity of translated resources, few or no computers, and insufficient interaction between students and teacher.⁵⁴

Finally, it is not uncommon to hear Christian leaders misunderstand church history and ways of speaking such that authority is vested almost blindly in one school of thought or another. For example, in a recent conversation with a [government] seminary trained pastor, he was shocked to hear that being a “Calvinist” did not mean that you followed everything Calvin said. Thus, such labels and affinities to some theological stream of thought carry more authority in China that is expected elsewhere. This can lead to uncritical acceptance of historical ideas. In a similar vein, “being Chinese” often shapes how Christians ascribe authority to the Bible and other ancient texts. For instance, when Chinese Christians deliberate over some biblical passage or doctrine, it is quite frequent to hear someone give a defense of a doctrine by appealing to some quotation from an ancient Chinese text or writer. Having confirmed that the doctrine actually was “Chinese,” the group more easily accepts it.

Locating Chinese Culture within a Biblical Context

We find a lot of affinity between Chinese culture and the historical contexts of the Bible. For example, the biblical world was highly group-oriented. It was within a particular community that one found honor (public worth), ethical standards, safety, and a sense of belonging.⁵⁵ David May

⁵⁴ In *Jesus in Beijing*, David Aikman’s portrait of national seminaries accords with my experiences, especially the typical schedule of daily activities on p. 121. Students typically take one *course* per week, different courses each week. Thus, in one month a group of students might take entire courses on World Missions, Theology, Church History, and Preaching. Time for reflection and doing assignments is lost to chores and more lectures.

⁵⁵ David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship, and Purity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000), 35–42, 78–84, 157–240; Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insight from Cultural Anthropology* (3d ed.; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 27–78, 134–58. To see one way this is evidenced throughout the New Testament, see David A. deSilva, *The Hope of Glory: Honor Discourse and New Testament Interpretation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999).

succinctly adds, “Honor is analogous to a contemporary society’s credit rating.”⁵⁶ Conversion to Christ meant foregoing the “competitive model of establishing one’s honor with a cooperative model” since “As sisters and brothers, believers share honor within one household, working together toward the advancement of honor of all members of this family”⁵⁷ In the first century, kinship and marriage wed the honor of two families; the latter “was undertaken with a view to political and/or economic concerns”⁵⁸ In Mediterranean societies, family authority resided in the father, who bequeaths honor (or shame) to his sons.⁵⁹ Various scholars point out that honor can be ascribed (due to family, relationships, gender, position, etc.) or achieved (i.e. wealth, intellectual, heroism, etc.).⁶⁰ Moreover, one first century writer notes that reciprocity—the social exchange of favors—was the “‘practice that constitutes the chief bond of human society’ (Seneca *Ben.* 1.4.2).”⁶¹ The above themes merge at various points. God’s covenants with Israel were a source of national(istic?) pride; yet Olyan and Hobbs argue that loyalty was critical to covenant or patronage relations; this was expressed in favors given to the nation and honor to God.⁶² Ultimately, God’s reputation is bound with the honor of his people. Within the community of Israel, shame was used as a social sanction, even within child rearing.⁶³ In short, the following could be said of either ancient biblical societies or Chinese culture:

⁵⁶ David M. May, “‘Drawn from Nature or Common Life’: Social and Cultural Reading Strategies for the Parables,” *RevExp* 94, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 203.

⁵⁷ deSilva, *Honor, Patronage*, 76.

⁵⁸ Malina, *The New Testament World*, 143. For a fuller discussion, see pp. 134–59.

⁵⁹ Malina, 141–42. Julian Pitt-Rivers, “Honour and Social Status,” in *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (ed. John Peristiany; London: Weidedfeld and Nicolson, 1965), 53.

⁶⁰ Jerome Neyrey extensively traces this idea in Matthew’s Gospel. See his *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1999); deSilva, *Honor, Patronage*, 28–29, 158–65, 206–12.

⁶¹ deSilva, 96. On patronage and reciprocity in the ancient and biblical world, see pp. 95–156.

⁶² Saul M. Olyan, “Honor, Shame, and Covenant Relations in Ancient Israel and Its Environment,” *JBL* 115, no. 2 (1996): 201–18. T. R. Hobbs, “Reflections on Honor, Shame, and Covenant Relations,” *JBL* 116, no. 3 (1997): 501–3.

⁶³ Lyn M. Bechtel, “Shame as a Sanction of Social Control in Biblical Israel: Judicial, Political, and Social Shaming,” *JSOT* 49 (1991): 47–76. Also, Anselm C. Hagedorn, “Guarding the Parent’s Honour: Deuteronomy 21.18–21,” *JSOT* 88 (2000): 101–21.

The conceptual systems which relate to honour provide, when each is taken in its totality and in its contexts, a mechanism which distributes power and determines who shall fill the roles of command and dictate the ideal image which people hold of their society. At the ultimate level of analysis honour is the clearing-house for the conflicts in the social structure, the conciliatory nexus between the sacred and the secular, between the individual and society and between systems of ideology and systems of action.⁶⁴

These considerations highlight the congruence that exists between China and the biblical world.

Ecclesiology must take seriously the rich array of metaphors Paul uses to portray the Church. Sawatzky explicitly has Chinese culture in mind in an article where he explains that Paul used metaphorical language for the church in order “. . . to convey the significance of the nature of that new phenomenon produced by the gospel . . . His doctrine of the church was not separated from the life situation of the church . . . The new life in Christ experienced in community produced new forms of expression.”⁶⁵ Though both Mencius and the Bible use the “body” as an image for community, from what has been said, I suggest that “family” is a more holistic and relational metaphor for a Chinese ecclesiology. In fact, what westerners call an “underground church,” Chinese Christians call a “family church” (*jiating jiaohui*, 家庭教会).

The Bible speaks of God as Father and his people as children in his household.⁶⁶ Packer is emphatic that joining God’s family is “the *primary and fundamental* blessing of the gospel.”⁶⁷ In Mal 1:6, God asks, “A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor?” Those in the church regard each other as brothers, sisters, mothers, and fathers.⁶⁸ Jesus is called the firstborn, the son of God, and a brother.⁶⁹ The genealogies of Jesus in Matthew 1 and Luke 3 assume the importance of family identification. Paul builds upon the

⁶⁴ Pitt-Rivers, “Honour and Social Status,” 73.

⁶⁵ Sheldon Sawatzky, “Church Images and Metaphorical Theology,” *Taiwan J Theolog* 6 (1984): 118–19.

⁶⁶ Matt 6:9; John 5:17–23; 8:41–42; 2 Cor 6:18; Eph 2:18–19; 3:14–15; Heb 12:3–9; Jas 1:27; 1 Pet 4:17.

⁶⁷ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downer’s Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 206–7.

⁶⁸ Matt 12:49–50; 1 Cor 7:15; Col 1:2; 1 Tim 5:1–2; Jas 2:15; 1 John 3:14–18.

⁶⁹ John 17:1–5; Rom 8:29; Col 1:15, 18; Heb 1:5–6; 2:11; 1 John 5:9–13.

family metaphor when he likens Christ and the Church to a husband and a bride.⁷⁰ Those who are in Christ are called Abraham’s offspring.⁷¹ Paul compares salvation to adoption.⁷² Furthermore, Paul refers to himself as an infant, a nursing mother, and a father.⁷³ Jesus even redefines true “family” around himself.⁷⁴ In Mark 10:29–30, Jesus’ words are as encouraging as they are startling, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.” In collectivist cultures where Christian conversion is considered shameful, believers can become outcasts, expelled from their family. Therefore, it is joyful and right to speak of conversion as a change in *community*.⁷⁵ From another perspective, it is revealing that in the pastoral letters, the qualifications of a church elder or deacon depend on their conduct as a husband and father.⁷⁶ “According to Campbell’s study, the term “elder” (πρεσβυτερος), in its original Greco-Jewish context, generally referred to “those who bear a title of honour, not of office, a title that is imprecise, collective and representative, and rooted in the ancient family or household.”⁷⁷ Aside from the Decalogue, many texts treat familial relations with utter seriousness, such as when Paul lumps “disobedience to parents” with murder, inventing evil, hating God, abuse and slander (Rom 1:29–32; 2 Tim 3:2–6).⁷⁸ He adds, “But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has

⁷⁰ 2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:32. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 858–59.

⁷¹ John 8:33–42; Rom 4:11–18; Gal 3:16–29; Heb 2:16.

⁷² Rom 8:14–23; Gal 4:5–7; Eph 1:5.

⁷³ For an exceptional treatment on these themes from 1 Thess 2:1–12 with application, see Jeffrey A. D. Weima, “Infants, Nursing Mother, and Father: Paul’s Portrayal of a Pastor,” *CTJ* 37 (2002): 209–29.

⁷⁴ Matt 12:48–50; Mark 10:28–30; Luke 18:28–30.

⁷⁵ On the “household of God” in the New Testament, see deSilva, *Honor, Patronage*, 199–239.

⁷⁶ 1 Tim 3:2–5, 12; Titus 1:6–8. Also, see Eph 5:22–6:4.

⁷⁷ R. Alastair Campbell, “The Elders: Seniority in Earliest Christianity,” *TynBul* 44, no. 1 (1993): 184.

⁷⁸ We should also note Ex 21:15, 17; Lev 18:7; 19:29; 20:9; Deut 21:18–21; 37:16–24; Ezek 22:7; Mic 7:6.

denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Tim 5:8). Positively, Mal 4:6 foresees salvation as the restoration of a “family,” more precisely interpreted as God’s restored people.⁷⁹ Room allows only for a brief survey of the family motif. Although it is not the only metaphor for the Church, it certainly spans the biblical canon and context to describe the people of God.

Some might object that in a collectivistic culture, using family imagery runs the risk of becoming inward or isolated. This objection fails for a few reasons. First, we simply cannot dismiss a pervasive biblical motif for describing the reality that unites God’s people. Second, we see that God *adopts* those who are not in his family, even his enemies. Far from being exclusive, the gospel is radical in its pursuit of the outsider or orphan. Third, this criticism comes out of a stunted (perhaps western) view of family, which narrowing means the “nuclear” family. Fourth, and most difficult to accept for many people, is the plain fact that the New Testament writers at times give preference to Christians over non-believers.⁸⁰ In truth, this vision of the church becomes more compelling as we have more biblically rich understandings of family.

Practical Implications for Church Leaders in China

Christian collectivism emphasizes love through interdependent identification. Just as the Bible compares the Church to a Body (Rom 12:4–5; 1 Cor 12:12–31; Col 3:15), so Christians affirm, “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (1 Cor 12:26). To love other Christians who make up the Church *is to love oneself* (cp Eph 5:28–32). The ecclesiology developed here differs from typical conversations that center on polity or structure; rather this essay reorients social categories (relative to western philosophies) such that different values and methods arise from a collective sense of identity. “Success” is

⁷⁹ Caryn A. Reeder, “Malachi 3:24 and the Eschatological Restoration of the ‘Family,’” *CBQ* 69 (2007): 695–709.

measured more by quality than quantity, specifically, how people relate to one another, less so on the number of degrees held or attendance in one's ministry. To some degree, one's view of social identity or honor-guilt impacts the way church structures and strategies are formed. For example, if one moves from a culture emphasizing autonomy within a "nuclear family" to a place stressing interdependence in a large, extended family, would not some teaching and ministries change?

Christians *should* care about others' opinion. After all, Jesus himself said, ". . . let your light shine before others, *so that* they may see your good works and *give glory* to your Father who is in heaven" (Matt 5:16). Similarly, Paul adds, "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the *glory of God*. *Give no offense* to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to *please everyone* in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, *that they may be saved*" (1 Cor 10:31–33). An elder must have a good reputation among outsiders (1 Tim 3:7). A widow receiving financial support is supposed to have "a reputation for good works" (1 Tim 5:10). Christian are to defend the honor of Christ with gentleness and respect ". . . so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior may be put to shame" (1 Pet 3:16). Proverbs 22:1 advises, "A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold." Central to the way the church lives life together is the concern for reputation.

As Father, God gets glory from the way his children live; likewise, they are ascribed honor by virtue of their membership in God's family. Therefore, the quest for honor is not competitive or vain, but rather selflessly oriented around God's reputation and secondarily that of the Church. Gosnell even argues that honor-shame rhetoric unifies Ephesians such that it

⁸⁰ Matt 25:40; John 13:35; Acts 6:1–6; Gal 6:10. Compare the patterns found in 2 Cor 8:4; 9:1; 1 Tim 5:10.

essentially acts “as a resocializing text for new converts.”⁸¹ Conversion into the *Christian* community means a change in what is reckoned honorable or shameful.⁸² In this way, becoming a Christian is the furthest thing from an individualistic event; no longer is the person primarily identified by ethnicity, blood family, or ideology. David deSilva speaks for the Christian, “We have a tremendous opportunity before us to honor Christ by saying his blood is more important than our own in determining who shall be our family.”⁸³ This radically challenges traditional, collectivist cultures. What seems scandalous to bystanders makes sense from the Christian’s perspective. Hence, Paul can defend his apostleship precisely by making much of his weakness and low public status.⁸⁴ When the Church determines honor (thus, success) in these terms, with respect to the Father’s reputation, the Christian can “rejoice and be glad” in seemingly shameful persecution (Matt 5:11–12). Hebrews exhorts God’s child to suffer scorn after the example of Jesus who endured the cross’ shame.⁸⁵ Thus, Scripture simply presumes the Church is collectivistic and honor-oriented family. Instead of seeking to perpetuate one’s ancestral name through biological children, the Bible prioritizes God’s fame through spiritual children.

What is intriguing is the way this gospel reorientation actually overcomes a few major problems in collectivist cultures. First, in order to save face, people are especially quick to cover over problems, resist admitting mistakes, and so hypocritically perpetuate fundamental issues that need to be addressed. Yet, through Christ, God gets honor even as we live lives judged shameful by the world, and even when we must repent of sin! Because God graciously forgives sin through Christ’s death, changing lives by the Spirit, it actually *withholds* public honor to God

⁸¹ Peter W. Gosnell, “Honor and Shame Rhetoric as a Unifying Motif in Ephesians,” *BBR* 16, no. 1 (2006): 105.

⁸² This idea permeates Neyrey’s work in *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew*.

⁸³ deSilva, *Honor, Patronage*, 238.

⁸⁴ A few passages that well capture this ironic approach are in 2 Cor 4:7–12, 17; 11:16–12:10.

when we hide sin. Confession magnifies God as it humbles us. In a peculiar twist, since God is honored, we too are honored with him as his children. Second, fear of being cast out of their social group deters some from becoming Christians. However, Jesus enticingly promises that they will “receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life” (Mark 10:30).

One’s sense of identity, derived from the community, determines who and what is recognized as authoritative. In Chinese culture, tradition and social position hold sway. In modern times, reason, experience, and the autonomous individual form a triumvirate in the West. The Bible speaks with authority over all cultural vantage points. While any church calling itself Christian should affirm this, steps must be taken to ensure practical implementation. This requires a strategic emphasis on hermeneutics. If Christians do not know how to interpret biblical texts, inevitably the Church succumbs to cultural assumptions or the eisegesis of the loudest voice or most educated person in a group. In addition, by equipping believers with interpretative principles, we put in check a few tendencies within Chinese culture. For example, group leaders (like elders) can easily abuse their position by becoming overly authoritarian. Or, a pastor may be theologically trained and so the congregation uncritically accepts any dogma or theological bias he teaches. Further, the traditional stress on memorization in Chinese education typically comes at the expense of critical analysis and synthesis. Proper training in hermeneutics addresses each of these problems. First of all, teaching hermeneutics “equip[s] the saints for the work of ministry . . .” (Eph 4:12). Elders must be humble enough to recognize the Church as a body, as a family, in which he is simply one member. Leaders should recognize that laypersons also have

⁸⁵ David A. deSilva, “Despising Shame: A Cultural-Anthropological Investigation of the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *JBL* 113, no. 3 (1994): 439–61.

the Spirit.⁸⁶ Second, congregants would be better able to pose constructive questions, make applications, and identify error. Theology is grounded in a sound interpretative process. If one is not careful, the Chinese respect for authority without regard for critical thinking will lead to the same sort of problems faced by the pre-Reformation Catholic Church. I have personally been in Chinese seminaries where students amazingly could recite from memory countless verses; however, in conversation, they are unable to explain or integrate one passage with another. The complexities of biblical exegesis demand study, community involvement, logic, and integrated thinking to handle the diversity of issues and cultures involved in the text. Finally, if the Bible will truly occupy the central place of authority in the church, teaching elders must learn to say, “I don’t know” to some questions. This is unthinkable for the average Chinese teacher; in fact, students tend *not* to ask many questions for fear of making teachers lose face if they are unable to answer. In God’s family, “. . . he who is least among you all is the one who is great” (Luke 9:48). Group standards undergo a conversion. Pride is shameful; humility is honorable.

An obvious application for ministry in China regards the family. If Christians strive to live as a spiritual family, they will certainly draw from their experience in a natural family. Mistrust and misunderstanding easily creep into a church. In Chinese families, fathers are often emotionally distant and busy at work. They see themselves primarily as disciplinarians.⁸⁷ Chinese parents often utilize shaming and highly stress education. In the Church, therefore, it is not surprising to hear of Chinese pastors using similar shaming techniques to motivate their flock. Also, overwork can discredit a church leader’s example and disqualify an elder; this is

⁸⁶ This would be one way of applying the principles argued by Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul’s or Ours?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962).

⁸⁷ For an empirical study showing the differences between maternal and paternal parenting, see Daniel T. L. Shek, “Chinese Adolescents’ Perceptions of Parenting Styles of Fathers and Mothers,” *J Genet Psychol* 156, no. 2 (2001): 175–90.

because he does not manage his household.⁸⁸ As men learn to be husbands and fathers, they learn to lead a church. In some sense, we can draw an analogy with 1 Pet 5:2–4, where Peter parallels human shepherds (pastors) to the “chief Shepherd.” Similarly, we might say elders are to take on the mind of a foster father or an older brother, who cares for the local family on behalf of the Father and the firstborn Son. This perspective tempers pride that comes from the title “elder.” If leaders would train Christians to live more honorably within their natural families, believers would be equipped to lead, submit, and serve their brothers and sisters in the church. Our perspective determines our practice. The emphasis on progeny, passing the family name through a blood relation, creates other deficiencies. For example, in China, adoption by Chinese is basically unheard of. If it does happen, it is shameful to tell anyone, especially the child. In fact, the desire for a male child has led to abortion and infanticide. This value system is entirely uprooted by a biblical ecclesiology. The gospel tells how God graciously adopts sinners. This honor is cause for joy, not shame. In addition, Jas 1:27 includes orphan care in “pure religion.” A biblical, Chinese ecclesiology must reform one’s cultural view of a family line and identity to allow for more inclusivistic expressions of love. Finally, since every believer is a part of God’s family, churches must not carry on the stigma that surrounds singleness in China. For example, many Chinese consider it shameful for a woman to still be unmarried at age 35. However, Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 exalts, even encourages, singleness for Christ’s sake. If ministry to orphans and widows is to be undertaken, a family ethic must be assumed whereby finances can be openly discussed and resources shared for the common good. Is it true that many people are far less reticent to pool their money to help a blood relative than they are in assisting church members?

⁸⁸ Doyle, “Cultural Factors.”

One of the primary roles of an elder is to teach the Bible. Foremost, the honor of God must be explicitly central. The Chinese worldview is an asset in that its honor-orientation raises awareness to the central concern of Scripture—the glory of God. As a result, teachers and missionaries must take advantage of the opportunity, thus relativizing the individual within a collective Church who bears the name of Christ. Accordingly, a contextualized theology will draw out areas where the Chinese community, through general revelation, may better understand the truths found in special revelation, the Bible. In addition, there is no reason to displace the Chinese propensity for authoritative teaching, replaced by mere discussion on a biblical text. Yet, here one might see some tension in cultural values. Although the Chinese mind is concrete and practical, teachers frequently lecture vast amounts of information and story. The lack of interaction and integration with people’s life can deprive sermons of application, making Christian theology feel remote. It is common to hear non-Christian Chinese say they don’t see what Christianity has to do with daily life. The Christian leader, whether pastor or missionary, would do well to develop and more fully elaborate an applied theology. Topics could include things like vocation, marriage, child rearing, finances, abortion, authority, and ethics. Furthermore, cultural pride can get in the way of faithful exposition. This is because pastors may be tempted to justify Scriptural teaching with appeals to classical Chinese literature. The danger is not so much using non-Christian writings as a bridge to the Bible; rather, as noted, it is not uncommon for teachers, wanting to solidify their point, to quote Confucius or Mencius to prove the “Chineseness” of the idea. Finally, Chinese highly esteem education. Believers often feel so inadequate (due to lack of training) that they refuse to teach even the most basic truths. It is as if one must be an expert before one teaches anything. Of course, some may teach simply because

they are the most educated, have *guanxi*, or have a bit more training; yet, China, like every other culture, must be cognizant that cultural leadership standards do not usurp biblical qualifications.

Another serious issue is the matter of harmony, perhaps the foremost goal of Chinese social ethics. This idea can easily get baptized with the biblical value of unity. As a consequence, harmony verges on idolatry when the gospel is displaced as the central aim of the church. Unity becomes an end in itself. For instance, a young believer once sat at my table and said that we should focus on loving people, not evangelizing people. In response, I asked, “Should I love my children, or feed them?” The false dichotomy is obvious; yet, this man created great division within a young church.

Chinese culture affords the Church an opportunity to regain the practice of church discipline. This is because some sort of collectivist thinking is presumed in passages that speak of exclusion or expulsion from the church (Matt 18:17; 1 Cor 5:1–13; 2 Cor 2:5–11; 2 Thess 3:6, 14–15; Titus 3:10; 2 John 10–11). People are more sensitive to public rebuke than those in individualistic contexts (cp. Mark 8:32–33; Gal 2:11–14; 1 Tim 5:20; Titus 1:13; 2:15). However, discipline is even more difficult to do where face is concerned. One cannot help but wonder if the vast spread of cults and heresy in the Chinese church is not due in part to the unwillingness of leaders to confront error and sin. Not surprisingly, it is immensely difficult for Chinese Christians to hold one another accountable. Avoidance, denial, and even overt hiding of sin are typical. After all, honor and shame are inherently public concepts; sadly, some may think they have nothing wrong *until* their conduct is known publically. Elders and missionaries must take radical, contra-cultural steps to infuse a more humble “DNA” into the Church. This necessarily includes confessing sin, admitting errors, and acknowledging weaknesses. Cultural norms do not trump humility or the fruit of the Spirit. It should be observed that any disciplinary

action or attempt at accountability is only viable when there is some level of interdependence. Therefore, these issues involve more than mere procedures; they arise from a sense of identity, located within the group, which is instilled before and after conversion.

Appropriately, greater attention and training should be given to conflict management. Paul himself highlights the shamefulness of the Corinthians who brought ill repute upon the God's church by having lawsuits with each other (1 Cor 6:1–8). The western missionary, in particular, should proceed slowly, being aware that haste, word choice, directness, and excessive emotion may forever ruin a relationship. One should not ignore social rank (at least within a given group). In China, mediators are commonly used in interpersonal disputes.⁸⁹ Obviously, this well suits the biblical pattern of salvation, where Christ is the mediator between God and humanity. The goal must always be to protect another's honor (cp Rom 12:10; 13:7; Phil 2:3).

A word must be said about decision-making. Some have asserted that the "priesthood of all believers" implies democratic rule, even that this principle "is a fundamentally critical attitude towards hierarchical authority."⁹⁰ In the context of 1 Pet 2:5, 9, from which the phrase comes, church structure is not in view. In fact, Peter goes on to affirm some degree of hierarchy within society, family, and the church (2:13, 23; 3:1–7; 5:1–5). By contrast, the concept in context suggests that all believers are "priests", that is, mediators between God and unbelievers, "that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (2:9). In addition, such egalitarianism ignores the fact that God established Israel as a monarchy. One crucial difference between a hierarchical church and a despotic pastorate is the overt recognition that any one elder is not the supreme authority in the church; he is simply a

⁸⁹ For example of an empirical study on Chinese confrontation, see Kwang-Kuo Hwang, "Guanxi and Mientze: Conflict Resolution in Chinese Society," *ICS* 7, no. 1 (1998): 17–38.

servant called even to suffer in subjection to God. Honor is ascribed to the *position*.⁹¹ David Lull twists conventional thinking on Luke 22:24–30 when he writes, “A common definition of ‘greatness,’ namely, the possession and exercise of power and authority, is subordinated to another, namely, that of the ‘benefactor,’ whose power and authority are exercised *in service*.”⁹² Pastors lead the recreation and renewal of a distinctly Christian culture, reoriented to Christ as the standard of honor. Certainly, hierarchy does not exclude group decisions; in fact, consensus is a value in Asian decision-making. Yet, serious thought must be given to these processes, including whether it is valid for all members to have “equal voting power” in any given matter. For instance, should a new or young believer have the same voice as an elder brother who has known Christ for 40 years? Perhaps, a Chinese form of congregationalism would be characterized by local church autonomy, without necessarily entailing a “formal right to vote” as a part of membership. How is honor distributed in leadership? For sure, having a plurality of elders implies shared leadership.⁹³ Missionaries should be careful when introducing ceremonies foreign to Scripture or the culture. For example, it is questionable whether what the western church has called “ordination” is an exact parallel to the Bible’s “laying on of hands” (Acts 6:6; 13:3; 1 Tim 4:14; 5:22). Given their high regard for teachers, Chinese may grant efficacy of an extra-biblical ritual and thus unnecessarily complicating church authority and decision-making.

Chinese ecclesiology cannot ignore politics. Westerners take for granted an ability to distinguish their love for the Chinese *people* from a dislike for the *government*. A typical

⁹⁰ Tobias Brandner, “Authority in the Church: Some Reformation Based Reflections about the Ministry in the church, also with Regard to the churches in China,” *Asia J Theolog* 21, no. 1 (2007): 137–38.

⁹¹ For further discussion on these points, see John C. Hutchison, “Servanthood: Jesus’ Countercultural Call to Christian Leaders,” *BibSac* 166 (January/March 2009): 53–69.

⁹² David J. Lull, “The Servant-Benefactor as a Model of Greatness (Luke 22:24–30),” *NovT* 28, no. 4 (1986): 303.

⁹³ For Scriptural discussion, see Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 161–96.

Chinese person cannot do this so easily. Nationalism can easily dilute biblical faithfulness. What fuels the government's persecution of the church is not primarily religious ideology (as in many Muslim countries), but rather the fear that religious groups may use their numbers to exert power against civil authority. Also, the rapid growth and persecution of the contemporary Chinese church is strikingly similar to that of the early church. Yet, the epistles are not silent on this matter (as many Chinese might prefer). Instead, they forthrightly teach submission to the civil government “. . . For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed . . . ” (Rom 13:2–3). If the Church represents a counter-culture, whose supreme allegiance is to Christ, Chinese believers must actively cultivate a theology of suffering for times of conflict; at the same time, their practice should prove to the civil leaders that the church *benefits* society. If Chinese Christians share in social conditions similar to the early church, then it might also one day be the case that the number and breadth of Christians in China may lead to a “Constantinian conversion” of the society. Without trying, Christian leaders may find themselves deciding national policy. The growth of the Chinese church will expose any lingering nationalism or prejudice, whether manifest in ecumenical gatherings or in international politics. In such a case, a Chinese ecclesiology must prayerfully labor to avoid “judaizing” the non-Chinese “Gentile.”

A number of cultural factors should inform evangelistic strategy. Many Chinese are uncomfortable standing alone as individuals in a large group; therefore, leaders would do well to utilize small group settings and visiting people in pairs. Hospitality is so important in China that hosting people for meals should be a standard way of building relationship. The evangelist needs a long-term perspective in keeping with the Chinese mindset. Because relationships are viewed as potentially life-long while still having a utilitarian aspect to them, evangelists must be

prepared to spend time understanding the concrete details of others' life; this especially includes meeting their family. Exchanging favors should be expected; however, this is not to be seen as bribery, but rather as a normal way of cultivating friendship. This approach contrasts western methods that focus on a single, quick gospel presentation, often with little follow-up or plan to know the hearer personally. Conversations should be full of concrete stories, parables, idiom, and personal testimony. Instead of systematic apologetics, an appeal to biblical narrative more resembles the forms of literature found in significant Chinese works of religion or philosophy. These recommendations actually lay the pre-conversion groundwork for what is normative for life together as a church. How one comes to faith influences the life lived out of that faith.

Clearly, what has been said should improve missionary strategy. Space allows only for a few additional though diverse suggestions. First, missionaries must cultivate genuine friendships (not just partnerships) with Chinese people. This requires an earnest embrace of cultural values, like interdependence, indirectness, authority, and face. This may mean sacrificing efficiency, rapidity, or even statistics on annual reports. Second, church planters need to balance the danger of foreign dependence/domination with the high cultural regard and need for authority. Perhaps, this means that they assert high levels of control early on, while always having in mind how they will practically train others to assume leadership as quickly as possible. Third, workers should specifically aim to raise up and improve male leaders to counter any "feminization of the gospel."⁹⁴ Fourth, agencies may need to send greater numbers of families and older couples for the sake of access and cultural credibility. Fifth, missionaries need to train Chinese believers missiologically, to assess and cross a foreign culture. Sixth, mission work in China needs to have a practical, social component that meets needs while demonstrating how to be a Christian with a

⁹⁴ The phrase with commentary comes from Doyle, "Gender Imbalance."

“normal job.” Seventh, the dearth of independent thinking has stifled creativity; thus, things like song writing and art should be encouraged within churches. Eighth, our discussion raises the question of leadership styles. Specifically, might “Leader-Member-Exchange” (LMX) or “transformational leadership” models best suit Chinese culture? The value of close relationships, consensus, and a common vision raise the question.⁹⁵ Finally, western missionaries should evaluate whether some goal setting strategies are too individualistic for Chinese culture.⁹⁶ The fruit of the Spirit cannot be quantifiably measured. So, “obedience” needs to be defined more holistically, not as is typical in methods that *functionally* reduce obedience to evangelism. This is not only more Chinese, but also a more biblical ecclesiology.

Conclusion: Starting Points for Developing a Chinese Ecclesiology

This study has identified a number of significant influences upon Chinese ecclesiology. In particular, we see that collectivism and an honor-oriented value system are fundamental to Chinese identity. Our examination of Scripture highlights key areas of overlap between a Confucianistic community and biblical conceptions of the Church. In each context, family is a central and comprehensive motif. Chinese Christians no doubt will draw upon life experience as they live together in community as “family churches.” Fathers and teachers are prominent models in Chinese culture. Authoritarianism and saving face are pervasive themes. Therefore, a collectivistic view of family and society has important implications for church leadership.

⁹⁵ See Jennifer J. Dose, “Leader-Member Exchange in Scripture: Insights from Jesus, Noah, and Abraham,” (paper presented at the Christian Business Faculty Conference, Point Loma Nazarene University, San Diego, CA, October 13–15, 2005). Also, John Schaubroeck, Simon S. K. Lam, and Sandra Cha, “Embracing Transformational Leadership: Team Values and the Impact of Leader Behavior on Team Performance,” *J Appl Psychol* 92, no. 4 (2007): 1020–30.

⁹⁶ Frances P. Brew and David R. Cairns, “Styles of Managing Interpersonal Workplace Conflict in Relation to Status and Face Concern: A Study With Anglos and Chinese,” *IJCM* 15, no. 1 (2004): 29–30; Hennig, “Confucianism as Leadership Strategy?,” 4.

These starting points lay a foundation for further developing a Chinese ecclesiology. One's cultural and biblical perspectives drive ministry practice. A new point of view may alter one's ecclesiology. This essay introduces a variety of possible areas of application for the Chinese Church and mission work in China. Fundamentally, this shift away from an individualistic paradigm drastically reorients how Christians see themselves, where loyalty is given, which authorities are obeyed, and what moral standards are embraced. They honor Christ *as* a community, even in the midst of shame. True humility brings honor. Since the Church is a family, greater attention needs to be given to guiding parents in how to lead their natural families. Elders must acknowledge their limitations and use their authority to equip, serve, and honor others. The Bible is the foremost authority over church life. Therefore, serious stress must be given to theological training, especially hermeneutical principles. By soberly assessing cultural blind spots and tendencies, leaders can anticipate problems in loving each other, communication, decision-making, evangelism, and mission strategy. In this way, the Church collectively honors the authority of Christ, on whom rests a biblical and Chinese ecclesiology.

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