THE GOSPEL WITH CHINESE CHARACTERISTICS: A CONCRETE EXAMPLE OF CULTURAL CONTEXTUALIZATION

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Abstract

In this article I use Chinese culture to demonstrate what it means to do "cultural contextualization." In order to avoid abstraction, the essay assumes a specific social setting. Each of the major sections considers a different question. How does one understand Chinese culture in view of Scripture? What are the "false gospels" of Chinese society? The article shows one way to share the true gospel in a way that is both faithful to the Bible and meaningful to Chinese people. The essay suggests merely one possible example of cultural contextualization. Therefore, people from different cultures can apply the process it uses to fit their own ministry context.

How Do We Preach the Gospel in China?

What does it mean to preach the gospel with Chinese characteristics? Countless authors have given their suggestions. Although consensus exists concerning the key issues that should influence how one does contextualization in China, there are very few comprehensive proposals that could easily be called both biblical and "Chinese."[1] This article attempts to offer just this sort of proposal. It builds on previous essays, putting forward an example of "cultural contextualization," whereby one interprets culture through the lens of the Bible.[2] We begin by reviewing the process of cultural contextualization. Following a survey of Chinese culture, the paper then examines potential "false gospels" in Chinese society. Finally, the article proposes a

[1] For a survey of different approaches, see Jackson Wu, *Saving God's Face: A Chinese Contextualization of Salvation through Honor and Shame* (Pasadena, Calif.: WCIUP, 2013), 94–144.

[2] Specifically, this essays builds upon Jackson Wu, "We Compromise the Gospel When We Settle for Truth: How 'Right' Interpretations Lead to 'Wrong' Contextualization," *Global Missiology* 2, no. 10 (2013), n.p. Online: http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/issue/view/99; "Contextualizing the One Gospel in Any Culture: A Model from the Biblical Text for a Global Context," *Global Missiology* 3, no. 10 (2013), n.p. Online: http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/article/view/1187; "Biblical Theology from a Chinese Perspective: Interpreting Scripture through the Lens of Honor and Shame," *Global Missiology* 4, no. 10 (2013), n.p. Online: globalmissiology.org.

gospel contextualization that draws upon major biblical themes while also addressing significant problems in Chinese society. Regardless of cultural context, it is hoped that people will be able to utilize this process of contextualization to more effective share the gospel in their own ministry setting.

Although theological ideas are contextualized for concrete social settings, this does not limit their value to a particular time and place. First of all, one can still benefit by observing the process used to develop a contextualized theology. Second, since cultures across the world share many common features, one does well to learn from those living in similar contexts. Third, the Bible is written to all humanity. Its message is not restricted any one culture. Therefore, anyone who wishes to do theological contextualization will be engaging in many of the same questions, since they seek to interpret the same biblical text. Accordingly, this essay articulates the gospel for the sake of a Chinese context; yet, its relevance extends well beyond the Middle Kingdom.

What is a "Cultural Contextualization"?

Former Chinese Communist Party Chairman Deng Xiaoping called on China to build "socialism with Chinese characteristics."[3] He adds, "So faith in Marxism was the motive force that enabled us to achieve victory in the revolution." For Deng, Marxism functioned as a sort of "gospel" for China, bringing deliverance from foreign powers and eliminating poverty. A Marxist lens filtered the way he spoke of China's past, its present problems, and their future solutions. In a sense, Deng was engaged in his own form of "cultural contextualization."

[3] In Chinese, "中国特色的社会主义." For an English translation of his 1984 speech, see Deng Xiaoping, "Building a Socialism with a Specifically Chinese Character" (Speech presented at the 13th Plenary Session of the Party's Eleventh Central Committee, Beijing, China, June 30, 1984), n.p. [cited 17 April 2013]. Online: http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/dengxp/vol3/text/c1220.html.

In Christian terms, I use "cultural contextualization" to refer to the interpretation of a culture using a Scriptural perspective.[4] This approach contrasts "exegetical contextualization," which refers to one's interpretation of Bible using a cultural perspective.[5] The descriptors "cultural" and "exegetical" emphasize what is being interpreted; respectively, this is either culture or the Bible. In cultural contextualization, one highlights key themes within a culture as explained in Scripture. For example, a Chinese contextualization could use a wealth of biblical material concerning family, shame, and national identity as a way of interpreting Chinese culture in light of Scripture. Perhaps one could learn something about the way China relates to foreign nations by examining the various ways that biblical Israel saw Gentile outsiders. Similarly, after reading a passage like Romans 6, one would more naturally notice when contemporary Chinese people talk about being "slaves to cars" (车奴) and "slaves to a house" (房奴).

Four Gospel Questions

In order to contextualize the gospel, one must be clear about what constitutes the gospel. Throughout the Bible, gospel presentations tend to answer four questions.[6] There is a clear logic to the order of the questions. (1) "Who is Jesus Christ?" The Old Testament adapts the question to "Who is God?" (2) "What has Christ done?" This question aims to show what kind of a person he is. (3) "Why does this message matter?" In other words, why is Jesus significant? This point largely deals with salvation. Traditionally, evangelicals have laid the greatest stress on this aspect of the gospel message.[7] (4) "How should we respond?" This fourth piece is not a part the

[4] The distinction between "exegetical contextualization" and "cultural contextualization" was previously discussed in Wu, "Biblical Theology from a Chinese Perspective," 4–5.

[5] An example of "exegetical contextualization" includes Wu, "Biblical Theology from a Chinese Perspective."

[6] This was fully explained and defended in Wu, "Contextualizing the One Gospel."

[7] For a critique of this tendency, see Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2011).

"gospel" itself but the command to respond is typical of gospel presentations. Appropriate responses include faith, repentance, obedience, and praise.

The emphasis of the first two questions is on proclaiming who God is in Christ and what he has done in history. The final two questions unpack the implications. To be clear, gospel presentations may not necessarily follow this exact sequence in the flow of conversation. Nevertheless, the question order clarifies how to relate the various facets of the gospel according to its internal logic and stress.

How can we utilize this pattern found in Scripture for the sake of contextualization? First of all, these questions can serve as criteria by which to assess various evangelistic methods. Is the presentation sufficiently thorough? Does it give priority to Christ rather than simply emphasizing human salvation and response? It is easy to highlight inadvertently the latter to such a degree that Christ becomes little more than a bridge or a tool for human benefit.

Second, these questions alert us to the array of possible answers given in the Bible. Because there are multiple right answers to each question, one must be attentive to both biblical emphases and the needs of the contemporary culture. In other words, where is the greatest overlap between the biblical text and the cultural context? Scripture uses an assortment of motifs and metaphors. Chinese will inherently grasp certain of these themes more readily than the average American (i.e. honor-shame and collective identity).

For the purposes of this essay, these four questions guide the contextualization process and particularly our study of Chinese culture and the Bible. After becoming familiar with the important features of Chinese culture, one can then start to identify its "false gospels." Every culture and subculture has substitute versions of the gospel. They offer alternative visions for what the world should be like, what are its problems, and what are the solutions that are needed.

The false gospels presented by a culture also answer the four questions mentioned above. First of all, we could ask, “Functionally, who is the savior-king in the culture?” Personally, one ask, “Functionally, who is the savior-king figure in his or her life?” Second, “What has this savior-king done in the past?” Again, the answer to this second question clarifies both what kind of a person he is as well as his significance (question #3). Therefore it matters that one know about this savior-king’s character and power. Third, “Why does it matter that attention be given to this authority figure?” What does he or she promise to do in the future? This question assumes a certain set of life problems that need to be solved. Implicitly, this false gospel has some sort of ideal world in mind. Fourth, how must people respond, given this assumed view of the world and the offer made by the savior-king? Whatever the particulars, one thing is assured: The supposed threat against people will only be overcome through steadfast allegiance to a certain cause or person. What is commanded? There is always a cost required.

Sketching the Contours of a Cultural Context

Within any large culture, there are countless subcultures, each having a hierarchy of authorities, values, and standards of conduct. It would be impossible to give a comprehensive of picture of Chinese culture. Sketches of culture are inherently limited by their abstraction. Aspects that are salient in one part of a country may hardly be noticed in another. For example, when describing China, how would one generalize about its view of religion? Minority groups in rural areas will typically have a greater fear of local spirits and demons than the Beijing urbanite who is educated, atheistic, and works a professional government job. On the other hand, it would be easy to distinguish near cultures too sharply. Near cultures often agree at fundamental point of worldview, even if particular cultural expressions differ in detail or degree.

The contextualization proposed in this paper focuses on a few themes prominent throughout China. Other books and articles give more detailed accounts of Chinese culture.[8] For now, we will review three spheres of Chinese social life. These include honor-shame, relationship, and economics. More simply, we could state them in terms of "face," "family," and "fortune." Each entails a variety of other subtopics.

According to a well known expression, "People want face like a tree wants bark" (人要脸树要皮). "Face" is a Chinese way of talking about honor ("gaining face") and shame ("losing face"). Put simply, it refers to one's perceived social standing and value. As a social concept, face is gained and lost according the standards of the watching public. This group could include one's family, coworkers, classmates, and fellow citizens, to give just a few examples. Certainly, one community will "give face" for something that would cause a person to "lose face" in another group. Anne-Laurie Monfret quotes a Chinese person who describes the importance of

[8] For a sample of books and articles across disciplines, see Olwen Bedford and Kwang-Kuo Hwang, "Guilt and Shame in Chinese Culture: A Cross-Cultural Framework from the Perspective of Morality and Identity," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 33, no. 2 (June 1, 2003): 127–44; Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); Chung-Ying Cheng, "The Concept of Face and Its Confucian Roots," *JCP* 13 (1986): 329–48; Ying-Yi Hong and Chi-Yue Chiu, "A Study of the Comparative Structure of Guilt and Shame in a Chinese Society," *Journal of Psychology* 126, no. 2 (March 1992): 171; Hsien Chin Hu, "The Chinese Concepts of 'Face'," *American Anthropologist* 46, no. 1 (March 1944): 45–64; Dilin Liu, *Metaphor, Culture, and Worldview: The Case of American English and the Chinese Language* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2002); Wenzhong Hu and Cornelius Lee Grove, *Encountering the Chinese: A Guide for Americans* (Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press, 1991); Kwang-Kuo Hwang, *Foundations of Chinese Psychology: Confucian Social Relations* (New York, N.Y.: Springer, 2012); Andrew Kipnis, *Producing Guanxi: Sentiment, Self, and Subculture in a North China Village* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997); Li Liu, "Filial Piety, Guanxi, Loyalty, and Money: Trust in China," in *Trust and Distrust: Sociocultural Perspectives* (ed by. Ivana Marková and Alex Gillespie; Charlotte, N.C.: Information Age Publishing, 2008), 51–73; Haihua Zhang and Geoffrey Baker, *Think Like Chinese* (Annandale, N.S.W.: Federation Press, 2008). For explicitly Christian perspectives, see Richard R. Cook and David W. Pao, eds., *After Imperialism: Christian Identity in China and the Global Evangelical Movement* (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick, 2011); Ralph Covell, *Confucius, the Buddha, and Christ: A History of the Gospel in Chinese* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986). Enoch Wan, "Practical Contextualization: A Case Study of Evangelizing Contemporary Chinese," *Global Missiology* 1, no. 1 (Oct 2003). n.p. [cited 27 Dec 2011]. Online: globalmissiology.org; Enoch Wan, "Critiquing the Method of Traditional Western Theology and Calling for Sino-Theology," *Global Missiology* 1, no. 1 (Oct 2003): n.p. [cited 21 Nov 2011]. Online: globalmissiology.org.

face: “To lose face is like ceasing to exist in the eyes of others.”[9] Not surprisingly, face determines one’s identity within a given social setting.

Face is won, lost, or maintained in a variety of ways. One’s public standing is partially determined by factors like family name, gender, one’s relationships, position and title. Face of this sort has often been called “ascribed” honor (or shame). By contrast, “achieved” face is the status gained due to individual achievements, whether moral or non-moral. For example, an athlete may get face by winning a competition. On the other hand, the bravery of a man who rescues children from a collapsing building would also win public praise. Of course, comparable examples could be given with respect to shame (i.e. losing face). “Shame” and “losing face” could come simply when one does not know an answer to a question and loses a competition. Actions deemed immoral, such as criminal activity, are more serious threats to one’s face. Within the Mandarin language, one can even distinguish between two kinds of face, *mianzi* (面子) and *lian* (脸). *Mianzi* is a broader term, thus including more trivial and circumstantial reasons for having face. *Lian* more narrowly carries moral connotations. It refers to one’s most basic worth as a person. All people are born with *lian*, which can be lost through bad conduct. One does not necessarily have *mianzi*. Daily, it can be won, lost, and maintained.

Face is the lifeblood of relationships (i.e. *guanxi*). The quintessential relationship is the familial. The Chinese notion of family extends well past the so-called “nuclear family” of the West; it even includes one’s ancestors. The Chinese word for “country” (国家) combines the characters for “land/state” (国) and “family” (家). To adapt Descartes’ famous dictum, “I am,

[9] Anne-Laure Monfret, *Saving Face In China: A First-Hand Guide For Any Traveller To China* (Bloomington, Ind.: Xlibris, 2011), 12.

because we are; and since we are, therefore I am."[10] This sort of collectivism contrasts the sort of individualism stereotypical of Western cultures. Chinese identity is largely determined by *whom* one knows. Accordingly, the Chinese conception of identity could be captured by the phrase, "There is no me without you."[11]

Accordingly, those in relationship with one another share face with the other people of their group. The head of the group, such as a company or the nation, represents and embodies the honor of the group's members. There is a moral obligation therefore for everyone to seeking and preserve face on behalf of those in their family, community, or peer group. Ties within relational networks are tightened by a constant exchange of favors (人情), which literally translates "person-feelings." The reciprocity of favors and gifts keeps people in relational debt to one another. One would break relationship with another person if he or she did not repay this sort of debt. Naturally, Chinese tend to divide those around them into "insiders" and "outsiders." It is morally imperative to maintain harmony with insiders (the most important of whom are those within one's family). Chinese people are more practical than abstract in their thinking. When applied to relationships, this way of thinking often leads people to see relationships as tools and means to be used for one's own benefit.

What happens when one crosses from one social context to another? Problems emerge when different groups compete for authority. In a hierarchal society like China, the predicament is captured by the idiom "忠孝两难全" (*zhong xiao liang nan quan*) meaning something like 'dilemma of divided loyalties'. If familial relationships are primary yet the nation is supposed to function as a large family, then who does one give his or

[10] Andrew M. Mbuvi, "African Theology from the Perspective of Honor and Shame," in *The Urban Face of Mission: Ministering the Gospel in a Diverse and Changing World* (ed. Manuel Ortiz and Susan S. Baker; Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 2002), 288–89.

[11] This is the title of a book unrelated to China by Melissa Fay Greene, *There Is No Me Without You: One Woman's Odyssey to Rescue Her Country's Children* (New York, N.Y.: Bloomsbury, 2007).

her utmost allegiance—one's father or the king/emperor? Accordingly, the tensions are heightened when talking about Christianity, which is seen by some as an outside "western" religion. Many Chinese people face a dilemma when they consider following Christ: How are they supposed to be loyal both to God and their family? In the Chinese mind, there is nothing more immoral than seeming to reject one's parents. In addition, becoming a Christian might feel very "un-Chinese."[12]

Face and relationship are critical for those seeking fortune. When China opened to the world in 1978, economic reforms created a Chinese socialism "with capitalistic characteristics." Since that time, its citizens have made labored to share in the wealth enjoy by the West. This has is sometimes called the "Chinese Dream."[13] Since 1982, the national policy restricting families to only one child has had tremendous social and economic implications. Any future hope for honor and prosperity by a family depends upon a single child. He or she bears the weight of both his mother and his father's ancestors. In adulthood, this entails financially supporting two parents, two parents-in-law, in addition to one's own children.[14] This dynamic coupled with China's massive population creates a context in which everyone feels the strain of competition. Success is not measured simply by good effort; instead, it is assessed by one's score on the *gaokao*, the national exam that decides if and where a student can attend college.[15] Any imperfection

[12] In fact, a well-known phrase used in China's past was "One more Christian, one less Chinese." The phrase is mentioned in many places, including John Promfret, *Chinese Lessons: Five Classmates and the Story of the New China* (New York, N.Y.: Henry Holt & Co, 2006), 198; DongLong Yang, "Theological and Cultural Reflections on the Relationship Between Church and Society in China," *CTR* (2003): 72.

[13] For a introduction, see Pan Liang, "Op-Ed: Here's a Correct Translation of the 'Chinese Dream'," *Tea Leaf Nation*, May 14, 2013, n.p. [cited 17 May 2013]. Online: http://www.tealeafnation.com/2013/05/op-ed-heres-a-correct-translation-of-the-chinese-dream/. Some argue that this dream has proven illusory. See Gerard Lemos, *The End of the Chinese Dream: Why Chinese People Fear the Future* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

[14] Li Wen, "Young Chinese Couples Face Pressure from '4-2-1' Family Structure," *People's Daily Online*, August 25, 2010, n.p. [cited 19 April 2013]. Online: http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90782/7117246.html.

[15] For a broad survey concerning the state of the changing family, see the multiple articles in ChinaSource's edition on "The Changing Chinese Family" in *China Source* 10, no. 3 (Fall 2008).

threatens the family's security and honor.[16] Fear of shame drives many to languish under the pressure.[17] The sort of stress felt in childhood continues to some degree or another as people take their careers and fight to win respect for their family, company, and country.

A False Gospel in China

The world is full of false gospels. These so-called "gospels" are popular narratives that present themselves as both explanation and solution to the world's problems. What follows is just one example of a false gospel in China. Most certainly, individual beliefs and ambitions in particular contexts will vary; yet, this pattern of thought is found in countless places. The biblical gospel proclaims that Jesus is king; therefore, it is natural for false gospels to center on the question of authority. Whom do we recognize as having supreme authority? To whom do we give allegiance? How people answer these questions will have a tremendous impact on the direction of their lives, including what they hope in, what they struggle against, and whom they love.

Who Plays the Role of God?

One might say the "god" of Chinese culture exists in a trinity. "Face" serves as a pseudo "Spirit," giving vitality and distinguish those in one group from another. "Relationship" (*guanxi*) plays the role of "the Son," regarded as a *functional savior* by most Chinese people. Ultimately,

[16] Brene Brown's insight is helpful, "We get sucked into perfection for one very simple reason: We believe perfection will protect us. Perfectionism is the belief that if we live perfect, look perfect, and act perfect, we can minimize or avoid the pain of blame, judgment, and shame. We all need to feel worthy of love and belonging, and our worthiness is on the line when we feel like we are never ___ enough (you can fill in the blank: thin, beautiful, smart, extraordinary, talented, popular, promoted, admired, accomplished)." See Brene Brown, "Want to be happy? Stop trying to be perfect," November 1, 2010, n.p. [cited 19 April 2013]. Online: http://www.cnn.com/2010/LIVING/11/01/give.up.perfection/index.html.

[17] Chen Han tells of another consequence of the pressure related to the *gaokao*. In essence, college becomes anti-climactic and students pay little attention to their university education. See Chen Han, "Translation: What's Wrong With Chinese Higher Education," *Tea Leaf Nation*, September 3, 2012, n.p. [cited 19 April 2013]. Online: http://www.tealeafnation.com/2012/09/translation-whats-wrong-with-chinese-higher-education/.

there is no material gain (i.e. the "Father") except through the "Son" and the empowerment of the "Spirit." Like the rest of humanity, millions bow their knee to the altar of wealth and security.

For a typical Chinese person, this god incarnates in the form of one's mother or father. This is not surprising given the fact that Chinese tend to identity strongly with their group, the most central one being their family. In Chinese history, social harmony has been a means of survival.[18] This begins with the family, in which one develops his or her views of authority and morality. Huo Shui concludes, "Family is the primary building block for social structures and for human interaction."[19]

Confucianism has shaped Chinese culture as much or more than any other religion, philosophy, or ideology. The three of the five foundational relationships, according to Confucian thought, are familial, the most prominent being the father-son relationship.[20] Wang Fengyan cites the Chinese classic *The Book of Filial Piety* (孝经), capturing the essence of a child's moral education:

> Filial piety is the foundation of all virtues and the fountainhead whence all moral teachings spring . . . Our bodies—from a single hair to a bit of skin—are derived from our parents, we must not in the least injure or wound them. This is the beginning of filial piety. We establish ourselves in the world and are considered successful by cultivating virtues and observing morality, so as to leave a good name for posterity and to bring glory to our parents: this is the ultimate realm of filial piety. Hence filial piety begins with the service of our parents, proceeds to

[18] As Nisbett points out, societies that depend on agriculture "need to get along with one another." See Richard E. Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerns Think Differently . . . and Why* (New York, N.Y.: Free Press, 2003), 34.

[19] Huo Shui, "China's Modern Family Problems," *China Source* 10, no. 3 (2008): 11.

[20] Antonio L. Rappa and Sor-Hoon Tan, "Political Implications of Confucian Familism," *Asian Philosophy* 13, no. 2/3 (2003): 90. Their article gives a broad but thorough introduction to the Chinese views on "family." Confucian familism centers upon the social relationships of men rather than women. For more on this, see N. H. Ko, "Familism in Confucianism" (presented at the International Conference of Women's Global Connection, San Antonio, 2004), n.p. [cited 1 February 2011]. Online: http://wgc.womensglobalconnection.org/pdf/11naihuako.pdf.

> serve the emperor and is consummated in establishing ourselves in the world and achieving virtue and hence success.[21]

Rappa and Ton adds a key idea,

> The family was the state in miniature, the state the family writ large. Max Weber calls China a 'familistic State'. From the Han dynasty onwards, the imperial laws upheld the absolute authority of the father in the family and reinforced other hierarchical family relations prescribed in the state ideology.[22]

Consequently, since political power is vested within a family model, it only benefits the state to reinforce the importance of parental authority.

Contemporary writers expand our understanding about the way Chinese children see their relationship with their parents. Although these children readily acknowledge that authority changes depending on the situation, it has been found that, regardless of context, mothers are consistently regarded as the *moral* authority compared to those outside the home.[23] The need to protect "face" bolsters an ethic that centers on child-parent relationship. Therefore, one always seeks to maintain the appearance of keeping core social values, such as harmony and filial piety.[24] Even if a child were to disagree with his parents, the concern for face ensures that his actions will be bound by his parents, to whom he must publically honor.[25] K. K. Hwang supports the point with his analysis of empirical data. For Chinese people, he concludes that it is more

[21] Fengyan Wang, "Confucian Thinking in Traditional Moral Education: Key Ideas and Fundamental Features," *JME* 33, no. 4 (2004): 432. He quotes from Hu, P. S. (1996) Xiaojing yizhu [Translated notes on The Book of Filial Piety], (Beijing, Zhonghua Book Company), 1.

[22] Rappa and Tan, "Political Implications of Confucian Familism," 93.

[23] Jenny Yau, Judith Smetana, and Aaron Metzger, "Young Chinese Children's Authority Concepts," *Social Development* 18, no. 1 (2009): 211, 221, 224.

[24] Kwang-Kuo Hwang, "*Guanxi* and *Mientze*: Conflict Resolution in Chinese Society," *Intercultural Communication Studies* 8, no. 1 (1997): 30.

[25] I do not suggest that the child obeys whatever his parents command. Rather, the point is that even in his rebellion, he will feel obliged to appear as if he is compliant to their wishes.

important to pursue "social face" (a positive social impression) than to seek "moral face," though of course one would not want to "lose" moral face.[26]

What Do Chinese Parents Do?

Parents give life to their children. Mothers and fathers make sacrifices to protect and provide for the child's physical and educational needs. As Amy Chua puts it, "Chinese mothers get in the trenches, putting in long grueling hours personally tutoring, training, interrogating, and spying on their kids."[27] In reality, one's life and fortune are the fruit of a long line of ancestors. There are no mere "individual" accomplishments.

Within this framework, children are in debt to their parents (and, more generally, ancestors).[28] This debt is relational thus a child owes the elder honor and loyalty. Of course, this relational debt will have financial implication; thus, from a holistic perspective, Chinese typically regard relational debts as being more important than financial debts.[29] Yeh and Bedford echo comments made by many others:

> Belief in reciprocal filial piety is based on the idea that children should repay their parents for their lives, and the expense and trouble of raising them….The fact of

[26] Kwang-Kuo Hwang, *Foundations of Chinese Psychology: Confucian Social Relations* (New York, N.Y.: Springer, 2012), 284. The key distinction is between what one *positively* seeks to gain versus what is merely obliged to maintain. In addition, Hwang says, "In Chinese parenting, parents usually encourage children to pursue highly socially approved 'vertical goals,' hoping to confirm a higher social status. However, for the 'horizontal goals' that the children personally feel interest, Chinese parents would not necessarily give the same support" (289).

[27] Amy Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (New York, N.Y.: Penguin Press, 2011), 52.

[28] This duty is called "a self-evident moral obligation" in Xinrui Yuan and Qing Wang, "A Tentative Study of Difference and Integration of Sino-Western Filial Piety Culture," *Asian Social Science* 7, no. 8 (2011): 100. Nietszche, in *On the Geneology of Morals*, gives a negative assessment of societies that stress the debt of filial piety: "The conviction reigns that it is only through the sacrifices and accomplishments of the ancestors that the tribe *exists*—and that one has to *pay them back* with sacrifices and accomplishments: one thus recognizes a *debt* that constantly grows greater, since these forebears . . . accord the tribe new advantages and new strength." This is cited in Erin Khuê Ninh, *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature* (New York, N.Y.: NYU Press, 2011), 33.

[29] This is rightly observed in 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.

> the debt can never be in question, so the existence of the obligation is likewise unquestionable.[30]

Recently, Amy Chua indicates that she is well aware that Chinese parents enjoy a leveraged position over their children.

> Chinese parents believe that their kids owe them everything….[T]he understanding is that Chinese children must spend their lives repaying their parents by obeying them and making them proud. By contrast, I don't think most Westerners have the same view of children being permanently indebted to their parents. Jed [her non-Chinese husband] actually has the opposite view. "Children don't choose their parents," he once said to me. "They don't even choose to be born. It's parents who foist life on their kids, so it's the parents' responsibility to provide for them. Kids don't owe their parents anything. Their duty will be to their own kids." This strikes me as a terrible deal for the Western parent.[31]

Hwang succinctly states, "Parents are the origins of one's life. People have the utmost filial obligation to repay the unending debt to their parents."[32]

Why Does this Matter?

A number of characters within Chinese-American literature illustrate the problem felt by Chinese children. Erin Khuê Ninh first restates the previous point: in a culture that stresses filial piety, a child has a debt, which is "incurred by birth and binding the subject, by virtue of living, to an ever-increasing principle."[33] She then recounts the anxiety felt by the characters, who are crushed by the burden of being Chinese daughters. They are in constant fear of transgressing the unknowable, changing, and seeming arbitrary standards of a sovereign parent. The "familial norms of filial obedience are devised in such a way as not to be attainable—and are, something

[30] Kuang-Hui Yeh and Olwen Bedford, "Filial Belief and Parent-Child Conflict," *International Union of Psychological Science* 39, no. 2 (2004): 141. Similarly, see Chang Hui-China and Holt G. Richard, "Debt-Repayment Mechanism in Chinese Relationships: An Exploration of the Folk Concepts of *Pao* and Human Emotion Debt," *Research of Language and Social Interaction* 27, no. 4 (1994): 360.

[31] Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, 52–53.

[32] Kwang-Kuo Hwang, "Two Moralities: Reinterpreting the Findings of Empirical Research on Moral Reasoning in Taiwan," *AJSP* 1 (1998): 232.

[33] Ninh, *Ingratitude*, 38.

like the proverbial carrot on a stick, effective precisely *because* they cannot be attained."[34] Ninh summarizes the plight in which the Chinese girl finds herself,

> Propriety is therefore the norm most appropriate to sovereign power, for what remains is simply that that which her parents deem acceptable is acceptable (proper), and that which they deem unacceptable is unacceptable (improper). Such a norm does not offer even the pretense of an outside referent, an objective measure. It is the prime number of norms: divisible only by obedience.[35]

One of the women longs for "perfect filiality," while another says, "In all of my imaginings, I was filled with a sense that I would soon become *perfect*. My mother and father would adore me. I would be beyond reproach."[36]

What is at stake? Without face (*mianzi*, *lian*) and relationships (*guanxi*), how could one ever expect to get married, have kids, find a job, buy a house, and provide food and security for one's family? Some have compared face to a "credit card," a form of "social currency"[37] Those who lose face by not conforming to cultural norms will risk social "bankruptcy." When one lacks face and relationships, one ceases to exist. Lawrence Yang and Arthur Kleinman graphically describe the problem.

> Those who fail to cultivate *guanxi* networks are assigned a severely disadvantaged status, a solitary state viewed as "disastrous". To represent the "social death" linked to such persons (and their associates), Northern Chinese terms use "death" (*si*) as a modifier (e.g., *sipi*—"dead skin", *sixing*—"dead characters") to describe the closed opportunities of such individuals' social networks. One especially illustrative term—*si menzi*—means "dead (closed) doors." By contrasting the popular phrase of using one's connections to obtain resources, or "going through the back door" (*zou homen* [*sic*]), *si menzi* is a metaphor that describes a relationship leading to no further resources.[38]

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[34] Ibid., 45–46.
[35] Ibid., 46.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Hui Ching Chang and G. Richard Holt, "A Chinese Perspective on Face: A Inter-Relational Concern," in *The Challenge of Facework: Cross-Cultural and Interpersonal Issues* (ed. Stella Ting-Toomey; Suny Series in Human Communication Processes; Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1994), 122.
[38] Lawrence Hsin Yang and Arthur Kleinman, "'Face' and the Embodiment of Stigma in China–The Cases of Schizophrenia and AIDS," *Social Science and Medicine* 30 (2008): 5.

What can save a person from this death? There is no other way under heaven by which one can be saved except by having a name.

This "salvation" begins with family, a person's most basic relational context. If one cannot manage the relationships in his own household, how will he relate to those in society? To maintain face (*lian*), one must pay careful attention to how one treats those closest to him. Most significant are blood relatives. Previously, it was mentioned that Chinese children, when they become adults, are responsible for providing for their parents financially. A recent Chinese law further illustrates the central importance of parent-child relationship. Adult Chinese children are now *legally* required to visit their parents on a regular basis.[39]

How Should People Respond?

It is as if parent and child were bound by a covenant. In exchange for life, protection, and provision, a child is obligated to show filial piety. For a Chinese person, the parent-children relationship determines one's identity and worth. It implies a promise and a threat—either honor or shame. Obedience is about face. If one does not show proper respect to one's parents, then he or she is a failure. He utterly loses face.

From childhood onward, Chinese children are constantly under the threat of losing face. Naturally, they feel tremendous pressure. They have a sense of needing to pay this debt back. Morality inherently involves face. Our view of right and wrong is connected with our sense of honor and shame. When a person does wrong, we sometimes say that person "has no sense of shame" (不知廉耻). People try hard to prove their identity and worth. Consequently, grown

[39] Of course, enforcement is difficult and doubtful. See Michelle FlorCruz, "Chinese Law Requires Children To Visit Elderly Parents," *International Business Times*, January 2, 2013, n.p. [cited 13 May 2013]. Online: http://www.ibtimes.com/chinese-law-requires-children-visit-elderly-parents-987796. In Western history, laws concerning filial respect have also existed. See Patti Spencer, "Filial Support Laws: Am I My Mother's Keeper?," *Pennsylvania Fiduciary Litigation*, July 19, 2009, n.p. [cited 13 May 2013]. Online: http://www.pennsylvaniafiduciarylitigation.com/2009/07/articles/elder-law/filial-support-laws-am-i-my-mothers-keeper/.

children labor diligently and make countless sacrifices to secure a sense of contentment, security, and success.

How Does One Pay an Infinite Debt?

Consequently, Chinese adults become slaves to their parents.[40] The debt children owe their parents quickly enslaves them. Life decisions are oriented in two directions. Looking backwards, people have a sense of obligation to pay back a debt. Looking to the future, the fear of losing face binds them. They know they should pay back their parents; however, these kids know *they can never pay back their parents*.

There is a reason children remain in debt: parents define what constitutes "filial piety." For so many Chinese parents, showing proper respect will include a number of things: a name, face, money, car, kids, house, etc. By providing their parents with these things, then children show *renqing* (人情), literally translated "human feelings" or more loosely, "favors." *Renqing* practically expresses one's concern for another person. Reciprocity is essential for the ongoing existence of a relationship. Accordingly, people *owe renqing* (*qian renqing*). Within parent-child relationships, the child owes a debt that can never be repaid. The parent determines the payback.

Parents make sure their child know his or her position. If parents were to show too much satisfaction with their children, if they praised their kid too much, then the child might get the sense he had fulfilled his duty. He or she would feel a little less urgency to do what parents command. To some degree, parents would relinquish control over their kids. Therefore, mothers and fathers withhold their approval. At the very least, their expressed contentment towards the child is restrained or measured. At times, one will hear a parent praise their children, however that commendation is often followed quickly with a "but…," after which one hears one or two

[40] It is noteworthy that Paul in Rom 6 says that everyone is a slave—either to sin or to righteousness.

small corrections for further improvement.[41] By withholding their full approval, parents ensure that they will retain control. Children remain desperate and in debt. In effect, they become slaves to their parents to whom they owe complete allegiance.

What else might a person do who wants to be freed from this debt and slavery? One popular option is to get wealthy but not for the sake of bring giving face to the family. Rather, getting rich is simply another means of winning face for oneself. Money not only brings freedom from the demands of parents, but greater wealth could also mean turning the tables. In that case, it is the parents who appease the whim of their adult child, hoping to get a little reward in return. Whatever the motive, Chinese people simply exchange one form of slavery for another. If money does not own a person, he or she can quickly fall slave to a car or house. Finally, a common alternative to these options is nationalism or even ethnocentrism. Such ideology essentially is a kind of family pride enlarged to a national scale.

How Should We Honor Our Father?

When people read the metaphors of Scripture, it is only natural that readers will draw from their own life experience to interpret such language. For example, the Bible calls God "Father." Of course, many people will wonder if God is like a Chinese father? How are they similar? How are they different? False gospels typical blend what is true with what is false. If Christians are to faithfully preach the gospel in China, they will need to help people identify the ways the culture has distorted a major motif in Scripture—family.

[41] At one level, parents say the added correction simply aims to help the child improve and keep them humble. This sounds reasonable. However, this is strangely convenient that so doing is highly beneficial for their own purposes and retaining some degree of control over the child. In addition, they don't do this in other relationships in the way they do it with their own children. Do they now love other people? Do they not want others humble as well?

The gospel summons people to change their allegiance. For Chinese, this raises the question about how they should relate to their parents. In Matt 10, Jesus sends out the twelve disciples, giving them a warning:

> Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matt 10:34–39)

Chinese will immediately recoil at the high cost of Jesus' invitation to follow him. Becoming a Christian is more than praying a prayer or doing a ceremony. Clear gospel preaching always exposes idols.

Christians are not immune to the influences of the false gospel summarized above. As we see in Galatians, compromise can also creep into the church precisely when one seeks to obey God.[42] For instance, Chinese may ask, "What does it mean honor our mother and father?" Jesus only complicates the question when he states, "For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Matt 12:50; cf. Mark 3:35).[43] In addition, we also have to ask, "Who defines the meaning of 'honor'?" A contextualized gospel should take seriously the fact that honor can have many shades of meaning.

Reinterpreting Chinese Culture from a Biblical Perspective

We are interpreting Chinese culture through the lens of Scripture.[44] We have discerned critical perspectives and problems within contemporary Chinese culture. They are characterized

[42] We are all prone to compromise *good* things with *best* things. This exchange is the essence of idolatry.
[43] All Scripture citations come from the English Standard Version (ESV) of the Bible.
[44] Again, I refer to "cultural contextualization." For an example of "exegetical contextualization," where Scripture is interpreted through a cultural lens, see my article "Biblical Theology from a Chinese Perspective."

using a variety of key biblical themes, which are interwoven throughout the canon. In order to contextualize the gospel in China, it is imperative to identify ways in which the story of biblical text is expressed in the Chinese cultural context.

The various motifs are connected to one another in some way. One's sense of identity, honor, and shame grows out of one's relationships, the most important being those in one's family. The way people relate to their families will shape the way they interact with others in society. Acceptance by one group entails adopting its honor-shame standard, which necessarily means a person will be excluded from other groups. Group members must conform to certain expectations of behavior. Conformity is a mark of allegiance. Essentially, these obligations or duties are the cost of belonging to the group. If one falls into debt, he or she runs the risk of being rejected, isolated, put to shame.

The truthfulness of a gospel presentation depends on the way one defines the terms. In the contextualized gospel presentation that follows, a number of ideas will redefined in light of Scripture. For example, one must consider how to answer Jesus' question, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" (Matt 12:48). In both the Bible and in China, this is a fundamental measure of what is right, wrong, good, and bad. In John 8:31–59, Jesus' polemic engagement with the Pharisees is full imagery intended to reinterpret and redefine their understanding of reality. First, Jesus suggests they are slaves in need of freedom (John 8:31, 34–36). In response, the Pharisees claim that Abraham is their father (8:32, 39) and possibly even insinuate that Jesus is an illegitimate son, "born of sexual immorality" (8:41). Jesus counters not only by calling God his Father; he also explains that their actions prove the devil is their father, not Abraham (8:39–47). In the end, Jesus says one's identity (a child of who?) and status (a slave or free person?) are determined by who s/he honors. Jesus declares,

> I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge . . . If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, "He is our God." But you have not known him. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and I keep his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad. (John 8:49–50, 54–56)

Moreover, Paul explains the gospel using similar imagery and by redefining the same concepts.[45]

A Chinese Contextualization of the Gospel[46]

The contextualized gospel presented in this section answers the four questions mentioned above: "Who is Christ?" (or, "Who is God?"), "What has Christ done?," "Why does he matter?," and finally, "How should we respond?" I will briefly summarize some of the main points that follow. God, as the Creator of the world, is Father of the human family. He sent Jesus to be King over all nations, whom he is reconciling to his Heavenly Father. God restores his kingdom in the world by defeating his enemies through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Believers can join God's family.

Therefore, Chinese Christians are not enslaved to parental expectations and the cultural demands that usurp God's role as heavenly Father. Accordingly, people should repent of familial idolatries and give their allegiance to Christ, who graciously shares his glory with us. In a previous article, I gave a narrative account of the grand biblical story.[47] I will not rehearse it here. Instead, I will use a more analytical approach. The purpose of this section is simply to highlight a number of ways one could answer each of the four questions in a way that is both faithful to the Bible and meaningful to Chinese culture.

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[45] I especially refer to Rom 2, 4, 6, which redefine what is honorable and shameful, who is a Jew "inwardly," an offspring of Abraham, and the meaning of freedom versus slavery. For a more detailed discussion on this point, see Wu, *Saving God's Face*, 250–80.

[46] Many assertions in this section are defended more comprehensively in Wu, *Saving God's Face*, 193–292.

[47] Wu, "Biblical Theology from a Chinese Perspective."

Who is the God of Jesus Christ?

When preaching the gospel among Chinese people, one does well to describe God in three ways: Creator, Father, and King.[48] He is the one who brings harmony out of chaos, separating light and darkness, deciding between life and death. He is the measure of all that is good and right. As Creator of the world, the one true God is not limited to any particular place. He is not like the local idols of folk religions. He does not live in statues or temples. In addition, he is not partial to any single nation. God not only orders the cosmos, he also sovereignly sustains the world. He creates beauty and provides food. The Creator is sovereign.[49] Because he is Creator, God is also Father of the human family (人类大家庭).

God creates humanity in his image. As his children, we were originally intended to bring him face. He wants us to reflect his glory in our family relationships. Of course, God is also the King of the world. We owe him supreme allegiance and love.[50] God shows his power and kindness in history. God rules as a loving Father. Naturally, he requires filial respect and honor. In short, we owe God our *renqing* (人情), our sincere affections. We honor our Father-King when we reflect his rule over creation.

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[48] One of the most common ways Christians translate "God" (of the Bible) is *shang di*, 上帝, which depicts God as the highest emperor. The Chinese word for "emperor" is *huang di*. Perhaps, this verbiage can be utilized to convey the point. Chinese Catholics have also emphasized God's role as ruler over the world. They have traditionally used the world *tian zhu* (天主), or "heavenly lord," to represent God.

[49] Historically, Chinese thinkers and artists have drawn inspiration from the order and beauty of nature. It has been argued that Chinese people derive their moral philosophy from their view of nature. See Dora ShuFang Dien, *The Chinese Worldview Regarding Justice and the Supernatural: The Cultural and Historical Roots of Rule by Law* (New York, N.Y.: Nova Science Publishers, 2007), 6.

[50] It is noteworthy that China's leaders have traditionally taken a pragmatic approach to religion. Whether Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity, or another religion, emperors saw religion as a political tool to maintain social harmony. Although the Chinese communist government in the past century has propagated atheism, modern political leaders echo these sentiments. In 1993, former Chinese President Jiang Zemin said the government should "actively lead religions to adjust to socialist society." Cited in Qiuling Li, "The Position of Religion in Chinese Society," in *Christianity and Chinese Culture* (ed. Mikka Ruokanen and Paulos Huang; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2010), 286. Similarly, Chinese scholar Zhibin Xie notes, "[T]he chief moral role of religion lay not in its being a premise of ethical values, but in its assistance in the enforcement of the secular moral standards." See Zhibin Xie, "Religious Diversity and the Public Roles of Religion in Chinese Society," in *Sino-Christian Studies in China* (ed. Huilin Yang and Xinan Yang; Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006), 232. Citing C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California, 1961), 286.

In Jesus, God the Father manifested himself in the world. Accordingly, God's people regard Jesus as King of all kings. Jesus is often called "Christ" and "Son of God." These titles signify Jesus' royal status (王位).[51] Thus, one might say Jesus is the true "son of heaven" (*tianzi*, 天子). Jesus was perfectly filial towards his Heavenly Father. As the offspring of Adam, Jesus was also human and thus able to represent the human family. He is the perfect image of God. Not only this, Jesus is the offspring of Abraham and David. As such, Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promises. Jesus is the means through which God would bless all nations, establishing his rule over the entire world.

What Has God Done in Christ?

In Christ, God defeats his enemies. Jesus demonstrates the sovereignty of God over every power that opposes God's kingdom—whether demons, disease, dominions, or death. In this way, he reveals his glory and exposes humanity's sinful shame. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus overturn common notions of wisdom, love, family, justice, honor and shame.

At first, the crowds welcomed Jesus. Not only was Jesus an excellent teacher, he was also able to heal the sick, feed the hungry, and cast out demons from people. He was even able to raise the dead. No matter whether one was an insider, an outsider, a rich man, a poor woman, a social leader, or had a disease, Jesus was willing to help them and eat with them. It has been said, "What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others."[52] However, this was not Jesus'

[51] For a detailed, scholarly argument on this point, see John Dickson, "Gospel as News: Ευαγγελ- from Aristophanes to the Apostle Paul," *NTS* 51 (2005): 212–30. For a condensed summary, see his chapter in *The Best Kept Secret of Christian Mission: Promoting the Gospel with More Than Our Lips* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2010), 111–40. The "Son of God title traces back to the Davidic covenant (2 Sam 7:14; cf. 1 Chron 17; Ps 2:2, 6–7). In John 1:49, Nathaniel quite explicitly says to Jesus, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel." In the ancient Mediterranean, deity and kingship were often linked such that a king of the nation was regarded as the son of that people's god.

[52] Confucius, Analects 15:23; cf. 5:11. Confucius, "The Analects," in *The Chinese Classics* (Translated by James Legge; 1861). [cited 16 May 2013]. Online: http://ctext.org/analects.

way. Instead, his life and words taught, “Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them” (Matt 7:12).

Jesus challenged many of the prevailing values of his culture. He even redefined “family.” Once, when Jesus’ mother and brothers wanted to speak with him, he said,

> ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother’. (Matt 12:48–50; cf. Mark 3:31–35)

In God’s eyes, family is not merely according to bloodlines. Jesus warned his listeners that families would be divided because of him (Matt 10:34–39). On the other hand, he gave his followers a promise: Jesus said,

> 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. But many who are first will be last, and the last first. (Mark 10:29–31; cf. Matt 19:29)

God will give them a family made up of people from all nations.

At other times, Jesus deeply offended the Jewish leaders, saying that they were not really Abraham’s offspring (cf. John 8). In addition, he preached a seemingly revolutionary message. Christ proclaimed the kingdom of God. He showed how God’s kingdom stood in sharp contrast to the political powers of his day, whether those in Israel or from Rome. Foreigners had long oppressed the Jews. Naturally, they dreamed of a king to rescue them. However, Jesus’ proclaimed an entirely different kind of kingdom. When his own disciples began to seek power and face, he exhorted,

> You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not

> to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:42–45; John 6:15)

God's power is manifest through weakness, suffering, and loving enemies.

Jesus confronted injustice, prejudice, ethnocentrism, unfaithfulness, and greed. He exposed people's true face. Jesus undermined various cultural customs. Why? Israel's teachers customarily these traditions to disobey God, give themselves face, and control the common people. Social leaders misused God's words. Some used religion as a ways of getting face, gaining power, and growing their wealth. They used God's blessings as a way of excluding others. Ethnocentrism and nationalism fostered hatred against the nations, who had mistreated Israel in the past. Jesus exposed their culture (*wenming*, 文明) as hypocrisy and vain propaganda.

According to conventional standards, he had little "face," i.e. *mianzi*. His hometown was a small. He received no formal theological training. Jesus was not like normal people. He did not try to climb the social ladder (攀附权贵). He did not people please, seeking to win the praise of man. Instead, he was humble. Despite Jesus' fame and accomplishments, Jesus often wanted to avoid the public spotlight.

In return, his countrymen turned against him. No one likes to lose face. They falsely accused him, treating him with contempt. The Jews slanderously asked him, "Are we not right in saying that you are a Samaritan and have a demon?" Jesus answered, "I do not have a demon, but I honor my Father, and you dishonor me. Yet I do not seek my own glory; there is One who seeks it, and he is the judge. Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death" (John 8:48–51; cf. 5:23–24). The world's threats could not make Jesus deny his Father. Rather than settling for social acceptance (*mianzi*), he sought the face (*lian*) of God. Finally, one of Jesus' closest friends betrayed him, helping the political leaders execute Jesus. His disciples abandoned him. Originally, God created Israel to be blessing; instead, they now

were under a curse (cf. Deut 28–29; Gal 3:10–13). They rejected God by murdering their true king. What God considered glorious, the world regarded as shameful. During Jesus' life,

> And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels." (Luke 9:23–26)

God uses what is shameful in the world's eyes to reveal his glory.

Death could not hold Jesus (cf. Acts 2:24). Three days later, God resurrected Jesus, vindicating Jesus as King of kings, Lord of lords. God had stripped the political leaders of their strongest weapons—fear, shame, and ultimately death. Through the cross, God condemned evil (i.e. sin). In Jesus' resurrection, shame was put to death. God overturns injustice. The heavenly Father will avenge the shame brought upon his name and restore his kingdom. "He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him" (Col 2:12–15). Through the resurrection, God brings about a new creation. God begins to remove shame and evil from world. In essence, God through Jesus Christ, creates a new humanity (cf. Eph 2:15). In this way, God is righteous. He keeps his promises. God is not partial, but rather blesses all nations.

Why Does Christ Matter?

Humanity has a debt that it cannot pay;[53] therefore, the world lives under a curse. Humans are made in God's image, created to reflect his glory in the world. We owe God our love and loyalty. This is the first and most fundamental human debt—the debt of filial piety to our true Father. However, since our first ancestors, people have preferred independence above

[53] For further elaboration on this debt-theme, see Wu, *Saving God's Face*, 181–219.

relationship with their Father and King. Our rebellion dishonors God. Our betrayal shows we have no sense of shame. Consequently, humans feel a sense of isolation, having all lost *lian*.

The human family is fragmented against itself. Each group divides the world into "insiders" and "outsiders." People throughout human history seek security and contentment through the groups in which they belong, whether their family, country, ethnicity, or social network. This way of seeing the world ensures that individuals will have a sense of identity among people like themselves. Within these relationships, persons compete for face, which is gained and lost according to how well one adheres to the group's values. In essence, humanity has invaded God's kingdom, segmenting the world into colonies to serve our own purposes.

The human lust for *mianzi* is in fact a longing for *lian*. Humans intuitively know we should not be fractured as we are. We fear the continued isolation that comes from being separated from God. Seeking *mianzi* is a cheap substitute for lasting *lian*, which is found in relationship to God. *Lian* is the sense of value one has as a human who has been made to reflect the face of God in the world. We know there is safety and joy in relationships. However, we have distorted identities, giving allegiance to various persons or groups that promises to accept us, to give us face.

In Romans 6, Paul explains that all people, apart from Christ, are slaves to sin. We are unable to obey God from the heart (cf. Rom 6:16–18). In essence, this means people are enslaved to their shameful, evil hearts (羞恶的心). We have all "loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God" (John 12:43; cf. Rom 2:29). Jesus once said,

> They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor,

> the Christ. The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. (Matt 23:5–12)

God knows when we try to use religion, ceremony, or relationships for personal benefit. Therefore, Jesus quotes Isa 29:13 to describe his opponents, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me" (Mark 7:6; cf. Matt 15:8).

Therefore, we have a second debt. We owe him our lives, having defamed his name. In essence, we spit upon his face, as it were, before a watching world. We ourselves have become utterly shameful and now deserve to be put to shame. There is no greater shame than death. It exposes our ultimate weakness and the folly of our claim to be self-sufficient. With boldness, every person proclaims before God, "I believe in myself!" God will vindicate his name. Death is the final humiliation in the face of our boasting.

Jesus perfectly glorified God. Through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus completed the mission God gave him. Before God the Father, Jesus had face (*lian*) that could never be lost (cf. Phil 2:9–11). Even though social leaders condemned him, God "highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father " (Phil 2:10–11). Because he represents humanity as a "second Adam" (cf. 1 Cor 15:45), he pays humanity's honor debt.

At the cross, Christ pays our life-debt. His death is the compensation we cannot pay.[54] He sacrificed himself as a sin offering. Thus, he vindicates God name, which had been defamed

[54] The purpose of the people's offerings and sacrifices was to honor the Lord (cf. 1 Sam 2:29; 1 Chron 16:29; Ps 96:8; Isa 43:23). On offerings as a payment of reparations, see Num 5:5–10, where אָשָׁם, typically translated "guilt offering" or "compensation" (cf. Lev 5) is regarded as restitution: "And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the people of Israel, When a man or woman commits any of the sins that people commit by breaking faith with the LORD, and that person realizes his guilt, he shall confess his sin that he has committed. And he shall make full restitution [אָשָׁם] for his wrong, adding a fifth to it and giving it to him to whom he did the wrong. But if the man has no next of kin to whom restitution [אָשָׁם] may be made for the wrong, the restitution [אָשָׁם] for

among the nations (cf. Ezek 36:23). As a result, God gathers his people, forgives their debt, and grants them his Holy Spirit (Ezek 36:25–28; cf. Jer 31:31–34; Gal 3:13–14). Through the Holy Spirit, God frees his people, changing their hearts and enabling them to glorify God. They can finally do what is right, giving God face. The first Adam brought death, curse, fear, and enslavement. Christ brings life, blessing, joy, and freedom (cf. Rom 5:12–21; 1 Cor 15:22–28, 40–49). In his death, Jesus hung cursed with the nations. In his life, all nations are blessed with him (Gal 3:10–13).[55]

We can explain the way that Jesus redeems us from slavery using Chinese language. Sin can be conceived as both a debt to be paid and thus a burden to bear.[56] How do we combine these two metaphors? "To pay a debt," in Chinese, can be translated as 付债 (*fu zhai*). Also, "负担" (*fu dan*) translate the word "burden." Combining the two phrases, one can translate "负债" as "to bear a debt." Conveniently, there is also a obvious rhyme in the characters 付 and 负. Accordingly, we summarize how Jesus accomplished our redemption on the cross—by bearing the burden of our debt to God.

God makes us his children and restores humanity's honor. Jesus, as the "firstborn son," reconciles the Father and the humanity. We are no longer the king's enemies (Rom 5:10; Phil 3:3). Instead, God adopts us as a heavenly Father (Rom 8:12–25; Gal 4:1–7). From all nations, he restores the human family such that we "become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12–13). According to ancestral lineage, we will die; through the blood of Jesus, we gain life. God regards his people

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wrong shall go to the LORD for the priest, in addition to the ram of atonement with which atonement is made for him. And every contribution, all the holy donations of the people of Israel, which they bring to the priest, shall be his. Each one shall keep his holy donations: whatever anyone gives to the priest shall be his."

[55] Thus, we can say God uses cursing for blessing, or *yi zhouzu lai zhufu* (以咒诅来祝福)

[56] For a fuller exegetical discussion on this point, see Chapters 2–3 of Gary A. Anderson, *Sin: A History* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale, 2009).

as having Jesus' own honor. In this sense, one could say we "borrow his face" (跟他借面子, *gen ta jie mianzi*).[57] If we follow Christ, the Father loves us like he loves Jesus. In John 17:22, Jesus prays to his Father: "The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me."

God the Father is not like so many human parents. He does not depend on our face, our gifts, our status, or our abilities. Even though he does not need us, he loves us. His words and commands are a delight, not a burden (cf. Ps 119: 24, 47; 1 John 5:3). Jesus said, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt 11:28–30). People in life make many promises that do not come true. However, Jesus has shown himself sovereign, having defeated his enemies. He is able to do what he has promised (cf. Rom 4:18–21). Because Jesus is Lord, there is hope. "Whoever believes in him will not be put to shame" (Rom 9:33; 10:11; cf. Isa 28:16).

Harmony and blessing will characterize God's kingdom. God will create a universal brotherhood (世界大同). God will judge human sin and evil. Rebels will no longer rule the world. Politicians have always devised plans to construct a "harmonious society." One example is the "Eight Honors and Eight Disgraces" (八荣八耻) campaign introduced in 2006 by Chinese President Hu Jintao.[58] In contrast, Jesus will bring into existence a world of the "eight blessings"

[57] K. K. Hwang discusses this idea in Hwang, *Foundations*, 335–36. In essence, one gains benefit from someone else's good face. There is no need to limit the use of the phrase to things like "name dropping". A mediator could use his "face" to reconcile two parties in conflict. Cf. Ibid., 359–60; Chang and Holt, "A Chinese Perspective," 116–20.

[58] For a brief introduction, see "Eight Honors and Eight Disgraces 八荣八耻," *China Media Project*, n.d., n.p. [cited 9 May 2012]. Online: http://cmp.hku.hk/2007/07/05/425/.

(八福), which are signified in the Beatitudes of Matt 5:3–10.[59] When Jesus returns, God will make a new heaven and new earth (Rev 21:1). Paul exclaims, "The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom 8:21). Isaiah describes this ideal state, "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them" (Isa 11:6).

How Should We Respond?

How do we enjoy these blessings? God commands that all nations trust Christ as Lord. Because God is King, faith is an ongoing act of allegiance. Because God is Father, our faith is equivalent to filial respect. Since God is the world's only true God, true faith means forsaking idols and false gods. In other words, following Christ necessarily entails repentance. We need a change of mind and a new heart. True repentance produces obedience. Obedience itself does not save people. True obedience is not found in ceremony or tradition. Instead, faith implies a new perspective about face. Our view of honor and shame naturally produces loving works.

Conversion changes our group identity. When we trust Christ, we belong to a new family and enter a new kingdom. Becoming a Christian does not mean rejecting our family and country; rather, we enlarge our sense of family and nation. Who do we most want to please? Who do we want to accept us? The answers to these questions reveal our sense of identity. Faith in Christ determines our "in group" and "out group," not bloodline, political views, gender, or denomination. Paul thus says,

> For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is

[59] In Chinese, the contrast is quite clear since the two phrases both use the number "eight." Each envisions the creation of an ideal society.

> weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." (1 Cor 1:26–31)

Boasting reflects our sense of belonging. We forsake exclusivistic pride.

The gospel provides the solution to the ancient Chinese dilemma concerning loyalty (忠孝两全). Should one give foremost allegiance to the king and nation or to one's father and family? The gospel makes clear that God is both King and Father. Likewise, one does not have to choose between being Chinese and being a Christian. The world is God's kingdom, humanity his family. In Ephesians 3, Paul intermingles different motifs to make the point. God is the "Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named" (Eph 3:14). He sent Christ "that he might create in himself one new man.…So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Eph 3:15, 19). It is for this reason that the early church father Tertullian called Christians a "third race."[60] Christ's kingdom includes all nations. In him, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28).

Finally, believing the gospel of Christ means accepting his mission. Christians desire all nations to make much of Christ. God's people long to see righteousness in the entire world. Taking up this mission has a cost—suffering. People do not like us to expose their true face. Having a righteous community requires we challenge selfish and arrogant people. Because God's children identify with Christ, they are willing to suffer with Christ. Paul encourages us,

> We are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified

[60] Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture Upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum, 1992), 39. In speaking of a "third" race, he makes a distinction from Jews and pagans.

> with him. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. (Rom 8:16–18)

Being accepted by Christ will mean rejection by the world.

Conclusion

This article offers an example of a "cultural contextualization." In order to avoid abstraction, the essay assumes a specific social setting. It demonstrates how people can communicate the gospel in a Chinese context. Of course, there are many ways to talk about the gospel. However, gospel presentations tend to follow a particular pattern, answering four key questions. In order to communicate the gospel, it is helpful to know some of the more popular "false gospels" in a culture. In our study of Chinese culture, we identified a number of key themes. Specifically, the essay highlighted the relationships between Chinese parents and children. In addition, biblical metaphors like debt and slavery helpfully illustrate fundamental cultural problems. A variety of similar theological contextualizations and evangelistic tools could be developed. Broadly speaking, gospel conversations and evangelistic tracts could focus on questions like, "Who is my family?" "Where do I belong?" and "Why do we want face?" Likewise, we could begin with questions Chinese have traditionally raised, such as "Should we honor the emperor or our father?" "What does it mean to be filial?" and "What is the basis for true harmony?" In summary, the article has argued via demonstration that contextualizing the gospel requires we take seriously the dictum "context is king." Interpretation and application begin with recognizing of one's context. "Cultural contextualization" intentionally uses the biblical text in order to interpret cultural context.

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