

CULTURAL HERITAGE AND CONTEMPORARY CHANGE  
SERIES VII, SEMINARS ON CULTURE AND VALUES, VOLUME 8

*General Editor*  
*George F. McLean*

# CULTURE EVANGELIZATION and DIALOGUE

Edited by

*ANTONIO GALLO*  
*ROBERT MAGLIOLA*  
*GEORGE F. McLEAN*

2003

THE COUNCIL FOR RESEARCH IN VALUES AND PHILOSOPHY

## CHAPTER XII

### THE INTEGRATION OF CHINESE CULTURE AND CHRISTIANITY: A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

*FENGGANG YANG*

The relationship between traditional Chinese culture and Western culture has been a focus of many scholars in China and the West for several centuries. We may trace the history of this scholarship back to Matteo Ricci, the Jesuit missionary to China in the early seventeenth century. He brought Catholicism to the Chinese, and introduced the classical Chinese scriptures into Europe. However, the Christian religion was either ignored as an unimportant part of western culture, or sometimes particularly interpreted by the Chinese intelligentsia as incompatible with traditional Chinese culture. The relative success of missionary work to the Chinese since the middle of the nineteenth century is found mostly in rural and border areas where philosophical inquiry is not very strong, or among overseas Chinese who live in a society with Christians as the majority. To understand this historical phenomenon we have to search for a new approach. This paper is a preliminary trial at constructing a heuristic approach dependent on a scrutiny of 'value system'. The historical experiences of the Chinese with Christian religion both in China and in the United States are to be examined.

#### VALUE SYSTEMS

Although I cannot give an elaborate and refined definition here, a heuristic description of the concept of 'value system' is a necessity for our discussion. By *value system* I mean a set of beliefs which are used consciously or unconsciously by a group of people to direct their thinking and behavior. The *core* of a value system is its answers to the questions of cosmology and ontology, in the form of philosophy, theology, mythology, or literature. The core-questions concern what are the origin, essence, and principles of the world and the human being. These are the ground on which values located in superjacent levels rest or depend. The superjacent levels we may call '*peripherals*' (in the root etymological sense of 'to carry around') of a value system. The most important of the peripherals

are social norms or social/behavioral rules, and symbolic identities such as ritual, language, and so on. Core concepts determine a value system: they define the character of a particular value system. Interestingly, peripherals are 'subjective' in how they relate to the core, and thus exhibit a relative independence. In other words, it is possible that a fixed set of core concepts can find differing sets of social norms and rituals affiliating to them. However, the differences are not unlimited. A change of social norms or rituals implies the potential or the danger of shifting or reshaping the core of a value system.

When I try to describe the concept of value system, two major value systems are in my mind—the traditional Chinese value system and Christianity. It is well-recognized that Confucianism has been the dominant force in traditional Chinese culture, but many scholars would not call it 'only a religion' or 'only a philosophy'. Christianity for its part as a 'religion' has many dimensions. By employing the concept of value system we can undertake a comparison of Confucianism and Christianity.

#### *The Christian Value System*

When taken as a value system, the core of Christianity is composed of the concepts of creation, sin and salvation. The world or the cosmos is created out of nothing by an all-powerful God. Human beings are created by this very God. The nature of human being is sinful so that a salvation is necessary. On this cosmology and ontology the Christian social norms are based, including love, forgiveness, etc. The symbolic identity of Christians is characteristically expressed in sacraments or Christian rituals centering on Jesus Christ. Although there are and have been various churches and denominations, the core concepts of Christian religion are common to all these. The variety appears for the most part on the level of social norms, especially rituals.

#### *The Traditional Chinese Value System*

The value system of the traditional Chinese culture has as its core the concepts of Tao, Yin and Yang. The world forever exists, and the existence and movement of all beings follow the Tao and the harmonious interaction of Yin and Yang. Human being is a part, although an intelligent part, of the world (nature). Following 'inner nature' and 'outer nature' should be the way of human life: human

life should conform to the Tao by balancing Yin and Yang. Based on this cosmology and ontology there are the social norms of the 'three cardinal guides and five constant virtues', regarded as the essential societal norms in traditional China. The three cardinal guides are 'ruler guides subject, father guides son, and husband guides wife'. The five constant virtues are 'benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and fidelity'. The symbolic identity of this value system is carried by *li* (ritual), which confirms and enforces the harmony and social order of the ruler, the subject, the father and the son (*Jun Chen Fu Zi*).

Although there have been three "religions" in traditional Chinese society—Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism—the core concepts of cosmology and ontology for these three are not much different. First of all, both Confucianism and Taoism developed their philosophizing from the *Yi Jing* (the 'Scripture of Change'), so they have a common cosmology and ontology sharing the concepts of Tao, Yin and Yang. Actually in Confucius and Menzi cosmological or ontological questions did not receive much attention. The early Confucianism before the Han dynasty focuses exclusively on social and ethical orders. Buddhism was introduced to China around the time of the birth of Jesus. It became a great challenge to the dominant Confucianism at that time, because Buddhism has a systematic answer to cosmological and ontological questions. Facing this challenge Confucianism made a great effort to reconstruct or strengthen its own theory of cosmology and ontology by extrapolating from the concepts of the *Yi Jing*. At the same time, Taoism as a philosophical school evolved into a competitive religion. The relative weakness of Confucianism in terms of its lack of attention to cosmology and ontology, and the underdevelopment of Taoism before the introduction of Buddhism, may be one of the reasons which may explain the success of the spread of Buddhism in China. In addition, the Buddhist cosmology and ontology, especially the reshaped Buddhism which was accepted by the Chinese, are quite compatible with the Confucian and Taoist cosmology and ontology. Although Buddhism appeals to human subjectivity to interpret the existence and the principles of the world and the nature of human being, it also regards the world not as created: in Buddhism, the principle of existence and the movement of things are the chain of causation. There is no place in any of these Chinese traditions for a creator or creation. The basic belief about human being is that human nature is good. Therefore, it may be acceptable to say that the core concepts of the traditional Chinese value system, in which

Confucianism is dominant and Taoism and Buddhism complimentary, are Tao, Yin and Yang.

### *The "Modern" Value System or "Secularism"*

Before discussing the relationship of the traditional Chinese value system and the Christian value system, a few words need to be said about the "modern value system" or secularism. Strictly speaking, it is difficult to claim that there is already a system of values identifiable with "modernism". But with the development of the scientific theory of evolution, a trend of rationalism and materialism has been forming over the past century. The theory of evolution of the cosmos and human beings is strikingly different from the traditional Christian cosmology, and very different from the traditional Chinese cosmology. Progressivism, science, rationalism, and so on, became the characteristics (the norms) of this trend. There are various theories and schools, of course, belonging to this overall trend. Among them Marxism gained a great influence. It has a comprehensive answer to cosmological and ontological questions, and it has a whole set of social norms and even rituals. It became a competitive value system in Chinese society and in many other societies.

## **FACTORS AFFECTING THE INTERACTION OF TWO CULTURES**

When two cultures meet, what happens? The factors which may affect the interaction of the two cultures are many. Obviously any value system must have people as its carrier. And the persons as carriers of a culture are biological, social and historical beings. Therefore, such factors as the physical, linguistic, social, economic, etc., will all have some effect. Among them, here I would like to discuss physical difference and social economic factors.

### *Physical Difference*

Physical difference as a factor should *not* be ignored. It is important especially in the early contact of the peoples of two value systems. During the American 'Gold Rush' the Chinese started to come to the west coast of America to search for gold and good fortune. At the same period many European immigrants came for the same purpose. Competition was very tense. Although there were

many immigrants from different countries, it is certainly because of physical difference, among others, that the Chinese were targeted for exclusion from America. Following some local exclusionary acts of the west coast territories, the United States Congress passed an Exclusion Act in 1882 forbidding any immigrants from China. In many places the Chinese were violently driven out. Although socio-economic conditions were the most important factor for the anti-Chinese movement late 19th century and early 20th century America, the physical difference obviously contributed to the selection of the Chinese, rather than other people, as the target of exclusion. Conversely, westerners in China had quite similar experiences. They were regarded as devils by the Chinese. As a Chinese scholar from Shandong Province recalled in his biography, two missionaries lived in their town. "They resided in strange looking buildings. . . . The two men were from beyond the west ocean. They were tall, had red hair and green eyes, and walked with long straight legs—the very personification of devils." (Chih Meng, p. 42). They were killed during the Boxers' rebellion in about 1900.

### *Social and Economic Factors*

Social and economic factors are even more important, persistent factors affecting interaction. For the Chinese in America, when the economy was good and more workers were needed, such as in gold mines or railroad construction, the Chinese were recruited and praised for their moral goodness and hard work. When the economic situation became bad, then the Chinese became the target of exclusion. As a member of a committee in charge of expelling the Chinese from Takoma, Washington, Judge James Wickersham said, "If given an equal chance with our people, [the Chinese] would outdo [us] in the struggle for life and gain possession of the Pacific Coast of America. . . . We cannot compete with them, not because of their baser qualities, but because of their better" (McCunn, p. 49)

During the years of exclusion and expulsion, many Chinese left North America. For those who stayed, they were driven into the 'Chinatown'—a ghetto for a relatively safe life. In the ghetto Chinatown, the Chinese clung to their own traditional values and feared exposure to the outside world, including Christianity. Christian evangelizing work among the Chinese in the Chinatowns cannot be viewed as successful. The converts were few and the few converts became marginal persons. They lost their full membership in their

own community, and yet could not gain full membership in the white Christian community. In other words, the Chinese Christians in the United States lost the trust of their fellow Chinese. At the same time the white teachers in the churches refused to socialize with them. Here is a typical incident. During the exclusion period, some churches had Sunday Schools for the Chinese in order "to teach the Chinese enough English so they could understand the gospel, convert, and then return to China as missionaries. Students often showed their gratitude to their teachers with gifts and banquets, and the Chinese students at the Baptist and Presbyterian churches in New York City organized the picnic illustrated here [my source exhibits a photograph]. Held at Iona Island, the event included swimming, kite-flying, boating, football, music, fireworks, and plenty of food. Of the 300 persons invited, however, fewer than half attended, as many of the teachers did not want to socialize with the Chinese, [but] only 'save their souls'" (McCunn, p. 42).

Did the missionaries do a better job in China during this period? No, the imperialism and colonialism of the Western powers could only inspire antagonism and hatred toward the westerners by the Chinese people, especially intellectuals. Missionaries were regarded as partners of the imperialists who wanted to make China their colony and make the Chinese their subjects. Missionaries worked as interpreters or secretaries for the merchants and representatives of the western governments. Missionaries enjoyed the same privileges as their fellow countrymen, enforced by military power and unequal treaties. While the merchants and diplomats used their guns and power to conquer the country, the missionaries, to many Chinese, were trying to make us "stop believing in our gods and ancestors, and to believe in theirs" (Meng, p. 43). The merchants were seen as killing our bodies by use of armed force, and stealing our material wealth: the missionaries were seen as killing our souls.

#### **POSSIBLE INTERACTIONS OF TWO VALUE SYSTEMS**

Although physical, social and economic factors are important, in this paper I want to focus on a higher-level factor—the value system. Logically speaking, when two value systems meet, there are only three ways for the interaction: conflict, peaceful coexistence, and integration.

#### *Conflict or Collision*

When the two value systems meet, if both of the value systems are solid in all their levels or dimensions—the core, the social norms and the symbolic identity—it is possible that there will be collision or conflict. The one must try hard to defeat and displace the other by all possible means—philosophical, political, even military. This might be the situation which eventuated in the victory of Christianity over Roman imperial culture, for example, and of Islam over ancient Egyptian culture. If one cannot defeat the other completely, then the two must fight for dominance. The early history of Buddhism in China is a good example of this. The Buddhists suffered nationwide violent exclusion and suppression five times, from the Han Dynasty up to the Sui Dynasty. It turned out that Buddhism could not be driven out completely, but the dominant position of Confucianism became firmly established. The early missionary work of Christianity was repeatedly wiped out from Chinese society two or three times. The first Christian religion which came to China was the Gnostic sect; the second was Catholicism in the Yuan Dynasty, coming via the road conquered by the Mongolians; the third was the Catholicism represented by Matteo Ricci, in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. All of these Christian missions failed.

#### *Peaceful Coexistence*

Once the dominance of one value system over the others is built, there can be some form of peaceful coexistence among the different value systems in a society, although small-scale conflicts are often unavoidable. This may be the situation of Islam in China, and of later Buddhism in China.

#### *Integration*

When both value systems are solidly believed by their people, and strongly regarded as sufficient by their people, the attempt of integration is impossible. Integration becomes possible only when believers feel at least one of the two systems is not sufficient or efficient to face the new social situation. During the conflict and then peaceful coexistence periods, the interaction of the two value systems may also result in some kind of adoption of certain values

from one value system into another. Actually integration is more interesting to us, as we live in a world which is becoming a global village, and the advanced technologies of communication and transportation now make so many value systems of different traditions available to people at the same time. Various levels of integration of value systems have become a common reality. However, what kind of integration do we want?

We have to distinguish several kinds of integrations:

*a. Syncretism.* When the cores of the two value systems are firmly accepted, the efforts at integration of some people are likely to result in syncretism. That is, values from both systems are broken into pieces and a new set of values is assembled from these pieces. Since it differs from either of the original two systems, the mixture is usually regarded as unreasonable or illogical by both the original systems. The people who accept this kind of integration often become marginal persons who lose full membership in any of the communities of the original two value systems. A case in point is the Taiping Tianguo movement in the China of the 1850s through 1870s, which integrated Christianity and the traditional Chinese value system.

The leader of the Taiping (Grand Peace) Tianguo (Heavenly Kingdom) movement, Hong Xiuquan, was educated completely within the traditional Chinese value system. He studied many years in order to take the government examinations and enter the state officialdom. However, he repeatedly failed the state examinations and this frustrated him. The failure of the Qing government to defend against the western powers further shook his belief in the traditional values. Therefore he began to search for a new way to reconstruct his value system. The presence of westerners in his home-region drove him to learn about Christianity. During this period of inquiry, he went to Guangzhou and found a missionary from the United States. He lived there and tried hard to learn the true teachings of Christianity. He asked for baptism but was rejected by this missionary. The missionary even suspected Hong was a "rice Christian," that is, someone who becomes a convert in order to be better fed or gain some other material benefit.

By teaching himself through reading missionary booklets, Hong came up with a new vision and innovated an integrated set of values. This new set of values is a mixture of Christian concepts and traditional Chinese values. For example, Hong believed in Jesus as the Son of God. However, to interpret the relationship of God the

Father and God the Son, he had no choice but to use the traditional Chinese values of the familial order of the father and the son. So he regarded God the Son as subject to God the Father, and he believed that he, Hong Xiuquan, was the younger brother (Tian Di) of Jesus the elder brother (as Tian Xong). Just as God the Father sent Jesus to save Israel, God the Father sent him to save the Chinese. In a dream vision Hong saw God the Father appear just like the Chinese traditional deity of the Heavenly King. Later on the followers of Hong even added a God the Mother, for a traditional Chinese mind considers it impossible for there to be a father without also a mother. The followers (originally called God Worshipers) of Taiping Tianguo adopted and modified Christian rituals, such as Sunday worship and Baptism. They sincerely invited Christian missionaries to come among them to further preach and teach. However, the innovation of Hong was so alien to both Christians and the Chinese that the Taiping Tianguo movement was suppressed by a coalition of the Chinese authorities and westerners (both merchants and missionaries). The socio-historical conditions as well as the core value systems led to the eventual failure of the Taiping Tianguo—an attempt at integrating Christianity with traditional Chinese culture.

*b. Organic integration.* A really organic integration of two value systems is the case when the core of one value system adopts the peripherals of the other. Let us look at two historical examples of this kind of integration. One is an integration initiated by the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci. Matteo Ricci clearly insisted on and retained the core concepts of Christianity. But he showed a sincere respect for the Chinese classics and Chinese rituals. He himself adopted the Chinese way of clothing (which has strong symbolic meaning), speaking, and even behavior. He allowed ancestral worship for the Chinese converts to Christianity. He flexibly translated the word God into Shangdi (the Heavenly Empire), as it appears in the most ancient Chinese literature (in *Shi Jing*, the Scripture of Poetry). This integration may be regarded as an example of "inculturation". It was a successful integration, for Ricci converted quite a number of Chinese, including some intellectuals. However, the Catholic missionaries after Matteo Ricci insisted on what they regarded as "pure Christian belief" to such an extent that they forbade the ancestral worship and the usage of Shangdi as the translation of the word God. These new proscriptions eventually caused the exclusion of all Catholic missionaries from the continent of China by a Qing emperor.

Another example of organic integration is from the Chinese

side with an insistence on and retention of the traditional Chinese value core. In the late Qing Dynasty some intellectuals tried a reconstruction of the value system with "Chinese substance and Western utilities" (*zhongxue weiti, xixue weiyong*). This framework was authorized by some high ranking officials of the Qing government, who started to send Chinese youth overseas to train in engineering, science, and humanities. However, the officials made it clear that conversion to Christianity was forbidden. The first group of Chinese students went to the United States in the 1870s, after a successful intervention by the first Chinese graduate from Yale University in the United States, Yong Wing. Yong Wing's goal was to let the Chinese youth "come and try great possibilities and Western Literature, Science and Religion" (McCunn, p. 17). But the Chinese authorities had no interest in western religion at all. Before leaving China the students were clearly instructed that they should stay away from churches and Christianity. And a Commissioner in charge of the students' Chinese education accompanied the students in order to oversee this. There is one incident which is very illustrative. The boys lived in American families which volunteered as host families. The English comprehension of the boys was very limited. "In one family, the boys, when told to get ready for Sunday school, only caught the word 'school' and were shocked to find themselves marched into a church. Since they had been warned to withstand attempts to Christianize them, the boys raced out of the church, to the consternation of their hosts" (McCunn, p. 19). The theory of 'Chinese substance and Western utility' was popular with many Chinese at that time. It was to fail later, because the western powers finally broke the door of the Central Kingdom and the Qing Dynasty collapsed.

The integration of traditional Chinese value and Christian value was challenged even further by the May Fourth Movement (1919-). Realizing the seeming impotence of Chinese tradition in the face of western culture, the Chinese intellectuals turned to destroy the Chinese tradition. The means they used to criticize the Chinese tradition were science and democracy. The slogan of the May Fourth Movement was to overthrow the "Temples of Confucius." The core of the traditional value system was destroyed. In the aftermath of the May Fourth Movement, fewer and fewer Chinese intellectuals still believed in the traditional Chinese cosmology and ontology. However, Chinese intellectuals did not substitute the traditional core with the core concepts of the Christian value system, but rather, they adopted the "modern value system" or "secularism." The

Chinese mentality found it too hard to adopt Christian cores. For example, Hu Shih once asked, "If the world was created by God, then God was created by whom?" This question may seem extremely illogical and unreasonable to westerners educated in a Judeo-Christian context, but it is a very logical question according to Chinese mentality. The concept of creation and creator, the concept of sin and salvation, are just not compatible with the way of Chinese thinking. Contrary to this, evolutionism and materialism provide an interpretation of the cosmos and human being which are highly compatible with the traditional Chinese cores. There is no creator; everything is in a chain of causation; all things conform to the Tao, or the Laws of Nature. Therefore, after several decades of criticism, debates, and competition, Marxism-Leninism eventually gained dominance in China. At first this "modern" cosmology lacked a full system of social norms and rituals. However, Mao's successful integration of traditional Chinese values and ideas with the secularist Marxism-Leninism produced the Chinese style of Marxism.

On the other hand, there are increasing numbers of Christian converts among the Chinese, both in China and overseas. However, in the case of these new Chinese Christians, they either integrate Christian cores and Chinese social norms, or integrate Christian rituals with Chinese cores. There are even many who suspend inquiry into core questions and adopt socially recognized behavioral rules only. There is an emptiness or vacuity in the matter of searching for the principles of the world and the meaning of life.

## CONCLUSION: WHAT KIND OF PLURALISM?

Pluralism has become a favorite word for many people today. Even Christian evangelists like to use this word. However, we have to distinguish among the different types of pluralism here. Pluralism can mean plural social norms and rituals with one core. This kind of pluralism is not hard to achieve. Actually it is the reality of the Christian world since the Reformation. However, pluralism can also mean plural value systems with distinctive cores, so several value systems peacefully coexist in a society. In this case, what is the point of evangelization? Does evangelization mean only to recruit those who have no systematic beliefs? How about the personal level? Can an individual person have 'plural belief', that is, affirm several value systems, several cores? These are the questions, some new and some old. But their answers are elusive, and beg for further inquiry.