Probing the Grassroots of Mission in Asia

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

² Often the [Christian’s] lack of overt mourning, within a culture that demands it, has led to comments, actually overheard at a funeral, like: “It is better to die as a dog than as a Christian.”
consciousness. The pace of secularization goes unabated in East Asia, evident in the great rise of atheism. The taken-for-granted notions of reality behind these Asian religious traditions are under great stress from a modernizing world, such that we should expect a "struggle for the real" on all religious fronts.\footnote{Clifford Geertz, Islam Observed (University of Chicago Press: 1968) pp. 90–117.} There’s a common struggle to maintain one’s traditional religiosity, yet, alternatively, statistics indicate that there’s a rise in participation at ancestral rites over the past few decades.\footnote{Chuck Lowe, Honoring God and Family (Billy Graham Center: Wheaton, IL 2001) pp. 26–27.} We recognize these reactions to secularization in other current events, how it stimulates violence and catalyzes new fundamentalisms. As secular forces continue to impact the religious consciousness of Asia, they create a gradual drift into less vital "religious-mindedness" or a radicalization of threatened traditions. How Asia responds to this crisis of worldview will determine the grip of any socio-religious ritual like these ancestor rites.

Secondly, fresh “self-theologizing” is appearing in Asia. It was Chen’s brother, Yung, who originally called for an exegetical and theological reexamination of the “hidden presuppositions” behind the elite Western theologies transposed onto Asia.\footnote{Hwa Yung, Mangoes or Bananas? (Wipf and Stock: Eugene, OR 1997) p. 229.} But it’s Simon Chan’s recent book, Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up,\footnote{Reviewed in IJFM 31:3 (2014), p. 158.} that outlines a new theological method for appreciating the grassroots religiosity of Asian family life, and leads him to reorient how we view the supposed stumbling block of ancestral rites (see Editorial Reflections). All to say, this ferment among Asian theologians runs in tandem with the missiology of these IJFM articles.

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

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

In Him,

Brad Gill
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Endnotes
2. Ibid., 229.
The US-led coalition in Iraq has denounced the swiftly-evolving drone threat as the military mission’s biggest concern in the country, reported The Washington Post. Iran-backed militias are accused by American military officials as increasingly resorting to sophisticated drones capable of evading detection and targeting military bases and diplomatic facilities, with some commanders describing their soldiers as “sitting ducks”. In place of rocket attacks, the militiamen have turned to employing small, fixed-wing drones that fly too low to be picked up by defensive systems, US military officials. But while Asian talent will take some time to develop on the ground, the NBA has already brokered lucrative distribution and content partnerships to satiate its most avid consumer-base. The league has also paid homage to these fans in a very public fashion, organizing offseason trips with its star players and hosting heritage celebrations on both ends of the globe. Grassroots efforts. For the NBA to reach its full potential in Asia, it’s no secret that the region is going to need stars its fan bases can identify with. Players with full or partial Asian heritage obviously help, but the gravity of having a high-level player born and raised in one of its countries cannot be overstated. The launch of the AFC Grassroots Charter has been a valuable driver in the rapid growth of grassroots football in Asia. The Charter is an endorsement tool to support Member Associations (MAs) in their role of implementing grassroots programmes, and the results have been overwhelming, with hundreds of thousands of participants joining in grassroots events held across Asia every year. Asia is a vast Continent and each MA faces different challenges, but, despite the obstacles, many have enjoyed success by following the 20 performance categories that are outlined in the Charter. In this Grassroots Samples of Good Practice, we have compiled some of the best grassroots activities by MAs, who have already been endorsed in the AFC Grassroots Charter. The move comes as tensions boil in East Asia, notably around the South China Sea, where China is laying claim to a number of disputed islands while the US has increased its backing for Taiwan, which Beijing views as an integral part of the People’s Republic of China. The UK, like many Western nations, has been highly critical of Chinese domestic and foreign policy, attacking Beijing’s alleged human rights abuses in Xinjiang and in Hong Kong, a former British colony. China denies any wrongdoing. If you like this story, share it with a friend! Read our definition and guide on grassroots. Grassroots movements begin small and local, but have the potential to grow and significantly influence the political discourse, swerve inadequately informed policy, and push for inclusive decisions. And they do this by working on the frontline to deliver for their communities and/or their causes. Grassroots Definition. The first Cambridge dictionary definition of grassroots is “the ordinary people in a society or an organization, especially a political party”. The second grassroots definition is “ordinary people in a society or organization, rather than the leaders”.