

(Research/Review) Article

Christianity and Local Wisdom: Contextualising Worship in Chinese Culture

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Abstract: This article explores the contextualisation of Christianity within Chinese culture by examining how Christian worship can embrace local wisdom and cultural values. Contextualisation plays a crucial role in ensuring that the expression of Christian faith remains both theologically sound and culturally resonant. In the Chinese context, where ancestral reverence, symbolic traditions, and family-centered values are deeply embedded, a sensitive and thoughtful approach is required. The study employs a qualitative method through a literature review of theological writings, historical records, and cultural analyses to investigate how Christian theology can engage meaningfully with Chinese traditions. The findings reveal that certain cultural elements—such as ancestor honour, which is central to filial piety; the colour red, symbolising prosperity and joy; and the collectivist view of family—can be reinterpreted within a Christian framework. Ancestor honour, for instance, can be seen not as idol worship but as a celebration of faith heritage and family lineage. The use of traditional music, symbols, and festivals such as Chinese New Year in church services demonstrates that cultural integration is possible without compromising the gospel's core message. Moreover, the emphasis on harmony and extended family in Chinese society parallels the Christian concept of *koinonia*, or spiritual fellowship. By embracing these cultural values, churches in China can present the Christian faith in ways that are both biblically faithful and culturally meaningful. This research underscores the importance of contextual theology in nurturing indigenous expressions of Christianity that honor both Christ and culture.

Keywords: Christianity, local wisdom, Chinese culture, contextualisation, worship

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1. Introduction

Christianity, as a universal and transcultural faith, has a rich history of encountering and engaging with diverse cultures throughout the ages. In various parts of the world, the Gospel has crossed ethnic, linguistic, and belief system boundaries, reaching people in their unique life contexts. In the Asian context, particularly among Chinese communities, Christianity is often viewed as a foreign religion rooted in Western civilisation. This view is rooted not only in colonial history and the influence of foreign powers, but also in fundamental differences in symbols, value systems, and perspectives on life and spirituality. Therefore, the success of evangelism in this community depends heavily on its ability to take root in the local culture without losing its divine essence.

History records that the interaction between Christianity and Chinese culture is not new. Since the Ming Dynasty, Jesuit missionaries such as Matteo Ricci have paved the way for the encounter between these two worlds. Ricci is known for his accommodating approach that respected local wisdom, studied classical Mandarin, and used Confucian philosophy as a point of convergence to explain the teachings of the Gospel [1]. Although this approach was controversial at the time, it demonstrated the importance of cross-cultural dialogue in the

Christian mission. Contextualisation in this case is not a compromise of faith, but an expression of the incarnation of Christ—where the Word became flesh in the human context.

In the effort to present Christianity that is relevant and acceptable in Chinese culture, Christian worship becomes a strategic space for cultural and spiritual dialogue. Liturgy, music, visual symbols, and even the structure of the church community can be means of inculturation without obscuring the message of the Gospel. For example, the use of Mandarin in liturgy, songs that adopt the pentatonic scale characteristic of Chinese music, or special celebrations that highlight values such as *xiao* (filial piety) and community harmony, can serve as bridges that reach the hearts of Chinese believers. In this case, worship is not only a spiritual ritual, but also a cultural act that shapes a contextual identity of faith.

This article aims to analyse how forms of Christian worship can be harmonised with the local wisdom of Chinese culture without losing theological integrity. By reviewing historical approaches and theological principles of contextualisation, this article seeks to affirm that the Gospel does not have to erase culture, but rather redeems and enriches its expression. Through this process, Christian faith can grow with deep roots in Chinese cultural soil, producing communities that are faithful to Christ while valuing their cultural identity.

2. Literature Review

A. Contextualisation in Theology

Contextualisation in theology is the process of conveying the message of the gospel in a relevant and understandable way in a particular cultural context, without changing its theological substance. The main goal of contextualisation is to authentically present the truth of the gospel in the midst of the real life of society with all its complexities of culture, language, symbols and values.

Stephen Bevans asserts that contextualisation is not an option, but a necessity in every theological reflection, because all theology is born in a certain context [2]. Thus, every proclamation of the gospel and formation of doctrine must consider the social, historical and cultural context in which the message is delivered.

David Bosch in *Transforming Mission* outlines that contextualisation is the hallmark of a dialogical, participatory and intercultural mission paradigm [3]. The church is no longer the sole owner of the truth that exports doctrines to other cultures, but a humble and open dialogue partner in listening and learning from the society it serves. This shows that the gospel does not come to dominate culture, but to redeem and transform it.

Hesselgrave and Rommen identify five models of contextualisation: translational, anthropological, praxis, synthesis, and transcendental [4]. In the context of Chinese culture, the anthropological and synthesis approaches are relevant as they encourage a deep understanding of the social, symbolic and spiritual structures of the community. The anthropological model emphasises respect for local cultural structures, while the synthesis model tries to combine the best elements of culture and Christianity into a harmonious whole.

In other words, contextualisation is not just a means of mission communication, but also a means of theological reflection that respects the diversity of faith expressions. In the Chinese context, contextualisation demands a deep exploration of the symbolic and ethical meanings in local culture and creativity in integrating them into church life and worship.

B. Local Wisdom of Chinese Culture

Chinese culture is one of the world's classic cultures that is full of moral, symbolic and spiritual values. Values such as *xiao* (孝) or filial piety, social harmony, and respect for ancestors have been the pillars of ethics in Chinese society for thousands of years. This local wisdom not only colours family life, but also determines the social and spiritual dynamics of society.

The value of *xiao*, for example, is not just an ethical obligation, but a sacred expression of love within the family structure. This can be bridged with Christianity, where honouring parents is part of God's commandment (Eph 6:1-3) and part of the practice of love taught by Christ. Within this framework, Christianity does not need to reject these values, but can give them a new meaning that is aligned with the Gospel.

Symbolism also plays an important role in Chinese culture. The colour red, which symbolises good luck, and the number eight, which is thought to bring prosperity, are not just aesthetic elements, but contain theological dimensions and life expectations. Churches can use these symbols contextually, for example in architecture, liturgical colours, or elements of

the celebration of faith, as long as their meanings are directed towards glorifying God and educating the people.

Cultural practices such as ancestral remembrance and Chinese New Year celebrations have a strong spiritual content. The challenge for Christianity is not to reject them totally, but to distinguish between honour and worship. In a contextualised approach, these practices can be accommodated in the form of family thanksgiving services or intergenerational moments of reflection. Emphasis is placed on thanking God for the legacy of faith and love within the family, rather than on the veneration of ancestral spirits.

Thus, Chinese local wisdom is not a barrier to Christianity, but rather a fertile ground to cultivate authentic expressions of faith that are fused with cultural identity. Contextualisation of worship becomes a strategic means to build bridges between the gospel and culture, without obscuring the truth of the Bible.

3. Proposed Method

This research uses a qualitative approach with a library research method. Data were obtained from theological, anthropological literature and contextualisation studies relevant to Chinese culture and Christianity. Analyses were descriptive-analytical, highlighting the intersections and potential integration between elements of Christian worship and elements of Chinese culture.

The literature used was selected based on criteria of actuality, relevance, and academic validity. Some of the key references include the works of Stephen Bevans, David Bosch, as well as local studies on Chinese Christianity. This approach aims to gain a solid theoretical understanding before formulating contextualisation principles that can be applied in worship practices.

The research steps included the identification of key themes from Chinese culture, the mapping of local values in line with Christian principles, as well as a comparative analysis of symbols and ritual practices between the two value systems. The analysis also considered the theological views of both mainstream churches and local Chinese churches.

The results of the research are then formulated in the form of contextualisation principles that are descriptive and applicable. With this approach, it is hoped that this article can provide theoretical as well as practical contributions for churches and Christian communities in designing contextualised and meaningful forms of worship in the Chinese cultural environment.

4. Results and Discussion

A. History of Christianity Contextualisation in China

The presence of Christianity in China has a long history dating back to the 7th century through the Nestorian mission. Although this early mission did not last long, it demonstrated that efforts to introduce the Gospel into the Chinese cultural context were not new. However, a more historically influential approach re-emerged in the 16th century, when Catholic missionaries, particularly from the Jesuit Order, began to implement a more systematic method of inculturation. [5].

One of the most prominent figures in this mission was Matteo Ricci. He was not only an evangelist but also an intellectual who studied Chinese culture and philosophy in depth. Ricci dressed as a Confucian scholar, spoke classical Mandarin, and wrote works that bridged Western and Eastern thought. This allowed Christianity to be accepted among the Chinese intellectual elite.

Ricci also demonstrated cultural sensitivity in his approach to ancestor worship, a key element of Chinese culture. He argued that honouring ancestors did not necessarily mean idol worship, but rather a form of respect for family traditions and moral values passed down through generations. This perspective opened up space for dialogue between the Christian faith and local traditions without compromising the essence of monotheistic faith.

Ricci's approach became a significant milestone in the history of contextualising Christianity in China. Although it later sparked controversy and rejection from church authorities in Rome, his inculturative legacy inspired subsequent missions. This history affirms that contextualisation is not a strategy of compromise, but an expression of faith that respects the dignity of local cultures while upholding universal theological principles.

B. Ancestor Honour in a Christian Perspective

Honouring ancestors is an integral part of Chinese culture, rich in spiritual, ethical, and social significance. This practice is not merely religious in nature, but also reflects values such as filial piety, appreciation for family history, and respect for moral heritage. In a Christian context, this often poses a challenge due to concerns that such reverence conflicts with the principle of worshipping the one true God.

However, with deeper and more reflective understanding, honouring ancestors can be reinterpreted in the light of Christian faith. In the Bible, there are many examples where genealogy and family history are highly valued (e.g., in Matthew 1 and Hebrews 11). Honouring ancestors can be seen as a form of appreciation for the faith journey of previous generations, not as an act of worship [6].

Some Chinese churches have begun to develop liturgies and spiritual practices that creatively accommodate this element. For example, they hold ancestor remembrance services that include intercessory prayer, praise, and reflections on faith. In this atmosphere, the congregation is invited to reflect on God's faithfulness throughout their family history and to renew their personal and communal commitments of faith.

This approach is a concrete example of how Christianity can take root in Chinese culture without compromising monotheistic theology. With an emphasis on Christ as the centre of faith, the practice of ancestor veneration is reinterpreted as a means of forming spirituality and faith identity that values history and family values.

C. Cultural Symbols in Christian Worship

Cultural symbols have great power in shaping faith and community identity. In Chinese culture, the colour red symbolises good luck, happiness, and protection from evil spirits. In a Christian context, this colour can be reinterpreted as a symbol of the blood of Christ that brings salvation and victory over sin. The reinterpretation of these symbols is one way of enriching Christian liturgy in a Chinese context. [7].

More than just colours, traditional Chinese music and art are also beginning to be used in praise and worship. The use of traditional musical instruments such as the guqin, erhu, or pentatonic scales in hymns provides a familiar feel for the congregation, while also becoming a contextual and beautiful expression of faith. This reflects that Christianity is not a 'foreign culture,' but is capable of permeating local cultural expressions.

Some churches even design special services during the Lunar New Year with themes such as gratitude, hope, and renewal of life. In these services, the Word of God is connected to values such as family unity, hard work, and hope for a better future. The congregation is invited to celebrate their cultural identity while reaffirming their faith in Christ.

These efforts are not merely liturgical adaptations but a form of recognition that salvation in Christ transcends cultural boundaries. Churches that can integrate cultural symbols wisely demonstrate that Christianity can belong to every nation, including the Chinese, without losing the purity of the Gospel.

D. Family Values and the Contextualised Church

The concept of extended family and harmony is very much in line with the spirit of community in Christianity (koinonia). The church can be seen as a spiritual family that emphasises love, mutual respect and cooperation. The church leadership structure can also adopt the collectivity value of Chinese culture without losing the theological principles of the church.

Chinese culture highly values family values, especially in the concept of extended family, hierarchy, and harmony among members. These values are in line with the Christian concept of community, namely koinonia, in which the church is seen as a spiritual family that supports one another in love, respect, and service. These shared values provide a strong foundation for the contextualisation of the church in Chinese culture.

In churches that adopt a contextual approach, relationships between members are not only formal, but are built like family relationships—full of empathy, care, and mutual responsibility. Church leaders are seen as 'spiritual parents' who guide and care for their congregation, just as the head of the family in Chinese culture. This fosters a strong sense of belonging and strengthens community bonds.

The church's leadership structure can also reflect the values of collectivism in Chinese culture. For example, decision-making through consultation within the council or elders can accommodate the spirit of harmony, as long as biblical principles are upheld. Thus, the church

is not only a place of worship but also a safe space for the spiritual and social growth of its members.

The contextualisation of family values is not only relevant in the internal ministry of the church but also in its external mission. A church that presents itself as a spiritual family will be more easily accepted by the Chinese community, which highly values togetherness. This opens up greater opportunities for impactful and sustainable witness to the Gospel.

5. Conclusions

Contextualising worship within Chinese culture represents a strategic and theologically significant approach in presenting Christianity in a manner that is both rooted and fruitful among local communities. The long-standing perception of Christianity as a foreign or Western religion can be gradually transformed when the church intentionally engages with cultural values that are deeply meaningful to the Chinese people. By understanding and incorporating elements such as ancestor respect, colour symbolism, traditional music, and family-oriented values, Christianity becomes more relatable and resonant without compromising the core message of the gospel.

Ancestor honour, for instance, when viewed through the lens of biblical theology, can be redefined as a form of respect for heritage and faith legacy rather than idolatry. Likewise, colours like red and gold, which hold significance in Chinese culture, can be symbolically integrated into worship as expressions of divine joy, redemption, and celebration. These practices not only preserve the cultural identity of local believers but also reflect the inclusive and incarnational nature of the Christian message.

Furthermore, the Chinese emphasis on harmony, family cohesion, and communal values parallels the New Testament vision of the church as a body of believers in unity and mutual care. Therefore, contextualised worship does not dilute the faith, but rather strengthens its relevance and witness.

To that end, the church must remain open and dialogical—committed to ongoing theological reflection that bridges faith and culture. Such openness fosters authentic spiritual growth and allows the church to become truly indigenous, living out the gospel in ways that honour both Christ and the cultural narratives of the people it seeks to reach.

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