Confucian songlines of dignity and community

Brian Quan

It was one of those conversations that left me curious, with more questions than answers. "I follow Jesus and belong to a Christian church, but I still keep my Buddhist beliefs," she said matter-of-factly. "I believe in Jesus and also keep our Chinese traditions."

Knowing I was a pastor, she wasn't offering a confession—just stating her reality without batting an eye. But warning lights flashed in my mind. What? How? Can someone really live this way? What about the First Commandment? The Great Commandment? James warns us about a divided mind.

She was my aunt, not my parishioner. How should I proceed? Should I warn her about misplaced allegiances? Question her theology? Or gently explore how she reached this conviction?

Family-gathering wisdom prevailed. I carefully navigated this minefield, simply nodding and saying, "Now that's interesting."

This conversation from over a decade ago remains vivid as I continue wrestling with what it means to be Christian—and Mennonite—within Chinese heritage. What do our history, culture, and context teach us about God, community, and peace? Which cultural values and practices align with biblical witness? And when culture and faith feel misaligned, how do we navigate that tension?

What follows is a praxis of decolonial discipleship in our intercultural church. When we recognize the deep ethics of Confucianism within our culture, we discover living songlines[1] that can guide our faith journey toward healing and solidarity without colonial assimilation.

Honor-shame mediation: The art of preserving dignity

My aunt's matter-of-fact declaration taught me something important about navigating our intercultural congregations. The Confucian concept of 礼 (*Li*) emphasizes proper relationships and social harmony. This is quite different from the Western approach, which is direct and tends to be more confrontational—something that can end up being counterproductive in our context. In Western contexts, we value direct and forward communication.

1 Elaine Enns and Ched Myers, *Healing Haunted Histories: A Settler Discipleship of Decolonization* (Cascade Books, 2021).

We see this as an honest, efficient way of addressing the issue at stake. But this approach can bring distress in our Chinese culture, which prioritizes relational harmony. If I were to charge headfirst into a disagreement, I could shatter the relationships to which I'm trying to bring healing.

A decolonial approach calls for moving beyond Western, low-context models of engagement. At the Toronto Chinese Mennonite Church, we operate within a high-context honor-shame framework, where communal harmony and the preservation of face are of central importance. This requires an approach that is nuanced and mediated. It is one that prioritizes discreet, often private conversations in which people are recognized, understood, and respected.[2] It is less like a debate and more like a dance, a carefully choreographed sequence of mindful reflections, pauses for discernment, and then the offering of carefully chosen words at the right time. The goal is not simply to present facts or resolve issues but to safeguard honor, nurture harmony, and preserve the unity of the body of Christ.

Jesus's teaching in Matthew 18:15–17 sheds light on this approach. His instruction to "go privately first" emphasizes the importance of beginning with personal conversation, then moving gradually outward if necessary. This progression mirrors the Li principle of harmony in relationships through expanding circles of obligation. It begins with the immediate family, then extends to kin, and finally to the wider community.[3] By practicing Jesus's teachings in this way, we create space for face-saving opportunities while still seeking reconciliation and truth.

Silence, too, carries a different meaning in this framework. In the West, it is often seen as ignorance, passivity, or even surrender. Yet in high-context cultures, silence is a form of reflection, a deliberate pause to assess before responding. It creates a safe space for discernment and honors the weight of the moment. Recognizing these nuances allows us to hold together both the wisdom of Jesus's teaching and the insights from our cultural traditions. Integrating these learnings allows us to nurture a community where dignity and truth do not compete with harmony.

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2 Many intercultural churches are learning that effective pastoral care and conflict resolution require an understanding of the honor-shame framework, where communal harmony and the preservation of face are of central importance. This represents a significant shift from Western models that prioritize individual guilt and innocence. See Jayson Georges and Mark D. Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures: Biblical Foundations and Practical Essentials* (IVP Academic, 2016).

3 Fei Xiaotong's concept of the "differential mode of association" provides a foundational sociological framework for understanding relational networks in Chinese society. Contemporary missiologists like Brad Vaughn have developed these ideas further, specifically applying them to theology and conflict resolution within honor-shame contexts. See Fei Xiaotong, *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society*, trans. Gary G. Hamilton and Wang Zheng (University of California Press, 1992), 64–67.

Sacramental hospitality: When meals become worship

Our church began renting space from a historic Presbyterian congregation after we outgrew our previous space. They were traditional and long-established, and we were a much younger new-Canadian congregation. The arrangement felt providential. We now had space to worship and, best of all, a large fellowship hall where we could share meals together.

Having meals together wasn't just about filling stomachs; it was a highlight, a joyful extension of worship and fellowship. Then we received a jarring request: "We ask that you refrain from using the kitchen and cooking meals during the morning service. Our members find the odor of your cooking distracting."

For our community, the fragrance of steamed jasmine rice was a pleasant aroma of welcome and belonging. To others, it was an interruption, even a nuisance. What we experienced as sacramental hospitality was interpreted as something out of place in worship.

Meals as sacred gathering

In our Chinese culture, meals are an expression of hospitality that carries both cultural and theological significance. There is a beautiful concept called 热闹 (*rè nào*)—literally meaning "hot and noisy." It describes a lively, vibrant atmosphere of communal dining. Gathering around the table embodies warmth, joy, and harmony. It is where relationships are formed and deepened. Eating together reflects intentional hospitality, belonging, and mutual respect. It is where we live out our social etiquette of serving the elders first and offering guests the choicest portions. Unlike individualistic fellowship models, Chinese hospitality is collective. Hosts serve others before themselves, embodying Christ's kenotic love—he came "not to be served but to serve."

Robert Karris commented, "Jesus is either going to a meal, at a meal, or coming from a meal."[4] Meals were central to his mission, teaching, and kingdom proclamation. Hence, a post-worship meal isn't just a social afterthought but an extension of liturgy and an expression of Christ's love.

The potluck problem

The tension we experienced wasn't just about food odors. It reflected a clash between sacramental hospitality and colonial individualist practices. With the typical North American potluck, individuals bring their own dish, queue up in a buffet line, and serve themselves. The act is decentralized and self-oriented. This model claims to be egalitarian, and anyone can serve themselves at any time. However, this ignores our formal practices of respect

4 Robert J. Karris, "Eating Your Way through Luke's Gospel," in *Luke: Artist and Theologian: Luke's Passion Account as Literature* (Paulist Press, 1985).

and honor in which our young people serve our elders first. When the loudest or hungriest eat first, cultural rituals of honor are lost. The sacred and ordinary become separated. Worship ends and the meal becomes a fellowship of casual conversation.

When churches dismiss cultural practices like Chinese communal meals as distracting, they miss the theological traditions embedded in these practices. It tends to perpetuate colonial assumptions about what proper Christian fellowship looks like. Yet the early church "devoted themselves to the breaking of bread" (Acts 2:42). For them, meals weren't optional extras but integral to worship.

Economic community: Learning from clan wisdom

When I first learned about Confucian clan structures, 宗族 (*zōngzú*), I was surprised to see how they resembled the early church in Acts. These family networks created ecosystems of care. When imperial governments in China were unable to meet people's needs, the clans stepped in offering economic support, education, health care, and conflict resolution.[5] This mirrors how the first Christians shared everything in common, caring for one another as one body.

Somehow, many modern churches have drifted from this holistic vision. We often silo faith into Sunday services and ministry departments, and leave the practical needs of parishioners to be navigated alone. It saddens me that this is the experience of many Christians. However, there are aspects in our cultural practices that don't separate the spiritual from the practical.

Consider these two stories from the Toronto Chinese Mennonite Church.

Even though Mr. Shen never attended our church, we prayed for him while he fought cancer. After he passed, we were deeply moved by his family's needs and learned that they struggled financially. The congregation immediately took up a love offering to help with his funeral expenses. Though he never visited our building, he was part of our community, and we could share that practical burden.

Then there was Mrs. Lee, a senior in our church who was also fighting cancer. In addition to visitations and prayer, we recognized she needed more support. When we shared her need, one member felt moved to personally prepare meals and to offer her company during the week. The congregation partnered with her, granting funds from our benevolence fund to cover the cost of groceries.

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5 Cohen provides an anthropological framework that details how kinship structures like clans acted as a critical, informal social safety net when the imperial state's reach was limited. See Myron L. Cohen, *Kinship, Contract, Community, and State: Anthropological Perspectives on China* (Columbia University Press, 2005).

This is the kind of integrated care that clans provide. Colonial Christianity has often dismissed these communal systems as foreign, overly enmeshed, and even backwards. They have replaced them with individualistic models.

Western missionaries often taught that clan loyalty competed with Christ, not understanding how clan structures actually embodied biblical principles of mutual care. While some missionaries recognized this and worked within the cultural frameworks, others struggled to see the relationship between these communal bonds and Christian discipleship.[6] The result is that our fellowship can sometimes feel limited to social gatherings, while people in our pews face crises in silence.

Mennonites believe the church is called to be an alternative to the world's systems of domination and scarcity. The clan structures understood something we've forgotten: Caring for souls means caring for bodies. We need to remember that we are a spiritual community that sees and responds to the physical, economic, and social needs of our people.

We have been rediscovering this rich way of being God's people. What feels new is actually very old. We are embracing collective responsibility, honoring our elders, and integrating our spiritual and practical lives together. These cultural practices continually emerge, not as separate from our faith, but as elements contributing to our theological heritage.

As a pastor walking this path, the journey often feels like a complex puzzle, yet it unfolds in surprising and beautiful ways. We have been learning that the very Confucian songlines within our culture are not obstacles to the Gospel; rather, they have become living guides. We continue to discover that being faithful to Jesus does not mean discarding cultural wisdom, but recognizing how God has already spoken through it. This is the promise of decolonial discipleship. It's a faith shaped by a rich culture while remaining rooted in the radical love of Jesus.

About the author

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6 This was a central tension in the missionary endeavor. Western missionaries in China frequently perceived the Confucian clan system as a primary rival to Christian allegiance, viewing its ancestral rites as idolatrous and its kinship bonds as a challenge to the absolute loyalty demanded by the Christian God. This perspective led to active efforts to dismantle clan cohesion among converts, inadvertently dismantling the very systems of social and economic mutual aid that mirrored the practices of the early church. See Lian Xi, *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China* (Yale University Press, 2010).