

Suggestions and Resources for Ministry Among Chinese

by *Carolynn Hudson*

THE CHINESE TAKE GREAT PRIDE in the five-thousand-year history of their nation. Earlier Chinese named their nation *Zhong guo*, the middle or central kingdom, because of the dominant role China played in the world at that time. Likewise, today's Chinese are very proud that China has once again become an influential presence all over the world. To minister effectively with Chinese, it is crucial to understand their long history and the Confucian culture that has impacted China throughout that history.

DIVERSITY AMONG CHINESE

China has around 490 people groups. While some of these people still have their own languages, the educational system instructs students in a common oral and written language, Mandarin Chinese, with simplified Chinese characters. This is the language of the majority Han people. In spite of the common language, Chinese differ according to place of origin, social class, educational background and generation.

- Rural regions, where there is much more poverty and traditional worldviews and folk religions prevail, or urban areas, where there are more opportunities and modern or postmodern worldviews are more prevalent (see chap. 5 for worldview definitions¹).

- Social class (classes based on wealth, position in business or government)
- Level of education (among universities, as in the West, there are elite and lower-status schools)
- Generation
 1. *Born after 1960.* Cultural Revolution or Lost Generation (1966-1976): Whether they were Red Guard members or persecuted by the Red Guard, all were deprived of their education. Educated people sent to the countryside despise Marxist philosophy, and the Red Guards eventually felt betrayed by Mao and lost faith in communism also.
 2. *Born in the 1970s.* Tiananmen Generation: These people lived during the economic reform era of Deng Xiao Ping and many were caught up in and wounded by the June 1989 Tiananmen Square events. Often selfish, many are concerned only with themselves.
 3. *Born after 1980.* Because of their woundedness and difficulty adapting to rapid changes in society, many parents of this generation have communicated to their children critical attitudes toward the status quo. Therefore many born in the 1980s inherited insecurity about life, but they are still open to new ideas. Because their parents may be manipulative or dependent, there is often a love-hate relationship between the two generations. The children are concerned for both family and society. Many yearn for reconciliation with parents and for close friends to take the place of siblings.
 4. *Born after 1990.* These people have grown up during the economic rise of China and are often very nationalistic. Due to family influences, they are overly dependent emotionally and have difficulty developing close friendships. They long for a sense of belonging and seek help in attaining self-fulfillment and happiness. At the same time, they are aware of the expectations and

possible financial needs of their parents (most are the sole child of the family).

5. *Born after 1995*. Some come to the United States as high school students. Because their parents have been too busy working to care for them, many have grown up in a fantasy world of television, Internet and social networking sites, and don't know how to interact socially. Obsessed with taking selfies, they look for a sense of belonging and existence on the Internet and want to show "face" in their online life. They are attracted to beauty and will be touched by God's creativity.

The material here cannot do justice to the diversity and complexity of China. Traditional Chinese thought is a balance of contradictions (e.g., *yin* and *yang*) that can embrace a pluralism of beliefs and values. What is true in one area and of one individual or group may not be true of others. As always in crosscultural relationships, *it is crucial to get to know and learn about the backgrounds of individuals and families.*

BELIEF SYSTEMS

- "Looking backward to go forward" (a Chinese proverb): Chinese consider the past a constant touchstone and see history as always present in the now. Since Eastern thinking is circular, then history is circular for Eastern thinkers. Understanding the ancient system of *Confucianism* is critical to understanding China today.
- "You know, the difference between you and me is that I think the world is a circle, and you think it is a line" (Chinese scholar Peng Kai Ping to Richard Nisbett in Nisbett's *The Geography of Thought* [New York: Free Press, 2004], xiii). This quote from Peng Kai Ping demonstrates the difficulties people from different cultures have understanding one another and the importance of recognizing the difference between Greek and Confucian thought. Western thinking has its origin in Aristotle's science of logic (the art and method of "correct thinking"). There are certain rules that govern correct thinking; our

linear Western worldview requires a right or wrong answer to every question. The non-linear Confucian worldview involves circular thinking and perceives that things are constantly changing. In the Confucian perspective there are no Western-type rules that govern thinking: ideas that are in apparent opposition can be held simultaneously without the need to choose between right or wrong.

- Confucian thought also says that when things change, they always move back to some prior state (thinking is circular). Making decisions while forgetting that things change would invite mistaken conclusions. While Greek thinkers need correct answers and urgent decision-making, Confucian thought seeks harmony; its internal dialogue must be unrushed.
- Confucianism is *the* belief system that has dominated Chinese thought throughout most of Chinese history and is an inseparable part of what it means to be Chinese. It is a moral and ethical system intended to maintain a proper and civilized society; the goal is *the perfection of society and the individual*. Younger Chinese who think they're no longer influenced by traditional ideas may realize later that those ideas have been present in their subconscious all along.
- *Contrast with Christianity*. Confucianism teaches that humans are good and can perfect themselves and society by striving to live correctly: humankind is perfectible through personal endeavor. Christianity teaches that there is nothing we can do to perfect ourselves; we need a Savior.
- The *family* is the central institution of society. Fulfilling mutual obligations to family members (and all in-group members) is a virtue; children are raised to perpetuate the system of mutual obligation. A perfect nation can be achieved through family.
- For four thousand years *filial piety* held the most important place in Chinese ethics. Filial piety is the duty to respect and care for the living elderly members of the family and venerate (worship, pay respect to) deceased ancestors.

- Due to the one-child policy, individuals or couples now face the responsibility of caring for four to eight aging parents and grandparents. Some of China's young are rebelling against traditional filial piety obligations, leaving 200 million Chinese over sixty in poverty. In 2013 the Chinese government passed laws to enable parents to sue children for emotional and financial support. Many hope that the one-child policy will be relaxed; such a loosening of the rules would help solve the additional crisis of *too few women for the number of men seeking marriage partners*. As the burden of caring for parents is lifted, many young people may revert back to more Confucian views.
- *Hierarchy: The basis for social order.* In Confucian thought everyone has a *dominant* or *subordinate role* to fulfill: sons obey fathers, wives obey husbands and subjects obey rulers. Since the early Chinese had no geographic mobility, they felt strongly the need for social harmony, and hierarchy made that harmony possible. In China today, youth are able to help their parents navigate rapid societal changes: fathers listen to their sons and young people don't accept hierarchy. Nevertheless the senior-junior relationship—which involves Confucian values of power and honor—plays a critical role in daily life.
- Examples:
 1. *Workplace* junior to senior gift-giving at holidays has been considered an essential practice. People often give gifts to those in higher positions.
 2. *Students* are cautious about asking questions that could cause a loss of face both for professors who don't know the answer and for students asking the question.
 3. *Grad students* or *interns* are often forced to do time-consuming research that professors take credit for.
 4. *Under Confucian influence, when a woman marries* she often loses her place in her family and finds herself at the mercy of her mother-in-law. Since the primary allegiance of her husband is to

his father and not to her, she may have nowhere to turn. This has caused many divorces in China.

Relationships. *Two kinds of in-group (insider) relationships.* Chinese live by the Confucian teaching that people only have the capacity to help their in-groups so they invest almost all their relational energy in those relationships. There are two kinds: close personal relationships and *guanxi* (pronounced gwahn-she) relationships.

1. *Close personal relationships.* Family members and close friends form the closest networks for Chinese. Among this group of family and friends, resources are shared freely with little need for reciprocity. These mutually dependent relationships are formed early and last a lifetime. Note: Chinese close relationships are usually very different from Western close, intimate relationships. Many Chinese are reluctant to share emotions and don't expect the level of intimacy that Westerners do.
2. *Guanxi relationships.* *Guanxi* relationships are networks of mutual obligation that hold people together for ongoing reciprocal exchanges of favors, not for friendship. *Guanxi* provides a way to get some of the needed but limited resources in society. Because of the need to care for entire families, establishing extensive *guanxi* networks is critical. The number and quality of powerful connections help to determine social status and ability to provide for family members. Unless a Westerner has married into a Chinese family, Western relationships with Chinese will usually fit in the *guanxi* category. However, the desire felt by many younger Chinese to experience real intimacy can eventually result in genuine friendship relationships with them.

Westerners need to remember:

- If one receives, one has an obligation to give later on.
- Chinese often don't understand when the help they ask for is not given and may decide that our not using our position to help is a deliberate decision. That can break the relationship.

- Never overpromise in any relationship. Be aware of possible jealousy from others if you help someone.

Close personal and *guanxi* relationships are lived out in a series of concentric circles.

- *Circle 1* (the center) is the individual.
- *Circle 2* includes those to whom a person feels closest and with whom there is fairly open sharing:
 - For women: two to three women, possibly including a family member, or one to three classmates.
 - For men: three to five men, classmates or business associates.
- *Circle 3* includes more extended family and remaining classmates.
 - *Classmates* are members of a specially selected, carefully matched academic collective of twenty-five to thirty with whom a child studies from the first through the last years of primary and secondary school. They are obligated to help each other in academic and other ways throughout life. For children with no siblings in the younger Chinese generations, classmates in the inner circle may take the place of siblings. Communication with classmates through social media continues after graduation, especially for Chinese born in the 1990s, providing them with trusted friends as they compete academically at university.
- *Circle 4* includes *guanxi* connections, relationships that are less personal but ongoing. Over time some genuine friendship may develop in these relationships.
- *Circle 5* includes temporary relationships formed to meet specific needs; they are quickly formed and quickly broken.

RELIGIONS THAT HAVE IMPACTED CONFUCIANISM

- *Daoism* had an early influence on Confucianism.
 1. focuses on individuals and their relationship with nature
 2. goal is harmony with universe

- *Buddhism* had later influence on Confucianism.
 1. teaches detachment from the world and ceasing all desire
 2. goal is the end of suffering by achieving Nirvana, which is the nonexistence of self
 3. becoming more popular in China
- *Folk* religion is practiced among those who hold more traditional power-weakness worldviews: the elderly and rural and urban poor. Various deities are worshiped and prayed to and if practitioners feel their prayers have been answered, deities are thanked by offerings of food or paper money. Many villages have shamans or spiritual healers to whom people turn to deal with sickness and the need for good luck. Ancestor veneration is still an important part of traditional Confucianism.

CHINESE WORLDVIEW

In Confucian societies those in power use face (honor-shame) to maintain their power. As a result power-weakness and honor-shame are intertwined in China. Public loss of face brings the painful awareness of imperfection and lowers status, and can affect both close personal and *guanxi* networks. *Harmony* in relationships is the goal of Chinese morality. Chinese believe that people who do not maintain harmony by protecting face are selfish and do not care for their family, in-group or country. (See chap. 6 for more on value systems and face.)

HISTORICAL EVENTS THAT AFFECT CHINESE VIEWS OF WESTERNERS

Those of us who work with Chinese students and scholars will not serve them well if we don't understand how humiliated China has felt at the hands of foreigners. In the August 2008 issue of *Newsweek*, Orville Schell discussed what drives China: "The most critical element in the formation of China's modern identity has been the legacy of the country's 'humili-

ation' at the hands of foreigners, beginning with its defeat in the Opium Wars in the mid-19th century and the shameful treatment of Chinese immigrants in America."

In the mid-nineteenth century opium was tolerated in Britain but banned in China. In 1850 the British overrode China's rules against opium, and China was forced to accept and pay for opium crops it did not want. Along with these unjust treaties came Western missionaries on the same ships that brought the opium. I have never met a Chinese scholar who was not fully aware of the humiliation felt by China at that time, or the fact that missionaries were associated with that humiliation. Nor are they unaware of the shabby treatment of Chinese immigrants in the United States during the nineteenth century. The only appropriate response to any Chinese student or scholar who brings up these facts is to apologize and acknowledge that you are ashamed for what was done.

COMMUNISM AND THE CRISIS OF CORRUPTION

The collapse of the dynasties in China left a vacuum that Mao Zedong was able to fill with his Chinese communist ideas. One of his main motivations was to destroy the Confucian value system, which he felt was too elite. He was thought to be the equalizer: the enemy of bureaucracy and privilege. By 1949 he had established the Chinese Communist Party. Mao then began to shift the focus of thought from the family to the Party and national interests.

Today students learn about communism from an early age. But since economic capitalism is now widely embraced, it's harder to justify communism as the most suitable ideology for China. To unify and inspire the people, the government often uses international issues to promote nationalism. Since there is also widespread corruption and a crisis of morality in China, there is a desperate need for values. Confucianism offers a Chinese source of values, so the government is now promoting both Confucianism and the Communist Party at the same time. This action by the government is quite typical. All through

Chinese history the state has always had power over religion, and the role of religion has been to bring harmony to society. Throughout the decades when Marxist/Leninist/Mao Zedong thought was being taught, Confucian attitudes remained just below the surface of people's minds. While not technically a religion, Confucianism has played the role of religion in China.

INSIGHTS FOR RELATIONSHIP AND WITNESS

For older generations of Chinese, the existence of God and questions about science and faith are still critical issues. With younger generations, offering relational counsel and demonstrating the power of unconditional love are attractive.

Here is some additional information for those entering into relationships with Chinese, whether in China or elsewhere.

Alcohol at Chinese events. One special issue in Chinese hospitality is serving alcohol. If you have been invited to a formal dinner or event, go prepared with a nonjudgmental excuse not to drink such as “It’s bad for my health” (not simply “I don’t drink”). Sudden refusal to continue drinking in this kind of situation can be interpreted as a refusal of relationship and a sign of disrespect. If you need to participate in a toast, use another beverage.

Relationships, invitations and face. Extending an invitation to Chinese—whether it be to attend an event or to follow Jesus—is fraught with difficulty. Cultural differences can cause great confusion. Westerners expect directness in relationships; Chinese seek for harmony. Therefore Chinese will seldom respond to an invitation of any kind with a straight negative answer. For them, responding positively to a request is a culturally required way to maintain relationship. Therefore it is imperative that invitations of all kinds—especially invitations to follow Jesus—be made in indirect ways that allow Chinese friends to say no easily. (See chap. 10 for examples of indirect invitations.)

- It’s important to work with Chinese Christian partners when pos-

sible so that it is evident to Chinese friends that Christianity isn't only a Western religion.

- Earn credibility with Chinese students and scholars by being a student of Chinese history and culture. You will have a better understanding of who they are and will be able to interact with them on a deeper level from the beginning. Discover what Chinese are proud of about their country.
- Being comfortable with Chinese culture enables us to more easily go to settings where Chinese gather. I have been to many Chinese Christian conferences where a colleague and I were the only Westerners among hundreds of Chinese. Seeing that we felt comfortable there gave us much credibility in the Chinese community.
- A relationship issue that's important to understand is conflict. Conflict involves directness in an indirect culture. The showing of emotion by losing one's temper brings great loss of face. Westerners need to understand that we will lose respect among Chinese if we lose our tempers in public.

Security and reentry preparation. It is essential to be extremely careful when it comes to sharing information about the spiritual interests of Chinese. Younger Chinese have less understanding of the difficulties they or others might face because of professing faith. So they are not likely to be sufficiently cautious when sharing about their own spiritual interest or that of friends.

- Do not share the names or pictures of new converts in emails or other public ways.
- Help new converts think through the consequences of Christian commitment before they return home.
- Link them with older Christians from China who can help with re-entry preparation.
- Do not share the names or locations of Chinese or Western Christians in China. Doing so could jeopardize their careers.

INSIGHTS FOR EVANGELISM AND DISCIPLING

- When presenting the gospel don't use legal language that describes God as judge or tells of broken laws. Rather, talk about broken relationships with God and people.
- It's very difficult for Chinese to accept "being a sinner." A Chinese friend puts it this way: "To be a sinner, I must feel shame because you know I've done wrong. It hurts my pride to have to accept lower status. It's more important for me to have 'dignity' (keep my pride) than to admit wrongdoing. Having dignity is far more important than doing things right." For my friend, holding on to pride and not losing face and status in his community was essential, even if it meant not getting closer to God.
- When doing evangelism we must understand that a worldview change is needed in our Chinese friends. Hidden assumptions must be brought to the surface. For example, examining beliefs about human beings might help them see that they have thought that people are basically good and have the ability to perfect themselves. Assumptions about God or the gods might include the belief that they must please God or bad things will happen. Looking at their ideas about relating to God, they might discover that they believe relationship with God must be earned and that grace is unreasonable.
- Telling our friends what to believe is not appropriate. Rather, providing opportunities for them to discover what they have subconsciously believed their whole lives opens the door for them to begin to see things differently. A good tool to help bring hidden assumptions to the surface is non-threatening groups for discussion of culture. In this kind of group, cultural differences can be considered in an atmosphere of discovery where people are never asked questions that are too personal, put on the spot or criticized for their

views. (See chapters 5 and 9 of for more information about cultural discussion groups.)

- Chinese students who have made decisions to follow Jesus overseas can easily slip back into circular Confucian thinking when they return home; such “conversions” are reversible.
- True conversions often take a long time (even many years). Pushing too fast can result in shallow decisions that don’t last and actually inoculate Chinese friends against future openness to God. After a number of unanswered prayers, people with a shallow understanding of the nature of God can decide that Christianity doesn’t work.
- Don’t use the word *guanxi* or let a translator do so when talking about relationship with God.
- When Chinese friends begin to learn about Christianity, they may interpret belief as a set of ethics without understanding grace. Grace is difficult for Chinese to accept. Confucianism teaches that being a “good person” requires continually working to perfect yourself and society by your good efforts. But to receive grace, you have to accept that no efforts you make are enough to gain acceptance from God. A Chinese friend put it this way: “Grace is too hard for me. To get it, I have to put myself in a lower position and accept that I am not a good person. But to please my family, I *must* be a good person.” For Chinese, receiving unearned grace can feel like failing self, family and society.
- Many Chinese Christians have told me that in spite of wanting to fully live out of grace, they find themselves enslaved to the Confucian virtue of obligation. This results in working themselves to exhaustion to serve God because they think that is what he expects. Sometimes this gets reinforced by their fellowship or church as members all strive to be good enough. This kind of pressure even leads some Chinese to become discouraged in their relationship

with God and leave the fellowship or church. Therefore it is crucial for disciplers to help both individuals and fellowships become aware of their subconscious Confucian values and realize how those values affect their relationships with God and each other.

RESOURCES FOR TRAINING AND OUTREACH

General Books

Fairbank, John King and Merle Goldman. *China: A New History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006. Includes the entire sweep of Chinese history.

Nisbett, Richard E. *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently . . . and Why*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003. This book explains Confucianism and circular thinking, and demonstrates their continuing impact today.

Understanding the Current Generation of Chinese (Paradise, PA: Ambassadors for Christ, 2015). Available at the AFC Bookstore website: http://afcreources.org/contents/en-us/d24o_New_Resources.html. This helpful booklet summarizes recent research on Chinese generations born after the 1980s, 1990s and 1995. Reading it with a Chinese partner would be helpful since it is translated. Versions are available in both languages.

Resources to Share with Chinese Friends

Overseas Campus Ministries, ocm.org. Overseas Campus Ministries is an independent ministry, but its founders were part of Campus Evangelical Fellowship in Taiwan, a group associated with the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES). The magazines they produce are available in Europe and Australia as well as North America. *Overseas Campus* magazine is an excellent periodical for Chinese seekers, and *Behold* magazine is for Chinese believers. Both are now available for mobile devices, but hard copies make good presents when visiting friends. OCM describes their material for mobile devices: “Currently we are developing more online ministries to meet the needs of new generation who are more used to read on Internet and smart phones. These ministries include website for *Overseas Campus* magazine (ocm.org), *OC e-Magazine* (ocimx.com), *Ai-Kan* (“Love to Read”) blogger

website (ai-kan.net), *Ai-Wen* ('Love to Ask') Q&A website (ai-wen.net) and *Behold* magazine (behold.oc.org), and WeChat platform (OC WeChat, BH WeChat), Jidian's Chat. The QR code for this material can be found on their website. *Note:* Overseas Campus also offers *Reentry Guide to China*, an excellent reentry guide in Chinese, and free sample copies of *Overseas Campus* and *Behold* are available for distribution at evangelistic weekends when ordered two months in advance. Call (310) 328-8200 in North America.

Cheng, Li. *Song of a Wanderer: Beckoned by Eternity*. Cincinnati: Foundation for Chinese Christian Authors, 2002. This conversion story of a Chinese intellectual contains apologetic material especially appropriate for those with many intellectual questions.

Helpful Blogs on Culture and Worldview

China Source Blog. chinasource.org/blog. As well as a general blog about living and serving in China, you can subscribe to *Chinese Church Voices*, which reflects what's going on in the Chinese church, and *ZGBriefs*, which includes articles about China from sources both inside and outside the country.

Jackson Wu. *Doing Theology. Thinking Mission*, jacksonwu.org. Many thought-provoking articles on honor-shame and helpful material on understanding and evangelizing Chinese. Search the archives for *The Creator King*, a gospel presentation from the honor-shame perspective.

Carolynn Hudson of *International Ministries Fellowship* has partnered with Chinese student fellowships and churches while ministering among Chinese scholars in Berkeley, California. She also helped train groups of English teachers headed for China and made a number of trips there to encourage teachers and visit Chinese friends. Carolynn has written for *China Source* and given seminars on partnership and the Chinese worldview at *Association of Christians Ministering among Internationals (ACMI)* conferences.

¹For all suggestions to see chapters, refer to *Crossing Cultures with Jesus: Sharing Good News with Sensitivity and Grace* by Katie J. Rawson (InterVarsity Press, 2015).