

Rebecca Wong  
Accepting Plurality as an All-Encompassing Religion

*Abstract*

As happens so often in history, cultures and religions collide and become inevitably intertwined. Hong Kong was no exception and served as a religious melting pot combining elements from both the east and west. Following the First Opium War and British occupation of Hong Kong, Christianity gained a strong foothold within the region. However, Christianity's increasing popularity did not result in a decrease in popularity in the folk religions of Hong Kong, including ancestor worship. Because Christianity did not displace ancestor worship, religious plurality is a topic of contention for many Christian religious authorities who regard certain aspects of ancestor worship, including worship of ancestors and the potential “superstitious” meanings behind certain practices, as incompatible with Christianity. Thus, many Hong Kongese have struggled to relinquish ancestor worship traditions that date back centuries while attempting to be devout Christians. However, my own upbringing and my father’s seamless integration of ancestor worship with Christianity made me wonder whether or not these two religions needed to be practiced exclusively. By consulting various religious authorities’ texts, both historical and modern-day, I found that there are a variety of methods and ways to interpret ancestor worship that allow the two to be compatible, and ultimately, the individual will need to determine the reasoning behind one’s own practices before deciding to commit faithfully to both.

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*Genesis of Essay*

“Accepting Plurality as an All-Encompassing Religion” was inspired by my own upbringing and my interest in learning more about the religion I practice. I grew up as many modern-day Hong Kongese have where they practiced ancestral veneration customs without understanding, or even realizing, that ancestor worship is religious in nature. I was surprised to discover that ancestor worship contains not only aspects of honoring ancestors but also superstitious beliefs such as sacrificing necessities, such as clothing and food, for the ancestors’ comfort as well as to secure blessings. I was also interested in the conflict between Christianity and ancestor worship that was so apparent to ministers and missionaries but that had never concerned my father. Thus began my research into better understanding the religious aspects of ancestor worship and the negotiations that are made between some ancestor worshippers and Christians that allow for this religious plurality. This work is based off of a research paper I wrote entitled “Negotiating the Boundary Between Christianity and Filial Piety in Modern-Day Hong Kong” submitted for REL 295: Empire and Religion in Asia and the Pacific under Dr. Amy Holmes-Tagchungdarpa. This essay differs primarily in its deviation from a non-biased, scholarly research paper, which was the original assignment, toward a more personal story of accepting religious plurality and the ability to practice and genuinely believe in multiple religions. I wanted to emphasize not only the transitions and changes that allow religions to become more compatible but also to empower the individual to determine how to make two seemingly conflicting religions compatible. The original paper emphasized the importance of religious authorities in negotiating the boundary between the two religions, while this essay focuses on the role of the individual.

Rebecca Wong

### **Accepting Plurality as an All-Encompassing Religion**

#### *Combining ancestor worship and Christianity in the modern world*

My parents emigrated from Hong Kong in the late 1980's. My father became a firm believer in Christ after moving to America but still actively participates in ancestor worship rituals that he had practiced since his youth in Hong Kong. When my father was choosing between churches to attend, he chose one that accepted all, regardless of what religion they believed, allowing him to more easily combine his various beliefs. Though I myself grew up without believing in either religion, because of my father, I grew up practicing both. Thus, going to church and performing ancestor worship practices together seemed a natural part of life, and I found comfort in my ability to seamlessly move between my two identities. Even after researching and understanding the conflicts that complicate the relationship between Christianity and ancestor worship, I have only become more firmly convinced that practices within different religions do not necessarily conflict. Rather, it is more important for an individual to determine which values to cherish and to find one universal meaning between the various religions that one chooses to adhere to.

As a former base for Christian missionaries during British rule from the mid-nineteenth through the late twentieth century, Hong Kong served as a gateway for the mixing of different cultures and traditions between the East and West. Thus, entanglements of religion have been facilitated by local negotiations between customary and imported traditions. However, throughout history, Christians have been suspicious of ancestor worship's "superstitious" practices, and many different groups have proposed solutions for merging the two stemming from outright banishment of ancestor worship to complete accommodation of Christianity to all

ancestor worship practices. Even today, uncertainties linger over which solution would be most suitable as many Christians believe that ancestor worship and Christianity are fundamentally incompatible. Such beliefs imply that religions are mutually exclusive; that is, one cannot be simultaneously Christian and an ancestor worshipper. However, this exclusivity results in the death of one unique set of beliefs for another, an unnecessary trade when beliefs can be reconciled with careful consideration. Considering how ancestor worship has changed since its creation, many of its key elements that conflict with the Bible have become less prominent, and ultimately, the combination of Christianity and ancestor worship should be used jointly to enrich the lives of those who want to practice both while encouraging a stronger connection between God and the individual.

### *Overview of Hong Kong's History*

Hong Kong is considered to be “westernized on the outside but ... Chinese on the inside” (Ho, 10). After being ceded to Britain following the First Opium War in 1842, Hong Kong served as a Christian missionary base until 1997, when it was formally handed back to the Chinese government (Evans & Tam, 239). However, because Hong Kong was returned with the stipulation that it would have some political autonomy for the 50 years following and be treated as a Specially Administered Region (SAR), Hong Kong has enjoyed greater religious diversity and freedom than many other parts of China, and thus, religious plurality has flourished in the region (Evans & Tam, 239). Before the British entered Hong Kong, folk religion, which includes ancestor worship, was the dominant religion and remained so with about 15.3 percent of people practicing ancestor worship following the return of Hong Kong to China (Lung & Chan, 6). However, over those 150 years, many Hong Kongese were introduced to Christianity, and, since

then, their numbers have grown to make up the second largest group of religious adherents at approximately 12 to 13 percent of religious believers (Lung & Chan, 6). The great religious diversity within Hong Kong has led to a vast array of different beliefs but also to issues of religious identity. Mistrust of other religions stems primarily from misunderstandings between different groups of people and unfamiliarity with other religions' customs and practices; such mistrust should be addressed through open dialogue between the religious groups.

### *Understanding ancestor worship*

Ancestor worship is the custom of venerating deceased ancestors and is practiced in many parts of the world, including Asia, Central America, and Africa. Though all areas use ancestor worship as a means to pay respect to the ancestors and have similar beliefs about the ability of ancestors to influence human affairs, Hong Kongese ancestor worship is unique in its origins, belief system, some practices, and emphasis on Confucian values, especially filial piety (respect, obedience, and care of one's familial elders) (Scott, 24).

Ancestor worship in China began with the Hsia dynasty (2163 – 1751 B.C.) when Tzou Cheh began honoring deceased kings. Eventually, worship shifted to family following the end of the Hsia Dynasty, and the Chou Dynasty (1046 – 221 B.C.) combined worship of ancestors and heavens (Ho, 16). Practices such as burning incense and paper money were later added during Han Dynasty (206 B.C. – 220 A.D.) under Emperor Ming (65-73 A.D.).<sup>1</sup>

The beliefs surrounding the origin of Hong Kongese ancestor worship are quite complex and involve the two distinct souls of the ancestor: 魂 (hún) and 魄 (pò). The 魂 is associated with yang and light and is believed to become the 祖 (zǔ, ancestor) while the 魄 is associated with yin

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed history, refer to Butcher (2010).

and darkness and is believed to become the 鬼 (guǐ, ghost) (Scott, 34). Hong Kongese ancestor rites allow for the two to separate and go to their proper destinations. Many of the customs themselves, such as kneeling and bowing before the ancestral casket, the burning of incense and paper money at the shrines and graves of ancestors, and the use of certain kinds of sacrificial food, are also unique to Hong Kong ancestor worship.

However, these unique aspects of ancestor worship in Hong Kong are also the very things that cause apprehension among devout Christians. To explore how ancestor-worshipping Christians resolve the incongruities between ancestor worship and Christianity, several key aspects of this tradition will be addressed: the ways missionaries and Hong Kong theologians define the term “worship” and its meaning, the purpose of ancestor worship, and their category of “superstitious” nature of ancestor worship. However, before delving into the issues themselves, investigation of one key historical event can give us a better perspective on how this issue has been addressed in the past: the Chinese Rites Controversy.

### *Overview of Chinese Rites Controversy*

The greatest religious dispute involving ancestor worship was the Chinese Rites Controversy (17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries). This argument was over whether one could worship ancestors while also being Christian, and though it has been settled in theory, in practice, it has yet to be resolved (Ho, 45). When we look at the major Christian parties in the debate, the Jesuits versus the Dominicans, the Franciscans, and the Protestants, we see a remarkable difference in the way that the two sides perceived and reacted to the situation. While the Jesuits actively adopted Chinese dress and traditions, the other denominations often kept to themselves and refrained from contact with the Chinese (Aijmer, 95). Of the Jesuits, the most prominent was

Matteo Ricci (1552 – 1610 A.D.), a missionary who concerned himself with becoming knowledgeable in all things Chinese, including memorizing hundreds of Chinese characters to achieve fluency as well as studying various Chinese religious customs. The Jesuits also saw the Chinese as equals; Ricci once wrote that “[t]he Chinese people are extraordinary well-suited for reception of the holy faith, far more than any other people; they are spiritually talented and significantly competent” (Aijmer, 95). The Chinese were similarly impressed with the Jesuits’ academic achievements and thus often gave them important positions within the government. For these reasons, the Jesuits were by far the most favored by the Chinese Emperor Kangxi. He appointed Belgian Jesuit Ferdinand Verbiest to take charge of the Beijing Observatory, and during the Late Ming (1368 – 1644 A.D.) and Early Qing Dynasties (1644 – 1912 A.D.), Jesuits occupied many important positions in astronomy, mathematics, western medicine and music, philosophy, and art (Aijmer, 94). In fact, the Jesuit’s relationship with the emperor was so deep-seated that they convinced him to announce that Chinese rites were not religious in nature and were merely used for civil purposes and also that the worship of 天 (tiān, Heaven) was really worship of God (Aijmer, 94). Whether the emperor actually believed these things to be true is another matter entirely. Though the Jesuits were by far the most likely of any Christian group to embrace and accommodate Chinese religion, many non-Christian ancestor worshippers criticized the Jesuits for de-emphasizing the value of ancestor worship as a religious ceremony and for claiming that it was simply a way for descendants to “show their love and grateful spirit” to ancestors.

Because of the different viewpoints expressed by both sides, reception of Chinese religion, including ancestor worship, varied greatly among missionaries. While the Jesuits argued that Chinese rites were secular in nature and therefore compatible with Christianity, Protestants,

Dominicans, and Franciscans believed that the practices had religious meaning and were therefore not compatible with Christianity (Smith, 109). In 1715, Clement XI issued the bull *Ex illa die*, which prohibited sacrifices to Confucius and ancestors as well as the use of the terms 天 and 上帝 (Shàngdì, God) to refer to God; this verdict was again reconfirmed in 1742 by Pope Benedict XIV's bull *Ex quo singulari* (Ho, 41). These two popes ruled in favor of displacement, meaning the elimination of ancestor worship in order to be Christian (1715 – 1939 A.D.) (Smith, 110). However, this verdict was reversed in 1939 by Pope Pius XII, who argued for accommodation, which acknowledges the civil aspects of ancestor worship that do not contradict Christian beliefs (Smith, 160).<sup>2</sup> However, despite the acceptance of ancestor worship by the current Pope, many, especially Fundamentalists, do not believe that one can be a faithful Christian while practicing all aspects of ancestral worship. Thus, we see that even after historical resolutions have been reached, the conflict itself has yet to be resolved for many, and therefore, the issues that led to this controversy in the first place will require more thorough study by religious scholars and authorities to reach a satisfactory conclusion.

#### *Understanding the implications of word choice*

Worship is the act of showing respect and love for a god especially by praying with other people who believe in the same god. This definition of worship requires religious authorities to identify the Chinese god, examine whether the Christian and Chinese god are one and the same, as well as decide whether ancestors are gods. Most Hong Kongese people would consider Shang-Di (though there are various other spellings as well) to be the equivalent of God (Liu, 159). Some argue, however, that Shang-Di cannot be taken to be the same as the creator God (the God

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<sup>2</sup>For a more complete overview, refer to Smith (1987).



that is referred to in Christianity), but rather as a power residing in the sky (Butcher, 188). Such a conclusion can be reached through readings of later Confucian texts (not the *Classics*) and consulting present day Neo-Confucian scholars (Butcher, 165). Historically, many missionaries as well tended to associate the worship of 天 and Shang-Di with idol worship, which would imply that they did not believe that Shang-Di was the same as God (Ho, 2). In fact, Pope Clement XI forbade the use of 天 and Shang-Di as terms for God. However, this general word confusion could stem from issues with translation and the various terms for Heaven and God, including 天主 (tiānzhǔ), Shang-Di, and even 神 (shén), which is a term used primarily for spirits but occasionally also God (Ho, 2).<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, many others did argue that God and Shang-Di were one and the same. Matteo Ricci came to this conclusion after analyzing the human characters mentioned in the *Classics*, a set of five texts delineating the foundation of Confucianism, among other early texts. He cited details such as the existence of Heaven and the immense power wielded by Shang-Di, making sure to differentiate between the two terms (Liu, 88). There are also parallels cited between the ancient books of China and the ancient Christian scripture that stated that Shang-Di was precisely the same as the Western “Lord of Heaven” (Liu, 271). However, with so much ambiguity, the issue of whether Shang-Di and God are the same is one more of semantics than of theological disagreement. As one Cistercian monk at the time, Thomas Merton, put it, “[t]here are so many words that one cannot get to God as long as He is thought to be on the side of the words...” (Liu, 4).

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<sup>3</sup> Confucius personally distinguished between ancestors and 神, stating in the chapter *Ba Yi* (八佾), “[We should] regard our ancestors as being here when offering sacrifices to them, and regard 神 as being here when offering sacrifices to 神” (Fengli, 4). However, 神 is a particularly interesting term because it has a variety of meanings spanning from the spirits of the nature, of famous or great men, and of unpredictable and wonderful changes (origin in *Chuang Tzu*) (Fengli, 8). For a more complete overview, refer to Fengli (2015).

Though the issue of the worship of Shang-Di may not be easily resolved, both sides agree that ancestors should be regarded as secondary in power to Shang-Di/God. Scholars often note that there are priests for Mass but not for ancestral rites because Mass is a ritual for the worship of God, and the officiating of the priests in Mass highlight this difference. Not only are the objects honored in Mass and ancestral rites different, but so are the rituals and participants (Liu, 251). For similar reasons, ancestor rites are not to be considered the most important ritual as they are a type of sacrifice second to that for God (Liu, 240). Historically, ancestors were not worshipped with the same veneration as God as they were considered to have less power (though many people at the time did still believe in the ability of ancestors to intervene in human affairs). Many current scholars believe the ancestors cannot change the moral law of cause and effect, and the ancient Chinese *Classics* declared that only Heaven had the sole authority to bless or punish people (Liu, 223). Neither Confucius nor the ancestors have the power to deliver blessings or punishments to people; if they did, then Confucian temples would be crowded with students praying for good fortune on exams or selection as government officials (Liu, 223). Though there are occasionally images of the ancestors depicted as “little gods” able to deal out various favors and penalties, in the *Classics*, God is the supreme ruler, so this idea cannot stem from the that work and is generally considered not to be Chinese in origin (Addison, 12). Instead, Christian scholars suggest that Christian ancestor worshippers consider ancestors as life-giving forms that assist God in his work as shown in the short poem below by Zhu Xi (1130 – 1200 A.D.), a Neo-Confucian scholar, read during the Our Lady of the Visitation 1993 ancestral memorial service (Butcher, 328):

God created our soul and our forefathers the physical being.  
 These gifts of birth and nurturing are as high as the mountains  
 And as deep as the ocean,

At this beginning of a new year, a time when the earth returns to spring,  
 We drink the water while remembering the source.  
 Our gratitude to you is everlasting.

This poem emphasizes the hierarchical relationship between God, whom Zhu Xi saw as a rational, greater entity, and the ancestors, with the ultimate power resting with God as shown in His creation of mankind and the universe. However, the poem still points to the importance of the ancestors and the value of respecting them and remaining grateful to them as the source of life. Additionally, the ideas of Confucian purity of mind and body are illuminated through the description of nature when illustrating the roles of God and ancestors. This emphasis on nature grounds the reader to the earth, moving the reader away from a “supernatural” perspective of the ancestors towards a more biological perspective. Indeed, these very sensations reflect the beliefs of Zhu Xi, who did not believe in the existence of souls or otherworldly ancestral powers and sought to honor ancestors strictly through Confucian values and teachings (Butcher, 329). Whether the God Zhu Xi believed in was the same as the Christian God is unknown, which makes the use of this poem in a Christian service all the more intriguing.

Since ancestors are not gods and all authorities agree that they are not gods, then the practice itself should not be considered worship. For reasons varying from the strength of reverence implied by the term worship to the many civil aspects of ancestor worship, the use of the term is misleading. Instead, we should use the term “honor,” the respect given to someone who is admired. Though the Bible would prohibit worship, honor, as defined in this way, would not be prohibited. Family honor is closely related to the idea of filial piety, which is the children’s honor and respect accorded to parents and grandparents (Ho, 24). The term in Chinese, 孝 (xiào), depicts a son carrying an elder on his back and can be translated roughly to “a child bearing and strolling with a hunch-backed and cane-carrying elder” (Ho, 22). In this sense of

taking care of ancestors and the elderly, these practices are in agreement with the Bible which states, “Honor thy father and thy mother” (Exodus 20:12). The *Classic’s Record of Rites (Liji)* also states that filial piety is the ultimate goal of ancestral rites, which suggests that the deceased ancestors are still family members even though they do not physically appear in the ritual ceremonies (Liu, 127). Seen in this light, ancestor worship is not worship as much as respect for those who are wiser and older.

### *Furthering civility through religion*

Ancestor worship has a variety of purposes, some religious, such as caring for and praying to the ancestors, and, increasingly, some civil. Though scholars often depict ancestor worship as a religion, it is seen by current Hong Kongese not only as a religion but as the “keystone to the arch of China’s social structure” (Addison, 29), which maintains family unity and continuity (Addison, 49). The history of ancestor worship as a civil cult began with Confucius (551 – 479 B.C.), who emphasized the practice to support his socio-ethical system and purely secular doctrine (Mungello, 56). Many ancestor worshippers still see ancestor worship as a way to maintain the unity of the family while continuing the presence of deceased family members through family name. Both Ho and Smith, two ministers, conducted surveys in order to identify the main purposes and current beliefs of those who practice ancestor worship in Hong Kong within their churches and the surrounding community. The majority of those surveyed (out of over 50 participants) by Ho (conducted in 2013) answered somewhat agree for ancestor practices helping to build family ties (Christians: 46.1 percent and non-Christians: 36.7 percent) (Ho, 135). 49 percent out of over 100 respondents for Smith’s survey (conducted in 1986) said they strongly identify with ancestor worship being used as a way of respecting (rather than

worshipping) ancestors, with the next highest percentage of respondents reporting performing the services to show gratitude to ancestors (29.4 percent) (Smith, 40). Both surveys suggest that ancestor worship is moving away from a religious meaning to a more civil one that emphasizes the value of family.

*Using “superstition” to justify religious exclusivity*

Even as we begin to see a shift from being more focused on worship elements to more honorific aspects, the entanglement of ancestor worship in the social lives of Hong Kongese people has made it difficult to separate everyday practices from other practices that may be less civil in nature. Nonetheless, the barrier to conversion to Christianity is often not the giving up of specific items and practices themselves but rather shifting the meanings and beliefs behind those practices. According to some theologians, several practices are banned by the Bible but not because the practices themselves conflict with Christianity but rather because of the possible meanings behind them. Scholars brand these practices as 迷信 (míxìn, superstition). As nationalism increased during the 1920s, 迷信 was perceived as a threat to governments, which began to take anti-religious stances (Nedostup, 160). Indeed, “crack-downs” on religion led to the strict definitions given to the ideas of “religion” and “superstition” despite the inherent “fuzziness” of both terms (Nedostup, 166). Eradicating “superstition” later became a strategy by Christians to “civilize” common people, build a stronger state, and educate those who were considered to be “backwards” (Nedostup, 163). Many Christians consider “any activity that involves burning incense” as being superstitious; the use of the term “joss stick” for incense implies that one is worshipping a Chinese deity in the form of an idol. Thus, 迷信 has taken on a derogatory meaning, referring specifically to “superstitious” activities such as fortunetelling,

spirit possession, ceremonies involving sorcerers, and the worship of gods and placation of ghosts (Butcher, 123). Nedostup further emphasized that the “superstitious” nature was not an essential part of religion and could therefore be removed if needed (Nedostup, 160).

According to the Bible, events do not occur by chance, and all is controlled by God’s will. Therefore, the idea that any other object or being has the power to control and intervene in human affairs would directly conflict with the Bible. “Superstitious” ways of thinking are considered dangerous by Christians because such thoughts make one more susceptible to the influence of the devil when one should rely on God alone. Additionally, “superstitious” beliefs can include those that are not accepted by society in general; thus, superstition itself is not strictly defined but rather decided by the majority of the population. Ironically, in ancient Rome, Christianity used to be considered a “contagious superstition” by several Roman historians such as Pliny, who wrote about its “disease-like qualities” and how it spread throughout not just the cities but also the countryside and village (Martin, 2). He blamed Christianity for why some temples were deserted, religious festivals neglected, and meat sales declining. One of Pliny’s contemporaries, Tacitus, called Christianity a “recurrent superstition” that should be regarded with caution due to its foreign origin (Martin, 3).

Christians consider “superstitious” beliefs in ancestor worship to include performing ancestor worship for the sake of the survival and comfort of the ancestors (Addison, 48) and securing ancestral favor for long life, protection, prosperity, and happiness (Addison, 9). First, consider the usage of incense and candles. Though many Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches burn incense and use candles at their services, the usage of incense for ancestors is considered “superstitious” since the ancestors are thought to enjoy the smell of the incense and to need the candles to see the offerings. However, when these items are used for purely practical

purposes, such as the use of candles to illuminate offering halls where the exhibited food prepared for worship is placed or incense for the service itself, the items themselves cannot be “superstitious” or sacrificial in nature (Liu, 94). Though the usage of incense is not mentioned in the Chinese *Classics* (which is understandable as the practice itself became popular centuries later), the usage of incense is comparable to putting flowers on the tombs of loved ones (Liu, 94). The use of food and drink in ancestor worship is, when not viewed superstitiously, also unproblematic since the usage of food is not prohibited (after all, Christians use wine and bread during Mass and other ceremonies). Similarly, the practice of bowing should only be regarded as improper when very reverent forms of bowing, such as those that should be reserved for God, are employed or if one is bowing to images or idols (Addison, 80).

One of the most commonly held “superstitious” beliefs is that ancestors can alter the course of human life, which, as previously discussed, is considered superstitious; therefore seeking benefits or avoiding disasters through the ancestors is strictly forbidden by Christianity. During the Shang Period (1600 – 1050 B.C.), the people believed that they were unable to contact God directly but that the ancestors could serve as mediators who could ask God to bring good fortune to their living predecessors. Later Christian scholars considered these actions to be superstitious behavior (Liu, 112). The beliefs described above are strictly prohibited since the Bible never claimed that the dead can act as intermediaries between God and man. Christians instead would argue that Jesus Christ is the only Divine Mediator between God and mankind (1Timothy 2:5-6; Hebrews 8:6, 9:15, 12:24). Additionally, the Bible states that all contact with the spirit world is expressly forbidden (Merwe, 1302). Luke 16:19-31 provides insight into the condition of the dead and the afterlife, indicating that it is impossible for the living to communicate with the dead (Merwe, 1307). Finally, Samuel 12:23 and Job 19:27 state that when

a person dies, the relationship between the living and the dead is severed permanently. Christians believe that it is dangerous to communicate with the dead since the dead's souls are no longer the souls of the departed but those of fallen angels and demons in disguise. For these reasons, the dead no longer continue life on earth and do not need the necessities of life (Merwe, 1317). Thus, the notion that ancestors can influence the lives of those still living is unscriptural. There are several instances in the Scriptures where a spirit does appear back on earth (these include Lazarus as well as when Samuel "appeared" to the Witch of Endor), but these incidences were attributed to the work of God's power and His permission (Merwe, 1321). Interestingly, Confucianism agrees with these principles, stating that social order must come before supernatural order and advises one to "pay homage to the spirits but to stay away from them" (Chan & Lee, 85).

Despite the prominence of "superstitious" beliefs during the Shang period, in recent years, such beliefs and elements of ancestor worship have begun to fade. In Smith's survey, the majority of those surveyed said they worship ancestors out of love and respect for the deceased rather than because of fear of punishment, hope of blessings, and/or guilt in relation to the deceased (Christian: 40.4 percent and non-Christian: 40.6 percent). The next highest was conformity to family expectations (34 percent and 32.2 percent respectively). Moreover, of those who practiced ancestor worship, most expressed only slight confidence in prayers to ancestors actually assisting them in times of trouble (Smith, 64). Another 87.1 percent of respondents said that there were no attempts to communicate with a deceased relative by their families in the past five years (Smith, 68).

The other widely held "superstitious" belief is that the ancestors have the same basic needs as humans (food, clothes, money, etc.) (Liu, 113). To satisfy these basic needs, offerings



of beautifully-crafted paper are made and then burned for the ancestors. For example, one workshop listed the basic set of ten to thirteen paper offerings as follows: a dragon tablet, a pair of items including the immortal crane and willow banner, a red and white fan, one bathing pan, a package of bathing clothes, a pair of mountains (one in gold and the other in silver), a sedan chair, and the image of the hell-breaking spirit. “More optional,” though still somewhat-essential items include male and female servants (often dressed in Qing or Republican-era costumes), a Chinese-style safe to hold personal items, a car, a Western-style multi-floored house with garden, a television set, and a seven-foot bridge in gold and silver (Scott, 114). For poorer families who might not be able to afford all of the offerings, the first seven items listed are considered the most essential. There can also be life-sized replicas of past possessions and daily necessities including electrical appliances and gadgets, fans, rice cookers, telephones, and computers among other items (Scott, 124). While the classical items settle the spirit into the underworld, the everyday items allow the dead to continue to live in comfort (Scott, 116). Replicating the conditions of the deceased as closely as possible is of great importance so that the dead can live contentedly (Scott, 115). Also, though the combination of traditional with modern items (the servants with historical clothing and classical items with modern luxuries) would normally be seen as contradictory, the different purposes of the two categories allow the items to coexist in harmony (Scott, 115). But there is another motivation for why descendants go to such extents to purchase these goods for their ancestors. Increasing elaboration of offerings may have as much to do with acceptance of heavy spending and consumption as pleasing and satisfying the ancestors (Scott, 126). Ancestral displays can serve to publically show off family wealth as well as display great care and love for the deceased and thus gain lavish praise from observers (Scott, 127). We should therefore view ancestor worship with increased emphasis on filial piety and

love of ancestors rather than the literal need to care for the deceased. The practice of serving the ancestors can be a show of respect for them, not necessarily the belief that the ancestors need the offerings to fare well in Heaven (Liu, 213).

Ultimately, ancestor-worshipping converts to Christianity will need to determine for themselves whether they can worship God exclusively and relinquish the worship and “superstitious” elements of ancestor worship. In more recent years, belief in the religious aspects of ancestor worship has decreased as more people are practicing ancestor worship without clear conscious motives (Addison, 47). Since some Hong Kongese have been performing these rites since they were children, sacrificing to the ancestors has become a custom, and “the spiritual meaning of these ritual practices becomes vaguer and vaguer, for [the Hong Kongese] have lost their taste for the everlasting soul and turned to the worldly view of ancestral veneration” (Liu, 108). In fact, others, such as Arthur Wolf, a leading researcher of Chinese society, claim that “the institution of ancestor worship is properly regarded as a religious practice, not as a religion in itself” (Ho, 4).

#### *Accepting religious plurality as non-contradictory*

As Hong Kongese, we identify strongly not with the Chinese ethnic identity but rather as 廣東人 (Gwóngdùngyàhn, Cantonese people); this identification is based on our unique language, 廣東話 (Gwóngdùngwá, Cantonese language), as well as our various traditions and religions customs, including 清明 (Qīngmíng, ancestor-worshipping festival).

For many families, including my own, the largest and most popularly practiced ancestor worship festival, 清明, is one of the few times that the whole family comes together. As a child, I associated ancestor worship’s primary festival as being akin to a “graveyard picnic” family

reunion. For me, the festival's primary purpose is to gather the entire family to remember the lives of our great-grandparents. We always celebrated with bountiful amounts of food from the restaurant that my grandfather owned laid atop flattened cardboard boxes: whole roasted duck, char-siu bao, fried shrimp balls, dumplings, fried pork, oranges, and Coke. Little cups of sake would then be poured and chopsticks would be set out, one set for each great grandparent. We would then do five slight bows with three sticks of incense each (with more incense for those who were closer to the deceased) before sticking them in the ground directly in front of the grave. Afterwards, we would eat the food, chat, and burn paper money in a small aluminum tin poked with holes. I was always fascinated by the intricate details printed on the paper gold longevity money and the beauty of the golden Chinese characters on the decorations. As a young child, I did not understand the symbolism behind all of these objects; all I knew was how much I enjoyed stirring the ashes, watching the beautiful paper decorations be consumed by the gentle licks of flames, and eating delicious food. After all of the paper money and decorations had been burned, we would then sit and talk for a while, as if the cemetery were a typical gathering site before cleaning up, pouring the sake into the ground, and taking everything but the flowers and incense away from the gravesite. The festival did not have much religious meaning for me as much as it was a way to remember loved ones passed and spend time with the family remembering. Now, I realize that some of these practices could carry implications of worship including bowing; sacrificing food (especially the pouring of sake into the ground for our ancestors to drink); burning incense, paper money, and decorations; as well as other "superstitious" elements. Though I realize the potential implications behind my actions now, the use of the terms "superstition" and "worship" seem even stranger to me. I think of my ancestors as elders to be held in high regard, but not necessarily as all-encompassing divine powers to

devote one's self to. I also see my practices as celebrations of life, traditions to be passed on. These practices do not necessarily mean anything until one gives meaning and value to them, and ancestor worship is not be the same for everyone. For example, my mother believes in the power of ancestors to grant wishes and protect their descendants from harm. Because she believes strongly in the power of ancestors to bring blessings to the family, she would struggle accepting Christianity in its entirety. For my father, it is a way for him to cherish and hold onto my great grandparents and his memories of them; thus, being both an ancestor worshipper and a Christian is possible. For my sister and me, it has become a part of our Hong Kongese-American identity, a practice that reinforces the many cultural elements that continue to shape our character and values. The meaning we each receive from ancestor worship is another aspect of our personality that will need to be negotiated among our countless other beliefs.

### *Final remarks*

Twenty-two hundred years before Christ, ancestor worship served as a foundation for Chinese culture and social organization. Now, with Christianity thoroughly established in Hong Kong, for many Hong Kongese, the two are tightly entangled. For those trying to walk the fine border between being a Christian and an ancestor worshipper, one must decide for him or herself whether the superstitious elements regarding ancestor worship are important in the way that he or she celebrates. For some, the dismissal of the religious nature of ancestor worship for merely its civil purposes will require too great of a sacrifice in terms of the value of ancestor worship. But for those who seek to combine the two religions, both are shifting to a more all-encompassing nature, including “accept[ing] the plurality of biblical cosmologies and liturgies,” and thus allowing for a multilingual and multicultural record of God that accommodates all individuals

and views (Smith, 161). The meaning of rites is fluid and constantly changes depending on the authority interpreting it, and each person will decide how to best accept his or her own religious plurality.

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