

# A FEW WORDS TO OUR WESTERN MISSIONERS

*by Joanna Chan*



A few months ago a German friend of mine paid me a visit. For the past two years, I had been working on audio-visual materials for the Hong Kong Church, using artists residing in China as illustrators of Bible stories retold in contemporary settings. Since he had raised the funds to pay the artists from people in Germany, he was interested in our progress. I told him one of the artists had just moved from China to Hong Kong, and that he now would not only be more available to us but also his work might take on a whole new dimension, since he would be exposed to the work of so many other artists. My German friend seemed disappointed. "Of course, you will no longer hire him for the project," he said. I was amazed: "But he is the same artist," I said. "Yes," he answered, "but he no longer lives in China." Since we are good friends, I teased him: "You want me to ship him back to China to make him more authentically Chinese?" He smiled: "Well, no, but it sounds so much better when I tell the people funding our project that the art work comes from China, 'the forbidden kingdom'. It is more romantic. It has a nice ring to it." When he saw the frustrated look on my face, we passed into silence. And while he was no doubt thinking about Kipling's words of warning: "East is East, West is West and never the twain shall meet", I was thinking of the more earthy Cantonese expression to describe a breakdown in communications: "Like a chicken talking to a duck."

When Dr. Franklin Wu asked me to help coordinate a panel around the topic: "The needs of China as seen by the Overseas Chinese," my first question was: "what will be of interest to our Western friends?" This, of course, is a very Chinese approach: first, desiring to accommodate to a practical situation, and second, acknowledging that we are quite different. Whatever may interest, delight or even embarrass and shame us would not necessarily be the same thing. And while it is true that we all as Christians share the treasure of Jesus, we also know that Paul has warned us that we carry this treasure in earthen vessels. Your vessel is, then, made according to a Western mould, but mine is definitely marked MADE IN CHINA. I think this awareness of our differences is more sharply felt by Chinese people living outside China, by those of us who experience Western culture directly in our daily lives. It is a paradox. In understanding the West better, we become more consciously aware of our "Chineseness". Perhaps, then, the most valuable contribution I could make to a conference so deeply concerned with the present "need" of China, as a Chinese who has lived and been educated in both worlds, would be to share what seems to me to be a need that lies beneath all the material needs, and that is the need for both East and West to understand better our differences and in understanding them to lay the foundation that might bring us to a better understanding of each other and, thus, to a closer unity.

When I reflect on my relationship with my German friend, I am always aware that while we live in the same world (he, too, is a religious and a missionary), we see it from basically different points of view. He tends to search for logic, to seek rational explanations in order to learn. He is anxious to make progress. He sees history as a forward motion, a process whereby man creates his own future by mastering his present situation. He is scientific and organized even in his approach to religious work. And he is full of restless energy. When he hears the mandate of Jesus in the Gospel to 'go throughout the whole world and make disciples of every nation', he reads it as a 'challenge to conquest' in the name of the Lord. It never dawns on him that the rest of the world might resent this. I do not mean the

message, but rather being the object of such frightful enthusiasm and its unspoken assumptions of superiority. I find, too, that he is a good man, a generous man, a man who cares for others and works unselfishly and without asking for anything in return. I also find that his individualism, which is his strength, often makes him rather lonely.

For the Chinese, my German friend is a mystery. The Chinese tend to have a light regard for logic. The understanding of life for them comes not from attacking the world with reason and science. For the Chinese, understanding the world comes primarily through relationship. To be born Chinese is to be born into a world of subtle and complex relationships. There is no need to search for one's identity, one is born with it. There is only the need to harmonize these relationships, not only the relationships between men, but also man with nature and with the divine. The goal of life for him is harmony, not conquest. History for him is not a march through time to some future destiny, but, like the law of nature which demands that spring follow winter and fall follow summer, so, too, does the law of history have its own cycles. According to that law, the past is always present to him, for the present is merely a repetition in a unique way of the past. This sense of history is one of the reasons the Chinese seem to be able to endure such terrible suffering without losing their basic optimism... for every winter must give way to a new spring. This is also the reason why the Chinese have such a deep awareness of their unique identity, for we carry the whole history of our people with us in the brief span of our lives. My favorite newspaper editorial was a recent one carried in a Hong Kong daily that was commenting on the government's latest plans to solve the traffic mess on one of the main roads leading to the heart of the city. It begins: "During the Sung Dynasty, the Minister Wong-Ji developed a similar plan for the Imperial city, etc." The Sung dynasty may have fallen several hundred years ago, but it is alive and well in South East Asia's most industrialized city.

For my German friend, as soon as my Chinese artist friend crossed the border into Hong Kong, he stopped being pure Chinese.

It seems he is no longer shrouded in mystery. He has become another one of those silent, hardworking Chinese living outside of China, easily seen but seldom heard, and who have never become in their new surrounding a force to be reckoned with, perhaps because they have never seen themselves as a separate entity. For the Chinese, no government structure, no ideology, no geographical locale, no acquired citizenship can change the fact that they belong together. If on the surface he or she appears to have accumulated many Western habits and styles, for the Chinese are a very practical people, it would be a mistake to look upon this "Westernization" as going much below the surface. For the overseas Chinese looking at mainland China, this sense of oneness or the feelings of ties that bind have not changed in the past thirty years. Even during the most trying of times, we have never stopped corresponding with each other. Our obligation to, and concern for each other across the visible and invisible borders have never altered. The needs of China are always the needs of every Chinese. It is just that at present we are able to express those relationships in ways more visible to the West. When Westerners showed great excitement at the recent re-opening of the China and its consequent possibilities, they tended to emphasize newness and change, and on a certain level they were right. But on a deeper level where I relate to my people, I knew things would be pretty much the same. My people would not be different. This unchanging relationship bears with it for every Chinese serious responsibilities. Now that China is open again to the West, Westerners often ask a Chinese: "What are you doing for your country now?" A common response is often an embarrassing, "Nothing." He may seem to the Westerner to be neither patriotic nor loyal. Yet at the same time, you might visit this man to find that his uncle's cousin's family on the wife's side has just come out of China and has taken up residence in his living room. There they will remain, being cared for and fed out of the man's meager resources as, perhaps, a waiter in a restaurant until they find work and are on their feet again. This kind of commitment to one's people stems not from the desire to do good, but rather from what he understands to be that which is right and proper and

expected of him as a Chinese. This man will expect no expression of gratitude for his sacrifices, and he probably doesn't even like this band of invading relatives, but relationships do have obligations and without relationships his life make no sense. His Chinese mind does not look at the past 30 years of physical separation in isolation, approving or disapproving a particular government policy or structure and then moving to do something about it. In the context of thousands of years of history, not only does he view 30 years as a negligible period of time, but also sees present divisions and conflicts as just more indications that we are now caught in the downward sweep of the cycle and eventually history itself will bring about its own resolutions and healings. When Chinese history enters the dead of winter, the desolation, the cold, and the pain become the common lot of its people. In providing for one's distant relatives, in his living room, a Chinese expresses his loyalty and patriotism in the way he understands best.

I mention the above example to caution the outsider from making hasty assumptions in even the simplest of situations. It is sometimes erroneously assumed in the West that since there is so much innate goodness in the Chinese spirit, such spiritual yearnings for a higher good, such a strong appreciation of his ultimate destiny in the universe, that if only he were not under a totalitarian form of government, if only he were to be given total religious freedom, if only the Christian world outside were allowed to offer him assistance in the form of religious publications, articles and personnel, then Christianity would easily find its way into contemporary Chinese life. Such thoughts, hopes and yearnings, however good, tend to forget that Christianity is but a very small portion of Chinese religious concerns, which again is a very small portion of the Chinese cultural world, and which again is a very small portion of the entire socio-economic-political reality that is China. Also the very desire to share one's religious belief through an active evangelism is quite alien to any kind of Chinese religious practise. While the exterior conduct of a Chinese is strictly goverened by minutely defined relationships expressed in very symbolic terms, religious belief belongs to a different,

highly private and personal sphere which ideally is never at odds with, nor becomes an obstacle to, the flow of structured social relationships. For this reason, it is difficult for a Chinese to understand why a Westerner, who has had no prior relationship with him, would want to have his religious convictions not only understood and accepted, but also embraced by him. While it may be said that the Chinese have never know 'freedom' in the Western understanding of that word, they have always had religious freedom except where religious belief assumed a political structure, or, as might be said of Christianity, it required the believer to become separate and exclusive. Such expressions of religious belief were often seen as disruptions of that social harmony which is of prime concern in all Chinese social situations. How, then, will a Chinese learn about Christianity? He will learn in the same manner in which he learns about everything else that is important in his life, not by logical explanations or convincing arguments rather through assimilation. He will accept the Christian faith in the same way he accepts everything else, not because it is reasonable, but because it enhances already existing relationships, be it his relationship with the Divine, with his fellowman or with himself. Not only may he not understand what prompts a Westerner to give service so freely and so generously, but the kindness of the Westerner, may often put him in a bind. To maintain a good relationship, a favor has to be returned. If being a Christian will make the Westerner happy, sometimes he will even become a Christian.

Many of us who serve on the China Committee at the National Council of Churches, in considering the relationship between the delegates who are going to come from China in October of this year to the International Conference and the Planning Committee, felt a bit uneasy. We worried about how much input the Chinese delegates would be able to make in the planning process, and what their expectations and objectives might be. My own personal view is that such concerns are valid but perhaps not quite as important as we make them out to be. As visitors who will be on a tour of North America, I am sure that what the Chinese delegates will be most concerned about

and most aware of is the nature of the new relationships they will be forming with their Western friends. In one sense, the material or the 'excuse' around which these relationships form themselves will be secondary. Without pushing this concept too far, I would say you could treat them to a week of Walt Disney movies and they would not be too offended. They will adapt to the existing situation. This does not mean that our Western colleagues will not be taken seriously, or that the content so important to their Western friends has no value in their eyes. Far from it. As their relationship with Westerners grows and becomes harmonious, and that is the dearest wish of everyone involved, their content and the content of our Western colleagues will find new levels of understanding and meaning. The Chinese are a very accommodating people. But accommodation is not compromise. I wish to borrow a story I heard from a Western friend of mine. He was talking to an old Chinese gentleman in Hong Kong, who told him that as a young man he returned to his father's village to find a bride. The matchmaker introduced him to a bright and pretty girl and the match seemed satisfactory to all concerned so it was made that day. A year later, the young man returned to the village for the traditional wedding ceremony. On the wedding night, when the time came for him to lift the heavy veil from the bride's face, he found that they had switched girls on him. Instead of the bright and pretty one, he had been given the not-so-bright and pretty older sister. When my friend, horrified by the injustice, asked him what he did, the old man smiled; "Well, you know how it is. You accommodate." In China, accommodation is an art form. It can easily be interpreted as cowardice or exploitation. But for the Chinese, it just makes good relationships possible amidst great diversity and contradictions. In summary, then, when we speak of the needs of China, it seems to me that the most fundamental need for both East and West is in the area of the KIND of relationship we must begin to establish between us. Ever since the West came East, China has been opening and closing itself to it, feeling its way towards a proper relationship with the "new-comers". What kind of relationship will they be seeking now, you may ask. In the Chinese classical sense of relationship,

there are only five kinds: Emperor to subjects or, as we might say today, superior to subordinates; father to son; older brother to younger brother; husband and wife and, finally, the relationship between friends. Only the relationship between friends is seen as one between equals, all the others define distinct responsibilities. Note that outside of the three family relationships, there are only two possible styles of social relationship: that of superior and subject, or that of friend to friend to friend. Also it is important to recognize that once the relationship is entered into, there is no possibility of moving from one to the other. The students whom I have taught throughout the years may become teachers themselves, may be more intelligent, more accomplished and successful than I, but forever they will call me "teacher", and I will see them as my "students". A Westerner who comes to China with skills and material things to offer runs a risk of being forever merely a "benefactor". No genuine fellowship is possible in such a set of circumstances.

In a few minutes, my fellow panelists will share with you may of the needs of our people. These needs are numerous, and they are not new. It is humbling for us to have to admit to people with whom we are not yet related that we have any needs at all. And we are afraid that in the very acceptance of your generosity we may be locking each other in an unequal relationship forever. We are uneasy because we do not know you well, because misunderstandings may arise before our true relationships can be formed, before they take on the same strength and resiliency which allow us to absorb and to accommodate to so many contradictions and changes in our own relationships. Part of the reason for this uneasiness our history is always present to us, how the noblest and most generous of missionaries were sometimes used by Western governments as instruments of our humiliation, and how our own leaders sometimes punished with arbitrary cruelty those who come only to do good, and were of all people the least deserving of punishment. And we are uneasy because we know that we are different, the things that excite us are different, the things that concern us are different, and the things that frighten us are different. But we



know that it is not in sharing your material goods, advanced scientific knowledge, and 'too' technical know-how that will eventually make us partners. It is not riches and power that will help you to understand our mistakes, our humiliations, our pains and our struggles. In this search for mutual understanding and acceptance, it is Jesus, I believe as in other things, who is to be our teacher. After all, the core of the Christian message is but the wonderful news that our God has taken on our human weaknesses so that He can become our true brother. In the end, the only thing that can make us, indeed make any two human being, true friends, is our willingness to accept the common experience of the frailty of our human condition. So when you come with your abundance, come also with your human frailty, your own disappointments, your own limitations, your own needs, your fragile ideals and your broken dreams. Perhaps then, we can forgive you for helping us. And since it is a law of nature that for every man, winter passes into spring, we hope that someday when your own winter comes, you too will find space in our living-room.

