

Chinese Ancestor Worship in the USA

by Yang Ni

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At the risk of appearing unpatriotic and disloyal, I shall let you in on a big secret. While I am Chinese born and bred, a true descendent of the Yellow Emperor, and have already reached the age of thirty, the very first time I bowed my head in reverence to my Chinese ancestors was, of all places, in the U.S. A.

My family in China never owned an ancestor tablet, nor to my knowledge, have they ever erected any kind of memorial to pay homage to the family ancestors. Nor was it because they were Catholics and ancestor worship was forbidden them. I suspect the real reason was more social than religious.

I grew up in one of those large family compounds common in the northern part of my country. Ours was just one of twelve families living cheek by jowl in conditions that might appear to Western eyes to be totally without privacy. We were the only Catholics, at least that's what my grandfather said. But I never saw any of our neighbours do anything that might be construed as reverencing ancestors, at least not while Chairman Mao was alive and well. In those days to be caught doing something like that would bring official sanctions down on your head and you'd be accused of engaging in illegal feudalistic superstition. And as you no doubt know from watching mainland movies, it was quite easy to distinguish the good guys from the bad in the old days.

Of course, times change. Now with the reforms and China opening itself to the outside world, and people having more money to spend, things from the dead past have been given new life. When Uncle Deng came to power, the posters of Mao Zedong and Hua Guofeng, which every loyal family dutifully pasted high on the outside walls of their houses for all to see, suddenly came down. And what went up in their place? Well nature does abhor a blank wall, and, whether they want to admit it or not, everyone does have at least some small faith in something. It was not uncommon for my grandma and grandpa's generation to harken back to the good old days and revive interest in the long-neglected family ancestors. Others preferred to worship the New

Master of the Heavens and the Earth...the God of Wealth, or gods of power such as General Guan Gong, or the sweet Goddess of Mercy Guan Yin. As for my own generation who grew up under the Red Flag that eschewed both religion and tradition, we took up the discarded portraits of Mao from the dust-bins, and with new found fervour, placed them back up on the wall.

When someone died in those days, the most that people would do to show respect would be to hang a photo in the living room. Who would dare indulge in religious rituals in remembrance of the dead? "Attend to the words of Chairman Mao and follow the dictates of the Party!" This was offered as the only good worth pursuing. Thus we rose up as a body and smashed the "Four Olds"...old ideas, old cultures, old customs and old habits. We toppled the altars of Confucius and Laozi, and swept away all the "cow-ghosts and snake-demons" who were enemies of the people. And what did we do to celebrate the ancient Qing Ming Festival when people were wont, out of filial piety, to go to the cemeteries to pay their respects and to "sweep the graves" of departed ancestors? We assembled in our work or school units and marched out to "sweep the graves of the martyrs of the revolution", an exercise meant to renew our ardour for "our battle flag," which was "dyed red with the blood of martyrs". Ching Ming became just another occasion on which to remember, with patriotic loyalty, that "without the Chinese Communist Party there would be no New China." It was only after the death of Mao and the overthrow of the Gang of Four, that I heard my uncle mention how grandfather had been buried in a tomb in the countryside that was destroyed by Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution. And how Uncle had got up one moonless night and went in secret, armed only with a flashlight, to search for the grave, only to find the earth dug up and grandfather's bones strewn about the site. And think about this for a moment. While he had the courage to visit the desecrated tomb, it was only 20 years later that my Uncle could tell his brother, my father, of his visit that night and what he had seen. What was my father's response? He listened in silence and never said a word. And what right did he have to speak? Did he not at that very same time, remove all the crucifixes and pictures of the Blessed Mother from their places of honour in our home, take them out to the back yard and burn them for fear of reprisals, for it had been decreed that only the image of Mao was allowed to be

honoured in the homes of the people? After this, what could my father have said to my uncle about the proper reverence for ancestors?

My grandmother died when I was three. Strange as it may seem, it was the one and only death I can remember not only in my immediate family but among distant relatives and friends. Thus it happened that I never shed a tear in grief nor bowed my head in sorrow before the photo of a deceased person until 1976. On January 8 of that year, we heard on the radio that Premier Zhou Enlai had died. When I heard the news, my reaction was immediate and sudden. I began to cry in a loud voice and could not control myself. While it seems strange to me now, I know for certain that the tears I had shed then were genuine expressions of grief and loss that came from within my heart. Some years later, in 1994, when I went to study in the United States I happened to be watching the T.V. coverage of the death of North Korea's Kim Il-Song with some classmates. The "Old American Hands", which is what we called the Chinese students who were born in America, were showing their amusement and scoffing at the pictures of Korean men and women who were wailing aloud at the loss of their leader. I, too, was moved at their great distress. I could not stay and share my classmates' laughter; I got up and left the room. The next day some of them stopped me on the street and asked if I wept the day before because I was "Korean". I had no answer for them. And what could I have said, except that I was sure if their lives had been jolted by something as catastrophic as the sudden death by assassination of their own President Clinton, they too would cry out for him as I had at the death of Zhou Enlai, and cried again on September 9, 1976 when Chairman Mao passed away. Those two dates will live forever in my memory...January 8 and September 9...and friends who were born on these two days can consider themselves lucky.

No matter how busy I may be, I shall always remember to send them best wishes on such notable birthdays.

Back to the subject at hand. The first time I ever attended a Mass offered to reverence Chinese ancestors was last year when I was living in California. When my wife and I first arrived in the city of "Lost Angels", we had lots of time on our hands, so we took to roaming about the different neighbourhoods. One day as we walked by a Catholic Church, we noticed to our astonishment on the sign-board outside a notice written in Chinese. In bold black characters on shiny white paper,

the notice read: "Chinese Catholics please sit up front." A voice behind me exclaimed: "Now this is something new!" We turned to find another Chinese student, this one speaking with a Taiwanese accent, sharing our astonishment at the message. "Do American's have the same custom of 'welcoming guests from afar' as we Chinese?" he asked. Our questions were soon answered as we entered the vestibule and spoke to a tall, hooked-nosed priest standing inside the door. Apparently a colleague of his, a priest who was a missionary in Taiwan, had returned on home-leave to celebrate his 30th anniversary of ordination. While at home he was saying Sunday Mass in Mandarin for Chinese members of the parish community. Because there were so few of them, the Chinese were invited to sit in the front pews during the celebration. The priest was most anxious to make us feel welcome and asked if we might be interested in attending a Chinese Mass and would we leave our addresses and telephone numbers so he could contact us. We did so and left.

And so it came to pass that I had my "show and tell" experience. Appropriately enough, it was on a Sunday in the following February, during our first Spring Festival (or 'Chinese New Year' as the Old American Hands like to call it) away from home. A Chinese bishop had come from Taiwan, and, according to the notice we received in the mail, he was to celebrate a Lunar New Year rite in veneration of ancestors. At the time my wife and I had left the mainland, we had no idea that such a liturgy even existed in the Catholic Church. It was, we supposed, something that had been developed in Taiwan or Hong Kong. On the mainland, the Church paid little attention to the annual celebration of the Spring Festival. There were no special Masses for the rank and file Catholics, who would even abstain from eating meat if the Lunar New Year happened to fall on a Friday. Of course, the Catholics, including the priests, like everyone else would spend the fortnight of festival days visiting and eating with relatives and friends right up to the final 'full moon' festival.

Now the Mass on that eventful day was at 10 in the morning. Chinese Catholics were again invited to sit up front. Some families from Taiwan made it a point to wear the richly embroidered robes, long stockings and even skull caps, traditional Chinese apparel that I myself had only seen in mainland movies, and then only those which satirized the *petite bourgeoisie* of the pre-revolution 1930's. As for my wife and I, we were decked out in the dress of mainlanders abroad, i.e. denim

jackets, blue jeans and white tennis shoes. The Old American Hands in attendance were wearing suits and ties. My wife could not resist asking the Taiwanese woman sitting next to her why she was wearing traditional clothes. "Is it the custom in Taiwan?" she whispered. "We only dress up 'elegantly' for weddings, " was the answer. "But Father asked us to wear something 'elegantly Chinese' today," she added by way of explanation. We also learned that to dress 'elegantly' in the parlance of the Taiwan Straits has another meaning: 'to put on a show'...a pun that loses something in the translation.

What happened next caused my wife and me to raise our eyebrows and, I confess, also to repress a ripple of laughter, for there bearing down on us was a column of American priests, all over six-feet tall, most of them somewhat overweight and all wearing bright red chasubles embroidered in gold. It was neither their height nor their heft that startled us, but the red garments, a colour worn only by brides, children and women in movies made for export. Men do not wear red in traditional China. All I could think of was my uncle, a priest on the mainland, having to wear this kind of vestment. But I must admit that the colour grows on you and after a while it began to look quite smart on the Western Fathers. The Chinese bishop and one other priest, however, restricted themselves to ordinary wear.

Of the 800 or so who made up the congregation, I would put the number of Chinese at less than 70. Add twelve more for the Chinese choir and the two playing the erhu and pipa, traditional Chinese instruments. This, too, was a new experience for me as in China, the only instrument I have seen in church is the organ, if not the pipe or pedal variety certainly an electronic one. Even the priest in my grandmother's village, which is far off the beaten track, had to bow to his parishioners' demands and import a Yamaha when they rebuilt the old church a few years ago. And they tell me that while the organist is no great shakes at playing it, it would take a brave priest indeed to introduce the Chinese trumpet or pan pipe as a more fitting instrument for worship among the Catholics of northern China. Everyone knows that a Catholic church without an organ is not a Catholic church at all. Some of the old Catholics in grandma's parish still entertain hopes of some day installing a pipe-organ in this rustic back-water church.

That's the way it is nowadays. People only talk about what 'should be' rather than what 'is', and everyone has an opinion on everything. As a

result, here I am listening to American folk tunes put to romanized Chinese at a Sunday Mass in California. Now I'd gladly have joined in and sung with gusto, too, but they forgot to provide us with song sheets.

Another problem was that we Chinese were not the same. We came from different worlds: mainlanders, Taiwanese, Hong Kong and American-born Cantonese. When reciting the Our Father, they used the modernized version from Taiwan and not the classical version which we mainlanders knew by heart. Becoming more and more confused, we took our lead from the Old American Hands, who couldn't pray in either version since they knew little Chinese, and followed the rest of the liturgy with grave attention but in total silence.

The Mass was a mixture of Chinese and English. Since most of the Chinese coming from Asia are bilingual, it was the English speaking people who needed a commentary. No attempt was made to translate the words of the Mass itself, which left the American born Chinese and the Westerners in the dark about when to join in on the 'Amen', the only word all had in common.

Perhaps because he did not have a good command of English, the bishop gave his homily in Mandarin. No one thought of translating his words into English, nor shall I do so here.

The special liturgy to venerate ancestors took place immediately after the Mass. A bright red cloth was spread on the main altar and a smaller altar, made of Chinese rosewood, was placed on top of it. A red plaque on which the words "Chinese Ancestors" was written in gold characters was fixed to the centre of the stand. A pair of black scrolls, also lettered in gold, framed the plaque. The scrolls had been shipped from Taiwan for the occasion. An English translation of the scroll on the right might read: "A father abounds in goodness, a mother in mercy, a teacher in learning, and grace overflows like the sea." On the left was the admonition: "Righteous faith, devout hope, sincere love are the recounting of a most profound virtue."

I watched fascinated as a solitary woman dressed in a red ceremonial robe moved forward. With a small mallet she struck the hollow wooden fish held before her, which gave off the familiar sound heard when monks chant the Buddhist sutras in common. She recited then in a loud voice, first in Chinese and then in English: "The rite begins; rise in reverence." Again she struck the wooden fish and again cried out: "Music!" The simple melody of the song "White Jasmine"

reverberated throughout the church. She struck a third time and announced: "The Celebrant is at hand" as the Taiwan bishop moved into place. Then another strike of the wooden gong and the command: "Attendants!" Two men in long gowns, white stockings and skull caps joined the bishop. "Lift up incense!" and the air was filled with sweet perfumed smoke. More raps on the gong, each accompanied with a command from the master of ceremonies to offer first flowers, then wine and finally fruit. After the offering of the gifts, all were told to face the ancestor tablets for the three ceremonial bows that are traditionally used to honour the dead. Then came the announcement: "The rite is now completed...music!"

When the time came for all to bow to the ancestor tablets, many of the Chinese-Americans stood with backs straight and heads unbowed. The Taiwanese lady next to us was annoyed. "Why don't they bow!" It was more a judgement than a question. "Maybe because we're venerating our own mainland ancestors and not theirs," said my wife by way of an excuse. There was some truth in it. The plaque read "Chinese ancestors". When the command to bow to the "Chinese ancestors" was given, the Chinese-Americans didn't move, figuring it did not include them. Although we Chinese like to think in terms of unity, and of the church as one big family, and often speak, perhaps too often, of our Chinese racial heritage, and how we in the church are all descendants of the same Yan Di and Huang Di, this may not be true of the Chinese-Americans, who live in a hyphenated society of mixed cultures and who when they hear such things cannot help but think of German-descent, English American, Japanese-American... 'My grandpa is Irish, my grandma is Greek, my mother is Mexican, what does that make me?'

One result of the years of the Cultural Revolution was the unflagging attempt to instil on my generation the cult of Chairman Mao. Memories of "Long Life, Chairman Mao! Long Life, Chairman Mao!" still echo in our ears. It was serious business. I remember as a child trying to finagle an extra piece of candy from my mother. I raised my fist and shouted to her: "Long Life, Mother Dear! Long life, Mother Dear!" She gave me a slap that sent me sprawling. "Don't you ever talk such nonsense again," she yelled at me. "What would happen to us if you were overheard by an outsider and reported? Will you never understand?" The Chairman dominated our lives. And perhaps because of this my sense of loss was acute when I heard that he had died. On the

other hand, when the bishop from Taiwan spoke in church that day in praise of the great Confucian tradition we Chinese had inherited from history, I had mixed feelings. All I could think of was the Anti-Confucius and Anti-Lin Biao Campaigns when I was a child, and how the streets were lined with angry people shouting angry slogans and carrying cartoon posters depicting Confucius and Laozi as wizened old turnip heads and objects of contempt and ridicule. Among us primary students these cartoons were as attractive and stimulating as the Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck figures were for children of our generation living in another world.

Mass in the vernacular is now being promoted everywhere on the China mainland. I do not know if they have included a ritual for venerating ancestors as well. And I wonder if they'll ever be able to get the mainland Catholics into long red gowns and white stockings to perform it. Colleagues from Taiwan tell me that in their towns and cities one sees a temple or shrine of worship every few feet. Yet Catholic churches remain few and far between. He, too, had not seen this ancestor ritual in Taiwan, as it began after he had left for America. It is said that on the mainland it is quite common now to find stylish women from Taiwan talking sweetly in Mandarin with Taiwan accents, but missionaries from the West are still not allowed entry to preach the gospel. So my mother may indeed live to see the day when a new plaque inscribed with the words "Chinese Ancestors" will find its way into her village. But it looks like she'll have to wait a good deal longer to see a Western priest wearing a bright red chasuble.

After the ceremony my wife and I did not rush off to Chinatown in search of ancestor tablets for our home. The plaque remains unfamiliar and distant to us. And should we return to that church for another ceremony next year, it will no longer have the punch and thrill of that first encounter. We still go to Mass each Sunday here in the States. But we feel no need to go in search of a Chinese Mass. We stick to our local parish, and perhaps, when all is said and done, this is the best way for us to blend into the community and feel a sense of belonging to the church.