

Inculturation of the China Church within the Context of the Cyber World

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Before dealing with the issue of the inculturation of the Chinese Church, as the title of this article suggests, I would like to address the tremendous changes now taking place in Chinese society. It is also advisable to identify the characteristics that, at this point in time, distinguish our 21st century. Perhaps many of the problems in the China Church that we consider so vital today, such as the division between the official and unofficial church, government control, the Church's geographical limits, as well as national issues such as the situation of indigenous peoples living in the plains or the mountains, the reunification of Taiwan, the fear of the influence of foreigners, etc., will not be so important later in the 21st century. These issues, as well as new issues that are sure to crop up, will require new understandings before solutions can be found.



There are, however, two issues of major importance that require immediate attention: (1) Can China's identity remain truly

Chinese in a world characterized by globalization? (2) How can the Church face up to the rapid changes arising from today's information revolution?

Can China's identity remain truly Chinese in a world characterized by globalization?

This first question, the so-called "China Question," is rooted in China's complex history. This question asks which "China" is to be considered more "Chinese?" Is it the pre-Communist China that tended to maintain traditional Chinese culture, or is it Communist China that took as its main task the overthrow of China's traditional values? Furthermore, in the present situation when globalization is engulfing the whole world, can China "recapture" a Chinese identity, granting there is a need to do so? Is it possible to define what it means to be "Chinese"?

At this point I would like my readers to consider the following question. What type of dress today would identify the modern Chinese? Before the Communist reforms that introduced the open policy in 1978, this problem of identification was rather simple. Mainland Chinese had to wear a blue liberation suit. This type of clothing expressed their identity. They were "Chinese who had undergone a revolutionary baptism."

Dress often reflects a person's identity and culture. The style of dress before the reform movement took place in China represented values that were prevalent at the time whether one appreciated these values or not. When the Communist revolution was at its height, the dress of Chinese, Vietnamese, and Korean Communists was basically the same. Today, nine times out of ten, anyone wearing the blue liberation suit would be considered old fashioned, or worse, be identified with an extreme leftist regime. When Li Peng and Yang Shangkun proclaimed martial law in Beijing on May 20, 1989, they took off their Western dress and wore liberation suits. This symbolic gesture sent a very clear message to the media and to the public.

The question remains: what should present day Chinese wear? Must Western clothes define the modern Chinese? Is one out of step with modern times if one doesn't put on Western dress? But if one does wear Western dress how can he or she be identified as a Chinese? We cannot say that clothing styles are international and

the same all over the world. The President of Indonesia, Abdurrahman Wahid, wears traditional Indonesian garb, even dispensing with footwear, when taking part in public functions. When the Shi-ite Iranian leader, Khomeini, overthrew the Shah in 1979, his dress was a clear sign of his culture.

A twofold abandonment

The radical revolution that began with Mao Zedong and ended with the Cultural Revolution replaced Chinese traditional culture. The abandoning of traditional Chinese culture was done by design to give way for a new revolutionary culture. However, in 1978, after China had abandoned its traditional culture, and before anything could replace it, China also experienced a complete abandonment of the ideology behind this new revolution. Chinese culture now suffered a second blow. China lost its sense of direction.

Chinese Communism had, at one point in time, made a concerted effort to build a new culture. This effort ended in failure and brought much suffering to the Chinese people, but we must nonetheless recognize that an attempt had been made. The new Communists themselves repudiated that attempt. They cast it aside as one would a pair of old shoes. Some have maintained that Mao was really prophetic when he swore over and over again that Deng Xiaoping was a traitor to Communism and a capitalist roader.

In 1978, after a 30-year hiatus, China once again opened to the outside world. It felt the immense gap that separated it from the modern world, and made every effort to bridge that gap. With this all out effort to modernize, China's particular "way of life" disappeared. The Cultural Revolution had set the direction for the New China. China's projected new way of life had been built on and guaranteed by that revolution. However, this new reform, this opening up to the outside world, destroyed any such guarantee. Any effort to define China's special cultural characteristics must take this twofold abandonment into consideration. All members of Chinese society must confront this cultural dilemma together.

I cannot imagine what the inculturation of the Chinese Church means while China is in the process of discovering its own culture and establishing its new identity. Does being a modern Chinese mean going all out to imitate the Western world? To discover what inculturation for the Chinese Church means, we must

first ask: what does it mean to be Chinese? Is China modernizing? What is the effect of “modernization” on “inculturation”? How the Chinese Church chooses to express itself is closely linked to how China chooses to express itself.

How can the Chinese Church face the rapid changes arising from today’s information revolution?

Modernization offers another serious challenge to the Church in China—namely, the challenge of the worldwide web. Traditional societies in today’s cyber world face disintegration. Since the Church is itself a traditional society, does this mean that it, too, faces disintegration?

The worldwide web and constantly developing technologies have a way of leveling societies into three tiers, as the diagram on the following page shows:

Alvin Tofler’s *The Third Wave*, had already predicted part of this phenomenon. However there are many problems that were not thought of in those days but have successively come to light today. The model of a three tiered society is not a pyramid because the lowest tier does not contain the largest number of people. Moreover, some of those in the lowest tier are being pressured to climb up into the second tier. Their attempts to leave only make matters worse for those left behind in the third tier.

In this three tiered model “wealth” and “power” are unevenly distributed. The first tier controls the greatest amount of wealth whereas the second tier controls the greatest amount of power through its use of the ballot. Those on this level can influence the direction of voting that, in turn, can enable them to go higher and become interested parties in the first tier. The lowest tier is an entirely marginalized group bereft of power and influence

How can the Church confront power structures that dominate people?

This future three-tiered structure of society presents the Church with various challenges. The form the first tier of society takes facilitates further concentration of power. Its challenge to the Church is this: can the Church continue its own mission without becoming an interested party (or accomplice) with those in the first tier?

The first tier of society, a minority, controls the majority of people in the second tier while squeezing out the remainder of people in the third tier. Its policing powers are a foreseen reality. The cultural commentator in Hong Kong, Ma Guoming, maintains that initially cyber culture was marked by a utopian ideal. It envisioned open sources of information, free transmission of knowledge and free expression of ideas. However, it didn't take long for capitalists to take over the cyber world and turn it into a veritable commercial warfare.

Social strata	Relation to information technology	Social scale
Controllers	(1) Government: Those who control legislative and juridical power over information; (2) Those who design and possess the hardware and software of information technology.	Few people involved, heavy competition among members of this upper echelon.
Users	Those who are able to adapt to and control technological development.	Most people theoretically This stratum contains most of the world's population.
Those left behind	Those unable to adapt to the mainstream of technology, and have become society's marginalized.	The absolute number of these people can be very large, but relatively this number is gradually decreasing. However the situation of the remainder only worsens.

I agree with Ma's analysis. I even go a step further. Since the cyber world has such tremendous influence, it has quickly changed the entire economic and social eco-climate. Governments naturally began to pay attention to this matter. In 2000, Beijing authorities put many curbs on the general use of the Internet. This clearly reflects political interference into the cyber world.

The development of technology should offer people a greater range of choices, but technology often chokes other possible choices not directly linked to it. While technology is reputed to providing greater freedom for people, in actuality, it often limits

human freedom thus producing a dehumanizing effect.

The Church and societal disintegration

The challenge the second tier of society (cf. chart) brings to the Church comes from social organization. The main support of 20th century society was the middle class. The 21st century has the power to change individuals into faceless internet beings. As society becomes more "cyberized," the reality of the world of space and time becomes confused. This observation is an insight of Professor Janet Lee of the Holy Spirit Seminary College, explained in an article entitled "The Relationship between Thomistic and Modern Thought." The immense confusion between space and time forces traditional society to disintegrate gradually. Since the Church is also a traditional society does it, too, face a crisis of disintegration?

Perhaps "disintegration" is too drastic a term. However, with the cyber world dominating society at large, it is possible that as church believers become more "cyberized," the Church's traditional community could become transformed into a nameless grouping or a collectivity of individuals. A collectivity of individuals is not the same as a community. A collectivity is concealed within a society of digitized personal relationships. Doctor Dominic Yung's web spirituality doubtless is a beautiful symbol, but it belongs to a world halfway between the real and the virtual. Mark Slouka's recent book, *War of the Worlds—Cyberspace and the High-Tech Assault on Reality*, is an incisive analysis and shocking description of this new phenomenon.

The Catholic Church relies heavily on a traditional neighborhood type of community. Many readers may recall Cardinal Wu's pastoral letter, *Into the Bright Future*, and the kind of community that he envisions. Cardinal Wu expressed the hope that the Hong Kong Church would be a neighborhood type community that would endure for a long time. However, within the context of present day society, this is clearly an unrealistic expectation. When localization meets the new world, we will no longer be able to evade defining inculturation.

As far as the church community is concerned the disintegration of neighborhood type communities is not without its positive aspects. On the contrary, perhaps it will be a good opportunity for

the Church to become the sign it should be for society. Both the modern cyber revolution and the industrial revolution that began in the 18th century have left human beings alienated from each other and from their real selves. Can the Church become the catalyst to heal the wounds caused by this alienation?

How the Church can search out society's drop-outs

The third tier of society, the weak and dispossessed, become even more marginalized in the cyber world because they are completely squeezed out of society. They are unable to change the world and are also unable to accept it. They are cast-offs, forgotten by the world. Even though a few in this tier successfully climb into and become members of the second tier, this only makes the situation of those left behind more desperate. Persons in this third tier have little or no influence. Those who manage to escape the limitations of their third tier status, only add to the number of those who look down on those who remain behind. The founder of Communism, Karl Marx, foretold that the number of those in the unfortunate lower tier would continue to grow until their combined strength would burst out and completely destroy the oppressing classes. The cyber world has proven this prophecy to be false.

The expansion of the cyber world not only causes the dispossessed to become more isolated as their numbers increase, but it also makes their lives more difficult. One reason for the cyber world's rapid expansion is that it can cut expenses for those that are part of it and use it. Obtaining information, for example, can be very cheap. There is also the added bonus of Internet shopping.

Web culture in place of former interaction models

Cost increases with decrease of activities outside the web does not only influence the economy, but it also harms political activities. Being an outsider of the web in society (if such a society continues to exist) one's civil and political rights will be weakened. Let us take general elections in Hong Kong as an example. Where present elections take place without use of the web, the government as a rule arranges polling stations to be set up in many small districts where even the weak and old can go to exercise their right to vote. Therefore they become a political power that the government cannot overlook or neglect. However, once website voting

becomes prevalent, the cost of its operations will be far cheaper than setting up polling stations in small districts that would increase the costs for the government. They will, therefore, set up only centralized polling stations to decrease the financial burden. If 90% of the 2,500,000 eligible voters in Hong Kong express the wish to use the web for voting, with only 250,000 going to the polling stations, the operating costs per voter for each polling station will increase tenfold. As the operating costs of these polling stations continue to rise, the government will certainly be forced to decrease the number of stations. With nearby stations being eliminated, voting for the minority not using the web will become a matter of making long journeys.

Web culture does not offer humanity another model for mutual interaction, but substitutes for former models. The above example of voting exemplifies this. Since the ratio of non-website voters keeps on decreasing, the cost to win individual votes (such as door by door canvassing and offering transportation to take voters to the polling stations, etc.) keeps on increasing; political parties and government officials will begin to weigh the costs of such efforts. They will naturally tend to use what is more economical and advantageous for them which will be to use the web while decreasing or doing away with former activities that do not make use of the web. Both government and political parties will neglect voters who do not use the web. As these voters lose political clout, they will also lose their voice in government affairs.

Lest readers think that website voting is for the distant future, I wish to relate a recent personal experience. In September 1999, I wanted to discuss the proposal on the establishment of a press council, that the sub-committee on privacy under the jurisdiction of the Hong Kong Law Reform Commission had officially published. I went to the government office to obtain the document. Formerly, government information documents were published in huge numbers, easily reaching 50,000 copies. Therefore there was a strict limit set on the length of these articles. Even a white paper or document—such as the one I sought—that would have wide influence on government reforms during the nineties only consisted of a few pages. However, because the privacy sub-committee document is published on the web—the cost of each page being very low—it contained 187 pages.

Printed information documents are quite unwieldy and not easily stored. Since the government printing office is unable to spend large sums on each single information document, the government information office can only print a small number of copies to be distributed in a limited number of offices. When all printed copies have been exhausted, the only recourse for those who do not plan to log onto the Internet is to copy the document at the Government Information office, each page costing six Hong Kong dollars. One can readily understand that it is almost impossible to copy an entire document. The moral of this story is: citizens who are unable to log onto the net are deprived of their basic right to discuss government policies that concern them. Persons not on the net are people living outside an interactive society. They do not hear what is going on around them and no one listens to their opinions.

On the July 1, 2001, some main stream banking corporations will charge the traditional account holder an extra fee for service. Those who use the electronic banking service, however, will not be charged. Obviously, banking corporations will be accused of discriminating against marginal groups. But the banking corporations also have their difficulty, because as the electronic use increases, the cost of person to person service will also increase.

The challenge that the Church faces here is how to deal with this situation.. The Church must confront two difficulties. If the church does not follow the crowd and enter the digitized world, it will be rejected by society. If however the Church does become digitized, it will exclude its dispossessed brothers and sisters. Of course, among all these contradictions, favorable opportunities also exist enabling the Church to become a sign to the dispossessed.

The problem of joy and suffering

Finally, as far as I can see, all experiences in inculturation must be rooted in the perceived experiences of the local people. A Church that is truly inculturated is one that shares the joy and suffering of the local people. To do this the Church must enter into the common consciousness, take seriously the deepest needs and desires of the local populace. It must also understand their deepest concerns and be able to work with them to address these concerns. Against the backdrop of all that is unreal in the cyber world, peo-

ples' joys and sorrows are life's only true reality.

To take part in this common consciousness, the church must personally experience the historical life of the local people. It must shake off its political, economic, and cultural protections. Inculturation means that the church no longer limits itself to the periphery of society, looking after its own social status, resources and human networking, but must fully enter into the suffering of the people. The Church's present protective covering has its own historical reasons and processes that must not be carelessly overlooked. However, facing the world's future we must take great care that the Church's protections do not become for it a heavy burden.

In conclusion, allow me to quote two lines from a horizontal scroll that hangs above the Lotus Cave at Dao Fung Mountain in Shatin, Hong Kong. It reads: *Put aside your burden, take up your cross.*

