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CONVEYING CHRISTIANITY TO STUDENTS
WITH TRADITIONAL FOLK BELIEFS
AT
TAIWAN ADVENTIST COLLEGE

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Introduction

Taiwan Adventist College (TAC) is located in the center of Taiwan. There are fifty-five faculty and staff. The student enrollment is two hundred seventy-five. TAC is a boarding school. Eighty percent of the students hold folk beliefs. The other twenty-percent come from Adventist or other Christian backgrounds. Under these conditions, it is difficult to convert students from folk beliefs. Hence there were only three who were baptized at TAC in 1999.

In this essay, the author will begin by identifying terms, presenting the characteristics of Taiwanese folk beliefs which are rooted in the minds of many TAC students. Then the essay will continue to develop a way to appropriately convey Christianity to students with folk beliefs. This faith conveying-method will involve teacher modeling, student activities, and a relevant message and through these provide a warm and loving atmosphere inductive to the integration of faith and learning.

When the results of my findings are applied at TAC, the goal of increasing the rate of baptisms among students with folk beliefs will hopefully be realized, and those baptisms will hopefully represent quality and quantity.

This essay will be presented in four sections. The first section explains terms; the second section deals with the characteristics of Taiwanese folk beliefs; the third section describes

methods of conveying Christianity to students with folk beliefs; the fourth section discusses follow-up programs to nurture new members.

The Identification of Terms

In this essay the terms Taiwanese Folk beliefs and Taiwanese Folk believers and student will be used as defined below:

Taiwanese Folk Beliefs: The name Taiwanese refers to those who immigrated to Taiwan with Jeng Cherng-gong from Min-nan (the southern part of Fu-kien province) and Yueh-tung (the eastern part of Canton province) in Mainland China in A. D. 1661 at the end of the Ming and the beginning of the Ching dynasties and their descendants.

A “ religion” is usually identified by five characteristics: (1) It has its own scriptures, (2) there is a ritual of initiation of new members; (3) it has a founder, (4) it has doctrines and the mission. About eighty-five percent of Taiwanese hold beliefs that do not include these five points ,so the author identifies their beliefs as Taiwanese folk beliefs.

Taiwanese Folk Believers and Students: Taiwanese folk believers mean devotees of Taiwanese folk beliefs. Taiwanese folk students means the young people at TAC who come from a Taiwanese folk beliefs background.

The Characteristics of Taiwanese Folk Believer’s Beliefs

There are three aspects that relate to the characteristics of Taiwanese folk beliefs: (1) the nature of gods, (2) rituals of the folk beliefs, and (3) the characteristics of

Taiwanese folk beliefs.

The Nature of gods

The gods of Taiwanese folk beliefs are polytheistic. Taiwanese folk believers worship gods of heaven and of earth. The highest heavenly god is Yu-hung-shang-ti who is followed by east, west, south, north, and center gods, and so forth. The earth gods are gods of the mountains, earth, rivers, and crops, and so forth. Folk believers also worship ancestors and fierce ghosts who died in an unnatural way, such as in car accidents or by drowning. In addition, they worship animals, huge rocks, the sun, the moon, and plants. Three characteristics of Taiwanese folk gods are power, anthropomorphism, and practicality.

Power. One of the characteristics of Taiwanese folk gods is power. Taiwanese folk believers consider that all natural matter will become spirits or gods through the merit of the sun and moon. Taiwanese folk believers recognize that when human bones, animal-bones, trees, or large stones recruit the energy of the sun and moon over a long period of time, they receive the spirit and change to powerful spirit beings or gods.

These gods or spirits will cause fortune or disaster to their believers. Doong Fan-yuan argues, “There is a spirit in all natural matter, hence they can become spirits to offer good or evil in the world.”¹

Taiwanese folk beliefs respect historical heroes who died for their country or made a great contribution to their people. They will consider them as gods. For instance,

“Kuan Yu” was a hero in the ancient China Romance of the Three Kingdoms. Taiwanese folk believers praise his righteousness and bravery, and so accept him as a god. Kramer also points out, “Historical personages noted for their loyalty, righteousness, virtue, or filial piety are all considered to have the power of gods within them.”² Taiwanese folk believers respect their ancestors since they brought a lot of blessing to their descendants. They are considered to be very powerful; therefore, they are recognized as gods to be “worshipped and honored.”³

Anthropomorphism. The second characteristic of Taiwanese folk gods is Anthropomorphism. ⁴ They have Titles or positions, such as: “Huang” (the emperor), “Wong” (the king), and “Kong” (the ancestor). They possess appetites. They need food to eat, otherwise when they get hungry, they will cause trouble for their believers. In addition, Doong mentions, “They have birthdays, dwelling places, wives and servants.”⁵ The highest among the gods is “Yu-huang- sheng- ti” (the emperor god) whose other title is “Tien—kung” (Heaven).

Practical Gods. Taiwanese folk believers worship practical gods. They worship gods who help them to fulfill the needs of their daily life. Whenever there is a need, there is a god to take care of it. For example, “Tu-dih-kung” (the god of the land) is responsible for protecting the land and controlling animal reproduction; “Shi-shen” (the wealth god) brings money to his believers; “Chu-sheng-liang-liang” (the god of the baby) is considered a god who brings babies to mothers and, finally, “Sheng—wu-kong” (the monkey god), who was created in a famous ancient novel under the title “His-yu-chi” (The Story of Traveling to the West), is expected to protect believer’s animals, and

especially to be a guard for pigs. Above all, these practical gods were assigned by human being to meet their particular needs in their daily lives. Each time a new challenge arises, Taiwanese folk believers form a new god again to handle the problem.

The Rituals of Folk Beliefs

The traditional law of Taiwanese folk beliefs is “Sheng-le-mo-se, ku-le-mo-kam” which means that new celebrations are not allowed to increase; but old traditional celebrations should be carried on unceasingly. This is a technique to assure that the activities of folk beliefs keep operating from generation to generations.

The Family Worship. There is a daily family service in the morning and evening.

The elder son of the family is the one who takes care of this religious responsibility, and this duty makes it difficult for the first born of the family to be converted to Christianity. They fear that no one will carry on their family worship. This ritual includes burning incense to the family gods, heaven, and the ancestors. Their family gods are “Kang-yen” (the god of answering prayer), “Kuan-yu” (the ancient hero), “Mu-zu” (the sea goddess), “Chao-shen” (the kitchen god), “Tu-dih-kung” (the god of the land), “Chai-shen” (the money god), “Sung-tzu-liang-liang” (the god of babies), and “Shou shing” (the god of longevity).

These gods care for the daily needs of folk believers which include answering their petitions (Kang-yen), protecting their business (Kuan-yu), taking care of their families (Mu-zu and ancestors), blessing their agriculture (Tu-dih-kung), providing their food (Chao-shen), making them rich (Chai-shen), prospering their descendants (Sung-tzu-liang-liang), and giving them a long life (Shou-shing).

Some business families only worship Kang-yen, Kuan-yu, Tu-dih-kung, heaven, and ancestors. Kuan-yu is the favored god of businessmen due to his honesty in serving his master in the ancient Chinese time of the Three Kingdoms.

Monthly and Yearly Celebrations. The little sacrifice is offered on the first day and fifteenth day of the month. During the year, the folk believers celebrate gods' birthdays and special occasions—Chinese New Year, Dragon festival (on the fifth of May), Chung-yuan festival “ (the ghost festival on the fifteenth of July), and moon festival (on the fifteenth of August). There are family reunions and fellowship with both friends and relatives during these special celebrations.

“Chi-an Fa-hew” and “Chiao”. The “Chi-an Fa-hew” is celebrated only when the town or village suffers a disaster. It is not a regular celebration. The purpose of this celebration is to perform a sacrifice to satisfy the hunger ghosts for the sake of peace. How many sacrifices will be offered to the ghosts by each family depends on how many rewards they want to get back because of the sacrifices. “Chiao” in Taiwanese Folk Beliefs means a large sacrifice celebration to thank gods in the community. According to Taiwanese culture when the people face difficulties such as disastrous fires, epidemics, and so forth in their community, they appeal to gods with the basis of their offerings. When their petitions are fulfilled, they offer a tremendous sacrifice of thanks. This sacrifice will be considered as a peace sacrifice for the future as well. In this sense, by promising a certain offering to gods in exchange for their protections, and by offering sacrifices of thanks for their blessings, the ritual of the “Chiao” goes on from generation

to generation. The sacrifice to the “ Chiao” is larger than the sacrifice to “Chi-an Fa-hew”.

There are four kinds of “ Chiao “.6 They are the “ Peace-Chiao” (for the sake of peace in the community), “Epidemic-Chiao” (to stop the epidemics in the community), “Ching-cheng-Chiao” (to celebrate the completion of temple rebuilding), and “ Huo-Chiao” (to be free from fire disaster in the community). According to the period of the celebration, there are three kinds of Chiaos: a three-day Chiao, five-day Chiao and seven-day Chiao. Among these the five-day Chiao is the most popular.

The “Chiao “ is celebrated in an alternating three-year and twelve-year cycle. Most Chaios are not celebrated on a regular schedule, but take place only when neededs or for the sake of peace among the community. There are family reunions and a tremendous banquet for friends and relatives following the celebration of “ Chi-an Fa-hew” and “ Chiao “.

The Characteristics of Taiwanese Folk Believers

Taiwanese folk believers are certain that their success in business, their physical well-being, and the peace of the families, villages, towns and nation are all dependant on spiritual power. C.K. Yang mentions, “Human abilities and efforts alone were not sufficient to guarantee physical well-being, economic success, or family harmony.--- but needed the blessing of spiritual forces.”7 Taiwanese folk believers tend to seek spiritual assistance. Their nature is to prefer to worship a “Ling-yen” god, asking for practical blessings, to worship female gods, and belief in “Ming-yun”; but they are afraid of gods and ghosts.

Favoring a “Ling-yen” god. Doong, Fan Yuan states: “Taiwanese folk believers like to worship ‘Ling-yen’ gods.”⁸ “Ling-yen” means the god who answers their petitions. A “Ling-yen” god attracts many followers to worship him/her in his/her particular temple. When their requests are fulfilled, the folk believers offer a sacrifice according to the promise that they have made. But if their petitions are not answered, they forsake their god immediately.

Practical blessings. Taiwanese folk believers seek daily guidance and protection from their gods. These daily events are as follows: to recover from illness, to succeed in business, to pass entrance examinations, to find things that have been lost, to have a good wife or husband, and so on. In short, Taiwanese folk believers favor practical petitions. Kramer points out: “Petitions are then usually made, beseeching the god for peace, protection from evil spirits, a good harvest, wealth, position, long life or whatever the worshipper desires.”⁹ In a word, Taiwanese folk believers’ main concern is with events in this life.

Favoring female gods. “Mu-zu” is a female sea god. She is worshipped by all Taiwanese folk believers, and she is one of the ten famous Taiwanese folk gods. “Quan-yen” is a god who always answers prayer. He was a male god, but folk believers favor female gods so they changed his sex to become a female god. Taiwanese folk believers are interested in a female god who can protect them as a mother who takes care of her children in a tender and patient way.

Belief in “Ming-yun” “Ming-yun-tien-ding” means that the destiny of this life has

been determined in the previous life. Taiwanese folk believers consider that they do not have any control over their fate in this life by themselves. The only thing they can do is accept it.; But they still try to change their destiny “through the supernatural.”¹⁰

Fear of gods and ghosts. Taiwanese folk believers fear gods. They consider that their gods get angry easily due to a lack of sacrifice or by a “taboo”¹¹ so they do not like to live together with their gods; they prefer to set a distance between their gods and them. They recognize that the only thing that they need to do is to offer sacrifices to their gods. After a sacrifice, Taiwanese folk believers explode firecrackers to force their gods to go away because they are afraid of them.

Taiwanese folk believers are afraid of “hunger ghosts and fierce ghosts”¹² who passed away by accident and who can bring calamities to people. Hunger ghosts create problems for the village, the town, and the country. In order to have peace for the people, Taiwanese folk believers offer food to satisfy the hunger ghosts.

The Way to Convey Christianity to Students With Folk Believers

According to this research, characteristics of Taiwanese folk believers are: they recognize their gods as ancient heroes or good people or ideal figures; the relationship between gods and people is based on practical benefits for this life; they believe in fate; they love celebration; they favor worship of female gods; and they are afraid of ghosts. Based on these characteristics, there are three ways for Christians to evangelize Taiwanese folk believers. These are through teaching, through student activities, and by the presentation

of a practical Gospel.

Teacher-student relationship.

The Apostle Paul proclaims: “ So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.” (Romans 10:17. NRSV.) Teachers are the ones who meet students. They have many opportunities to share Christian beliefs and values with folk believing students. Ellen G. White declares: ” The Savior mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, ‘ Follow me.’”¹³ Students with folk beliefs who live in the dormitories are prone to become homesick and feel lonely, especially when they are sick or get upset due to poor results on their examinations or quarreling with their friends. These are opportunities to show Christian love and concern for them through counseling, prayer, and an invitation for fellowship in the teacher’s home. Teachers should not only meet them in the classroom, but should also play and work together with them in order to build good relationships. Then, through these personal relationships, Taiwanese folk students can become acquainted with God and develop a personal relationship with Him. In this way, the teacher can meet the needs of folk believing students and win their confidence and thus prepare them to respond to the calling of God.

The essence of the sweetness of Christian beliefs and values can be seen through modeling. This was one reason why Jesus Christ came into this world as a man. When Christians and Christians teachers have applied their beliefs and values to their daily lives, then folk believing students will be attracted and converted to the Lord.

There is a difference between imparting knowledge and technical skill to folk believing students and teaching them how to apply this knowledge and these skills according to Christian beliefs and values. Regarding the teaching of Christian teachers, Arthur F. Holmes points out, “The educator’s task is to inspire and equip individuals to think and act for themselves in the dignity of persons created in God’s image.” And he says, “To teach a person to read and to write is to teach him to think for himself, to develop more fully the possession of his God-given power. He becomes a reflective, thinking being.”¹⁴

The main purpose of Christian teachers is to teach a Christian life-style. Humberto Rasi , Adventist General Conference Educational Department Director, argues, “In the Seventh-day Adventist setting, the aim of this integration(faith and learning) is to ensure that the students, by the time they leave school, will have freely internalized a view of knowledge, life, values, and destiny that is Bible-based, Christ-centered, service-oriented, and kingdom-directed.”¹⁵ In this way, students will practice all they have learned under the guidance of Christian beliefs and values for the rest of their lives as they serve the Lord and the community.

The Student’s Activities.

Students with Taiwanese folk beliefs are accustomed to having celebrations in connection with their beliefs. During the celebrations, folk believers review their values and enjoy social fellowship. Hence, the activities of students should be arranged in a way for evangelism and fellowship through various celebrations and social activities during the school year.

There are special occasions such as Moon festival in August, Christmas in

December, and Dragon festival in May and these occasions are the best time for sharing Christian beliefs to folk students by using drama and celebration activities. Dramas can be used to relate stories of biblical heroes; such as the story of Moses, Joseph, Jacob, David, Paul, or Jesus Christ. The story of baby Jesus would be a good theme for celebration in the Christmas season which could be followed by a performance of “the story of Jesus Christ’s ministry”¹⁶ when Jesus overcomes the storm and evil spirits for example (Mark 4:35-37; Luke 8:26-29.) During the Moon Festival Christian witnessing could be done by putting biblical passages into moon cakes. As the students enjoyed the moon cakes, they would read the texts. These texts could be related to the creation of the world and the love of God such as: God’s Creation of the moon (Genesis 1:14-19), and God is love (1John 4:8). In a word, the students’ activities must include both fellowship and evangelism.

The Practical Gospel.

Folk believing students are interested in practical issues that relate to their daily lives. They love practical gods who can solve their daily difficulties. The Apostle Paul said, “I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means, save some.”(1Corinthians. 9:22. NRSV).

Ellen G. White argued, “As the dew and the still showers fall gently upon withering plants, so his words are to fall gently when he proclaims the truth.”¹⁷ Both the apostle Paul and Mrs. White emphasized the use of carefulness and gentleness in presenting the Gospel. The practical Gospel meets this need. The practical Gospel includes the practical characteristics of God, the health reform message, the tithe, and the displaying of biblical

passages and pictures.

The Practical Characteristics of God. Taiwanese folk believing students favor practical gods; so ministers of God need to: (1) Present a God who likes to communicate with people personally, in other words, to introduce God's humanity first then His divinity. (2) Teach Jesus Christ's love, righteousness, and sacrifice. (3) Proclaim the tender love of Jesus who cares for people more than their mothers. (4) Emphasize God's omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience which enable Him to answer prayers, to control human destiny and to overcome evil spirits.

The Health Reform Message. Taiwanese folk students are very concerned about their health. The New Start program is a good way to meet their practical needs. This program can be conducted in the first three weeks of the semester; thus integrating Christian beliefs and values and physical well-being.

The Tithe. Bruce Power divides the period of the human spiritual development into four stages. College students belong to the third stage.¹⁸ This stage could be referred to as the period of testing religious reality. College students in this category are 19-27 years old. In this stage, college students tend to experience their beliefs in their individual daily lives and thus test them to make sure whether their beliefs are true or not. In other words, the young people rediscover their own religion through experience in this stage.

Perry Downs declares that there are "three ways to help college students to overcome their own doubt regarding religious issues"¹⁹. The first is to prepare a warm and safe environment for them to help them to talk about their problems. Teachers should accept

their questions completely. The second is to provide adequate and satisfactory answers for their spiritual questions on such issues as, Does God really exist? Are the Scriptures infallible? The third is to experience God. They trust their own experience. When they have tasted and seen God in their daily life, then they can settle the problem of reasons to accept Jesus Christ as their personal Savior. To let college students experience the existence of God is the key point in their religious experience.

There is the only biblical passage in which God asks people to challenge Him, and this can be used to meet the challenge of college students. “Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of the host; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.” (Malachi. 3:10.NRSV) College students have reached the age of nineteen. Young people at this age tend to test the power of God before they believe in Him. The Gospel of the tithe prepares a way for them to exercise their faith. The precondition of this challenge is to admit that God is the owner of the whole universe and that He is the Creator of this earth, and then, through cooperation with God in the events of their daily lives to experience the existence of God. For example, they can ask God to help them find a job as a tutor and then promise to return their tithe to God. When God answers their prayer and they have returned the tithe to Him, then they will have really touched, tasted and seen God.

Displaying Biblical Passages and Pictures. Taiwanese folk believing students are used to getting acquainted with folk beliefs through visible pictures; therefore biblical passages and pictures can easily catch their eye and present the message in a simple way

for them. These passages and pictures should be based on practical premises. Such biblical passages might be: God invites His people to ask of Him so that they can receive (Matthew.7:7.); cast your burdens before the Lord (Matthew.11:28); and God cares for us even more than a mother cares for her child (Isaiah49:15.); and so forth. Such biblical pictures might be: God defeating Satan (Mark5:1-20); the prodigal son (Luke.15:11-24), and so forth.

Follow Up

After the baptismal service, the transferal of new members to local churches becomes an important stage in their Christian growth. In order to make this transition successful, there are three things that should be done: (1)The styles of the worship services in the local church and in the college church should be in harmony with each other; (2) The local church should have an Adventists Youth Association because youth can attract and care for other youth in a special way; (3)New members should be trained to become fishers of people.

Conclusion

Taiwanese folk believers consider the personality of gods, the power of gods, and the tender love of goddesses as the important characteristics of their gods. They prefer to follow gods who can supply their daily practical needs.

The way to convey Christian beliefs and values to TAC folk believing students is through

- (1) Love, modeling, and Christ-centered teaching.
- (2) Celebration activities for the students.
- (3) Presentation of a practical Gospel.

(4) Displaying biblical pictures.

(5) Following up with newly baptized students to keep them growing in the church

Then the conveying of Christian beliefs and values to students that have traditional folk beliefs will be realized; and the experiential quality of the newly converted will be assured at TAC.

END NOTES

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