

Ancestor Remembrance and its Implications on Ecumenism in the Chinese-speaking World

祭祖在華人社會的合一啟示

Simon K.M. WONG SJ

[ABSTRACT] This article aims at arguing against the statement that ancestor “worship” is idol worship. To begin with, I will argue that the term ancestor “worship” is a mistranslation. The correct one should be ancestor remembrance. A historical review of the Chinese Rites Controversy, which racked the Catholic Church in the Qing Dynasty is conducted. In 1939, the Church judged that ancestor “worship”, used to be idol worship but gradually lost its religious significance, has been transformed into a cultural event. Consequently, the Catholic Church allows the Chinese faithful to participate in liturgy of ancestor remembrance. Karl Rahner’s theology of symbol is used as the critical framework for a dogmatic and liturgical examination of ancestor remembrance. Idol worship believes in the real presence of their gods in the idols, hence, an idol is in itself a real symbol. On the contrary, the spirits of our ancestors are not present in the liturgy of ancestor remembrance, which, therefore, is but a secondary symbol, culturally and historically conditioned, to express our filial respect to our ancestors. Our ancestors are not gods but members of the Church in heaven. The Church on earth and in heaven constitute one Church in the mystical body of Christ. I will conclude that ancestor remembrance is but a cultural and liturgical expression of our filial piety, which is in full

harmony with the teachings of the scripture and *magisterium* of the Catholic Church.

【摘要】 本文旨在反對祖先「崇拜」是偶像崇拜的說法。首先，作者論證祖先「崇拜」這個詞是一個誤譯。正確的說法應該是對祖先的紀念。文章對中國清代天主教會的禮儀之爭進行了歷史回顧。1939年，教會認為祖先「崇拜」（曾經被認為是偶像崇拜）已失去宗教意義，並轉化為文化事件。因此，天主教會允許中國信徒參加祖先紀念儀式。作者引用卡爾·拉納的符號神學，作為檢視祖先紀念的教條和禮儀的框架。偶像崇拜相信他們的神在偶像中的真實存在，因此，偶像本身就是一個真正象徵。然而，祖先的靈魂並不存在於祖先紀念儀式中，因此，它只是在文化和歷史條件上的次要象徵，表達我們對祖先的孝敬。我們的祖先不是神，而是天堂教會的成員。地上和天上的教會構成了基督神秘身體中的一個教會。結論是，對祖先的懷念是我們孝道的文化，它與天主教會的經文和教會的教義完全一致。

Foreword

This essay aims at arguing for the statement: ancestor remembrance in the Chinese-speaking Catholic Church is not idol worship. To begin with, I will argue that the statement "ancestor worship" is but a mistranslation. The Chinese term *ji* (祭), which has multiple meanings, and translated by missionaries whose native language was not Chinese, was mistranslated as "worship". To the Western Christian world, especially Protestantism, ancestor "worship" is undoubtedly idol worship. Based on a misconception as a result of mistranslation, many Protestants strongly criticize the Catholic Church for practicing "ancestor worship". In the absence of meaningful dialogue, and further reinforced by negative historical

experiences, the misunderstanding continues to well up. This essay aims at unfolding the root of the misunderstanding regarding the issue of ancestor remembrance, with a view to facilitate ecumenical dialogue in promoting Christian unity.

Karl Rahner's (1904-1984) theology of symbol will be used as the epistemological ground for subsequent discussion.

1. Rahner's theology of symbol

Rahner theorizes that there are two kinds of symbols: the primary and the secondary. The primary symbol is also a real symbol. The national flag, for example, is a symbol signifying a reality existing outside of itself, namely, the nation. If the national flag is destroyed, the nation remains intact. It is, therefore, obvious that the nation is not in the flag. Rahner calls this a secondary symbol.¹

The human body is an example of a primary symbol. The body signifies the person but the person is in the body. In the normal historical context, there is no such thing as a person having an independent existence of her/his body. If the body is destroyed, the person too. Rahner calls this a primary or real symbol.²

After establishing the epistemological ground for discussion, the following is an etymological examination of the Chinese term *ji* (祭).

¹ Karl Rahner, trans. Kevin Smyth, "The Theology of Symbol", *Theological Investigations vol. IV*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 221-244; 黃克鏞, 谷寒松編, 〈528 象徵〉, 《神學辭典》, (台北: 光啟出版社, 1996), 732-733 頁。 [Joseph H.P. Wong, "528 Symbol", *Theological Dictionary* (Taipei: Kuangchi Press, 1996), 732-733.]

² Rahner, "The Theology of Symbol", *Theological Investigations vol. IV*, 245-252.

2. An etymological examination of the Chinese term *jì* (祭)

The term *jì* (祭) carries at least three meanings:

- 1) *jì sì* (祭祀): worshipping gods and spirits
- 2) *jì diào* (祭弔): remembering and paying respect to the deceased
- 3) *fǎ shù* (法術): the black arts; white magic³

It is commonsense that we can never translate multiple meanings of a term. In choosing one of its meanings *jì sì* (祭祀), the Western missionaries kicked off a heated debate which finally led to the lamented misconception that ancestor remembrance is “idol worship”!

The meaning of ancestor remembrance in the Analects

We can trace the meaning of ancestor remembrance to chapter one *Xué ér* (學而) of the *Analects* (*Lúnyǔ* 論語), the records of dialogue between Master Confucius and his disciples, written between 540 and 400 B.C. *Zēng zǐ* (曾子), a disciple of Confucius, said: “*Shèn zhōng zhuī yuǎn, mín dé guī hòu yǐ*” (慎終追遠，民德歸厚矣)。 *Zhōng* (終) means parents’ death. *Yuǎn* (遠) means ancestors. The whole phrase means: Prudently handle the funeral of your parents with mourning respect and proper liturgy, and pay respect to ancestors at the liturgy of ancestor remembrance. This will improve the moral standard of the society and culture.⁴ It is obvious

³ 國語辭典教育部重編修訂本[Chinese Dictionary, revised by the Ministry of Education, Republic of China]網頁:

<http://dict.revised.moe.edu.tw/cgi-bin/cbdic/gsweb.cgi?ccd=ffYVY8&o=e0&sec=sec1&op=v&view=17-1>

⁴ 謝冰瑩等編譯，《新譯四書讀本》，五版，(台北：三民書局，2002) (民 91)，71 頁。

[Xiè Bīng Yíng, et al. ed., *A Commentary on the Four Books*, 5th ed. (Taipei: Sān

from Zēng zǐ's saying that ancestor remembrance carries only cultural not religious connotations. The *Analects* have been regarded as the standard of Chinese morality and culture for the past 25 centuries. According to the Chinese intellectual tradition at least, we can conclude that ancestor remembrance is only a cultural phenomenon and carries no religious nuance.

Ancestor worship as a core element of folk religions

Born and bred in Hong Kong, a place with Chinese culture as the core, however, my personal experiences of ancestor remembrance differ significantly from the idea of the *Analects*. Ever since I was a small boy, I have been hearing my mother praying to our ancestors during the Chinese New Year and at other festivals. From what my mother was praying, it was very obvious that she saw ancestors as transcendent spirits who were able to bless and protect her family. This is no single incident but is a core element in folk religions in the Chinese-speaking world. I can testify from my personal experience that ancestor remembrance carries religious connotations.

To conclude, there exist two traditions in Chinese culture regarding ancestor remembrance. First, the intellectual tradition sees ancestor remembrance as a cultural and moral event. Second, the folk religions, fully embracing the intellectual tradition on the one hand, have infused religious meanings into ancestor remembrance and transformed it into ancestor worship.

Mín, 2002), 71]
Chinese Dictionary, revised by the Ministry of Education, Republic of China at:
[http://dict.revised.moe.edu.tw/cgi-bin/cbdic/gswweb.cgi?ccd=fFyVY8&o=e0&sec=sec1
&op=v&view=17](http://dict.revised.moe.edu.tw/cgi-bin/cbdic/gswweb.cgi?ccd=fFyVY8&o=e0&sec=sec1&op=v&view=17)

3. The Chinese Rites Controversy

The debate in the late Míng Dynasty (明朝 1368-1644)

The pre-eminent Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) arrived in Macau, China in 1582. After much endeavor, he was finally able to reside in Beijing to begin his missionary work in 1601. When confronted with the issue of ancestor "worship", he argued that in Chinese culture, there exists a long tradition of filial piety, manifested in ancestor remembrance. Traced back to its origin, ancestor remembrance was but a liturgy to express profound filial piety. Among the intellectuals, at least, ancestor remembrance carries no religious or superstitious nuance. Nevertheless, he admitted that superstitious elements could be found in ancestor remembrance among the grass-roots. With proper cultivation, he believed, the liturgy could be "purified" to its original form. Other missionaries of his time, especially his successor Nicholas Longobardi (龍華民: 1559–1654), held an antagonistic view which sparked a debate on the issue. By and large, the debate is confined to the missionary circle in the late Míng Dynasty.⁵

The Chinese Rites Controversy in the Qīng Dynasty (清朝 1644-1912)

In 1644, the Míng Dynasty came to an end. Missionaries were allowed to work in the new Manchurian Empire. Shortly afterwards, the Chinese rites to Confucius (*jì kǒng* 祭孔) and to ancestors (*jì zǔ* 祭祖) became a heated debate among missionaries during the reign of Emperor Kāngxī (康熙皇帝).

⁵ 穆啟蒙,《中國天主教史》,侯景文譯,(台北:光啟出版社,1971),52-53頁。
[Joseph Motte, trans. Joseph Tarc Hou, *History of the Catholic Church in China* (Taipei: Kuangchi, Cultural Group, 1971), 52-53.]

As discussed before, there are two traditions in China regarding ancestor remembrance: the intellectual as well as the folk tradition. The Jesuits, who followed Matteo Ricci's line of thinking, understood *jì zǔ* as a cultural event for the Chinese people to express their filial piety, and *jì kǒng* as reverence towards Confucius. Their opponents, namely the Dominicans and Franciscans, insisted that the liturgies were but idol worship. They testified that the Chinese people believed in the real presence of their ancestors' spirits in the liturgies. It is not too difficult to see why the two parties held antagonistic views on the same issue. The Jesuits, by and large, worked among intellectuals who upheld the intellectual tradition. The Franciscans and Dominicans came into contact with the ordinary people who upheld the folk tradition. In short, they were both right and both wrong in the same way, taking the part as the whole.

Pope Benedict XIV's final decision

The debate on the Chinese Rites flared up in China among the missionaries. The Holy Office launched an extensive investigation which led to the decree of 1704 followed by the Nanjing Decree of the papal legate Carlo Maillard de Tournon (鐸羅) in 1707. The 1704 decree, though allowing the name of an ancestor inscribed on a memorial tablet, prohibited using the characters *líng wèi* (靈位), which literally means "a place for the (ancestor's) spirit". It also prohibited any offerings before the memorial tablet or the tomb or taking part in the rites to Confucius, so as to rule out any possibility of idol worship. The 1704 decree served as the foundation stone for Pope Clement XI's decree in 1715 (*Ex illa die*) and Pope Benedict

XIV's in 1742 (*Ex quo singulari*), which banned the Chinese Rites and prohibited further debate.⁶

A Copernican revolution in 1939

The Manchurian Empire (Qīng Dynasty) was overturned and the Republic of China was founded in 1912. A seemingly "minor" incident happening in the Jesuit Sophia University in Tokyo triggered a Copernican revolution regarding the Chinese Rites Controversy. On 5 May 1932, a few Catholic students studying at Sophia University objected to bowing before the Shinto Shrine. Finally, with a view to preserving the integrity of the Japanese Empire, the Japanese government declared that the Shinto Shrine rites were civil and social rather than religious. The Catholic Church in Japan, with this government declaration, allowed the faithful to take part in the Shinto rites.⁷ This incident, however, compelled the Catholic Church to re-examine the Chinese Rites Controversy. Rome finally came to the knowledge that, through the advancement of science and education, the religious meaning behind the rites to Confucius and ancestors has been fully watered-down. At the same time, the Chinese government also declared that the public rites to Confucius practiced in government organizations were civil and social rather than religious. On 8 December 1939, the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith decreed that the rites to Confucius were to express profound respect to Confucius, the great Master, and the rites to ancestors were people's expression of deep

⁶ D.E. Mungello, 'An Introduction to the Chinese Rites Controversy', *The Chinese Rites Controversy: Its History and Meaning* (San Francisco: The Ricci Institute; Sankt Augustin: Institut Monumenta Serica, 1994), 4; Joseph Motte, *A History of the Catholic Church in China*, 88-92.

⁷ 鄒保祿,〈中國禮儀之爭始末〉,《神學論集》,79(1989)86-87。[Paul Zou, *The Chinese Rites Controversy*, *Collectanea Theologica Universitatis Fujen*, 79(1989)86-87.]

filial piety. Both were civil and social rather than religious. This put an end to the extremely painful contention of the Chinese Rites Controversy in China.

From this historical review of the Chinese Rites Controversy, we can see that the Catholic Church is extremely careful and prudent in dealing with the religious implications behind the rites to Confucius and ancestors, and has forbidden any trace of idol worship in the rites. To accuse the Catholic Church of practicing idol worship in the rites to ancestors is to overlook the whole history of the Chinese Rites Controversy and many other similar cases in different cultures.

4. A dogmatic examination of ancestor remembrance

From the above discussion, we can see that the Catholic Church in China has undergone an extremely painful history of contention regarding the rites to Confucius and ancestors. It is also evident that the Catholic Church was extremely careful and prudent in settling the Controversy. It seems now expedient for me to provide a dogmatic explanation to the Church's decision in 1939.

What is an idol?

Regarding the accusation of ancestor remembrance as "idol worship", we have to ask a fundamental question: what is an idol? Rahner's theology of symbol sheds much light in the search of an answer. Followers of folk religions see the real presence of their god in the idol they are worshipping. In other words, the idol is the god and vice versa. It will be great insult to followers of folk religions if they are told their idol is merely an object, not a god. Since the real

presence of the god is the key element constituting an idol, according to Rahner's theology of symbol, an idol is a primary (real) symbol.

Rahner theorizes that the secondary symbol signifies a reality outside of itself. The Chinese rites to ancestors are obviously secondary symbols: they point to our ancestors. We believe that some of them are in heaven. Nevertheless, their spirits are not present in the rites. The church has made it crystal clear that the rites to ancestors are merely expressions of filial piety. As stated clearly in the 1704 decree, the real presence of ancestors' spirits in the rites or in the memorial tablet is out of the question. And offerings to spirits of ancestors are strictly prohibited. Both the Church on earth and the Church in heaven constitute the same body of Christ. The rites to ancestors are to call to mind our ancestors' love for us so that we can respond with a grateful heart. Meanwhile, they also remind us that because of God's grace, some of our ancestors are able to enjoy eternal happiness in heaven. Ancestor remembrance, as a secondary symbol, is by no means idol worship. On the contrary, if we believe in the real presence of our ancestors' spirits in the rites, it is idol worship.

The two traditions

As previously discussed, there are two traditions regarding the rites to ancestors: the intellectual and the folk tradition. The intellectual tradition sees ancestor remembrance as cultural and social rather than religious. The folk tradition, believing in the real presence of ancestors' spirits in the rites, is undoubtedly religious, hence, idol worship. The Catholic Church has obviously rejected the folk but accepted the intellectual tradition, evident in the various rulings and decrees related to the Chinese Rites Controversy.

Communion of saints in the mystical body of Christ

Since both the Churches on earth and in heaven belong to the same mystical body of Christ, the two Churches are but one, enjoying full communion in Christ. In the Holy Eucharist, there is prayer for our ancestors who are now in heaven enjoying eternal happiness. Though we pray for ancestors in the Eucharist, we do not believe in their real presence, as they are now in heaven. The prayer for ancestors is only a secondary symbol. This is critically important, as the Catholic Church is extremely careful about the orthodoxy of faith. There is no compromise in matters of faith. We have to secure the purity of faith as not to mingle with folk religions, which believe in the real presence of ancestors in the rites.

5 A liturgical examination of ancestor remembrance

The Catholic Church in Taiwan is the pioneer in reviving the rites to ancestors. It is largely due to the fact that the Nationalist Party (the *Kuomintang* 國民黨) endeavored to revive traditional Chinese culture. Echoing the government's endeavor, the Catholic Church in Taiwan began with a theological investigation as well as liturgical reformation regarding ancestor remembrance. This endeavor has borne much fruit in the past decades.

Nowadays, both the Catholic Church in Taiwan and in Hong Kong have a formal liturgy for ancestor remembrance which is based on several theological criteria. First, ancestors are not gods. There is no real presence of ancestors' spirits in the liturgy of remembrance. Second, we have adopted some traditional practices, such as using flowers, incense, fruit, etc. in the liturgy. But the Church has made it crystal clear that they are not "offerings" to our ancestors, but presents to express our respect, thanksgiving and love. We bring with

us some presents when visiting a friend. We also bring with us a bundle of flowers or other things when we visit the tomb of our deceased family member. The same logic applies to the rites to ancestors. All material things we use in ancestor remembrance are but secondary symbols signifying our love and fond memories of our ancestors. It is critically important not to take presents as "offerings" to ancestors, as this is superstitious and hence heretical.⁸

6 Implications of ancestor remembrance in ecumenism in the Chinese-speaking World

An outlook for meaningful dialogue

Protestantism is consciously careful regarding matters of faith. This serious attitude towards faith, nevertheless, is to be highly appreciated. In this regard, the Catholic Church and our Protestant brothers are entirely at one.

In the Chinese-speaking world, in order to eradicate all traces of superstition and idol worship, Protestantism condemns all forms of ancestor "worship". As discussed above, adopting the folk religious tradition, which believes in the real presence of ancestors' spirits in the liturgy, is undoubtedly idol worship. However, the Catholic Church has unreservedly rejected the folk religious tradition and adopted the intellectual tradition, taking the rites to ancestors as secondary symbols. The real presence of ancestors' spirits in the liturgy is absolutely out of the question. This opens a common

⁸ 錢玲珠,〈天上人間—天主教會看「祭祖」及相關問題〉,〈新北市:輔仁聖博敏神學院禮儀研究中心,2002〉。[Teresa Chien, *Between Heaven and Earth: a Catholic View on Ancestor Remembrance and Related Issues*, (New Taipei City: Research Centre for Liturgy, Fu Jen Faculty of Theology of St. Robert Bellarmine, 2002)]: http://theology.catholic.org.tw/public/liyi/topics_ancestor.html.

ground for dialogue between Protestantism and Catholicism. The Task Force for Theological Exchange⁹ recently held a public talk on the issue of ancestor remembrance. My view on ancestor remembrance was fully accepted by my dialogue partner, a Protestant pastor. He even considered the possibility of Protestants and Catholics joining hands to co-organize an occasion of ancestor remembrance. This is but one example of how dialogue can promote mutual understanding and contribute to further opportunities of co-operation between Protestantism and Catholicism. This dialogue in ancestor remembrance, therefore, serves as the stepping stone for further dialogue in contentious theological issues.

Karl Rahner's theology of Symbol in ecumenical dialogue

Rahner's theology of symbol, in one way or another, serves as the common epistemological foundation for meaningful dialogue between Catholicism and Protestantism in contentious theological issues, such as the use of icons and statues, the place of Our Lady in the Church, the Sacraments, the real presence of the risen Christ in the Holy Eucharist, and so on. Take the icons and statues as examples. The Catholic Church teaches that all icons and statues are but secondary symbols. Consequently, the statue of Christ points to Christ but His real presence in the statue is out of the question. The same logic applies to all other icons and statues in the Catholic Church. To take icons and statues as "idols" is to take the secondary symbol as real. Consequently, the accusation that icons and statues in

⁹ The Task Force for Theological Exchange is a coordinating body working under the cooperation of the Diocesan Ecumenical Commission, Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong and the Hong Kong Christian Council aiming at promoting Christian unity through theological exchange. Every year, the Task Force organizes about four public talks/conferences to facilitate dialogue between the Catholic Church in Hong Kong and member Churches of the Hong Kong Christian Council. The public talk on ancestor remembrance was held on 17 January 2018 at the auditorium of the Catholic Diocesan Centre, 16 Caine Road, Hong Kong.

the Catholic Church is "idol worship" is resting on little ground. In this regard, the Catholic Church will not tolerate any ambiguity in her teachings and actions.

If both Catholicism and Protestantism share the same good will in ecumenical dialogue in promoting Christian unity, Rahner's theology of symbol is, perhaps, the common epistemological key worthy of consideration.

Bibliography

Books:

Rahner, Karl (trans. Kevin Smyth). *"The Theology of Symbol", Theological Investigations vol. IV*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966.

Mungello, D.E. *'An Introduction to the Chinese Rites Controversy', The Chinese Rites Controversy: Its History and Meaning*. San Francisco: The Ricci Institute; Sankt Augustin: Institut Monumenta Serica, 1994.

黃克鏞，谷寒松編。〈528 象徵〉，《神學辭典》。台北：光啟出版社，1996。

[Wong, Joseph H.P., Gutheinz, Luis ed. "528 Symbol". *Theological Dictionary*. Taipei: Kuangchi Cultural Group, 1996]

謝冰瑩等編譯。《新譯四書讀本》，五版。台北：三民書局，2002 (民 91)。

[Xiè Bīng Yíng, et al., ed. *A Commentary on the "Four Books"*, 5th ed. Taipei: sān mǐn, 2002.]

穆啟蒙，候景文譯。《中國天主教史》。台北：光啟出版社，1971。

[Motte, Joseph (trans. Joseph Tarc Hou). *History of the Catholic Church in China*. Taipei: Kuangchi Cultural Group, 1971.]

傅樂成。《中國通中》下冊。(台北：大中國圖書公司，1982)。

[Fù Lè Chéng. *History of China, vol. 2*. Taipei: Great China Book Co., 1982.]

Articles:

陳開華。〈「敬天祭祖」的歷史與神學、哲學反思〉。《神學論集》179(2014)36-37。

[Chen Kai-Hua. "A Historical, Theological and Philosophical Reflection on *Jing Tiān Jì Zǔ*." *Collectanea Theologica Universitatis Fujen*, 179 (2014)36-37.]

鄒保祿。〈中國禮儀之爭始末〉。《神學論集》，79(1989)86-87。

[Zou, Paul. "The Chinese Rites Controversy." *Collectanea Theologica Universitatis Fujen*, 79(1989)86-87.]

Websites:

錢玲珠。〈天上人間—天主教會看「祭祖」及相關問題〉。輔仁聖博敏神學院禮儀研究中心，2002。

[Chien, Teresa. *Between Heaven and Earth: a Catholic View on Ancestor Remembrance and Related Issues*. New Taipei City: Research Centre for Liturgy, Fu Jen Faculty of Theology of St. Robert Bellarmine, 2002] :

http://theology.catholic.org.tw/public/liyi/topics_ancestor.html

國語辭典教育部重編修訂本

[Chinese Dictionary. Revised by the Ministry of Education, Republic of China] :

<http://dict.revised.moe.edu.tw/cgi-bin/cbdic/gsweb.cgi?ccd=fFyVY8&o=e0&sec=sec1&op=v&view=17-1>