

CHAP CHAY LO MI:
DISENTANGLING THE CHINESE-FILIPINO WORLDVIEW

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1. Introduction

“Chap Chay Lo Mi” is a local favorite in Chinese restaurants made up of mixed vegetables (chap chay), pork, thick round noodles (lo mi) and cooked in a thickened soup base. It is taken as a snack, soup to accompany other main dishes, or as a meal in itself. The name of the dish has come to be used much like the Filipino term “halo-halo,” which refers to a dish with many ingredients or something that is a mixture. The worldview of the Chinese Filipino can be likened to “chap chay lo mi,”¹ because one can identify Catholic, Protestant, Buddhist, Confucian, Taoist/Daoist and animistic elements in his/her belief system and practices.

Consider the recent video production by the Jesuit Communications Foundation of the Ateneo de Manila University, entitled *Haha Popi: Faces of Chinoy Catholics Today*.² Four Chinoys were interviewed about their beliefs and cultural practices. Gail Tomas and Regina Lim, although professed Catholics, still observe many Chinese religious customs and consider these as “traditions” that do not conflict with

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¹ I prefer this term “Chinese-Filipino” to the earlier ones such as “Philippine Chinese” or “Filipino-Chinese.” Another term that is equivalent is “Tsinoy/Chinoy,” which is coined by combining the Tagalog words, “Tsino/Chino” (Chinese) and “Pinoy” (Filipino).

² *Haha Popi: Faces of Chinoy Catholics Today*, VCD (Quezon City, Philippines: Jesuit Communication/Jesuit Province Commission on Chinese-Filipino Ministry, 2000). *Haha Popi* is Chinese Hokkien dialect baby talk meaning “to clasp one’s hands and bow in prayer.”

Christianity. They also believe in Chinese deities, some of whom they consider as “saints.” Patrick Ong feels uneasy performing the Chinese rituals, seeing the conflict with Christianity (monotheistic vs. polytheistic), yet he has learned to compromise in order to respect his elders. Lit Onrubia considers himself a Filipino but he has assimilated Chinese/Buddhist/Protestant traditions with Catholic tradition, although he knows these are different from each other.

In such a complex reality, how should Chinese Filipino Evangelicals engage the surrounding cultures and belief systems in order to be authentic and effective witnesses for the Lord? This paper will attempt to identify and describe the worldview of Chinese Filipinos. This study will focus mainly on the Chinoy. A Chinoy is foremost a Filipino either by birth, blood relation or by citizenship. They are Chinese by cultural heritage and include the ethnic Chinese (resident and naturalized Chinese who originated from southeastern China and who were either born in China or in the Philippines). The first group comprises 85% while the second, 10% of the total population of Chinese in the Philippines; the alien Chinese (temporary residents, foreign citizenship) constitute the last group which is about 5%.³ This study is based partly on the findings of Chiu Eng Tan.⁴ It also provides a contextualized, biblical alternative worldview.

2. Identifying Worldviews

The worldview of the Chinese Filipinos must be understood in the context of the macro system that includes the biophysical, personal, social, cultural and spiritual systems.⁵ Religion must be studied with a

³ See Sylvia Palugod, *The Chinese in the Philippines: A Demographic and Socio-cultural Profile* (Manila: CCOWE Fellowship-Philippines, 1993) and Fannie Tan Koa, “NGOs in Intercultural Relations: The KAISA Experience,” in *Intercultural Relations, Cultural Transformation, and Identity—the Ethnic Chinese—Selected Papers Presented at the 1998 ISSCO Conference*, ed. Teresita Ang See (Manila: Kaisa Para Sa Kaunlaran, 2000), pp. 490-509.

⁴ Chiu Eng Tan, “The Cosmos, Humans, and Gods: A Comparison of Non-Christians and Christians on Chinese Beliefs in Metro-Manila” (Ph.D. diss., Trinity International University, 1996).

⁵ Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw and Tite Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1999), p. 33.

view as to how it operates in these human systems, especially the social and cultural systems. Today religion is defined by anthropologists as "beliefs about the ultimate nature of things, as deep feelings and motivations, and as fundamental values and allegiances."⁶ Beliefs, feelings and values are also the three essential components of culture.

Larry Laudan has provided a helpful model of cultural knowledge that examines the nature of belief systems and their place in culture as a whole.⁷ He points out that human minds work on four levels of cultural knowledge: the experiential data (signs, words, gestures, drawings that link experiences to images in the head); theories (low-level explanations of a narrow range of reality); belief systems (higher level, guides thought processes to focus on experience and formulate theories to help solve problems); and worldviews (this is the highest level, the fundamental givens with which people think).⁸

There are two dimensions used to analyze belief systems: the horizontal has to do with the fundamental analogies people use to formulate beliefs while the vertical is concerned with immanence/transcendence or scale. In the former, the two basic analogies are organic ("seeing things as living beings in relationship to each other") and mechanical (seeing things as inanimate objects that act upon each other like parts in a machine).⁹ Furthermore, in Morris Opler's understanding, there is an interplay of themes and counter-themes creating a dynamic tension in one's worldview.¹⁰

According to Hiebert, there are three levels in the vertical dimension: the bottom scale is the empirical world of seen human senses; on the top scale are the cosmic realms beyond human experience; and in-between are the unseen or transempirical realities of this world. These three levels emerge out of the intersection of this world (earth, universe)

⁶ Hiebert, et al., *Understanding Folk Religion*, p. 35.

⁷ Larry Laudan, *Progress and Its Problems: Towards a Theory of Scientific Growth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), cited in Hiebert, et. al., *Understanding Folk Religion*, p. 38.

⁸ Hiebert, et. al., *Understanding Folk Religion*, pp. 38-40.

⁹ Hiebert, et. al., *Understanding Folk Religion*, p. 45.

¹⁰ See Tan, "The Cosmos, Humans, and Gods," pp. 32-33. Her dissertation made use of Opler's theory to examine and explain the presence and persistence of folk beliefs among the adult Chinese Christians in Chinatown, Manila. Opler's model "examines worldviews as dynamic tensions between themes and counterthemes, which vary in different social contexts and change over time." Hiebert, et. al., *Understanding Folk Religion*, p. 45 n. 2.

and other worlds (heaven, hell), of the seen (empirical) and the unseen (transempirical).¹¹

3. Chinese Belief System

For the Chinese belief system, the three key worldview themes (following Opler's theory and Tan's study) are cosmology, the pantheon of infinite living beings, and humans.¹² The Chinese believe the universe is permeated with the cosmic breath or life force called Chi, indicated in a bi-polar manner as Yin and Yang. Everything comes from the interplay of these two forces. Humans are but a feeble part of this cosmos, and as such, must live in harmony with the cosmological process.¹³

There are an infinite numbers of gods, deities, spirits, and ancestors that make up the vast pantheon of the Chinese formal and folk religions.¹⁴ Tan identifies the non-human beings known by Metro Manila Chinese Filipinos (listed below).¹⁵ Since Chinese Filipinos can also accommodate the Filipino belief system, the pantheons are listed alongside Tan's list in bold print.¹⁶

¹¹ Hiebert, et. al., *Understanding Folk Religion*, p. 47.

¹² Tan, "The Cosmos, Humans, and Gods," p. 36.

¹³ The eight trigrams of broken and unbroken lines stand for all possible patterns of cosmic change which are linked to human affairs. Geomancy is used to seek harmony between humans and the processes of the Chi and Yin/Yang.

¹⁴ F. Landa Jocano, *Folk Christianity: A Preliminary Study of Conversion and Patterning of Christian Experiences in the Philippines* (Quezon City: Trinity Research Institute, Trinity College of Quezon City, 1981) gives an in-depth study of folk Christianity in the Philippines, describing how one religious system can be incorporated into one's social and cultural ways, modifying and accommodating where necessary. Hiebert, et. al., *Understanding Folk Religion*, pp. 73-79 distinguish between formal religion (which offers ultimate truths about the origin, purpose and destiny of the universe/society/self) and folk religion (which can be of two types: the small, kin-based, particularistic type which has its own gods and ancestors and deals with everyday questions in life, and the large, specialized type which mixes elements of animism with little traditions of formal religions.)

¹⁵ See charts and detailed explanations in Tan, "The Cosmos, Humans, and Gods," pp. 60-87.

¹⁶ The *Zong-Fu* Temple in the Chinese Cemetery in Manila has the image of the god of the underworld (Di Chang Wang Puo Xa) in the middle, the image of

3.1 Buddhist Beings

- Enlightened: Sakyamuni Buddha (釋迦牟尼菩薩), Bodhisattvas (菩提薩埵), Kuan Yin (觀音) = Ma-Tzu (馬祖) = Virgin Mary,¹⁷ Lo-hans or Arhats (阿羅漢);
- Unenlightened/reincarnated good beings: Ian Kak, Shen (神), Humans, Asuras (阿述拉);
- Unenlightened/reincarnated bad beings: hungry ghosts, demons, beasts and animals

3.2 Taoist Beings

- Highest beings: Jade Emperor/Yu Huang (玉皇), Kuan Yin (觀音), Sam Po (三保), Xianshi (先師), Sanqing (三清), Sanzunfo (三尊佛);
- Heavenly beings/saints: Yu Huang San Tai Chieh (玉皇三太子), Iao Gi Bio, Eight Lucky Saints (八仙);
- Lower world beings: Hu Lin Ma (夫人媽), Tai Tien (太天)

3.2 Folk Gods

- Supreme gods: Thi Kong (天公, god in heaven), Christian God, Shang-ti (上帝), Tien Chu (天主); Bathalang Maykapal (God the Maker)
- Lesser gods: Tu Ti Kong (土地公, god of earth/soil), Teh Khi Chu (地基主, god of foundation), god of blessing, longevity, male sons, and wealth; diwata
- God of hell: Pao Kong (包公)

the Taoist historical figure (equivalent to the keeper of the key) to the left, the figure of Buddha, to the right and the image of the crucified Christ at the back, and the manifestations of Virgin Mary on the extreme left and extreme right. See Teresita Ang See and Go Bon Juan, "Religious Syncretism among the Chinese in the Philippines," in *Chinese in the Philippines: Problems and Perspectives, vol. 1*, ed. Teresita Ang (Manila, Kaisa Para Sa Kaunlaran, 1997), pp. 60-75.

¹⁷ In Batangas, for example, there is a Chinese temple called Temple for the Goddess Matzu (variant spelling) but inside the church is the Virgin of Caysasay. She is being worshiped as the Chinese goddess Ma-Tzu at the same time. See & Go, "Religious Syncretism among the Chinese," p. 63.

3.4 Shen (good spirits)

- Spirits of Tu Ti Kong (土地公), Yu Huang (玉皇), San Tai Chieh (三太子), Pao Kong (包公), Santo Niño;
- Deified humans: Pao Kong (包公);
- Red dwarfs;
- Gold dwarfs

3.5 Kuei (鬼, bad spirits): black dwarfs, white dwarfs, taong lupa

3.6 Humans/ancestors: roaming and full-status; anito (souls of ancestors)

Hiebert's model combines both the horizontal (organic and mechanical analogies) and vertical dimensions, producing a grid of six sectors. His chart for folk Chinese belief systems appears as follows:

FOLK CHINESE BELIEF SYSTEMS	
ORGANIC	MECHANICAL
Jade emperor (Tien) 天 Gods and goddesses	Ming (命運) Yin and Yang (陰陽) Other worlds
Earth gods Sages Mythological figures Spirits and ghosts Ancestors Animal spirits (totem)	This world Five elements Magic Feng Shui (風水) Divination Palmistry Luck
People Animals and plants	Acupuncture Matter

Hiebert and others point out that “boundaries between the categories are often fuzzy” and the “organic and mechanical analogies form a horizontal continuum with many shades between the pole.”¹⁸ Applying this model to the Philippine context, the Chinese Filipino belief system would look like this:

¹⁸ Hiebert, et. al., *Understanding Folk Religion*, p. 50.

FOLK CHINESE FILIPINO BELIEF SYSTEMS	
ORGANIC	MECHANICAL
God the Father, Jesus, Tien Chu (天主), Gods and goddesses (Buddhist/Taoist gods, Kuan Yin [觀音]/Ma-Tzu [馬祖]/Virgin Mary), Angels, Satan, devils	Ming/Fate (命運) and fortune Yin and Yang (陰陽) Other worlds
Earth gods, dwendes (Buddhist/Taoist), Sages/Saints, Mythological figures (Capri, agta), Spirits and ghosts, Ancestors, Animal spirits (totem)	This world Priests/pastors/faith healers/feng shui masters Five elements, Magic, Feng Shui (風水), Divination Palmistry/horoscope, Good luck charms/anting-anting, tawas, kulam
People Animals and plants	Chinese medicine/doctors manananggal, mangkukulam, Matter

The Chinese believe that there is one universal spirit whose manifestations (hua shen, 化身) include all the religious figures on earth (Sakyamuni, Mohammed, Jesus Christ, etc.) Following this principle the Chinese Filipino believes that this spirit is “benevolent and effective, that it performs miracles and brings good fortune.”¹⁹

To the pragmatic and syncretistic Chinese in the Philippines, this is what matters the most: the meaning of life and death, the good life and security, knowing the future in order to live well and avoid misfortunes, and dealing with morality and evil.²⁰ It is also important that every day, he must maintain harmony between the dominant culture (thus embracing Catholic/Protestant beliefs) and the minority culture (his Buddhist, Taoist, or Confucianist roots); he must also relate to the larger society as well as to his own community. Practicing all religions facilitates his acceptance within the one group and maintains his identification with the other group. It also helps him find solutions to real life problems and situations. “Whatever will work is what he will believe in.”²¹ Because of this pragmatic approach, God is distant while

¹⁹ See & Go, “Religious Syncretism among the Chinese in the Philippines,” p. 74.

²⁰ Hiebert, et. al., *Understanding Folk Religion*, pp. 77-79.

²¹ Palugod, *The Chinese in the Philippines*, p. 30.

the Sto. Niño and Mary are more approachable. Relationships with human ancestors and the spirit beings of this world are also more central to his existence. He sees everyone and everything as interconnected. Fear and the need for security also drive him to employ all means (prayer, rituals, feng shui, divination, magic, charms, etc.) to ward off evil and bad luck.

Before making any response from the Bible or from Christian theology one must realize other factors in the religious consciousness of the Chinese Filipino. First, he lives in a culture that is very receptive to any religion-oriented power. Secondly, the prevalent religious consciousness is one where sin is not thought of so much as offense against God's holy perfection but as missing the target or making a mistake; hence "one may have erred, but not sinned; one may be sorry but is not guilty; one may have lost face, or caused others to lose theirs, which is maladroit and hopefully negotiable."²² A third aspect is the pluralistic environment of the Philippine society which puts God on a pedestal alongside other gods believed to be equally powerful. Hence, doing theology among the Chinese Filipino community necessitates an understanding of the Christian worldview as a whole and re-orientation of some emphases or themes in its beliefs and practices.

4. Christian/Biblical Response

4.1 Christian Worldview

James W. Sire gives eight basic principles for a Christian worldview, with my additional emphases in parenthesis:²³

- 1) God is infinite and personal (Triune), transcendent and immanent, omniscient, sovereign and good;
- 2) God created the cosmos *ex nihilo* to operate with a uniformity of cause and effect in an open system;

²² This is a description of the Filipino religious consciousness given by Melba Padilla Maggay, *Filipino Religious Consciousness: Some Implications to Missions* (Diliman, Quezon City: Institute for Studies in Asian Church and Culture, 1999), pp. 24-27, but I find this to be true also of the Chinese Filipino.

²³ James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door* (Leicester: IVP, 1977), pp. 26-42. See also David Burnett, *Unearthly Powers: A Christian Perspective on Primal and Fold Religion* (Eastbourne: MARC, 1988), pp. 245-46.

- 3) Man is created in the image and likeness of God and thus possesses personality, self-transcendence, intelligence, morality, gregariousness and creativity.
- 4) God can and does communicate with man (through Christ and the Bible);
- 5) Man was created good, but through the Fall the image of God became defaced, though not so ruined as to not be capable of restoration; through the work of Christ God redeemed man and began the process of restoring man to goodness (and righteousness), though any given man may choose to reject that redemption.
- 6) For man death is either the gate to life with God and his people or the gate to eternal separation from the only thing that will ultimately fulfill man’s aspirations.
- 7) Ethics is transcendent and is based on the character of God as good (holy and loving – Sire’s clarification);
- 8) History is linear, a meaningful sequence of events leading to the fulfillment of God’s purposes for man.

4.2 The Trinity

The Chinese Filipino must be made aware of the fact that the Triune God is the Creator²⁴ (thus He is distinguished from creation) and Lord²⁵ (the only One in control) of the natural world.²⁶ That man is created, not dominated by beings and powers beyond his control and that man can live meaningfully in and cultivate this world in personal relationship with the Creator. Jesus Christ is not the miracle-working little boy or the

²⁴ Buddhists do not believe in creation but in “yuan” as the source of everything. Some folk Buddhists have legendary creation accounts so Christians must present the biblical account of creation forcefully and convince them that God is the source of all life and the universe. Scripture references include Gen 1:1, Isa 40: 12, 21-23.

²⁵ God created and sustains the world by His provision and will. This must be presented clearly from the history of God leading the Israelite nation and individuals throughout the Old and New Testament.

²⁶ The emphasis should be on Old Testament passages like Psalm 80 and 89. See Gailyn van Rheenan, *Communicating Christ among Folk Religionists* [book-on-line] (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991, accessed 24 January 2004) available from <http://www.missiology.org/folkreligion>; Internet. The book version entitled *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1991) is also available.

forever-suffering crucified Savior.²⁷ He is the incarnated Son of God who lived among men, grew from boyhood to adulthood, established the kingdom of God, healed the sick, cast out demons, suffered on the cross, defeated Satan, overcame death, and now reigns as the resurrected Lord of Lords.²⁸ People of the East believe that “only three feet away from them a god really exists there” (頭頂三尺有神明). They need to be taught about the person and work of the Holy Spirit.²⁹

There is a great need to de-emphasize the causal role of God as the giver of wealth, health and material blessings and to fully emphasize Christ’s injunction to “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness” (Mat 6:33), i.e., live according to His will and commit to His standard and purposes for each of our lives.

4.3 The Spirits and Human Intercessors

The Bible does reveal a world of good (angels/messengers of God) and evil spirits (Satan and his demons)³⁰ but not ancestors turned good/evil spirits. Christ is above these spirit beings and has vanquished Satan and his minions; there is no need to fear their power for the Holy Spirit who is in us is greater than these hordes of evil (1 John 4:1-4).

To counter the popular beliefs and practices of Filipinos in venerating and communicating with the dead,³¹ and the Chinese practice

²⁷ See further Benigno P. Beltran, *The Christology of the Inarticulate: An Inquiry into the Filipino Understanding of Jesus the Christ* (Manila: Divine Word Publications, 1987).

²⁸ Buddhists believe in reincarnation and have stories about men becoming gods, but they must be brought to realize that history is linear so reincarnation is unnatural but incarnation is a historical event unique to Christ alone, with manifold evidences from biblical and non-biblical sources. See also Donald Leroy Stults, *Developing an Asian Evangelical Theology* (Mandaluyong City, Philippines: OMF Literature, 1989) and David Hock Tey, *Chinese Culture and the Bible* (Singapore: Here’s Life Books, 1988).

²⁹ Chow Lien-Hwa, “Towards Evangelical Theology in Buddhist Culture,” in *The Bible and Theology in Asian Contexts: An Evangelical Perspective on Asian Theology*, ed. Bong Rin Ro and Ruth Eshenaur (Taiwan: Asia Theological Association, 1984), pp. 318-21.

³⁰ Scripture references include: Luke 22:53; Eph 6:12; Col 1:16, 2:9-15; I Pet 3:22.

³¹ Leonardo N. Mercado, *Elements of Filipino Theology* (Tacloban City, Philippines: Divine Word University Press, 1975), especially chapters 2 and 3, tries to present his alternatives to Filipino folk Christianity. I do not agree with

of filial piety or ancestor worship, as well as the supra veneration of the Virgin Mary, we must stress the unique, exclusive and sufficient mediation of Christ (John 1:18; 1 Tim 2:1-6). The angels, departed Christian ancestors, Mary and the apostles, are not lesser mediators but merely servants of God whose holy lives should be emulated. We also need to teach about the work of the Holy Spirit and the Bible as the sole authoritative guide for living and worship.

4.4 Humans, Life and Salvation

The belief about recompense through good work can be turned around to substantiate the reality of man's sinfulness and need for salvation. Human efforts to control life also reflect self-centeredness and a magical mentality which the gospel rejects. The central message should be God and what He does. Humans must submit to God and live by faith in His plan and in His power (Isa 8:19-22; Jer 27:9-10; Gal 5:19-20; Rev 21:8). The Chinese Filipino also needs to realize God's kingdom is found whenever God's people are obedient to Him; its fullness will come only upon Christ's return (Rev 12:10). Until then Christians and non-Christians live in a world where sin and temptation, disease, degeneration and death abound; only when they accept Christ's salvation will they have eternal life and security from eternal damnation. Death must be explained as a transition from this life to the next. The theology of power must be seen in Christians and the church, not through sensational signs and wonders, but through transformed lives, and in Christ-like confrontation of demonic/systemic/ personal evil. Such power must always be "rooted in love, not in pride; redemption, not revenge; concern for others, not the self."³² As Benigno so aptly said, "The Incarnation of the Logos is the summit and foundation of God's self-giving."³³ Chinese Filipinos must learn to focus more on the Almighty God and less on puny man and his needs.

his views on lesser mediators. His doctrines on God and Christ are also weakly presented.

³² Hiebert, et. al., *Understanding Folk Religion*, p. 374.

³³ Beltran, *The Christology of the Inarticulate*, p. 234. This, however, is just the teleological and not the ontological aspect of Christ's incarnation.

5. Conclusion

The Chinese Filipino is a naturally religious and other-worldly conscious being. Living in the Philippines, he/she has also come into contact with and now imbibes a Roman Catholic or Evangelical belief system. These are all plus factors directing him/her toward a religious outlook and value system. Yet, whether non-Christian, Roman Catholic or Evangelical, he/she needs to disentangle all the unbiblical, sometimes even anti-Christian worldviews that are vestiges of non-Christian religions if he/she really desires to be an authentic and effective Evangelical Christian or Roman Catholic. Chap Chay Lo Mi is a delicious dish, but when it comes to faith, theological thinking and righteous living, one cannot afford to have a “Chap Chay Lo Mi” mentality or spirituality. For as Paul admonished in 1 Cor. 2:16, “we have the mind of Christ.” Furthermore, Harry Blamires said: “The Christian mind is the prerequisite of Christian thinking. And Christian thinking is the prerequisite of Christian action.”³⁴ Only if we think rightly (biblically) can we live righteously (as living testimonies of Christ).

³⁴ Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1963), p. 43.