

THE GOSPEL HITS HOME IN A HAKKA VILLAGE: THE CASE OF O-MEI CONGREGATION

Thomas Yu

In the historical encounter between Christianity and Confucianism the thorniest issue in bring the Gospel home to the Chinese had been the question of ancestral worship. According to the Confucian precepts, the chief duty of the filial son was to keep the family line unbroken and the incense burning to ancestors unceasing【祖先香火不斷】. When Matteo Ricci came to China in Ming dynasty he saw the Chinese reverence of their ancestors to be a social custom, rather than a religious rite. Later, when Ricci's opponents accused his position as a concession to idolatrous practice, and consequently secured the papal order to ban the Chinese Christians from engaging in ancestral worship, it angered the Emperor Kang-his of the Ch'ing dynasty who was sympathetic toward Christianity, and decreed to ban all missionary activities in China. Ever since this tragic event Christianity has been stigmatized as a religion that demanded its followers to deny their ancestors. And this stigma became and still is the biggest obstacle for the Chinese to open themselves to the Christian Gospel.

Among the population of 23 millions in Taiwan, Protestants and Catholics represents little less than 4%. Out of 23 millions there are 3 millions Hakkinese. The recent statistics shows that there is 38% of Christians among the aboriginal population, 6% among the Mandarin-speaking, 0.85 % among the Taiwanese-speaking; whereas only 0.3% among the Hakkinese are the least evangelized. The main reason is that the Hakkinese are the most close-knit ethnic group who are most conscious of and adhere to their tradition in which ancestral worship constitutes its core.

O-Mei Village has a population of about 7,000. It is a typical and predominantly Hakka community. There was only one church there which was Catholic located at the entrance of the village. However, in the past the villagers saw that church and its activities as something alien to their tradition and way of life. Because of the villages' persistent indifference and resistance to its work, that church did not make any headway and was eventually closed down.

In 1983 the Chinese Grassroots Mission, together with the six Hakka congregations in the east district of Hsinchu, saw the need of evangelization in the rural Hakka communities, and sent Pastor and Mrs. Fan Pin-tien to begin their work in O-Mei. Pastor Fan felt the closed down catholic church building there to be a good place for the start of a visionary ministry. Later, he rented the whole compound for

one NT dollar per year.

Pastor Fan and his wife are very dedicated Hakkanese couple who are passionate in bringing the Gospel to their fellow compatriots. They are very thoughtful and talented. Their strategy for reaching and shepherding those people in the community is as follows:

1. Because there are a larger number of villagers who are elders, they make the first task of their ministry to serve them by regular visitations, providing them the necessary transportation for the medical attention, and meeting pastoral care needs.
2. While retaining the original altar and its mosaic behind it, pastor Fan placed a traditional Chinese altar table in the backcorner of the hall. Above it he put the short essay, “The Treasury of Life”【生命之寶】 written by the Emperor Kang-hsi, in the center. On top of the essay a horizontal votive tablet with these words, 天父是萬物本源【Heavenly Father is the origin of all things.】, and on the two sides a vertical inscriptive couplets. In front of the altar table there is another table for fellowship, catechical instruction, and serving food.
3. Pastor Fan makes use of the existent The Hakka Three-word Gospel Classic【客語福音三字經】 for catechical instruction, and published recently a new book on The Hakka Three-word Gospel Classic and Martin Luther’s Small Catechism.
4. He took a good number of familiar Hakka and Taiwanese folk tunes and put essential Christian message into them, and taught the congregation to sign them. Thus these hymns become a very dynamic means for communicating and memorizing the message of the Gospel.
5. Pastor Fan and his research team also started a project of contextualizing Christian rites such as the order of funeral service, and the liturgy of ancestral remembrance. He had not only published a handbook for these rites, but also began to use them in the Hakka congregations which welcome such project.
6. In 1994 a Hakkanese Bible of the New testaments with Psalms was published. That Bible puts the Romanized and literary Hakkanese texts in parallel. The congregation in O-Mei uses the new Hakkanese Bible.

Pastor Fan’s ministry in O-Mei has been quite successful. He and his wife are very respected and loved by the community. And his project of contextualizing the Gospel has been effective in making the new and potential converts feel very much at home about the Christian gospel and the way O-Mei Christians worship God and pay respect to ancestors.

O-Mei project of contextualization represents a concrete practice of the Christian-Confucian dialogue. Last year the O-Mei Congregation started a new evangelistic station in neighbouring San Wan Village where there was no church before. So far this creative project appears to be effective in reaching the Hakkanese with the Christian Gospel. However, it is still in the experimental stage which requires further evaluation.