

THE ANIMISTIC ASPECTS IN THE CHINESE
ZHONG YUAN FESTIVAL

by Daniel Liu

Introduction

Animistic phenomena exist everywhere in this world; animism does not merely dominate the belief in tribal societies, it also hides behind major religions around the world during their indigenous process.¹ Actually, animism has even become an influential and prominent component in many cultures. The *Zhong Yuan* Festival is considered one of the most important festivals to the Chinese people. Regarding the characteristics of animism and the significance in the *Zhong Yuan* Festival, this paper will attempt to demonstrate the animistic aspects in this Chinese traditional festival; the reasons for “why Chinese people do what they do in the *Zhong Yuan* Festival” will be illuminated. In addition, a Pentecostal response to the specific animistic aspects in this Chinese *Zhong Yuan* Festival will also be formulated in this paper.

The Definition of Animism and Its Characteristics

In order to perceive and demonstrate the animistic aspects of the Chinese *Zhong Yuan* Festival precisely and accurately, a definition of animism and its characteristics are necessary. The term animism started to be used in the latter part of the nineteenth century.² Different scholars have diverse definitions. Gailyn Van Rheenens defines animism as “the belief that personal spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces have power over human affairs and, consequently, that human beings must discover what beings and forces are influencing them in order to determine future action and, frequently, to manipulate their power.”³ Rheenens perceives animism as a belief system in which an

¹Gailyn Van Rheenens, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 1991), 11.

²*Ibid.*, 19.

³Van Rheenens, 20.

interaction exists between human beings and supernatural power: the power seems to be able to control human affairs and humans try to seek and manipulate the power.⁴

Philip M. Steyne states that there are four foundational beliefs in animism, which are holism, spiritualism, power, and community.⁵ A broader scope of animistic beliefs is formulated by Dave Johnson; he addresses seven tenets in animistic belief. These seven tenets are provided in this paper in order to analyze the specific animistic practice in the Chinese *Zhong Yuan* Festival. They are:

1. Animism is holistic.
2. Animism is spiritual.
3. Animism is amoral.
4. Animism is a religion of power.
5. Animism is socially oriented.
6. Animism is pervasive and attractive.
7. Animism tends to breed nominalism.⁶

These seven tenets are also considered as the characteristics of animistic belief in this paper. Even though animism has these prominent characteristics, at a certain time in the last century some missiologists began to believe that animism would disappear; “they presumed that participants of animistic rites would forsake these rites to become participants of world religion.”⁷ However, the fact is that “animism has not died, in many cases it has extended itself.”⁸ Today, animism continuously influences this world at four levels: 1) Level one—animism dominates religion; 2) Level two—animism has a significant effect on religion (such as folk Catholicism and Folk Islam); 3) Level three—religious practice is claimed to be orthodox, but it is not pure; animism still provides answers; 4) Level four—religious practice is orthodox and has very little animistic influence.⁹ Are there any animistic aspects in the Chinese *Zhong Yuan* Festival? If there are, to which level do these aspects belong? In this paper, Rheenen’s definition of animism and Johnson’s seven tenets will be used to analyze and prove whether there are animistic aspects in the Chinese *Zhong Yuan* Festival.

⁴Ibid., 20-21.

⁵Philip M. Steyne, *Gods of Power: A Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Animists* (Columbia, South Carolina: Impact International Foundation, 1996), 58-63.

⁶Dave Johnson, “Lecture #3: The Seven Tenets of Animism.” Lecture at Asia Pacific Theological Seminary (Baguio, Philippines, October 9, 2014).

⁷Van Rheenen, 23.

⁸Van Rheenen, 24.

⁹Steyne, 46-47.

The Ritual in the Chinese *Zhong Yuan* Festival

China has a 5000 year long history; many traditions and customs have remained from generation to generation. Today, these traditions and customs still influence Chinese people's lives; whether they live in China mainland, Hong Kong, Taiwan or Singapore. The majority of Chinese people celebrate eight ancient major festivals, according to the Chinese lunar calendar.¹⁰ The *Zhong Yuan* Festival is one of these eight major festivals. In this paper, the term *Chinese people* specifically refers to the major population of Han people in China mainland and overseas. The term *ancestor* mostly represents the soul or the spirit of the ancestor whose name is still in the family genealogy or is lost.

The *Zhong Yuan* Festival is celebrated on the fifteenth day of the seventh Chinese lunar month, usually in late August, according to the regular calendar.¹¹ There are twenty-four time periods all year round on account of the lunar calendar; *Zhong Yuan* is the thirteenth time period in a Chinese lunar year. In some areas of China and Singapore, the *Zhong Yuan* Festival is celebrated for thirty days through the whole seventh month.¹² However, the most important day is still the fifteenth day in the seventh month. During this festival, Chinese practitioners celebrate with specific activities and ceremonies. In order to gather some more details and updated information about the *Zhong Yuan* Festival, this author has interviewed a practitioner in mainland China who is aware of the whole ritual of this festival. In addition, this author also experienced the *Zhong Yuan* Festival in his childhood and teenage years. The following information about the practice in the *Zhong Yuan* Festival is mainly from both the interviewee and this author.¹³

On the fourteenth day of the seventh month, people start to prepare good food, such as chicken, pork and fish, to receive their ancestors' souls, because people believe that on this day their ancestors will come back to take an offering from the living generation. The weather on that day becomes cool, compared with the days before the fourteenth day. People believe this is a sign of their ancestors' coming back because the festival is celebrated in early autumn when the weather is still hot. Of course, the souls of the ancestors will stay a day and a night with the living generation. A short ceremony is performed before each meal on

¹⁰*Chinese Customs and Festivals in Singapore* (Singapore: Singapore Federation of Chinese Clan Association, 1989), 15.

¹¹Henry Schuman, *Chinese Festivals* (New York: Wolfram Eberhard, 1952), 129.

¹²*Chinese Customs and Festivals in Singapore*, 62.

¹³Liu Jing Yang. Interview by Daniel Liu. Phone interview. From APTS campus to Mainland China, November 13, 2014.

the fourteenth day and fifteenth day. All the good food is placed in bowls or plates on the table and people pray and appeal to the ancestors to sit down and eat first. At this time no one else is allowed to touch the table. By this means, people show respect and honor to their ancestors. Afterward, family members will start to eat. The whole family believes they are living with their invisible ancestors together in their house; therefore, they are very careful and sensitive about their words and behaviors during these two days, lest they offend their ancestors and lose blessings from them. People also prepare extra food for the homeless souls so that these homeless and hungry souls may not trouble their family in the future. (Translation mine)¹⁴

On the fifteenth day, the ancestors will return to Hades which is called *Yin Jian* in Chinese. The night time, especially after supper, is considered as the most prominent moment in the *Zhong Yuan* Festival.

When night comes, people start to give offerings or gifts to their ancestors to take back to *Yin Jian*. In the villages and townships, usually people use plaster to make circles on the ground in which gifts and offerings are distinguished for different ancestors, so that each ancestor will not mistake the other's gifts or offerings. In order to prevent the homeless souls from taking the gifts or offerings from their ancestor's share or disturb the ritual, people also make extra circles and prepare some extra gifts or offerings for the homeless souls. Today the Chinese people have new offerings and gifts. Together with the traditional, people offer modern gifts. The traditional offerings are paper money, paper silver and paper gold. The paper money is made of traditional grass paper with the previous money's design on it. Paper silver is shaped into Chinese treasure with silver colored paper and paper gold is made with golden colored paper. The idea behind the traditional offerings or gifts is that the living generation tries to make sure their ancestors have enough money to use in *Yin Jian*.

Because of their experience of the fast economic development in mainland China, people wish that their ancestors could enjoy the same modern rich material life in *Yin Jian*. Thus, people make all kinds of models of cars, televisions, refrigerators and even high-rises, which mostly are made of paper. Regarding modern society's perspective of money transfer, people also specifically make a type of *Yin* money, which is considered to be authorized from the *Yin Bank* by the Emperor of *Yin Jian*, *Yan Wang*, who is in charge of all the souls and devils in *Yin Jian*. On this *Yin* money, people can write and issue them to specific ancestors and they trust that the ancestors can receive the

¹⁴*Chinese Customs and Festivals in Singapore*, 64.

amount according to the names on the *Yin* money. This type of money is almost like a check in modern society.

When all gifts and offerings are dedicated to the different ancestors, the next step is to burn the gifts and offerings so that the ancestors can take them away and use them in *Yin Jian*. While burning all the gifts and offerings, practitioners from families will pray and appeal to the ancestors to bless the family wealth, health and prosperity, which include their businesses, promotions, babies' births, children's education, physical health, and much more. They will eagerly ask ancestors to protect family members from all evils and disasters so that they can live a peaceful and harmonious life. Of course, they also wish their ancestors can have a happy and enjoyable life in *Yin Jian*, too. With the fire burning, family members say farewell to their ancestors. Today, some rich families even use fireworks or firecrackers to send their ancestors back towards the end of the ritual. When people return home, they expect a year of prosperity and peace to come as they requested from their ancestors.

In cities, it is not easy or convenient for residents to burn the modern and traditional gifts or offerings in the *Zhong Yuan* Festival. Some may simplify the ritual and practice it in their apartments or houses. However, some still try to burn some gifts or offerings along the streets. The morning following the fifteenth day, people can see the marks on the sidewalk, which were left by the burning from the night before. The Communist government in mainland China tries to restrain residents in big cities from burning things in the *Zhong Yuan* Festival because of the pollution. But the Singapore government respects the tradition of *Zhong Yuan*; in a proper way, the government specifically opens some public spaces and provides some iron containers to let people perform the ritual. More than that, people gather together to have ceremonies and parades along the streets.¹⁵ In South China, there is another way to send their ancestors back; on the fifteenth night people place paper-made lantern boats in the rivers to take the ancestors home. The lantern boats "drift down the river, a beautiful sight in the early autumn night, until they sink, one by one."¹⁶

¹⁵*Chinese Customs and Festivals in Singapore*, 66.

¹⁶Schuman, 133.

Are There Animistic Aspects in the *Zhong Yuan* Festival?

During the *Zhong Yuan* Festival Chinese people believe there is spiritual power from their ancestors and this power can affect human affairs. They practice the ritual to gain and use the power. This fits Van Rheenen's definition of animism. The practice of the ritual in the *Zhong Yuan* Festival also meets the seven tenets (characteristics) of animistic belief:

- 1) Animism is holistic. The *Zhong Yuan* Festival encompasses the Chinese people, including both the deceased and living generations, the visible world and the invisible, *Yin Jian*, the filial spirit and fearful feelings, etc. This is totally holistic.
- 2) Animism is spiritual. The practice of the ritual completely involves the spiritual world; the two realms of man and ancestors obviously interact with each other. People encounter both the spirits of their ancestors and homeless spirits. Therefore, the *Zhong Yuan* Festival is also called the Ghost Festival.
- 3) Animism is a religion of power. Chinese people zealously seek supernatural power—ancestors' protection and blessings. They desire to earn the power to influence their life.
- 4) Animism is socially oriented. The *Zhong Yuan* Festival is one of the eight major Chinese festivals; its celebration has become one of the most important Chinese identities. People from villages to cities, from Mainland to overseas, participate in this festival. Therefore, the ritual of the *Zhong Yuan* festival is truly socially oriented.
- 5) Animism is amoral. People are well aware of their ancestors' moral standards: enough offerings or gifts can bribe their ancestors, to protect the living family members; otherwise, ancestors will be offended and will not protect or bless the family members.

Animism tends to breed nominalism. Even though people show some respect to their ancestors in the festival, their purpose of investment in the ritual is to get more blessings and protection from their ancestors, not to sincerely honor them. Furthermore, people do not want to treat the homeless souls equally with their ancestor's souls, in this way again revealing their real lack of honor toward the ancestors. This vividly and obviously proves that people's motivation and purpose in the ritual reveals nominalism.

- 6) Animism is pervasive and attractive. Because the practice of the ritual is so nominalistic and utilitarian, each year the *Zhong Yuan* Festival attracts numerous Chinese people. Though communism and atheism greatly influence people in China's mainland, the belief of ancestors and practice in the *Zhong Yuan* Festival is resuscitating.

The rituals and Chinese peoples' behavior in the *Zhong Yuan* Festival are indicative of all the seven characteristics of animism. Therefore, a conclusion can be drawn that animistic aspects are proven to truly exist in this festival. Meanwhile, all the rituals during the *Zhong Yuan* Festival are almost completely related to animism. The animistic aspects in this festival are categorized to the animistic first level of influence (animism dominates religion).

Now the next step is to dig out the reason why Chinese people practice such prominent animistic aspects in this festival before a biblical perspective is provided to respond the animistic aspects.

A Worldview Perspective to the Animistic Aspect in the *Zhong Yuan* Festival

What is Culture and Worldview?

Since the *Zhong Yuan* Festival is considered as a culture, maybe an analysis of culture itself could respond and interpret the animistic aspects in *Zhong Yuan* Festival. This paper attempts to use a worldview perspective to illuminate the reason that why Chinese people participate the animistic ritual in *Zhong Yuan* Festival.

Culture is the synthesis of human civilization, which takes into account visible and invisible systems of religion, economy, tradition, politics, food, philosophy, history and many other diverse things. David J. Hesselgrave addresses one of the characteristics that "culture is an integrated whole, all the parts of which function in such a way to affect each other and contribute to the totality."¹⁷ Hesselgrave's theme can be interpreted as: 1) there are different parts in a cultural entirety; 2) these parts affect each other and contribute to the totality. Regarding Hesselgrave's theme, a few questions could be brought up: how many parts are in a cultural entirety, what are they, and which part is most crucial? G. Linwood Barney's model of culture can wonderfully answer these questions. Barney's model of culture is:

¹⁷David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 100.

- 1) People's behaviors—what people do in their life?
- 2) Institutions—Annual religious rites and festivals.
- 3) Values— a) Religious: what religion do people follow, including those that follow none at all; b) Social (guilt/shame/honor based cultures).
- 4) Worldviews—Worldview drives culture and, therefore, is its most important aspect.¹⁸

In regard to Barney's model, an entirety of culture consists of four components: people's behaviors, institutions, values and worldviews. Worldview is the most crucial aspect in the entirety. Barney's four patterns of culture are just like four layers of an onion; studying these four patterns in order is just like peeling an onion's layers to the core.¹⁹

These four patterns of culture can lead people to perceive culture from the easily recognizable to the deep and complex.²⁰ Barney's model clearly indicates that only when people reach the worldview level, the core level of culture, can they answer the questions which relate to the other three patterns, because worldview drives culture.²¹

Then what is worldview? Charles H. Kraft has a close perception of culture as Barney's explanation does and he states that worldview is a deep level of culture that links to "largely unconscious and invisible assumptions;" the surface level of culture is people's behavior patterns.²² Kraft illustrates: ". . . if we observe people wearing clothes, we would guess that this surface-level custom relates to some deep-level assumption that wearing clothing is proper, right, even moral."²³ Hesselgrave defines a worldview as "the way people to see or perceive the world, the way they 'know' it to be."²⁴ Following Kraft's and

¹⁸Dave Johnson, "Lecture #2." Lecture at Asia Pacific Theological Seminary (Baguio, Philippines, October 2, 2014). Adapted from G. Linwood Barney, "The Supracultural and The Cultural in The Gospel and Frontier Peoples: A Report of A Consultation December 1972. ed. R. Pierce Beaver, 48-55 (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library), 49-50.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Dave Johnson, "Lecture #2." Lecture at Asia Pacific Theological Seminary (Baguio, Philippines, October 2, 2014). Adapted from G. Linwood Barney, "The Supracultural and The Cultural in The Gospel and Frontier Peoples: A Report of A Consultation December 1972. ed. R. Pierce Beaver, 48-55 (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library), 49-50.

²²Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity With Power* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf&Stock Publishers, 1989), 53.

²³Ibid., 53.

²⁴Hesselgrave, 197.

Hesselgrave's definitions, people can understand the function of worldview, which shapes and drives a whole entirety of culture.

How to analyze animistic aspects in a cultural activity through worldview perspective is emphasized and valued by people now. Dave Johnson stresses that "the deepest assumptions and belief about reality lie at the worldview level."²⁵ Van Rheenen specifically emphasizes the necessity and importance of using worldview perspectives to understand animism. He states that "animistic perspectives become comprehensible to a missionary only when he understands the worldview that validates and integrates cultural values and behaviors."²⁶

Therefore, since worldview functions to shape and drive a culture and people value and emphasize it for analyzing animistic aspects in cultures, the following is how to use worldview perspective to analyze the animistic aspects in the *Zhong Yuan* Festival.

Reasons for Animistic Aspects in the *Zhong Yuan* Festival

Hesselgrave characterizes different worldviews in terms of people's basic understanding of supernature, nature, man, and time.²⁷ This means that people view their world around them basically through these four elements, supernature, nature, man, and time. Thus, as long as these four elements of worldview and the relationships among them are understood, people can grasp and master a certain type of worldview in a specific culture. After understanding the worldview, naturally, people will completely and entirely get to know the other three layers of a culture.

Because of this, how to understand the animistic aspects in the *Zhong Yuan* Festival is based on understanding Chinese people's perception of the supernature, nature, man, and time. Originally, Chinese culture was based on Confucianism and Daoism; these two ideologies have been tremendously influential in Chinese society and individual lives. A common modern Chinese people's worldview is still essentially formed by Confucianism and Daoism (although not by religious Daoist belief). In regard to Confucianism and Daoism, the following are Chinese people's basic perception of supernature, nature, man and time

²⁵Dave Johnson, *Theology in Context: A Case Study In The Philippines* (Philippines, APTS Press, 2013), 45.

²⁶Van Rheenen, 33.

²⁷Hesselgrave, 202.

1. Supernature. Chinese cosmology believes that the universe was made in Tao and by Tao. (Translation mine)²⁸ Tao controls the whole universe and Tao is the essence of life and everything was made within Yin and Yang in Tao.²⁹ Yin and Yang operate as the “two great opposing forces . . . Associated with Yang are the positive elements, such as heaven, light, heat, masculinity, strength, life, etc. Yin includes the opposite elements: earth, darkness, cold, femininity, weakness, death, etc.”³⁰ However, Yin and Yang can change into each other: good to bad, and bad to good; light to darkness, and darkness to light . . . This changeable attribute of Yin and Yang has produced some specific animistic phenomenon in the *Zhong Yuan* Festival. Even though people died, they still have desires just as living human beings do. When ancestors receive gifts and offerings, they are willing to protect or bless their living family members; otherwise, they will not. This means the ancestors are amoral; they can be either good or bad according to how many gifts and offerings are made to them.

2. Nature. To Chinese people, the whole universe is structured as three realms of existence: heaven, earth and hell. “Heaven, which is ruled by an Emperor with numerous *shen* [gods] to assist him, belongs to Yang. Hell, which is the world of devils and dead souls ruled by an Emperor of Hades, is considered Yin. The earth contains both Yin and Yang.”³¹ Chinese people believe when they die, their soul or spirit will leave their flesh, but still be alive with the same awareness as living human beings on earth. They also believe there are different *shen* in the universe and Tian (Shang Di) is the highest one who is also God of Tao. (Translation mine)³² To a Chinese, supernature is composed of a variety of deities, devils (*kui*), and spirits.³³ Souls or spirits can also exist on earth with human beings; this is the reason that in the *Zhong Yuan* Festival ancestors can come out of Yin Jian and stay with their living family members. At the same time, the evil ghosts and *kui*, and good *shen* from heaven can also stay with human beings on earth, which means good and bad can live together on earth.

Another doctrine Daoism has been advocating is to “live a good life and be at peace with the universe, one needs to be in harmony with

²⁸Kam-lun Edwin Lee, *China Today from Her Cultural Roots: A Theological Interpretation of Chinese History*. (Hong Kong: CMI Publishing Co. Ltd., 2010), 110.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 99-100.

³⁰Hesselgrave, 257.

³¹*Chinese Customs and Festivals in Singapore*, 19.

³²Elisha Wu, Rev., ed., *Five Great World Religions* (Hong Kong: The Christian Literature Service, 1981), 96.

³³Hesselgrave, 263.

Tao.”³⁴ In order to have a peaceful and harmonious life with the world, including both visible material nature and invisible spiritual world, Chinese people also want to stay harmonious with the ghosts, *kui*, and their ancestors.³⁵ They know that the evil ghosts and *kui* come up from *Yin Jian* (Hades) and would bother their daily life; therefore, they offer food and gifts to their ancestors and the ghosts and *kui* as well in the *Zhong Yuan* Festival.

3. Man. Confucianism greatly values and encourages filial piety. Honoring and respecting parents is considered as one of Five Cardinal Relationships in society. “The family unit is viewed as the key of a successful and united nation. Filial piety is viewed as the greatest of all virtues (community and family before self)”³⁶ It claims that people should serve the deceased in the same way they serve their parents while they were living. (Translation mine)³⁷ Children are required to obey and submit to parents. Due to this strong filial piety, Chinese people spend as much money as they can for the ritual during the *Zhong Yuan* Festival. Besides the *Zhong Yuan* Festival, Chinese people also engage in ancestral worship in the Spring Festival and the Tomb Festival to show their filial piety to their ancestors. They perceive that all the souls and spirits have spiritual power to overcome living people, therefore, people pray and appeal to ancestors to get blessed or protected. People perceive the interaction with spirits in almost the same way they perceive social life between living people. Thus, if people do not offer food and gifts, it is understandable that ancestors will not protect or bless them.

4. Time. While Chinese people emphasize the present time, they also tend to look back. “The spirits of the dead join the ancestors. Therefore history past is extremely important. . . . People must take advantage of the present with its opportunities for human achievement and advancement.”³⁸ This kind of punctuality precisely influences Chinese people’s feelings and emotions; they always tend to dwell in the past and focus on previous things. This occupation with the past becomes one of the reasons why Chinese people focus so much on the ancestors, but at the same time, they also want to take advantage of the present to try to get blessings and protection from ancestors in the *Zhong Yuan* Festival. Focusing on today and ignoring tomorrow is a very common philosophy for many Chinese people.

³⁴Daniel Tong, *A Biblical Approach to Chinese Traditions and Beliefs* (Singapore: Genesis Books, 2003), 20.

³⁵*Chinese Customs and Festivals in Singapore*, 17.

³⁶Tong, 12.

³⁷Wu, 107.

³⁸Hesselgrave, 264.

Regarding the analysis of these four basic elements of worldview, supernature, nature, man, and time, the reason why Chinese people participate in the rituals in the *Zhong Yuan* Festival has been demonstrated. This worldview perspective also proves the seven tenets of animism in the animistic aspects of the *Zhong Yuan* Festival. With this fundamental worldview perspective, the animistic aspects hiding behind the other three layers of the cultural onion will also clearly be defined; worldview perspective is able to interpret the *Zhong Yun* Festival's religious origin, which is the second layer of the cultural onion, according to Barney's model of culture.

A Worldview Perspective Regarding the Religious Origin of the *Zhong Yuan* Festival

The Daoist Origin of the *Zhong Yuan* Festival

Regarding Daoist belief (A clarification: the religious Daoism here is different from the ideology Daoism), it is believed that on fifteenth day of the seventh month "the god of earth visits the heavens and reports on the good and bad deeds of men. On that day the hungry ghosts are allowed to leave the gate of hell. These ghosts have to be pacified and so most Chinese families make offerings of joss and *Yin* money to the wondering ghosts."³⁹ Another story about the origin of the *Zhong Yuan* Festival in regard to Daoism is that

the gates of hell are open on the first day of the seventh lunar month. This allows the *kui* (uncared for spirits or spirits under judgment that are locked in hell) to roam the earth to eat their fill before being locked up for another year. The belief is that once the gates are open, the *kui* will come out to look for food and if no one has prepared any offerings for them, they will go into homes to help themselves. Fear[ful] of such visits, people are generally quick to make offerings to appease and ward off the hungry ghosts.⁴⁰

Regarding worldview perspective, though the date for the hungry ghosts or *kui* to come out of hell is different, one is July 1st, the other one July 15th, the significance is almost the same: 1) hungry ghosts or *kui* are from hell; 2) hungry ghosts and *kui* will disrupt people's lives if

³⁹Evelyn Lip, *Chinese Practices and Beliefs* (Torrance, California: Heian International, Inc., 2000), 26.

⁴⁰Tong, 40.

they cannot get their food or offerings; 3) people fear the hungry ghosts and *kui*; 4) there are gods in charge of the hungry ghosts and *kui*. All these elements are based on Chinese peoples' worldview. This Daoist origin of the *Zhong Yuan* Festival also shows that Chinese people believe in heaven and hell in this universe and that there are also spirits and gods on earth who are able affect people's lives.

The Buddhist Origin of the *Zhong Yuan* Festival

According to Buddhist belief, there are two similar stories about the origin of the *Zhong Yuan* Festival. These two similar stories portray a filial son with the name Mu Lian. One story goes that after Mu Lian's mother died, he

dreamt one night that she was in hell. In the dream, his mother appeared and said to him, "I am hungry; I am not being taken care of and am poorly treated." *Mu Lian* was so moved and touched by this dream that he decided to bring food down to hell to feed his mother. To do so, he had to endure many trials and difficulties in an attempt to gain favour from various gods. After much hardship, he ultimately reached hell and was "reunited" with his mother. This story is told to encourage filial piety towards parents and elders.⁴¹

The other story says that

Mu Lian was able to locate his dead mother in Hades after many trials and tribulations. When he tried to feed his starving mother, however, the food was invariably grabbed by other hungry ghosts. It was only through the intercession of Buddha, who was touched by Mu Lian's love and devotion to his mother, that the filial son finally succeeded in providing relief for his mother. To commemorate Mu Lian's filial act, Buddhists make it a practice to offer prayers to the dead on *Zhong Yuan* Festival.⁴²

Both stories vividly tell why people want to offer food or gifts to ancestors—they want their ancestors to have enough food and an enjoyable life in Yin Jian. At the same time, as the second story tells, they do not want the hungry ghosts to bother their ancestors while receiving the food and offerings. The Buddhist origin is obviously

⁴¹Tong, 41.

⁴²*Chinese Customs and Festivals in Singapore*, 65.

colored with Buddhist belief; Mu Lian's successful filial act was favored by Buddha or other gods. It is undoubtedly true that the Chinese *Zhong Yuan* Festival is a mixture of Daoism and Buddhism. However, the Chinese worldview perspective still adequately provides all the explanation for the Buddhist origin, especially why people show filial piety to ancestors.

The worldview perspective not only deeply illuminates animistic aspects, but it also shows social filial piety in the religious origin of the *Zhong Yuan* Festival. Therefore, through the Chinese worldview perspective, people can get an entire understanding of the animistic aspects in the *Zhong Yuan* Festival.

Perspectives on the Animistic Aspects in the *Zhong Yuan* Festival

Historical Controversy on Rituals in China

A historical controversy surrounding the Chinese rituals began in 1633; the closure was not seen until 1937.⁴³ This famous controversy lasted a few centuries. The core argument was about whether Chinese converts were allowed to perform Confucian rituals (the main part of Confucian rituals was ancestral worship) and how to use the right terms to address God.⁴⁴ The controversy started among Catholic missionaries, as "the Roman Catholic Society of Jesus (Jesuits) advocated the acceptability of ancestral tablets and the offering joss sticks," while the opposite group, such as "Dominicans and Franciscans did not advocate any accommodation to the Chinese culture and beliefs."⁴⁵ Meanwhile, many Protestants advocated a total rejection of the rituals because of some kind of pride and prejudice without serious study of the Chinese cultural context.⁴⁶

The essence of this controversy is about how to make Christianity indigenized in the Chinese cultural context. Either totally accepting Confucian rituals or totally denying them are both dogmatic attitudes, a result of ignoring the real context. Even though a decision was made in 1935 by the Catholics, nothing was mentioned about the spiritual issues behind Confucian rituals.⁴⁷ Animistic aspects in the Confucian rituals were completely ignored in the history of controversy of rituals.

⁴³Tong 4.

⁴⁴Huen Hoo Wing, Joseph 184. *Chinese Christianity History in Pictures* (Hong Kong: Tien Dao Publishing House, Ltd., 2011), 184. Translated from Chinese.

⁴⁵Tong 3-4.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁷George Minamiki, S.J. *The Chinese Rites Controversy: from Its Beginning to Modern Times* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985), 218-219.

In contemporary times there are still different voices on the rituals in China. One voice, Yu Ping, perceives ancestor worship is biblical, according to the fifth commandment; however, Henry Smith, says that there is no religious meaning left in the rituals, but that it is only secular customs and another voice, Daniel Hung, states people should keep the cultural filial activities but stop the ancestor worship.⁴⁸

A Pentecostal Perspective on the Animistic Aspects of the *Zhong Yuan* Festival

However, Pentecostal churches or missionaries, compared to Catholics and Evangelicals, have a different perspective with which to approach the Chinese people who are involved in the animistic aspects of the *Zhong Yuan* Festival.

First, according to a biblical worldview, Pentecostal missionaries or churches should be aware that the animistic aspects of the *Zhong Yuan* Festival are abhorrent to God because people offer sacrifices not to their ancestors, but to demons (Deuteronomy 32:17; 18:9-14). Since animistic aspects are spiritual, dealing with them becomes spiritual warfare and must depend on the power of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 6:10-18). This Pentecostal perspective is distinguished from Evangelical and Catholic perspectives. Besides power encounter, Pentecostal missionaries and churches also need to use other approaches to reach the Chinese people who are involved in the animistic rituals of the *Zhong Yuan* Festival. Johnson's "Four Encounter Paradigm for Ministering in Majority World Contexts" is inspiring and practical.⁴⁹ The significance of this pattern is that through biblical truth, power encounter and love encounter people can be converted to accept Jesus as a personal Savior or new believers can transfer their allegiance from their animistic practices to God, so that they can become committed Christians.

Second, to a new believer who used to participate in the ritual during the *Zhong Yuan* Festival, it is not easy to break the relation from the past emotionally or spiritually; it cannot be done in a day or one month; it is a process. Therefore, a healthy church needs to implement some plans to help and guide new converts to change or shift their thoughts and minds to commit to God. Regarding Christian Swartz's

⁴⁸Rheenen, 263.

⁴⁹Dave Johnson, "Lecture #12: Johnson's Four Encounter Paradigm for Ministering in Majority World Contexts." Lecture at Asia Pacific Theological Seminary (Baguio, Philippines, November, 2014).

eight characteristics of a healthy church,⁵⁰ inspiring services and small groups are especially effective for a Chinese convert who has experienced the rituals during the *Zhong Yuan* Festival. An inspiring church service can lead a believer to meet God spiritually each time. He or she can shift from feelings and emotions of ancestors to concentrate on God. Small groups fit well in the Chinese cultural context. Through Bible study, prayer meetings or fellowship, a new believer can feel accepted and establish a new social relationship instead of the old animistic relations. Leading new believers to seek God's power and presence themselves is one of the goals of discipleship.

Third, there is still a good aspect to the *Zhong Yuan* Festival. The filial piety should not be ignored when missionaries approach the Chinese people. In history, filial piety served as the cornerstone of all morality in Chinese society.⁵¹ Today, this filial piety is still valued as one of the cardinal virtues in China. Thus, Chinese people's filial feelings should be respected by missionaries or churches. Now, more and more Chinese people are open to Western Mother's Day and Father's Day. Therefore, the church can have activities to celebrate these holidays. The Chinese also have an Old Generation Day. The Church should provide special services to help new believers honor their parents and grandparents. At the same time, through the similarity of honoring and respecting parents in the Bible (Deuteronomy 5: 15) and Chinese filial piety, missionaries and churches can use the contextual approach to share the Gospel with Chinese people.

Conclusion

Animism exists in many cultures and affects people's lives deeply. So does the Chinese traditional *Zhong Yuan* Festival. The Chinese people's worldview determines their ritual practice and the implications of the *Zhong Yuan* Festival. Through different approaches and specific kinds of church involvement, a church or missionary can win more Chinese people who used to practice ancestral worship in the *Zhong Yuan* Festival. A successful Christian indigenization is based on the power of the Gospel and proper social contextualization, which is

⁵⁰Dave Johnson, "Lecture #13 and #14: The Eight Essential Characteristics to Having Healthy Churches." Lecture at Asia Pacific Theological Seminary (Baguio, Philippines, November, 2014.) Taken from Christian Swarz, *Natural Church Development* (St. Charles, IL: Church Smart Resources, 1996): 15-38.

⁵¹Minamiki, 4.

biblical and is also one part of the diversity of contemporary successful Pentecostal globalization.⁵²

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⁵²Wonsuk Ma, Veli-Matti Karkkainen, and J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, eds., *Pentecostal Mission and Global Christianity* (United Kingdom, Regnum Books International, 2014), 3.

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