



insight



Building Practical Ministry on Biblical Foundations

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— Peter Teagle

From Big Story to Biblical Worldview: Equipping students with a Bible overview
— Geoff Low

Challenging China's Indigenous Prosperity Theology
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Please address all correspondence to: insight@friendsinternational.uk

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A Word From the Editor



**Lynette
Teagle**

Originally from Singapore, Lynette joined Friends International in 2001 and serves as Head of Learning and Development. Married to Peter and based in Oxford, she is currently researching for a PhD.

“Isn’t international student ministry just about hospitality and Bible study?”

It seems hard to argue, sometimes, that our ministry is more than making friends and showing hospitality. Especially when (for good reason) our organisation is called *Friends International*, we constantly have to make the case that there is more to it than might meet the eye. Other misconceptions include the view that serving international students is “church welcome using foreign languages” and that contextualisation and cross-cultural communication are just another form of political correctness.

But international student ministry is more than just the act of putting the biblical injunction to “welcome the alien and stranger” into practice. At its heart, this ministry springs from our biblical understanding – our theology – of God as the divine initiator of relationship with Himself, of God who draws outsiders into His family through general grace, but primarily, through the specific grace demonstrated by His Son’s sacrificial death on the cross, which transcends all boundaries and barriers. We can thus have the confidence that the biblical worldview is holistic and comprehensive enough to guide and shape followers of Christ, no matter what their context or circumstances might be.

It is therefore vital that every part of international student ministry is shaped by sound biblical foundations. As our new strategy document states, one of our core

values is the centrality of the Bible as “our authority, source of teaching and model of ministry”. In this issue, we see how this is applied to:

Evangelism – Peter Teagle explains, from his developing work with Christian Unions, how effective gospel proclamation during university events weeks must follow a biblical model of knowing our audience and seeking to address the heart questions that need answering;

Equipping – Geoff Low outlines an approach, developed through the Philip Project, which helps international students move beyond reading the Gospels, to having a better understanding of the entirety of the biblical narrative;

Discipleship – based on personal ministry experience in Taiwan, the USA and the UK, Stuart Bullington demonstrates how the worldview of Chinese students can continue to be influenced by pre-existing religious beliefs and values, and highlights key aspects of biblical teaching which are vital for their healthy, ongoing growth as followers of Christ.

We hope you will find much in this issue to strengthen and encourage you in ministry.

In Christ,
Lynette





The Reason for 'i-tracks':

A rationale for international student gospel events, talks and speakers



Peter Teagle

Peter is Centre Leader for Friends International Oxford. He also preaches and teaches at CU events weeks, training events and Word Alive in his role as Head of Events Speaking. He is married to Lynette and they have three young adult children.

Abstract

The idea of having a series of gospel talks specifically for international students ('international tracks', or simply, 'i-tracks') at university Christian Union events weeks is not new. Some CUs have experimented with them over the years alongside their other events, with relative success.

In recent times, a greater acknowledgement of the potential of such talks has emerged and they have become increasingly popular and effective. However, some are still sceptical as to their practicality or even their validity. It is my belief that they are essential, and that it is crucial that we support the Christian Union movement, UCCF, IFES and others, **now**, so that international students may hear and understand the Gospel clearly, and that speakers can be equipped to demonstrate to all students (Christian and non-Christian, British and international) the **trans-cultural nature of the gospel**.

So Many, and Yet so Few...

At an IFES conference for university evangelists we recently attended, Lindsay Brown gave a reasoned and impassioned address, calling us to prioritise public speaking and debate in the form of university events weeks, as part of an overall strategy for student

ministry, alongside small-group discussions, one-to-one friendship evangelism and whole-life witness. His point was simply that such public proclamation and debate is biblical, and it works.

There was, however, a dichotomy. Although there is an increasing awareness and excitement about the relative openness of many international students to the Gospel, and indeed, international students are a significant element in many of the emerging national IFES movements (both in terms of internationals coming to Christ and international Christians engaged in the outreach) the focus at the conference was given primarily to understanding and speaking to postmodern, post-Christian European students. Of 180 delegates, I counted four whose particular ministry prioritised evangelism to non-Western internationals.

In the UK, there is an increasing awareness of the value of international student tracks, or talks, as part of university CU events weeks. But there are still mixed feelings about it in some quarters, for reasons I outline below.

The aim of this article is simply to ask the question: what is our rationale for promoting the idea of having talks specifically for international students at university missions (and other events), and how do we communicate this to

Christian Union members, student ministry and church leaders and indeed the international students themselves?

In other words, if public proclamation of the Gospel in a culturally relevant way to post-modern, post-Christian Western students is biblical, and it works, should we not be seeking to do the same for non-Western students, too?

We Need Pauls, Not Just Peters

At the conference, one evening, our Catalan hotel offered snails as part of the evening meal. This caused a stir among some, but with my plate of snails before me (I enjoy snails!), I was reminded of Acts 10 and 11, and how my namesake struggled to accept that God would want him to eat such things. “Get up, Peter, kill and eat” (Acts 10:13).

The point then, as now, is not about food, but people. Exceptional evangelist that he was, Peter struggled to accept that the Gospel could be for people who were not like him. Peter saw the link between eating ‘unclean’ food and visiting ‘unclean’ people, but once certain God had spoken, he moved in obedience to the command and brought the Gospel from the Jews to the Gentiles.

In that moment, Peter, the culturally conservative Jewish fisherman, who preached to thousands at Pentecost, realised the Great Commission is a whole lot greater than he had imagined.

Paul, on the other hand, was from the start the Apostle to the Gentiles. In 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, Paul describes moving from one group of people to another, adapting his culture and lifestyle to reduce all possible barriers to the Gospel. Whether to those who are culturally Jewish, those “under the law” (who keep to religious rules, v20), to Gentile pagans (those “not under the law”, v21), or to the powerless in society (“to the weak”, v 22; see 1 Corinthians 1:27-28), every adaptation he made, he did so for the sake of the Gospel, “that I might share in its blessings” (v23).

Although Paul seems to emphasise the importance of his own agency (“...that by all possible means I might save some”), clearly, he has not forgotten the role of the Holy Spirit to convince and convict. Instead, Paul is demonstrating the incarnation, the ‘art of becoming’, the part that love demands we play by identifying with those whom we are seeking to reach for Christ.

It was Jesus Himself who made Peter a “fisher of men” (Mark 1:17). But in Galatians 2:11-21, it seems that even after the flagship Cornelius conversion of Acts 10, Peter was still culturally inflexible. Paul, on the other hand, although an eminently more ‘qualified’ religious Jew (Philippians 3:1-11), was able to move from one culture to another, bringing a message of salvation to all nations.

The point is this: in our universities, we have many ‘Peters’ – exceptional, dedicated evangelists who are able to wonderfully connect with contemporary British/Western student culture. But there are so few ‘Pauls’, who can to step out of the British cultural milieu and connect with students from Asia, Africa, the Middle East and beyond.

Obstacles and Objections

Many are aware of the responsibilities and opportunities to share Christ effectively with international students, but that fact is not matched with an equal enthusiasm for making international student tracks a priority in many centres. From my discussions and observations, it seems that the more common obstacles and objections are as follows:

Fear of segregation

Part of the underlying dilemma is that a whole generation of British young people have – for good reason – been brought up to avoid any appearance of segregating people on the basis of race, religion or culture. It thus feels a risk even to advertise a series of talks ‘focused on international students’.

We recently developed a game for teaching cross-cultural friendship-building, called, “Good Question / Bad Question”, which requires groups to evaluate the merits of a set of typical conversation questions. When CU students play the game, the question “Where are you from?” is most certainly seen as a ‘bad’ question, whereas older volunteers would normally put that in the ‘good’ question pile.

When such a simple question is seen as a potential minefield, we need a compelling reason to positively focus on a particular student demographic.



The “English-made-easy” fallacy and the silent majority

The most common – and unhelpful – misunderstanding about international tracks is that they are for ‘people who might struggle with English’. We need to repeatedly tell people that the aim is not to have an “English-made-easy” version of the “real” talks (that latter term often implied).

Of course, language is a factor, just not the main one. Students are listening to lectures all the time and will often have good academic English; it may even be their first language (such as for many Singaporean and Indian students). But Western-style gospel talks often involve unfamiliar terms and concepts. British evangelists working hard to connect with British student subculture routinely pepper their talks with idioms, expressions and cultural references which can confuse and alienate internationals.

The added dilemma is that those who would most value an international series of talks, are the ones who are least likely to say so. Anecdotal evidence would strongly suggest that the average British CU student does not have international friends. Where they do, they tend to be friends with someone who is more culturally confident than most, and whose English is proficient enough to hold their own in a British peer group. Such an individual might say, “I don’t need an event specially for international students,” meaning, my English is good enough and I don’t want to seem unable to access something my British friends can. It is hard to convince a British CU member that an international track is needed if their international friend says they don’t want one.

My wife was one of those rare students – an English-as-first-language (Singaporean) international student in a majority white, British CU. She would have been torn between preferring an event run just for internationals and wanting to prove to her peers that she didn’t need ‘any special treatment’.

Whilst we should respect those who feel that way, there are many more who will be glad to come to an international student event, hoping that it will be culturally more relevant and easier to access than a default, British-dominated event. These students are the silent majority amongst internationals, the ones we need to speak up for; this is where the opportunity and imperative for international student talks lie.

Practicalities and Priorities

In many cases, there is insufficient will or resources to overcome the necessary obstacles. The ministry leaders I spoke to agreed that i-tracks will always be more common in larger CUs with a strong campus tradition, namely Oxbridge, and the older city universities.¹

The bare facts are that for most CUs, any events week is a big undertaking, resting mostly on the shoulders of a committed, capable few. The task of organising a full week of lunch-bars and evening talks is already a major responsibility. The addition of a third series of events through the week (together with speaker, venue, advertising and food), is more than many can cope with. Since international students can and do attend the ‘main’ talks, many will doubt the priority of having an i-track at all.

I am realistic. Supporting organisations cannot and must not impose a structure on CU events weeks they neither have the will nor the resources to sustain. But for those who wish to do so, I believe the benefits are tremendous, and it is up to us to serve and support them in their efforts.

The Compelling Reasons

I believe that, if we could just communicate the exciting opportunities of an i-track, many would be more than willing to rise to the practical challenges of running one. But we need to do two things: answer their questions and provide the expertise.

Answering their questions: segregation or offering choice?

I-track talks are for everybody.

They are not the English-made-easy version of the other talks, nor are they otherwise ‘simplified’. Their purpose is to demonstrate the trans-cultural nature of the Gospel and that it is not a Western construct. There are Christians all over the world who follow Jesus in a way which is relevant to their culture, and the talks are designed to peel away any Western associations and show that the message of Jesus speaks directly to all cultures.

We are not segregating anyone – British students are welcome to (and indeed have much to benefit from) the international talks just as international students are of course welcome to come to the lunch-bars or the other evening talks. An international track is not about segregating people; it is about offering a choice.

1. One good example of the differing contexts is London, where the international student population is higher than average, and the priority is therefore on integrating British and international students. Taking our daughter’s London experience as an example, where her university CU is 70% SE Asian, I would argue that it is imperative that any speaker in London should have some cross-cultural awareness and adapt their talks accordingly.

For that reason, we² strongly advise that the international talks are not arranged to clash with the other events, and everything should be advertised centrally, as far as possible, to avoid any appearance of the i-track being a side-show.

Since many international students come from very different cultures, religions and worldviews, it is probable that they will have a very different set of questions which need to be answered. In my experience, the apologetic questions asked by non-Western students differ greatly from those of students from the post-Christian West. Describing good and bad, right and wrong might require a shame-honour approach rather than guilt-innocence. Presuppositions and starting knowledge will almost certainly be different.

A good international track should supplement, support and enhance the other talks, and will address questions and worldview issues more common outside Britain and the West. Here are some suggestions for possible talk titles:

- Western Religion or World Faith – is Jesus relevant to my culture?
- Eight Million, None or One – how can Christians say there is only one God in a world of so many?
- What about my family? Is Christianity just a personal belief, or will it affect the people around me?
- A Long Way from Home – How can I be close to God, when home seems far away?
- What does it mean to be ‘good’? – How ‘good’ is ‘good enough’?
- When things go wrong – what does it mean to suffer, and where is God when we do?
- What’s my purpose – chance, destiny, fate or... something else?
- Community – what does it mean to belong, and what happens when we don’t?
- Knowing God – is God a force, a power or a person?
- Honour or Shame – how can I be a good person inside AND outside?
- Harmony with Heaven – how can I know inner peace?

Providing the expertise

From time to time, I hear about a CU that have agreed to hold an i-track, but a suitable speaker cannot be found, or else it is given to a ‘rookie’, to try

their fledgling skills on a more forgiving audience. I inwardly groan. We all have to start somewhere, but surely international students are no less worthy than any others? If supporting organisations cannot provide good speakers who can address the worldview questions and issues of international students, then i-tracks will quickly be relegated to a thing of the past without ever having seen what a good i-track can do: we tried that a few years ago, and it didn’t really work. Not worth the effort.

The time is **now**. Interest in i-tracks is at an all-time high. Let us not let the CUs down by failing to advise them or provide suitable speakers.

We need people who have experience of other cultures and can apply that knowledge to a multicultural context, who can handle different metaphors of the atonement that Scripture provides and who can demonstrate that the cross of Christ frees us, not only from guilt, but shame, uncleanness, debt, estrangement, disharmony, fear and blindness. We need people who can use culturally appropriate language and examples with sensitivity and understanding. We need people who, though they cannot speak the heart-language of everyone in the room, can speak the language of the heart to all.

“This is For Me!”

At an international student talk in Cambridge some years ago, a Chinese postgrad sat texting his friend, not knowing that a Christian worker was looking over his shoulder. It seems he was looking for a way to leave early to meet his friend. But then he heard the speaker connect the passage with something in his culture. He texted his friend, “Wait, this is for me,” and put his phone away.

Surely this is our aim: to present the Gospel in a way that people outside our Western cultural sphere can say, “This is for me!”

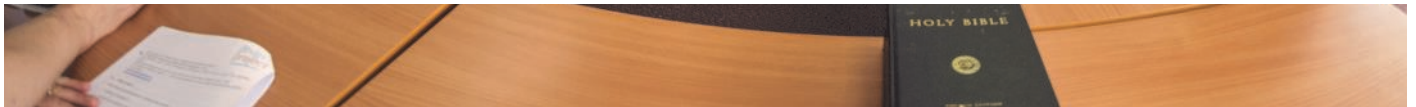
Other than personal experience, the research for this article is mainly from significant conversations with the following people: Lindsay Brown (evangelist), Michael Ots (evangelist), Adam Jones (UCCF), Tim Rudge (UCCF), Dick Dowsett (OMF/international student evangelist) and others.

2. A point echoed by Dick Dowsett, Lindsay Brown and Michael Ots.





From Big Story to Biblical Worldview: Equipping students with a Bible overview



Geoff Low

Geoff co-ordinates the Philip Project, an initiative that trains Christian internationals to teach the Bible, and presently runs courses in seven cities. He previously served in theological education in Peru for eight years. He now lives in south east London with his wife Rachel and has three sons.

There is a well-known quote from the missiologist Lesslie Newbigin of a Hindu scholar's comment to him about the Bible:

"I can't understand why you missionaries present the Bible to us in India as a book of religion. It is not a book of religion – and anyway we have plenty of books on religion in India. We don't need any more! I find your Bible a unique interpretation of universal history, the history of the whole creation and the history of the human race. And therefore a unique interpretation of the human person as a responsible actor in history. That is unique. There is nothing else in the whole religious literature of the world to put alongside it".¹

This sense of an overall story of humanity and our place in the world helps us to answer an important question: *how can we equip Christian international students during our time with them?* Many will return to situations where there will be no British-style churches or international cafés eager to welcome them. They may face issues that were never mentioned in sermons or Bible studies. There may be expectations from parents or employers that will create dilemmas for them and even test their loyalty to Christ. We believe that a clear grasp of the 'big picture' of the Bible is a great preparation for such challenges.

Over some years we have taught the overall story of the Bible on the Philip Project, a Friends International initiative to train Christian international students to teach the Bible. We break the Bible story down into 6 major 'episodes' (like a TV mini-series) as follows²:

1. **Creation** (Genesis 1-2)
2. **Curse** (Genesis 3-11)
3. **Covenant** (Genesis 12-Malachi)
Since this episode covers most of the Old Testament, we break it down further into:
Part 1: Calling (Genesis 12-50)
Part 2: Came Out (Exodus-Deuteronomy)
Part 3: Conquest (Joshua-Ruth)
Part 4: Crown (Samuel-Chronicles)
Part 5: Captivity (2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, prophets)
4. **Christ** (Matthew-John)
5. **Church** (Acts-Revelation)
6. **Creation Renewed** (Revelation 20-22)

Our students over the years have certainly appreciated this as preparation for teaching the Bible and for living for Christ:

"The Bible overview has really aided my own personal devotion. It gives me a mental mind-map of redemptive

1. Quoted in *The Drama of Scripture* Bartholomew and Goheen p.3 [first edition; SPCK, 2006]
2. The original model of 5 'acts' [in a play] was devised by Tom Wright, then extended to 6 and developed further by Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen in *The Drama of Scripture* – though we have not followed all their headings.

history, and provides me the extra push to read and interpret the Bible for myself". Shawn, Singapore

"The Bible Story has helped me understand the sovereignty and love of God and the fact that God has always had a plan". Wendy, Uganda

"Understanding that the Bible tells one beautiful story of God's salvation and redemption plan, where the Old Testament actually shadows the coming of Christ, has been so helpful". Hannah, Malaysia

"I use this overview to help me when I'm reading the Bible and leading Bible studies". Jamie, China

So what are the advantages in explaining the Bible story in this way?

1. Every episode is understood in the light of the Gospel

It shows the unfolding story of God and humanity and relates it to the Gospel. It leads us through the Old Testament and looks forward to its fulfilment in the New Testament. It leads us up to Christ and on to the hope of the new creation. It can therefore help us explain the Gospel better as we relate individual Bible passages to it.

2. Every episode is a distinct period

God is at work in a different way in each episode – whether that's making promises to Abraham's family, leading Israel out of Egypt or choosing a king for his people after his own heart. This highlights the fact that the Bible isn't just a uniform set of teaching or repeatable events. Rather students learn that it is an unfolding story of God working his purposes out within his relationship with people.

3. It shows us where we are in God's purposes

On the one hand, we do stress that we live in different times to Bible characters. We are not Joseph, King David or the apostle Paul. Yet we stress that we are in the same 'episode' as the New Testament church. Like them, we are blessed by the Spirit's presence, awaiting Jesus' appearing and the new creation. This prevents us getting side-tracked by issues belonging to earlier 'ages'. For example, prosperity teaching is a huge threat to the Gospel in churches across the world; some students may face it when they return. They need to see that the promises of blessing in the Old Testament law (e.g.

Deut. 28:1-14) don't apply now in the same way. Besides, we enjoy greater blessings now in Christ (Ephesians 1:3-8).

4. It helps us understand the mission of the church

For Christian international students, it gives a great sense of where they fit in to God's purposes. They are united to Jesus as part of his living church. They join in spreading the good news of Christ's death and resurrection. Wherever they go and whatever they do, they can live and work in the light of God's new creation.

5. It helps us understand each Bible passage correctly

We spend time helping students to learn good Bible interpretation by asking helpful questions of the passage they are studying. The first of those questions is "where does this passage come in the Bible story?". We're convinced that this is one of the best guards against misunderstanding the Bible. Seeing how every part of the Bible fits into place is a big step towards understanding it correctly today.

6. It's memorable & transferable

Alliteration isn't always ideal or everyone's favourite way to remember things! But through explaining carefully the different titles (such as 'covenant' and the admittedly risqué 'came out!'), we can help students to remember at least the six episodes (and perhaps the five parts to Episode 3). Reducing it to six episodes (plus five) helps it to be memorised better than more comprehensive overviews. This also means it is easier for students to pass it on to others when they go home in Bible study groups or in evangelism – and so teach others.

7. It helps us form a Christian worldview

We will unpack this final advantage further. A reason for teaching the Bible story in a clear and memorable way is that we are giving someone the seed for growing a full Christian worldview. So we use our study of the Bible story on the Philip Project as a springboard into our study of worldviews. In this we help students to examine their own worldview and that of their contemporaries at home. We also invite teachers with knowledge of significant representative worldviews e.g. Western, Islamic, Chinese, Indian. These provide models for



students to compare how such worldviews answer significant life questions in comparison with the Bible story.

We can provide answers to some of these questions and help students develop a biblical worldview as we unpack the Bible story with them. For the sake of space, we will show how we do this with the first two episodes:

Episode 1 – Creation (Genesis 1-2)

Apart from answering the basic question, “Where have we come from?” we see here:

Who God is: the personal, relational, only Creator – not a force but one who is revealed to be (as the story unfolds) three persons united in love. This equips students to trust and follow the true God in contexts of polytheism, secularism or a vague deism. In contexts where there is fear of the unseen world, we see the supremacy of this God over all things.

Who humans are: the climax of God’s creation – we are *special*, made in his image. We are made to be *sociable* – to relate to God and to one another – and to be *stewards* – to rule the earth and develop it. In doing this we seek to display God’s character in the way that we live and work. This looks forward to Jesus who comes as the second Adam and the true image of God into which we are remade. Such an understanding of what it is to be human helps students to face situations where there is pressure to put family desires ahead of honouring God. They can engage in work as a creative activity in which they give worship to God and be cautious of its potential to become an idol.

What the world is: a very good place made with order, purpose and love (in spite of the sin which has spoiled it – to which we come in the next episode) – against other views which see the world coming into being from chaos, chance or ‘nothing’. This enables the Christian student to have a positive approach to the world as a place designed for our good and for enjoyment, to be received as a gift from God, neither to be worshipped nor to be exploited.

Episode 2 – Curse (Genesis 3-11)

This episode provides students answers to another ‘worldview question’ - “What’s wrong with the world?” In studying these key chapters we highlight the themes of sin, judgement, and grace.

Sin: Apart from Adam and Eve’s rebellion against God’s command, this section also features Cain’s murder of Abel, the violence that leads to the flood,

and the pride shown in building the Tower of Babel. This enables the nature of sin to be explored in various dimensions: as bringing dishonour on God through rejecting his provision of a wonderful garden; as bringing disorder into creation and disharmony to human community – leading to violence; as giving in to evil powers rather than trusting in God and his good ways. Thus sin is seen as a destructive, twisting, and corrupting presence, separating us from God and distorting our relationships, both with one another and with the created world. This should bring realism into our students’ view of the world.

Judgement: God acts against sin in judgement – cursing the fruitful ground, condemning humanity to die, expelling Adam and Eve from Eden (and thus humanity from his presence), drowning the corrupt world; then confusing and scattering Babel’s builders. None of us can escape our responsibility before God – whatever other authorities may appear to be ultimate in our lives.

Grace: Yet there are rays of God’s mercy in these dark chapters. The curse on the serpent promises one who will be born of a woman who will crush God’s enemy (Gen. 3:15); in spite of the presence of death, there is continuity of life in the line of Adam (Gen. 5) and the table of nations (Gen. 10); and there are the covenant promises to Noah (Gen. 9) – and immediately in the next section, to Abraham (Gen. 12) – that God will care for his world and ultimately bring blessing to all families on earth. This looks forward to Jesus as the second Adam, the one who will reconcile us to God and bear his judgement against sin.

Conclusion

It is a privilege to regularly guide international students through understanding this framework. Thinking through its implications and building a Christian worldview from it can be invaluable for their discipleship returning home or wherever they go in the world.

Bibliography

Books that I have found helpful in teaching the Bible story to internationals are:

The Drama of Scripture – Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen (SPCK, 2nd edition 2014)

God's Big Picture – Vaughan Roberts (IVP, 2002)

The Symphony of Scripture – Mark Strom (P & R, 1990)

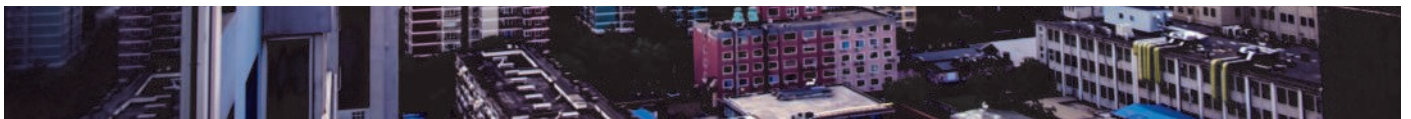
Crossing Cultures with Jesus – Katie J. Rawson (IVP, 2015)

21: The Story of God, the World and You – Glen Scrivener (10 Publishing; 2014)





Challenging China's Indigenous Prosperity Theology



**Stuart
Bullington**

*(with editorial
assistance from
Lynette Teagle)*

Stuart currently works for OMF Diaspora Returnee Ministries in Sheffield. He previously served as a missionary for eight years in Taipei, ministering to Taiwanese students and returnees, and then completed doctoral research into returnee issues at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

Falling Away

I remember when our Bible study group in Taipei welcomed Jade, a new believer who had just returned from America. Jade quickly got involved in our group of university students and returnees, and came to our meetings regularly. She seemed to enjoy the group, and I especially remember how glad I was when she helped us to organise a very memorable weekend retreat.

We could see that Jade was growing in her faith. Her father was very ill, however, and his condition weighed heavily upon her. She would often ask us to pray that her father would be healed. This went on for months, and then I heard from a group member that her father had died. Jade completely vanished after that – we never saw her again. She stopped communicating with us, dropped out of church, and, as far as I know, never came back.

During my years as a missionary in East Asia I encountered many “Jades”. They began well, committing to the Christian faith while studying abroad in the UK or elsewhere, but after returning home they encountered a “time of testing” – an illness, a death in the family, a period of unemployment, financial difficulties, broken relationships – and their faith was shattered. They became living illustrations of the second soil in Jesus’ interpretation of the parable of the sower: “Those on the rocky ground

are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away.” (Luke 8:13)

Of course, the situation I describe here could happen anywhere, in any culture. I want to suggest, however, that the connection between life’s misfortunes and falling away can be especially strong among the Chinese.

To understand why this is so, we need to delve into the traditional Chinese culture and worldview, including the folk religions that have dominated the Chinese mind for thousands of years.

I will begin now to use the term “Chinese” to refer to those who practise and adhere to the traditional folk religions, past and present, including the ancestors of today’s Chinese atheists, as well as the many modern-day practitioners in ethnic Chinese communities across East Asia and beyond. We will try to see the world for a moment through their eyes.

As with any other culture, Chinese culture is multi-layered and complex, and a full and accurate portrayal of the traditional Chinese worldview will necessarily include many other factors, such as ancestor worship, karma, the appeasement of vengeful spirits, and all of the particular beliefs and values of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. In addition, for those of us ministering to

the Chinese, China's collectivist, honour-shame culture is an essential topic of study.

My limited purpose in this article, however, is simply to highlight some key aspects of the traditional folk religions that will help us to begin to grasp why Chinese students today, after professing faith in Christ, might generally expect prosperity to follow, and why it can be devastating when it does not.

Every assertion I make here must be qualified by the statement, "This is how it appears to a Western observer." I am an outsider looking in, trying to make sense of what I see, yet still seeing "through a glass, darkly" (1 Corinthians 13:12 KJV). I would therefore encourage the reader to take this as a starting point, and to dig deeply into the literature on Chinese folk religion, beginning with the 'Recommended References' listed at the end of this article.

Guanxi – The Exchange of Favours

Guanxi (关系), often poorly translated as "relationships", is one of the key ideas in understanding how Chinese society works. The term describes the personalised networks of influence that Chinese people carefully cultivate with others, constructing over their lifetimes a large and intricate web of relationships which may extend in a huge number of directions.

While friendship may certainly be a factor, the goal in many cases is simply pragmatic – to the outsider it may appear that Chinese regard *guanxi* mainly as a crucial way – indeed often the only way – to get things done. The basic premise is that each relationship is cultivated with an expectation, like a contract, that one of the parties will provide a tangible benefit to the other when it is needed, and in fact *guanxi* is largely based on this exchange of favours. Trust grows between individuals with each successful exchange, and, conversely, a failure to reciprocate is considered an unforgivable offence. In reality, *guanxi* can be very nuanced, undergirded by mutual unspoken understandings which can appear, at best, mystifying, and at worst, utilitarian.

Studies in business ethics have divided *guanxi* generally into three types: "obligatory (family and kinship relations), reciprocal (friends and acquaintances), and utilitarian (seller-buyers or

strangers)."¹ I will focus only on the latter two types here.²

Exchanging Favours with the Gods

It should not be surprising to discover that the principle of reciprocal favours, so firmly rooted in Chinese society, extends also to the world of the gods.

But how can mere mortals exchange favours with gods? First, we have to think of what they want. The gods demand worship, honour, incense and prayer. They are to be consulted when decisions need to be made. They require beautiful temples to be built in their honour, where offerings of food and money must be made. The worshipper will gladly provide them with all of these things, because the payback will someday make it all worthwhile.

To understand how *guanxi* can transfer so easily from human society to the spirit world, it may be helpful to understand that many of the gods in China's pantheon are simply human beings, more powerful now in the afterlife than they ever were when they lived.

How do the Chinese know that a deceased human being has become a god? The criterion is simply whether it "works" to pray to this person, i.e. whether the aspiring god is responding to prayers by bestowing tangible benefits. As Thompson explains,

The gods are alive because they have manifested themselves through their works. Their spiritual power, called ling in Chinese, is the evidence of their existence. That is why, to borrow an apt phrase from Maspero, "people become gods every day in China." Any claim or attribution of ling that gains a certain public currency may result in deification of a person. Rumors having spread and credibility having been established through confirmation that the spirit responds to prayers, a temple will be put up through public subscription. From then on the growth or decline of the cult is a matter of the god's efficacy... The interest of the local community in their gods is a matter of their usefulness... (Thompson 1996, 55, italics in the original)

1. Jackson Wu. *Reciprocity, Collectivism, and the Chinese Church*. Patronage Symposium, Beirut, 2018, citing Zhang Y. and Zhang Z. *Guanxi and organizational dynamics in China: A link between individual and organizational levels*. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 67(4)2006:375-392.

2. A more in-depth discussion would require consideration of the dynamic of "human feeling" (*rénqíng* 人情) that often governs exchanges between friends and acquaintances, but that is beyond the scope of this article.



The terms “efficacy” and “usefulness” used by Thompson reveal some of the more pragmatic and human-centred motives underlying Chinese folk religions. Religious practice is a tool, a resource, that people use to get what they want, a means to an end, rather than a submission of the human will to a transcendent deity.

Confessions of an Online Shopper

Perhaps we can convey how this might feel by comparing it to a modern-day experience: online shopping. When I shop, I search online to find a vendor who can deliver the things I need, and of course I want good quality, low prices, and fast delivery – the faster the better. I am just a typical consumer.

After placing several orders and getting good service, I committed to a relationship with Amazon by joining Amazon Prime. It costs me something, but in view of what I'm getting, I think it's worth it. Now my orders arrive even faster!

Of course, I didn't join Amazon Prime because I love Amazon. I committed to them because they deliver the things I want. My loyalty would instantly evaporate if someone else were to come along with better stuff at cheaper prices, delivered on the same day.

After all, brand loyalty only goes so far. No one would expect me to lose money and sacrifice my own self-interest for Amazon's sake.

Vendors in the Sky

With this understanding of a “marketplace” of the gods, we can see that, to our Chinese friends, there may be many “vendors in the sky”. Some deliver the goods better than others. As Chinese search for the right god to worship, they will often try one, as an experiment, to see whether this god is ready to “do business”. By prayer, worship, and perhaps an offering of money or food they “place their order” and then wait to see the result. They have done the god a favour; now they hope that the god will reciprocate.

They may seek the god's help with a particular need: an upcoming exam, an illness, financial difficulty, or a decision. They may pray for the god's blessings in the form of business success, success in courtship and marriage, or healthy children. And more generally they hope to secure the prosperity described in the traditional five blessings (*wǔ fú* 五福): longevity (*shòu* 寿), wealth

(*fù* 富), good health (*kāngníng* 康宁), love of virtue (*xiu hǎo dé* 攸好德), and a good end, that is, a natural death in old age (*kǎo zhōng mìng* 考终命). As they pray, they will often make a vow to donate more money to the temple at some future date, after their prayers have been answered. Having received the desired help, they return to the temple to fulfil their vows (*huányuàn* 还愿), so that the reciprocation and the relationship may continue.

Perhaps the most sought-after blessing is money. Originating from a nation with a massive population, in which there has historically been immense pressure to survive and compete for success, Chinese culture can appear obsessed with money and business. The Lunar New Year greeting, *gōngxǐ fā cái* (恭喜发财), means, literally translated, “wishing you to enlarge your wealth”. Games played for money, such as mahjong and other forms of gambling, are hugely popular, and indeed Macau is now regarded the “Gambling Capital of the World”. Those who are doing well in business will often seek to gain “face” (social esteem) by an ostentatious display of their wealth, spending beyond their means to host lavish feasts or to purchase expensive cars, watches, jewellery, and other luxury goods.

For many, the Chinese folk religions play an essential role in this materialistic quest, providing the means by which spiritual forces can be brought to bear in aiding the worshipper's quest for gain.

While this may seem to be an odd mix of business and religion in Western eyes, the traditional worldview of China is holistic. It has no room for the sharp Western distinction between the natural and the supernatural. The partition between the world of spirits and the world of material things, if any, is illusory. Consequently, it may not occur to Chinese to separate spiritual well-being from material prosperity, as if people could enjoy one without the other.

The Measure of a God

For traditional polytheists, the confirmation that they have found the right god is the level of prosperity and good luck they have experienced since they began to worship. The window of time for this confirmation is generally short, perhaps only one or two years (certainly not extending as far as a future eternity after death!).

When things do not go well within that time, as often happens, the god is believed to have failed. (I have heard that people in Taipei will sometimes take their

god's idol, go to a particular bridge that crosses over the Tamsui River, and literally throw it into the water below! The bottom of the river is littered at that point with discarded idols.) Then they move on to the next god, hoping for better results.

What About Jesus?

When Chinese students put their faith in Jesus, of course we hope that they will never "move on to the next god." Yet, if their default paradigm remains in place, that is exactly what they will do. (Keep in mind that the "next god" might just be money, power, "face" or other popular idols.)

If and when they experience suffering or loss, they may interpret God's apparent unwillingness to intervene as a failure to reciprocate, which, according to the rules of *guanxi*, is an unforgiveable offence. How then will they continue to trust him?

Chinese prosperity theology, when blended with Christianity, gives birth to a hybrid faith (syncretism) that is inherently fragile, and will remain so until a deeper study of the Bible calls the paradigm into question.

Challenging the Paradigm

How, then, to challenge this cultural paradigm? How can we set our students free from false expectations that lead to disappointment with God? How might we work with the Holy Spirit to nurture the growth of a robust and resilient faith in Christ?

Where biblical teaching is concerned, there is clearly much we can do to equip our students by addressing the pre-existing worldview issues discussed above. Some of these include focused teaching on:

1. **Monotheism.** The Old Testament, especially, has very clear affirmations that there is only one God, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. (Gen 1:1; Ex 20:3; Deut 4:35,39; Deut 6:4; 1 Kgs 8:60; Isa 44:6, 8b, 45:14b, 22.)
2. **The attributes and character of God.** Can God fail? Does He make mistakes? We want to underscore the attributes that make God fundamentally different from humans, and make it clear that humans never become gods.
3. **What it means to have God as our Father.** He is not distant and aloof, as are some earthly fathers. He is instead our constant guide and friend in all of the trials of life.
4. **The Kingdom of God.** This includes both "the now and the not yet", the small foretastes we experience now and the abundant fulfilment of God's promises when Christ returns. (Phil 3:20; Heb 13:14; 2 Pet 3:13)
5. **Understanding the here and now.** What do we stand to gain in this present life from being a Christian? How might this faith become a practical blessing to families, to people in business, and to society?
6. **A Christian definition of "blessings".** What are the blessings that God actually promises? (Matt 5:1-12; Luke 6:20-26) How are they different from what we might choose for ourselves?
7. **Idolatry.** Is it wrong? Why? What are we valuing more than God? Money, "face", success? Are we valuing the blessings more than the One who blesses?
8. **The theology of work.** Is the only goal in working to get rich? What are the biblical motives for secular work?
9. **Biblical reciprocity.** What is the biblical exchange that we are called to make with God? (Matt 13:44-46, 16:24-26; Mark 8:35; Luke 14:33; Rom 12:1-2)
10. **Having godly motives.** What are the right motives for following Christ? (John 6:27)
11. **The cost of discipleship.** Is it worth living a life of self-denial and discipline for the sake of the Kingdom? (Luke 9:23-27, John 15:18-25, Phil 3:7-8)
12. **A biblical framework for understanding why Christians still suffer,** based on biblical examples of suffering and martyrdom. Is suffering always a punishment for sin? How can we understand that Christians suffer, but that in no case has God ever failed them? (Heb 11:32-40; 1 Peter)



All this must be embedded in the context of deep and strong relationships with our student friends, within which we can work through the joys, but also the more difficult demands of discipleship; discern the gracious hand of God even in the face of discouragement, trial and suffering; and ultimately walk alongside them in the challenges of following Christ, no matter the circumstance.

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The Insight Team

Sue Burt
Head of Returnee Ministry

Lynette Teagle
Head of Learning and
Development

Jenny Hudson
Staff Worker, Exeter

Peter Teagle
Head of International Student
Event Speaking and
Oxford Centre Team Leader

Fiona Barnard
Staff Worker, St Andrews

Jack Bentley
Communications & Media
Coordinator



friends
INTERNATIONAL

The Rowan Centre
All Nations Christian College
Easney
Ware, Herts
SG12 8LX

01920 460006
info@friendsinternational.uk
www.friendsinternational.uk