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Book Reviews

Tony Chuang, *Religiosity and Gospel Transmission: Insights from Folk Religion in Taipei* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Langham Academic, 2024), xx + 270pp.

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Religiosity and Gospel Transmission (RGT) is a nuanced study of the complexities of Chinese religious attitudes in the context of folk religions in Taiwan. Tony Chuang explores how Christianity is perceived, understood, and received against the background of Taiwanese culture in Taipei. Drawing from qualitative research in the form of twenty-five in-depth interviews, his aim is to "better understand the religiosity behind folk religion by exploring the specific concepts related to faith, which leads to a more contextual approach to gospel transmission" (6). It is an insightful piece of work that, for the most part, accomplishes what it sets out to do. In the process, Chuang provides much theological food for thought and opportunities for further reflection.

The work is broadly divided into three parts: a literature review, a discussion of the ethnographic research, and an analysis portion that unpacks the findings and best practices taken from the interviews carried out in the second section.

Chapter 2 (the introductory chapter being the first) discusses the various approaches, classifications, and definitions of the concept of folk religion and describes Chinese religiosity in general and its particular iteration in Taiwan. Chapter 3 outlines Chuang's methodology and explains the rationale behind the choice of qualitative rather than quantitative research. Chapters 4 and 5 present Chuang's findings. The former covers general attitudes and religiosity. The latter covers the topics of deities, Jesus, and Christianity, and examines three points of interest: how to have faith in a

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deity; why people choose a particular deity; and assumed belief in multiple deities. Chapter 6 outlines the implications drawn from the preceding chapters on gospel transmission in Taiwan and provides a brief guide of what not to do by way of pointing out possible "landmines" to avoid in conversation. The final chapter is a general strategy of what *to do* and how best to engage non-Christians in Taiwan.

The careful unpacking of the various terms and concepts surrounding Taiwanese religious culture and those relating to Christianity lays an excellent foundation for the goals in the later chapters. The observation that certain words have semantic ranges that differ what is often assumed is key. For example, Chuang notes that the word "faith" (信, xìn) can mean belief in something, superstition, a familial relationship, or an exchange-based relationship with a deity. This fluidity in understanding has significant implications for gospel communication, as Christian concepts often differ from local interpretations. Many such terms (such as worship, belief, fate, and so forth) are taken for granted but, in the context of Taiwan, may have entirely different meanings from those with whom the gospel is being shared. Various participants in Chuang's study expressed that worship primarily concerns beseeching a deity for immediate needs rather than fostering an ongoing faith commitment— in Taipei, the relationship with a deity is often seen as transactional rather than relational. This stands in sharp contrast to Christianity, whereby faith is seen as transformative and typically coupled with permanent, exclusive allegiance.

Some other interesting and perhaps counterintuitive findings unearthed by Chuang include the apparent apathy among the Christians interviewed regarding the afterlife and their general lack of interest in the historical aspects of Jesus's life and work on the cross. Adherents focused mainly on the practical aspects of their faith when queried. Similarly, the non-Christians interviewed saw Christianity's deity as transcendent, lofty, and less approachable. This is beneficial information for gospel transmission— Chuang argues that Western approaches to evangelism, which emphasize historical facts about Jesus and the afterlife, may not resonate with a culture that prioritizes pragmatism and present-life concerns over eschatology. Instead, gospel communication should initially focus on how Christianity, much like other religious traditions in Taiwan, meets immediate life needs.

Throughout, Chuang's research reveals unexpected insights into Taiwanese attitudes and their significance for Christianity and doctrine. He identifies several intriguing parallels between the beliefs and presuppositions of Chinese folk beliefs and Christianity. Sometimes these are explicated, and sometimes they are simply alluded to, leaving the readers to draw their own conclusions. An example of the former is the belief in Taiwanese folk religion that one's fate is predetermined but can also be altered through personal effort—this might be thought to mirror the perennial Christian debate regarding divine sovereignty and human free will: the Christian believes that God's will is absolute (in Reformed circles, even determined), but still there is room for human agency. As for the latter, there are a number of other parallels that can be drawn between Taiwanese and "Western" views, that is, shared presuppositions that can be further explored. The idea of reincarnation from Buddhism points to a shared belief in an immaterial substance (a "vehicle" for personal identity into the next life), *mutatis mutandis*, for the resurrection of the dead in Christian doctrine (86). Another is the popular Taiwanese idea that "anyone can be a Buddha" (128), which may have interesting overlap with the concept of theosis. Chuang also alludes to the idea that the Dao, as philosophized by Lao-Tzu, sees its fullest expression in the Word, and that the ancient Chinese philosophers were talking about such fullness as found in Jesus Christ (200). There may be some helpful cross-pollination with a similar claim regarding Plato, found in Louis Markos's work *From Plato and Christ*. Markos writes that "the works of Plato can be most profitably read...as inspired writings used by the God of the Bible to prepare the ancient world for the coming of Christ and the New Testament" (9).

Chuang's study excels in providing a "slice of Taipei religious attitudes" offering a deeply contextualized look at faith in Taiwan. It reads much like a series of vignettes with colourful and absorbing stories. His careful analysis highlights key cultural dynamics that affect gospel reception, making this work invaluable for missionaries, pastors, and theologians engaged in Chinese contexts. Having said this, a notable limitation is the sample size, which, while providing rich qualitative insights, might not capture the full statistical breadth of Taipei's religious landscape. A larger cross-section would help confirm whether certain trends are widely representative. Nevertheless, Chuang acknowledges this limitation and

justifies his methodological choices within the scope of qualitative research. Another critique is that while the study provides excellent groundwork for understanding gospel transmission in Taiwan, it leaves certain theological questions underexplored. For instance, Chuang's findings on the absence of the notion of grace in Taiwanese religious discourse could have been further developed into a discussion on how concepts of merit and divine justice might be reinterpreted within a Taiwanese framework. But perhaps this criticism is unwarranted; given the confines of space, these deeper theological explorations and connections might detract from the practical focus of RTG.

In summary, Tony Chuang's work offers a thorough analysis of how religious identity and day-to-day practice shape the reception of Christianity in Taipei, emphasizing the need for very particular theological contextualization. His findings challenge evangelists to approach gospel communication in a way that aligns with Taiwanese cultural and religious frameworks while remaining faithful to Christian doctrine. By illuminating the lived realities of religious thought in Taipei, Chuang provides both a roadmap for effective ministry and a deeper appreciation and understanding of how one may begin to witness in Taiwan. RTG is a noteworthy contribution offering both theoretical and practical insights into gospel transmission in Taiwan; it will undoubtedly serve as a seminal piece of work for further research in the field of contextualization.

About reviewer

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