

## Chapter 2

# Anthropologists and Ancestors

### 2.1 A Brief Literature Review

Chinese ancestors' worship and the Chinese rites, in general, have aroused the interest of many eminent anthropologists and scholars. Since Freedman<sup>1</sup> and Francis Hsu<sup>2</sup>, anthropologists have continuously and constantly researched and studied the relations between the Han people and their ancestors. In Taiwan, the research of the last past decades was performed by many distinguished anthropologists, including Ahern<sup>3</sup>, Wolf<sup>4</sup>, Feuchtwang<sup>5</sup>, Harrel<sup>6</sup>, Li Yih-Yuan<sup>7</sup>, Wang Song-hsing<sup>8</sup>. These scholars' studies have already helped us to deeply comprehend the Han ancestors' worship phenomenon, and the relationships between ancestor worship and geomantic omen, lineage, kinship, family division, etc.

Freedman and his study about lineage organization could be considered as a starting point for the works of many anthropologists who, based on his theories, started to talk about "the relations between worshipers and the worshiped in the two contexts of domestic and hall shrines; the rites performed in the two settings; and ideas about the roles of ancestors relevant to the two different contexts."<sup>9</sup> These spatial concepts, the domestic home, and the ancestral hall, elaborated by Freedman had become the basic point

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1. Freedman, *Lineage Organization*.
  2. Hsu, *Under the Ancestors' Shadow*.
  3. Ahern, *The Cult of the Dead in a Chinese Village*.
  4. Wolf, "Gods, ghosts, and ancestors."
  5. Feuchtwang, "Domestic and communal worship in Taiwan."
  6. Harrell, "The ancestors at home."
  7. Li, "Chinese geomancy and ancestor worship."
  8. Wang, "Ancestors proper and peripheral."
  9. Freedman, *Lineage Organization*, 81-91.

for most of the research topics elaborated upon by many scholars during their fieldwork in the Taiwanese context.

Terms such as “domestic worship” and “hall worship”, were elaborated upon by Wolf with the purpose of adopting the terms “domestic rites”, “communal rites” and “corporate rites” to refer to worship ceremonies performed by one family, by a group of agnatically related families, and by the representatives of a lineage. Wolf also argued that the terms “home” and “hall” could then be reserved to refer to the buildings in which rites are performed. According to him, the placement of tablets also provides some evidence for his view that there are three types of ancestral altars: Domestic altars, Communal Altars, and Lineage shrines. The three types of altars reflect real differences in the nature of the three types of groups they serve<sup>10</sup>. Also, Harrel started to distinguish two points about ancestor worship. In his view Chinese ancestor worship is two separate cults: a series of rites that express the unity of a lineage or lineage segment (Freeman’s “hall cult”), and a group of rites that continue the acts of filial obedience to recently deceased forebears (Freedman’s “domestic cult” or “cult of immediate jural superior”)<sup>11</sup>. Starting with this acknowledgment, Harrel focuses his point by trying to understand what happens to ancestor worship in a community where there are no lineages, where almost nobody owned the land until recently, and where an unusually large proportion of households contain members of two or more lines of descent. He argues that while the absence of lineages in Ploughshare has made ancestor worship a purely domestic cult, the lack of land ownership has helped to make ancestor worship much less closely connected with inheritance<sup>12</sup>. Another aspect of the ancestor cult in Ploughshare that perhaps connects with the natives’ lack of property, is their failure to divide responsibility for the worship of different lines of ancestors. In many communities, the children of an uxori-local marriage<sup>13</sup> are divided between their two parents’ lines of descent, some taking the father’s surname and worshipping his ancestors; others taking the mother’s surname and worshipping hers.

He concluded that the question remains as to whether Ploughshare is an anomaly, possessing a type of ancestor cult found only in rural communities of wage laborers, or whether we might find similar situations elsewhere. Answering this question, Harrel agrees that the latter is much more likely; in areas of China where lineage organization was weak, in villages of fishermen, loggers, or salt workers, and even in poorer communities of farmers,

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10. Arthur P Wolf, “Aspects of ancestor worship in northern Taiwan,” in *Ancestors* (The Hague; Paris: Mouton Publishers, 1976), 363.

11. Harrel, “The ancestors at home.”

12. Harrel, 379.

13. From the Latin word *uxor*, meaning “wife,” the English words “uxorial,” “uxorious” (meaning “excessively fond of or submissive to a wife”), in the Chinese context it describes a marriage where the husband agrees to marry by “joining” his wife’s family. The first or one of the sons will also take his wife’s surname and not his own. Usually, this type of marriage is accepted by poor men, who could not provide a home for the future bride.

the order imposed on the ancestral cult by agnatic organization and patrilineal inheritance patterns were probably considerably modified in accordance with the local situation. In urban areas, where geographic mobility was greater and where affinal ties become more important among families of merchants, the strict patrilineal ideology might have been weakened and the ancestor cult accordingly modified<sup>14</sup>.

According to Arthur Wolf and his famous piece “Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors,” the Taiwanese common people’s point of view is that the character of the relationships that links the popular religion pantheon gods, is essentially bureaucratic (1974:133). For him “the Chinese supernatural through the eyes of the peasant is a detailed image of Chinese officialdom”<sup>15</sup>. The Chinese gods shared a clear hierarchy; a hierarchy that represents the Chinese imperial structure. For example, according to his fieldwork in Taiwan, Wolf considers Tudigong (土地公, one of the popular religion pantheon’s divinities) a policeman for a community, and his roles are to spy on the affairs of his human charges, keep records of their activities and report regularly to his superiors<sup>16</sup>. In this way, people in Taiwan consider Tudigong as the lowest-ranking member of a supernatural bureaucracy, where Yuhuangdadi (玉皇大帝), the Pearly Emperor and Supreme Ruler, the mightiest god in the peasant’s pantheon, is but a reflection of the human emperor<sup>17</sup>.

The subject that the author presents in his concluding paragraph is very interesting. Wolf links the Chinese popular religion with the Imperial power in a very original way. Because he presents the Christian religion as a completely different symbolic system with respect to the Chinese local religions, this may explain the reason why the Christian religions are clearly and deeply considered by the Chinese – and Taiwanese – people as a foreign religion.

In sum, what we see in looking at the Chinese supernatural through the eyes of the peasant is a detailed image of Chinese officialdom. This image allows us to assess the significance of the imperial bureaucracy from a new perspective. Historians and political scientists often emphasize the failure of most Chinese governments to effectively extend their authority to the local level. Certainly, many governments had difficulty collecting taxes, and some allowed this function and others to fall into the hands of opportunistic local leaders. Judged in terms of its administrative arrangements, the Chinese imperial government looks impotent. Assessed in terms of its long-range impact on the people, it appears to have been one of the most potent governments ever known, for it created a religion in its own image.

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14. Harrell, “The ancestors at home,” 384.

15. Wolf, “Gods, ghosts, and ancestors,” 145.

16. Wolf, 134.

17. Wolf, 142.

Its firm grip on the popular imagination may be one reason the imperial government survived so long despite its many failings. Perhaps this is also the reason China's revolutionaries have so often organized their movements in terms of the concepts and symbols of such foreign faiths as Buddhism and Christianity. The native gods were so much a part of the establishment that they could not be turned against it<sup>18</sup>.

The thesis that Chinese popular religion is in some ways linked to the imperial power structure has been expressed by other anthropologists. In his "Domestic and Communal Worship in Taiwan" Stephan Feuchtwang<sup>19</sup> describes the religious system reproduced in the annual round of Mountainstreet's domestic and communal ritual, and in a further step, he seeks to extract the selective definition of society that the system implies. Feuchtwang analyzes the three major categories of spiritual beings – ghosts, gods, and ancestors – which, according to him, are arranged in pairs of cross-cutting opposition, and puts these categories in the domestic/communal as an inside-outside concept. Putting all these in a calendar of contrast and continuity, he was able to assert that we find in the domestic and communal rituals of Mountainstreet three orders: a paradigmatic order of spatial contrast, a syntagmatic order of sequence and expense, and an order of inclusion. The first distinguishes the spiritual beings into several classes; the second establishes order and continuity between the classes; while the third arranges the classes as parts of even more inclusive categories<sup>20</sup>.

His conclusion is that Chinese religion was a recreation of a metaphor, where gods are a metaphor for the system of authority, the state. The metaphor is one of the gods as rulers and judges and the mass of *gui* (鬼) as a beggar and supplicants being judged and saved by the gods. Yet *gui* are also a broken extension of the living into this domain. And though gods are neither *gui* nor ancestors, they and ancestors are placed in the same category (*shen* 神) and worshipped as insiders, in contrast with *gui*, worshipped as outsiders. Where god is to a locality like the imperial bureaucrat, a stranger with authority, and ancestor a native of the locality, *gui* is an unwelcome stranger and outcast native. This particular vision of Chinese religion as one "Imperial Metaphor"<sup>21</sup> was also supported by other eminent anthropologists, like Weller<sup>22</sup> and Ahern<sup>23</sup>. Ahern, in particular, defines popular religion as a game, and in playing this game Taiwanese people learn their social relations.

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18. Wolf, "Gods, ghosts, and ancestors," 145.

19. Feuchtwang, "Domestic and communal worship in Taiwan."

20. Feuchtwang, 111.

21. Stephan Feuchtwang, *Popular religion in China: the imperial metaphor* (Richmond: Curzon, 2001).

22. Robert Weller, *Unities and Diversities in Chinese Religion* (University of Washington Press, 1983).

23. Emily Martin Ahern, *Chinese ritual and politics*. (Cambridge, etc.: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

Research about geomancy (*fengshui* 風水) and ancestor worship have been carried out by Freedman<sup>24</sup> and Li Yih-Yuan<sup>25</sup>. Freedman asserted that once a tomb was built, periodic rituals were carried out at the tomb site; the author has described the public, male-dominated nature of rituals surrounding tombs of apical ancestors, contrasting them with the domestic practice of ancestor veneration in which the female is the principal actor<sup>26</sup>. Fengshui ensures not only that the tomb is placed appropriately but also that it is safeguarded. In interlineal rivalry “the surest way to destroy a rival for good is to tear open his ancestral tomb and pulverize the bones they contain because the bones are decent; without them, one is cut off from the most powerful source of ancestral benefits”<sup>27</sup>.

Li Yih-Yuan supports that inside these rites, the geomancy concerning the ancestor’s tomb reflects the more affective, supportive, and rewarding-punitive relations of domestic life, while the ancestor worship in the tablets falls into the realm of a more formal jural authoritative relationship derived from the descent system<sup>28</sup>. The author explains the inextricable bonds existing between the family, the graves, and the ancestor tablets.

One other research front was explored in order to understand the boundaries of the three categories of supernatural beings, gods, ancestors, and ghosts. Wang<sup>29</sup>, especially, stressed the fact that these three supernatural beings and their structural division reflect themselves in Taiwanese architecture. According to Wang, three different types of Taiwanese buildings – *miao* (廟, the temple), *sanmianbi* (三面壁, a particular temple dedicate to ghosts), and *zhengting* (正廳, the house living room) – express a fundamental division of all supernatural beings into three distinct types<sup>30</sup>. In a *miao* people worship the dead who have been deified as representations of legitimate authority; in a *sanmianbi* they propitiate the powerful dead who had served selfishly rather than for the community interest (see also 林瑋嬪<sup>31</sup>), and in their own *zhengting*, they worship the dead of their own line to whom they are obliged by descent.

Again, ancestors have been the object of analysis directed to understand their intrinsic nature. While Francis Hsu defines the ancestors of West Town (his fieldwork location in Yunnan 雲南 Mainland China) as “always benevolent, never malicious, and never offended by the descendants”<sup>32</sup>,

24. Freedman, *Lineage Organization*; Maurice Freedman, *The Study of Chinese Society. Essays Selected and Introduced by G. William Skinner* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1979), accessed March 8, 2022.

25. Li, “Chinese geomancy and ancestor worship.”

26. Freedman, *Lineage Organization*, 172.

27. Freedman, 139.

28. Li, “Chinese geomancy and ancestor worship,” 332.

29. Sung-hsing Wang, “Taiwanese architecture and the supernatural,” in *Religion and ritual in Chinese society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974).

30. Wang, 192.

31. 林瑋嬪 Wei-ping Lin, “「鬼母找女婿」：鬼、三片壁、與貪婪的研究,” 考古人類學刊 1, no. 75 (2011): 13–36.

32. Hsu, *Under the Ancestors’ Shadow*, 213.

“ancestral spirit, in every part of China, are believed to be only a source of benevolence, never a source of punishment to their descendants. This is shown by the fact that when a Chinese is suffering some misfortune, such as sickness, fire, flood, or the lack of male progeny, he will suspect the fault lies with any of a variety of deities or ghosts, but never with the spirits of an ancestor”<sup>33</sup>. Ahern, on the contrary, supports the theory that ancestors direct their malicious effects toward descendants, and posits that people attribute serious illness and even death to their ancestors<sup>34</sup>. Ahern believes that the harsh child-training customs in Ch’inan (Sanxia 三峡, Taipei County, where she performed her fieldwork) were responsible for the highly malevolent activities of ancestors there. A painful experience in childhood throws a shadow over the rest of one’s life, and the child expects that ancestors will behave in the same way as when they were alive. “The dead in the underworld retain the personalities while alive, but they are remembered as they were during their middle years, not as helpless old men and women awaiting death.”<sup>35</sup>

Wolf arrives to define ancestors as ghosts if viewed from another family line viewpoint and also puts the emphasis on the tension between the good consideration of the ancestors and the fear of being punished<sup>36</sup>. “This seems to me only one manifestation of a conflict between an ideal that says the ancestors are always benevolent and a fear that they are in fact punitive. Asked if they believe that their ancestors would punish them for neglect, people usually insist that they would not. But when they suffer a series of misfortunes most people give serious consideration to the possibility that the ancestors are responsible.”<sup>37</sup>

Wang classifies ancestors into two categories – those who are patrilineal forebears and those who are non-patrilineal kin, calling the former “proper ancestors” and the latter “peripheral ancestors.”<sup>38</sup> This dichotomy is also a way to analyze the intrinsic nature of the ancestors. As we saw, most anthropologists who studied the popular religion phenomenon recognize a cultural and structural aspect of supernatural beings which is the division into gods, ancestors, and ghosts. According to my fieldwork and my experience in Taiwan, we can affirm that this way to divide these beings, and the structural relationships between them, is a basic concept among Taiwanese people. I would suggest that the most basic way to structure them in a schema, it is to consider the dead who have descendants who continue to pray (*bai* 拜) for them as ancestors, the dead who don’t have descendants who take care and pray for them, will become ghosts. The dead prayed to by a multitude of people, not necessarily descendants, are considered gods.

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33. Hsu, *Under the Ancestors’ Shadow*, 45.

34. Ahern, *The Cult of the Dead in a Chinese Village*, 201.

35. Ahern, 218.

36. Wolf, “Gods, ghosts, and ancestors,” 173.

37. Wolf, 165.

38. Wang, “Ancestors proper and peripheral,” 365.

Every person must pray for his own ancestors, so it is necessary that every generation finds a way to preserve and continue the patrilineal descent system. Otherwise, the soul of the dead will cease to be an ancestor, becoming a ghost who will bring misfortunes and troubles to the family<sup>39</sup>. This concept is very important and as we will see, still influences Catholic believers' conversions and their approach to the new religion. Again, as suggested by the scholars mentioned above, there are two basic places where to perform the ancestors' rites; at home, and at the family hall. This point also stresses the importance of the *zhengting* inside the Chinese homes, and also – in the same way – the importance of the ancestor hall. These spatial concepts are also very important in order to better understand the way in which these rites are performed by the Catholic faithful, both at home and in the Church.

## 2.2 The Ancestors' Rites and the other imported Religions

Ancestors' rites have been a very important topic not only among the Catholic Church but for all the foreign religions, which tried, in different periods and different ways, to enter the Chinese world. With regard to the Christian faith, we can see that the reverence of ancestors is forbidden by most of the different Protestant Churches. Ancestor rites are seen as heresy because, in the Protestant doctrine, believers can only venerate Jesus Christ, the only mediator between God and humanity. According to this viewpoint, contrary to the Catholics, Protestants don't recognize and venerate the figure of the Blessed Virgin Mary or other Catholic traditional Saints. In the same way, they cannot venerate their ancestors, as these rites are considered a type of superstition, and the rites performed in front of the ancestor's shrine and tablets, are a type of idolatry. Anyway, if we analyze the history of Christian Protestant evangelization, even if it is not so easy to find a common background due to the conspicuous number of these different Churches, we can find interesting evidence of the great discussion of ancestor rites and worship within the Christian world<sup>40</sup>. Except for occasional references to ancestors' worship in the published books and reports of missionaries, nearly all of which condemn the rites as "idolatrous", the problem was not brought before the missionary public until 1877, after seventy years of Protestant work in China. The reason for this is twofold: the problem of ancestors' worship had not been recognized as a problem, and Protestant missionaries, acknowledging no central authority, had never met as one body until 1877. In his paper, Addison traces the development, between 1877 and the present, of the attitude of Protestant missionaries in

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39. Lazzarotti, *Place, Alterity and Narration*, 105–106.

40. Addison, "Chinese Ancestor-Worship and Protestant Christianity."

China in regard to ancestors' worship. The significance of ancestors' worship in Chinese social life, and the problems raised thereby for missionaries are discussed, and it appears very clear how the decision to prohibit the ancestors' rites was long debated and hard for the Chinese.

The reverence for ancestors played an important role in the localization process of other religions in China. According to Weller<sup>41</sup> and other researchers such as Chun-Fang Yu<sup>42</sup>, Erik Zürcher<sup>43</sup> or Stephen Teiser<sup>44</sup>, every religion that has tried to enter China has changed its ideological core in order to adapt itself to the new cultural environment.

As it has been already discussed, today Buddhism is considered a Chinese religion, but historically, in order to enter and be accepted in China, Buddhism had to accept the worship of the ancestors. In the traditional Buddhist religion, (many would debate whether Buddhism could be considered a religion) there is no concept of the ancestor, so there is absolutely no need to venerate ancestors. The reincarnation theory basically eliminates the ancestor concept, because one's own ancestor – following the belief in the reincarnation cycle – may have already become an animal or another man or woman. Therefore, it would be completely useless to pray for or venerate ancestors. But now, even in the most important Taiwanese Buddhist temples, there are places dedicated to the ancestors. When the Buddhist tradition came into contact with Chinese cosmology, it needed to transform its ideological core to adapt itself to the new cultural environment<sup>45</sup>. Buddhism in China is, thus, a case of localization of religion<sup>46</sup>.

Teiser<sup>47</sup>, in his analysis of *yulanpenhui* (于蘭盆會), the “ghost festival” performed on the seventh month of the lunar calendar, at the time of the Tang dynasty<sup>48</sup>, analyzed how Buddhist cultural elements were grounded in indigenous practices. According to him, the name *yulanpen* is usually taken to mean the bowl in which offerings are placed for monks, with the intention of rescuing one ancestor from the fate of “hanging upside down in Hell”<sup>49</sup>. The festival combined the interests of the monks, householders, and ancestors in an annual celebration of renewal. Most residents of the city, laypeople with no exclusive religious affiliation, provided for the salvation of their ancestors by making offerings to the monastic community.

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41. Weller, *Unities and Diversities in Chinese Religion*.

42. Yu, *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara*.

43. Erik Zürcher, *The Buddhist conquest of China: the spread of adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China*, OCLC: 488646391 (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

44. Teiser, *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China*.

45. Weller, *Unities and Diversities in Chinese Religion*.

46. Zürcher, *The Buddhist conquest of China*.

47. Teiser, *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China*.

48. The Tang dynasty (唐朝) was an imperial dynasty of China that ruled from 618 to 907 AD, with an interregnum between 690 and 705. It was preceded by the Sui dynasty and followed by the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period.

49. Teiser, *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China*, 4.



Had the ghost festival been limited to a local cult phenomenon, it would hardly be known later in history. [Thus] Its ritual and material connection with the monastic community secured its place in Buddhist historiography, while its vital function in the ancestor's cult and the local community insured its survival into modern times<sup>50</sup>.

Teiser stressed how these rites were adopted by the imperial power. The ancestral tablets of previous emperors, kept in the Imperial Ancestral Temple, were brought out, and offerings were made to them in bowls decorated with golden kingfisher feathers. In most years, after completing the ritual obligation for his ancestors, the emperor then joined in the festivities at the large temple in the city. The pervasiveness of the ghost festival in Chinese medieval society went well beyond the multifaceted ritual of renewal celebrated throughout the empire by the emperor and the common folk<sup>51</sup>.

Other scholars such as Chun-Fang Yu<sup>52</sup> described this kind of religion's acculturation. The topic of this scholar was the localization process, analyzed through the transformation of the Buddhist Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, a male figure in India, and in his earliest Chinese appearances, into the female divinity Guanyin (觀音). Chun-Fang Yu's work describes the process through which Buddhism became a Chinese religion. Using different methodological approaches, including analysis of Buddhist scriptures, miracle stories, pilgrims' accounts, popular literature, and monastic and local gazetteers – as well as images of Guanyin and the evolution of his/her aesthetic representation – Chun-Fang Yu stresses the particular role Guanyin has played in the process. Furthermore, by clarifying the dramatic transformation that saw the (male) Indian bodhisattva Avalokitesvara into the (female) Chinese Guanyin; or again the change of minor figure Avalokitesvara into the universal savior and “Goddess of Mercy” worshiped by so many Chinese devotees; Chun-Fang implies that Guanyin is in a fact a Chinese creation<sup>53</sup>, “Chinese created indigenous forms of Guanyin, just as they composed indigenous sutras” and further explains that “new forms of Guanyin appearing in devotees' visions of the Bodhisattva as contained in some later miracle tales served as effective media for the domestication and transformation of Guanyin”<sup>54</sup>. By “domestication” Chun-Fang Yu refers to the “creation of images of Guanyin unauthorized by scriptures” or with “no scriptural basis”, aimed at presenting the goddess in a “way that would respond to the needs of the faithful”<sup>55</sup>. According to Batairwa the deep impact of this domestication could perhaps justify why most Chinese look at

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50. Teiser, 5.

51. Teiser, 6.

52. Yu, *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara*.

53. Batairwa, “What Do You Do When Visiting a Temple,” 74.

54. Yu, *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara*, 6.

55. Yu, 8.

Buddhism as a Chinese religion, forgetting the original atheistic orientation of Buddhism. The same process of metamorphosis has also shed light on the reason why during the first centuries, Buddhism was looked at as a special sect of Taoism. The reason will be simple, just as Taoism the “new religion” stressed the importance of meditation and encouraged a withdrawal from worldly affairs. Yet, the accommodation had introduced a radical component in the atheistic religion: Bodhisattva Guanyin was foremost a goddess, a savior to be worshiped and prayed and not only a role model to imitate<sup>56</sup>.

The concept of ancestors not only resisted any effort of “religious colonization” but also caused an internal change, or at least a big debate, inside these religions. Some scholars even believe it is possible to think of the rites of ancestors as a real religion<sup>57</sup>. In the next pages, I will try to show how the Han cultural system, and its internal structure based on the three supernatural categories described in many anthropological works, and especially the concepts of the ancestors, influenced Taiwanese Catholicism.

## 2.3 A Case of Cultural Encounter

I have introduced the idea that in order to understand the encounter between the Taiwanese cultural environment and the Catholic Church, it is necessary to analyze it as a contact between cultures. But what is culture? I believe that in some ways culture imposes meaning on the world; culture makes the world understandable through semiotic processes. “Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs”<sup>58</sup>; webs of meaning which form every aspect of our daily life, from managing interpersonal relationships to the performance of daily actions, such as how to get dressed or what to eat. The concept of religion falls within the boundaries of this environment of meanings. Following Geertz, we can try to define religion as a cultural system, “where culture means a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about attitudes toward life”<sup>59</sup>. Meanings, according to this definition, are embodied in symbols and these symbols are historically transmitted. But because history cannot belong only to one person, it follows that these patterns of meaning also belong to a community, in other words, these patterns of meaning are public.

Religion develops and discloses itself known within the bounds of its own peculiar symbolic system, even though most people consider it only

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56. Batairwa, “What Do You Do When Visiting a Temple,” 76.

57. Paulin Kubuya Batairwa, *Meaning and Controversy within Chinese Ancestor Religion* (Cham: Springer, 2018).

58. Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 4.

59. Geertz, “The interpretation of cultures,” 89.

as natural or supernatural. I do not dispute the natural or supernatural characteristics of religion, but we must consider and analyze religious phenomena as embodied in a specific cultural context. As Geertz reminds us, religious concepts spread beyond their specifically metaphysical contexts to provide a framework of general ideas of which a wide range of experiences—intellectual, emotional, moral—can be given meaningful forms<sup>60</sup>. According to these words, religion plays a very important role in the everyday life of people, giving everyone terms of judgment for the interpretation of life experiences, and for assigning them moral, intellectual, and emotional values.

Catholicism, entering Taiwan, brought a specific cosmology that was formed by centuries of experiences, ecumenical councils, and so on. As we will learn in the next chapter, when the Catholic Church arrived in Taiwan, it already carried with itself centuries of disputes and discussions about Chinese rites. Arriving in Taiwan, this religion met another cosmology, also built through different experiences and influenced by different political power, in other words, a different cosmology built through a different history.

Anthropologists like Sahlins<sup>61</sup> or other scholars like Todorov<sup>62</sup>, even though in pursuit of a different purpose – and arriving at different conclusions – have studied events like this: the encounter of two different cultures. A brief introduction to the works of these authors will help an understanding of why I consider these authors important in the analysis of my data and my experiences in the field.

Sahlins' work helped me to highlight how the same event, filtered by different cultural frameworks, gives life to stories and to a different history for each participant in the meeting. In his book "Islands of History", he analyzes the encounter between Captain Cook, the great British navigator, and Hawaii's native people. An encounter, according to Sahlins, between a cultural structure<sup>63</sup> (the Hawaiian cultural structure), and an event, (the arrival of Captain Cook). Sahlins emphasizes the importance of the myth in this process because according to him and his structuralist conception of culture, it is through the myth that native people interpret contact with a foreigner and completely new entity. As Sahlins also stresses, Hawaiians were not the only Polynesian people to interpret the advent of early Europeans as a spiritual vision. New Guineans and Melanesians speak in terms of "ghosts", "ancestors", "demons", "goblins", "non-human spirits", "culture heroes", "mythical beings" or "gods", terms that according to Sahlins<sup>64</sup> could be found in an extensive literature ranging from first-hand accounts through personal recollections to long-standing oral tradition. The point is that the

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60. Geertz, 123.

61. Sahlins, *Islands of History*.

62. Todorov, *The conquest of America*.

63. Sahlins, *Islands of History*, 103, 147.

64. Sahlins, *How "Natives" Think*, 177.

natives interpret the intrusive coming of Europeans in ways consistent with the Hawaiian people's own cosmological schemes.

For a deeper understanding of this theory, although Sahlins' work is very famous, I am now going to give a short summary of it. According to the author, Captain Cook accidentally arrived in the Hawaiian Islands, on the Kealakekua Bay, during a special ceremony, the Makahiki. The Makahiki was a ceremony that lasted four months and celebrated the annual revival of nature, where the central and most important event was the arrival of god Lono from his "house" on the sea, which was symbolized by one big tapa cloth and by a representation of a bird that was taken in processions in a clockwise direction around the island for one month. The Hawaiians used to divide the lunar year into two periods. One of them was the Makahiki time, during which the native priest of Kualii and the fertility god, Lono, peacefully regulated life, while the king was inactive. During the rest of the year, after the god Lono, turning away his bird's image, was gone again, a time of war came and the immigrant priest Nahulu and the virility god, Ku, were dominant, while the king was active again. Captain Cook arrived during the Makahiki, at a good time, from the right direction and in the right way. During the day procession, the sea was the principal taboo: no canoes were allowed to venture off. But because at the time Lono had arrived by sea, the people assumed that it was proper for them to go out to sea in their canoes; native Hawaiian people were convinced that Lono (Cook) was really a god (Akua) and his vessel was a temple (Helau)<sup>65</sup>.

Because of this particularity and well-synchronized temporal conjunctures, the Hawaiians considered Cook as their god Lono. The captain was therefore consecrated as such by elaborate rituals in the big temple of the island, called Hikiau. After this, the Captain, who was exploring the Pacific Ocean with the goal of discovering the Northwest passage, again accidentally in accord with the Hawaiian calendar, left the island the same way he came. However, shortly after leaving the Big Island, the foremast of his ship, the *Resolution*, broke and the ships returned to Kealakekua Bay for repairs. But by sailing into the bay again on that particular day the great navigator was out of phase with the Hawaiian ritual cycle<sup>66</sup>. So, as Sahlins argued, the problem was not just empirical or practical, it was a cosmological problem, a situation that implied social and political problems: Cook's return in this season was sinister to the ruling chiefs because it presented a mirror image of Makahiki politics. Bringing the god ashore during the triumph of the king could reopen the whole issue of sovereignty<sup>67</sup>. The relations between the British and Hawaiian deteriorated, and then the natives took one of Cook's small boats. Cook, who did not want the natives to think they had an advantage over him, decided to use force.

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65. Sahlins, *Islands of History*, 39.

66. Sahlins, 78.

67. Sahlins, 81.

According to the native's point of view, this situation was no other than the god Lono (Cook) wading ashore with his warrior to confront the king<sup>68</sup>. In the final ritual inversion, which reproduces the ultimate fate of Lono, Cook's body would be offered in sacrifice by the Hawaiian king. Cook was transformed from the initial position of the divine beneficiary of the sacrifice to the position of its victim<sup>69</sup>. Following Sahlins, this transition from beneficiary to victim came suddenly, when the king started to perceive Cook as his mortal enemy. This explains how, when all social relations begin to change their signs, a structural crisis develops.

This is the history narrated by Sahlins, a concept of history that is made by a succession of changes in cultural structures or schemes. The changes happen when a structure meets with an event. Sahlins bases his theory on structure, event, and the structure of the conjuncture<sup>70</sup>, he brings the structure into the historical process and creates a new way to interpret history. And this theory is, and I think that it will remain, his bigger contribution to the historical sciences.

Starting from another point of view, Tzvetan Todorov – a French-Bulgarian philosopher, one of the most influential voices in the European cultural world – in the book “The Conquest of America, The Discover of the Other”<sup>71</sup>, analyzes the same topic, the encounter of two different cultures. As his book's title already shows us, the focus of his work is the “discovery of the other” as a process that is produced by the encounter between two different identities (persons, societies, cultures, etc.).

In this perspective, Todorov chooses a unique and exemplary historical moment: the discovery of America. This choice was dictated by many factors. First of all, at the time of this big discovery, European people already knew that other people inhabited their world, they already knew the existence of African peoples and in similar ways, they also already knew about the presence and of course the existence of Chinese and other Asian peoples. The discovery of America, for European people, represented the encounter with the “absolute other” with a real and in some ways inexplicable otherness. This theory was also endorsed by many scholars<sup>72</sup> who analyzed this aspect. According to their studies, at the time of the discovery of America, and most important of American Indians, a very big discussion was raised in Europe in order to define the nature of these people. If they really were men, consequentially they were also created by God because they were sons

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68. Sahlins, 82.

69. Sahlins, 83.

70. Located between cultural expectations of what an event should look like, what, and how, it should mean, and how individuals exploit it for their own, historically meaningful purposes, the “conjuncture” is the space where history is produced.

71. Todorov, *The conquest of America*.

72. Peter Hulme, “The Spontaneous Hand of Nature: Savagery, Colonialism, and the Enlightenment,” in *The Enlightenment and its shadows*, ed. L. J. Jordanova (London ; New York: Routledge, 1990), 16–34; Margaret T Hodgen, *Early anthropology in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964).

of Adam; otherwise, if they were animals – like big apes – it meant that they could be considered slaves.

With the objective of analyzing the encounter between the self and the other<sup>73</sup>, Todorov chose the history of the discovery of America not only because it was an example of an extreme and exemplary encounter, but also because according to him, it is in the fact the conquest of America that heralded and established the present identity of Europeans<sup>74</sup>. Analyzing the history of the conquest, Todorov's interest aroused several doubts in his mind about the conquest made by the Spaniards. Why Spaniards obtained so many lightning victories with a limited number of soldiers when the inhabitants of America were superior in number to their adversaries and fighting on their own territory? To confine ourselves to the conquest of Mexico, how are we to account for the fact that Cortes, leading a few hundred men, managed to seize the kingdom of Montezuma, who commanded several hundred thousand?<sup>75</sup>. The answer cannot be found if these facts are not examined within a cultural context.

As in the case of Captain Cook, Cortes was regarded as a god, Quetzalcoatl. This god is both a historical (a leader) and a legendary (a divinity) figure. At some moment in the past, he was forced to leave his kingdom and flee to the east (toward the Atlantic); he vanished, but according to certain versions of the myth, he promised to return someday to reclaim his kingdom. But Todorov's point is different from Sahlins's it does not establish itself on the myth to understand this kind of encounter. Rather the author analyzes how the Aztec culture, basing itself on ritual and on divination and prophecies that were invariably based on memory because past and future were considered as the same thing<sup>76</sup> – produces a collision between a ritual world and a unique event. The effect of this collision was Montezuma's incapacity to produce appropriate and effective messages<sup>77</sup>. The Spanish invasion created a radically new, entirely unprecedented situation, in which the Spanish (but we could say "European") art of improvisation matters more than that of ritual<sup>78</sup>.

Starting from these reflections, Todorov tries to give a cultural answer to these facts. Therefore, he divided the book in four important moments of the colonization process: Discovery, which concerns Columbus and the discovery of America, and in which the author analyzes the relationships between Columbus and the Indians and interprets the personage of Columbus in a hermeneutic way. The second part of the book is dedicated to the Conquest and to the greatest conqueror Cortes. In this part, the author analyzes the reasons behind the Spanish victory, putting in relief the differ-

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73. Todorov, *The conquest of America*, 3.

74. Todorov, 5.

75. Todorov, 53.

76. Todorov, 85.

77. Todorov, 87.

78. Todorov, 87.

ent ways in which Cortes and Montezuma – according to their own culture – interpreted the signs of the conquest. The third chapter is dedicated to the Love, represented by the personage of De las Casas, the first American Catholic Bishop. In this chapter, Todorov explains the meaning of terms like Take and Destroy, Equality and Inequality, Slavery, Colonialism, and Communication. The fourth chapter analyzes the Knowledge. Here the author gives us his typology of the relationships with the other and explains the importance of characters like the “mestizo” Duran and the phenomenon of the miscegenation of cultures. Finally, Todorov presents the work of the Spaniard Franciscan Sahagun as a way to understand the other. With this book, the Franciscan tried to acquire the knowledge of the other in order to realize his own objectives, in this case, the conversion of Indians.

According to Todorov, conquest, love and knowledge are autonomous and, in a sense, elementary forms of conduct<sup>79</sup>. Discovery is in another sense more linked with land than with man, and the main protagonist of the discovery, Columbus, is described only in negative terms: he does not love, does not know, and does not identify himself. By means of these three steps (discovery, as we have seen, is not taken into consideration by Todorov), the author builds his own pattern in order to understand the relations with the others. In this encounter, we can find three different kinds of typologies. First of all, there is the value judgment that Todorov calls the axiological level. At this level a person can recognize the nature of the other as good or bad, he loves or does not love him, the other is his equal or his inferior. A second typology is what Todorov calls the action of rapprochement or distancing, an action that the author describes as a praxeological level. That means that a person can accept and embrace the other’s values, he may identify himself with the other or he identifies the other with himself and imposes his own image upon the other. Between these two extremes, there is also a third term, which is neutrality or even indifference. Thirdly, there is a third level, the epistemic one: a person knows or is ignorant of the other’s identity, he recognizes the identity of the other and he is also able to better understand his own identity<sup>80</sup>.

Of course, there are relations between these three levels, but no strict implications. A person can know very well and recognize the identity of a certain culture but this does not mean that he likes it. Or he may like it but he doesn’t recognize the other’s identity. Also here, as in the work of Sahlins, we meet the same focus: people use their own cultural views, their own cosmology in order to understand and interpret a new event. The next pages will demonstrate that also in Taiwan, at least from what I saw during my fieldwork, this kind of process happened, and it is – in some ways – still going on.

I generally agree with Sahlins and Todorov and their idea of considering culture as the most important element of interpretation that men use to

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79. Todorov, 186.

80. Todorov, 185.

understand and receive a new event, although there are some small – but fundamental – differing points with which my position doesn't coincide.

First of all, I don't believe that we can define culture as a structure (even if dynamic), in my own view, culture is a more dynamic and creative entity. To consider culture as a structure means to lose a lot of different positions that – at the same time – live within the same cultural environment. Borrowing from the famous linguist Noam Chomsky's critique of structuralism<sup>81</sup>, I also believe that structuralism loses sight of a fundamental problem: the creativity of language. According to Chomsky, in order to comprehend the functioning of a language, it is not enough to only understand its structure, as it is not enough to describe the components and the relationships between them, and it is also not enough to analyze and classify them.

Structuralism, according to Chomsky, cannot answer the question: "How is it that the speaker of a language is able to produce and understand an indefinite number of sentences that he has never heard first or that even can never be pronounced before by somebody?" Chomsky answers this question by claiming that innate creativity exists, which is governed by linguistic rules, and continuously produces new sentences. Creativity is considered one of the basic characteristic ways to use a language. While respecting the limited number of words and of existing rules, we are inclined to create something new that goes beyond the mechanical ways of the grammatical rules, even if the "something new" is in some ways generated by these rules.

Taking these ideas, thoughts back into context, one can suppose that even though we live in the same symbolic universe, it is possible that we assign two different meanings to the same symbol. This phenomenon happens because the symbols are the same, but the potential to interpret them or put them into relationships is infinite.

In the same way, I believe that the three steps suggested by Todorov are a process in which these steps are not fixed once and for all. What I mean is that in the moment of the encounter with the other, people can opt for and adopt one of the three points of view proposed by Todorov, and more importantly, they can change points of view according to their needs or with the contingencies of that moment, because of this the other can be my friend (and so accept the new faith), but I can change my mind and consider the other an enemy if the circumstances of my existence changed in the meantime. If culture is a public system of meanings, everybody who lives in the same cultural context can arbitrarily choose the meaning apt to interpret one specific event. Of course, this arbitrariness is always linked to each individual's personality, knowledge, situation, economic contingency, and so on. Arbitrariness is mediation, a negotiation between the public system of meanings and the particular conditions, the everyday life, and

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81. Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic structures* [in English] (The Hague: Mouton, 1957); Noam Chomsky, *Cartesian linguistics: a chapter in the history of rationalist thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966); Noam Chomsky, *Topics in the theory of generative grammar*. (The Hague: Mouton, 1966).



the practical contingency of each man. In my view considering culture as a structure means losing most part of these “arbitrary choices” and in this way, we would consider history just as a “mythological product” of the ruling class (kings, priests, political parties, etc.).

The meaning of this could be found in another of Todorov’s works, this time on Bakhtin<sup>82</sup>. Following Bakhtin, Todorov argues that in structuralism, there is but one subject: the scholar himself. Things are changed into notions (of variable abstraction); but the subject can never become a notion (he speaks and answers for himself)<sup>83</sup>. According to Bakhtin the importance of a language does not reside in the textual production but in the “utterance”, and the most important feature of the utterance is dialogism, that is, its intertextual dimension<sup>84</sup>.

## 2.4 Person as a *jian* 間: The Space where Cultures Meet

According to all we discussed above, it is possible to propound that history is not only arranged culturally, but history is a process that contains symbolic systems with internal contradictions. In this process, the mythical structure is important but just as important is the daily life, because if it is true that culture is dynamic and that history is a process, remember that for common people culture is something static and concrete, fixed in the everyday practices that a person has performed since childhood.

In my view, the point where this encounter takes place is the person. Considering the person as the space where this encounter takes place, where these two cultural systems play their game, cultural systems need to be understood only in order to understand the elements by which the person plays the game because the rules are arbitrarily chosen in accordance with the “needs and wants” of the person.

Sahlins’ thesis that social communication is as much an empirical risk as a worldly reference, and that the effect of such risks can be radical innovation<sup>85</sup>, is basically right. These risks should not be considered as risks, but rather as culture itself. As Gramsci<sup>86</sup> pointed out, in order to understand a structure, we must get a movement and its own contradictions; the contradictions are an integral part of the structure.

Stressing the concept that the person is a space, the anthropologist’s goal will be to analyze the encounter in itself, in this way both protagonists of this encounter, the Han people and the Catholic missionaries would be

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82. Tzvetan Todorov and Wlad Godzich, *Mikhail Bakhtin: the dialogical principle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

83. Todorov and Godzich, 21.

84. Todorov and Godzich, X.

85. Sahlins, *Islands of History*, X.

86. Antonio Gramsci, Valentino Gerratana, and Istituto Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere* (Torino: G. Einaudi, 1975).

considered as the anthropologist's other. In my view, Sahlins work tends to emphasize too much how the Hawaiians interpreted and responded to the event represented by the arrival of Captain Cook. The European symbolic system (or in other terms cultural structure) is not considered in terms that help us to better understand the Hawaiians' actions<sup>87</sup>. This is because the author – probably unconsciously – puts himself on the westerner's side.

In fact, the European actions don't need a deep and accurate description, such as the Hawaiian one, because their actions are considered purely common sense, something that everybody (who is European) can easily understand. This is, in my view, the critical issue that Obeyesekere<sup>88</sup> addresses in Sahlins' work (a critical issue with which I don't completely agree), because at the same time, Obeyesekere faces the same problem. If Sahlins' place is within the Western side, then Obeyesekere look only inside the native side and at the construction of their rationality<sup>89</sup>. It seems to me that these two scholars overemphasized "how the natives think" and did not emphasize enough the concrete, dialectical essence of this event.

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87. Sahlins, *Islands of History*, 19–21.

88. Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

89. Obeyesekere, 60.