

Ceng Beng in Christian Perspective: Harmonizing Faith and Tradition in Chinese Culture

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Abstract

This article discusses the relationship between the Ceng Beng practice, a Chinese cultural tradition, and the Christian faith among the Chinese community. Ceng Beng, a festival to honor ancestors through tomb visits and ritual offerings, presents theological challenges for Chinese Christians, as Christianity emphasizes monotheism and worshiping only God. The Chinese Christian community faces a dilemma between preserving ancestral traditions and adhering to Christian teachings. This article identifies three main approaches to responding to Ceng Beng: rejection of the practice, modification of the rituals to align more closely with Christian teachings, and acceptance of the practice in a less ritualistic form. The role of the church and family significantly influences individuals' decisions on whether to follow or modify the Ceng Beng practice. The article also highlights the importance of a pastoral approach that is sensitive to cultural values, as well as the need for the church to provide relevant and contextual theological education. The findings show a diversity of views among Chinese Christians regarding this tradition and emphasize the importance of the church accommodating these differing perspectives with wisdom.

Keywords:

Ceng Beng, Chinese Christianity, Chinese Tradition, Ancestral Worship, Religious Adaptation, Church.

Abstract

This article discusses the relationship between the practice of Ceng Beng, a Chinese cultural tradition, and Christian faith among the Chinese community. Ceng Beng, which is a holiday to honor ancestors through tomb pilgrimages and worship rituals, poses theological challenges for Chinese Christians as Christianity emphasizes monotheism and the worship of God alone. Chinese Christians face a dilemma between maintaining ancestral traditions and following Christian teachings. This article identifies three main approaches in response to Ceng Beng: rejection of the practice, modification of the practice to make it more compatible with Christianity, and acceptance of the practice in a less ritualistic form. The role of the church and family greatly influences the individual's decision to follow or change the practice of Ceng Beng. The article also emphasizes the importance of culturally sensitive pastoral approaches, as well as the need for churches to provide relevant and contextual theological education. The results show that there is a diversity of views among Chinese Christians in addressing this tradition, and the importance of the church to accommodate these different views wisely.

Keywords:

Ceng Beng, Chinese Christian, Chinese tradition, ancestor worship,
Religious Adaptation, Church

INTRODUCTION

Ceng Beng is an important tradition in Chinese culture that is routinely celebrated every year, usually on April 4 or 5, as a time to remember ancestors. The celebration involves various rituals, including pilgrimages to the graves of ancestors and making offerings, in the hope of gaining blessings and protection from the spirits of the ancestors. However, for Chinese who have converted to Christianity, Ceng Beng often poses a dilemma, as some elements of the ritual are considered to be in conflict with Christian teachings that emphasize the worship of God alone. Nonetheless, many Chinese Christians continue to observe the tradition with certain adjustments, or even choose to avoid it altogether. This phenomenon raises important questions regarding how Chinese Christians reconcile their cultural practices with their religious beliefs, especially when it comes to honoring ancestors and maintaining the sanctity of the Christian faith (Mair 2015, 52).

The importance of this research lies in the attempt to understand more deeply the relationship between the Ceng Beng tradition and Christian religious views in the context of Chinese culture. As a community with a rich cultural background, Chinese Christians are often at a crossroads between maintaining their cultural heritage and following the teachings of their newly embraced religion. In this case, Ceng Beng is not only seen as a ritual of honoring ancestors, but also as a symbol of the Chinese community's spiritual dependence on the presence of the spirits of their ancestors. Christianity, on the other hand, teaches that worship is only given to God, and there is no place for intermediaries such as ancestral spirits in worship practices. Therefore, understanding how the Chinese Christian community responds to and adapts to the Ceng Beng tradition is highly relevant to illustrate the dynamics of their religious life (He, 2012, 74).

The issues that arise in this topic are not only related to Christian theology and Chinese cultural values, but also to the social and cultural identity of Chinese Christians themselves. Many individuals who are born into Chinese families with strong Ceng Beng traditions, and later choose to convert to Christianity, are faced with the tension between two often conflicting worlds (Jebadu, 2009, 1). Along with social change and increasing

globalization, Chinese Christians are also increasingly open to a more diverse range of theological views, including those that are more tolerant of their local culture. However, the influence of traditional culture remains strong, and is often difficult to change, especially among the older generation. Thus, it is important to explore how Christianity, which is often seen as a "foreign" religion in the context of Chinese culture, can coexist with long-established traditions, such as Ceng Beng (Lin, 2018, 92).

One aspect that needs to be considered in this research is the different understanding of the concept of worship in Christianity and Chinese culture. In Christianity, worship can only be given to God, and this is the main principle that distinguishes Christianity from other religions that teach ancestor or spirit worship. In contrast, in Chinese tradition, Ceng Beng is seen more as a form of deep respect for deceased ancestors, and not as worship in the religious sense. Hence, the question arises whether Chinese Christians can still carry out this tradition without feeling that they are violating their religious teachings. Some Chinese churches even provide guidance on how Christians can still honor their ancestors, while maintaining the integrity of their faith, in ways that are consistent with Christian principles (Lee, 2020, 45).

Overall, the purpose of this research is to investigate and examine the various perspectives that exist regarding the relationship between the Christian faith and the tradition of Ceng Beng in Chinese culture. This research will analyze how Chinese Christians respond to the Ceng Beng tradition, both from theological, cultural, and social perspectives. In this context, it is important to consider the various factors that influence an individual or groups decision in choosing to participate or not participate in this tradition. Is the influence of family, church, or the surrounding community the dominant factor in the decision-making? In addition, this research also aims to offer insights into how Chinese churches should provide guidance in addressing this cultural practice, as well as how Chinese Christians can adapt the tradition to their religious teachings wisely and not at the expense of the core values of the Christian faith (Wei, 2017, 88).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach to explore the relationship between the Ceng Beng tradition and the Christian faith in Chinese culture. This approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of how individuals and groups view the practice of Ceng Beng, and how they harmonize it with the teachings of

Christianity. The method used was an in-depth literature study with members of the Chinese Christian community. These two approaches complement each other to provide a more comprehensive picture of the dynamics between culture and religion (Raco, 2010; Lee, 2020, 32).

The literature study was conducted by analyzing books, journal articles, and church documents that discuss the relationship between Christian faith and traditional Chinese practices, particularly Ceng Beng. This literature included texts that address Christian teachings on ancestor veneration, such as church guidelines on Chinese cultural practices in a Christian context. The research also involved secondary sources that discuss the practice of Ceng Beng in Chinese culture in general, which helped provide an understanding of the historical and social context of this tradition (Zhang, 2017, 89)

The research also involves interviews with members of the Chinese Christian community to obtain their first-hand views on how they manage the practice of Ceng Beng in their faith life. The data obtained will be analyzed thematically, to identify patterns in the way individuals or groups respond to this dilemma, as well as to provide better insights into how religious and cultural values can coexist or even conflict in this context. The data obtained through the literature study is then thematically analyzed, where certain patterns in participants' responses and interpretations of the literature sources are identified to provide a better understanding of how Chinese Christians interact with the Ceng Beng tradition in the context of their Christian faith (Moleong & Surjaman, 2017; Yang, 2018, 103).

RESULTS

This section describes the various views and experiences of Chinese Christians regarding the practice of the Ceng Beng tradition, as well as how they respond to the dilemma between maintaining their cultural traditions and following the teachings of Christianity. Based on interviews with 20 individuals representing various Chinese churches in Indonesia, as well as a literature review on Christian theology and Chinese culture, it was found that there are different ways in which Chinese Christians perceive the Ceng Beng tradition. These results can be grouped into several main themes: (1) rejection of the practice of Ceng Beng, (2) modifications in the implementation of Ceng Beng, (3) full acceptance of Ceng Beng with theological adjustments, and (4) the influence of family and church in influencing personal decisions.

Opposition to the Practice of Ceng Beng

Most respondents from conservative Chinese Christian churches expressed opposition to the practice of Ceng Beng. They consider that the ritual is not in line with Christian teachings, especially in terms of ancestor worship which is considered a form of worship that is incompatible with Christian monotheism. This view is often found among churches that have a stricter interpretation of the Bible. According to them, the worship or veneration of ancestral spirits contradicts the tenets of the Christian faith, which only recognizes God as the sole object of worship. This view is affirmed by some pastors who consider that Christians should disassociate themselves from cultural practices that are incompatible with their faith, even though such traditions have long existed in Chinese society (Lee, 2020, 39).

Moreover, most respondents who follow this view revealed that they prefer not to participate in Ceng Beng celebrations and prefer to replace them with other forms of respect that are more in line with the Christian faith, such as praying for deceased parents or family. For them, Ceng Beng celebrations are not just a matter of custom, but also a matter of spiritual beliefs that must be upheld in accordance with the teachings of the Bible (Zhang, 2017, 105). In line with this, Lee (2020) in his research revealed that the rejection of ancestral traditions in a Christian context is often due to the perception that the culture contains elements that contradict the Christian faith's teachings on life after death and God's role in the lives of human beings.

Modifications in the Implementation of Ceng Beng

The second group is those who choose to modify the implementation of Ceng Beng to be more in line with Christian teachings. Individuals in this group still perform Ceng Beng, but they change some elements of the ritual so that it does not involve elements of ancestor worship. For example, they still visit their ancestors' graves but do not make offerings of food or items that symbolize worship, but only flowers and candles as symbols of respect without the intention of "feeding" the ancestral spirits. These modifications show an attempt to preserve cultural heritage while still adhering to Christian teachings on the worship of God alone.

Some respondents explained that they use this occasion to reflect and pray for their deceased relatives, with the aim that their spirits have a good place before God, in accordance with Christian teachings on salvation and eternal life (He, 2012, 81). This is in

line with the views expressed by Zhang (2017) who states that Chinese Christians often seek ways to integrate respect for ancestors in a way that does not contradict the basic tenets of the Christian faith. In this case, the modification of the implementation of Ceng Beng is a form of adaptation to the broader social and spiritual context.

Full Acceptance of Ceng Beng with Theological Adjustments

On the other hand, there is a group that is more accepting of the Ceng Beng tradition in its original form, but with more flexible theological adjustments. This group considers that honoring ancestors should not be seen as a form of worship that contradicts Christian teachings, as long as there is no intention to worship the ancestral spirits as gods or intermediaries between people and God. For them, Ceng Beng is rather seen as a form of respect for deceased parents and ancestors, which is in line with biblical teachings on the importance of honoring parents. According to some respondents, this tradition should not be avoided, as they believe that honoring ancestors is part of the moral values taught in Christianity (Yang, 2018, 140).

This view is rooted in the basic tenets of Christianity that teach love and respect for elders. As Yang notes, there is a more inclusive understanding among some Chinese Christian churches that allows people to continue following Ceng Beng traditions as long as there are no elements involving worship or rituals that are deemed incompatible with biblical teachings (Zhang, 2017, 112). Some Chinese churches in major Asian cities even provide guidance to their congregations on the proper way to honor ancestors without violating the tenets of the Christian faith. This shows an attempt to accommodate both cultural and religious dimensions in the daily lives of Chinese Christians.

Family and Church Influence on Decision Making

In addition to theological and cultural factors, the results of this study also show that family and church play an important role in decision-making regarding participation in Ceng Beng. Some respondents revealed that their decision to perform or not to perform Ceng Beng was heavily influenced by family influence. For many Chinese families, maintaining tradition and relationships with extended family is very important. Therefore, they tend to prefer to participate in Ceng Beng even though they have embraced Christianity. However, on the other hand, there are also those who feel pressure from the church not to participate in the tradition.

Churches are often places where stricter interpretations of religious teachings are taught, and this affects congregants' attitudes towards cultural practices such as Ceng Beng. Most of the more conservative churches brief their congregations on the importance of breaking away from ancestral traditions that are deemed contrary to Christian teachings. This is also seen in the views of some more liberal churches, which tend to give congregants the freedom to adapt cultural traditions to their personal beliefs (He, 2012, 92).

Some respondents also pointed out that social pressure from the church community could influence their decision to join or leave Ceng Beng. In some cases, this pressure comes not only from the church, but also from older family members who expect their children to maintain family traditions. This creates a tension between personal will and family or church expectations that could influence their decision (Yang, 2018, 151).

Overall, the results of this study reveal that Chinese Christians' attitudes towards the Ceng Beng tradition vary widely, depending on theological views, the level of church conservatism, and the influence of family and social community. While most choose to avoid or modify the Ceng Beng rituals, some accept the tradition with adjustments in accordance with Christian teachings. This shows that Chinese Christians are able to find a middle ground between maintaining their cultural identity and following their religious beliefs. Therefore, it is important for Chinese churches to provide guidance that is sensitive to the social and cultural context of their congregation in bridging these two worlds (Lee, 2020, 45).

DISCUSSION

This discussion aims to interpret the research results regarding the practice of Ceng Beng in the context of Christian faith among the Chinese community. In examining the interaction between Chinese culture, which is rich in traditions of honoring ancestors, and Christian teachings that emphasize monotheism, it is found that there are diverse ways in which Chinese Christians face and respond to this cultural dilemma. As a starting point, it is important to understand the two main interacting dimensions: first, Christian teachings on the worship of God as the only one worthy of worship, and second, Chinese cultural values regarding respect for deceased ancestors. This discussion will explore the ways in which Chinese Christians adapt, change or even reject the Ceng Beng tradition

based on their theological and social views, taking into account factors such as church, family and community influences.

Of the many Chinese cultures and traditions, one of the most popular is the Ceng Beng holiday (Ceng/Qing - Clean, Beng/Ming - Light), also known as grave prayers. This holiday is held once a year, in the third month of the lunar year. Ceng beng tradition is indeed a paternalistic cultural concept (Xiao-Dao) in ethical principles called *Hao/Hauw* (*Filial Piety*) mixed with elements of mythology and superstition (Cheung, et al., 2022; Ching, 1993). The word Ceng Beng (Hokkien dialect) is one of the Chinese astronomical terms, which is based on one of the 24 positions of the sun. In this position, sunlight is believed to shine brighter (Tjioe, et al., 2023, 33-49; Cheung, et al, 2022; Li, 2013, 211-225; Fong, 2016, 219-235).

According to folklore, the origin of this ceng beng tradition dates back to the Han dynasty (202 BC-220 AD) and became increasingly popular during the Tang dynasty (618-907) during the leadership of Emperor Xuanzong. On Ceng Beng Day, Chinese will visit the graves of their ancestors. At that time they clean the tomb, burn prayer paper and burn incense (hio), clean the grave, give offerings in the form of fruit or wet cakes and several other things. On the day of Ceng Beng they not only send prayers for the spirit's path to be clean (Ceng) and bright (Beng) but they also pray for the blessing of parents for work, marriage, and others, although in its development things like this are no longer fully done (Ivory & Tondok, 2024, 12643-12652).

Respect for parents in Confucianism, which is thick with Ceng Beng culture, actually also emphasizes filial piety to parents during life and not when they are no longer there. When they are alive, they are not filial piety, but when they are gone, they burn incense/paper, but it is all useless and useless. Ceng Beng is a continuation of filial piety after they are no longer around. The belief of the tiong hoa people, teaches that death is not the end or "point" because there will be a continuation or "comma". When parents die then they will be in the celestial kingdom led by the celestial emperor. Heaven and earth are interconnected so that there can be communication between heaven and earth. Communication from the earth is done by giving offerings in the form of offerings, sacrifices, while the will of the sky can be known by humans through divination. In the original tradition, Ceng Beng culture begins with a prayer ritual that not only sends prayers for the spirit's path to be clean (Ceng) and bright (Beng) but also asks to be blessed, asking for forgiveness for mistakes. The process of this forgiveness prayer ritual

is preceded by the cold meal feast day which is held one day before Ceng Beng day. This ritual is carried out by eating cold food (it cannot be warm or warmed).

Theological Challenges in Ceng Beng Tradition

Ceng Beng as part of the Chinese cultural tradition does contain elements that clash with Christian teachings. In the Ceng Beng tradition, there is the practice of worshiping ancestral spirits, which although culturally considered as a form of respect, in a Christian perspective is considered a form of worship that is not in accordance with biblical teachings (Creel, 1990, 34). Christianity teaches that only God is worthy of worship and any form of worship of intermediaries, including ancestral spirits, is a form of deviation from the true faith. This becomes a major dilemma for Chinese Christians who are caught between maintaining their cultural traditions and being faithful to their Christian faith. As noted by Lee, for many conservative Chinese churches, the main problem lies in the understanding of Christian monotheism that requires believers to worship only God and avoid any form of worship of other beings, including ancestral spirits (Lee, 2020, 39).

For many respondents in this study, the church's teachings on the worship of God alone were the main reason for rejecting the performance of Ceng Beng in its traditional form. They assume that the ritual inherently contains elements that cannot be harmonized with Christian teachings (Ong, 2021, 44-59). In line with this view, Zhang in his research points out that many Chinese Christians feel that they should break away from traditions that include elements of spiritualism that are incompatible with their teachings, including the veneration of departed ancestors (Zhang, 2017, 105). However, while many reject these ritualistic aspects, many also strive to maintain other forms of reverence that do not contradict Christian teachings.

Modification of Ceng Beng Practices: An Adaptive Approach

In response to this theological dilemma, some Chinese Christians have chosen to modify the practice of Ceng Beng to make it more compatible with their religious teachings. They still visit the graves of their ancestors, but remove the element of spirit worship, such as giving food or items as offerings. Instead, they offer flowers or candles as a symbol of respect without linking it to belief in the power of ancestral spirits. These modifications are an attempt to adapt cultural traditions to Christian principles, as

expressed by Yang, who states that many Chinese Christians seek a middle ground between honoring ancestors and following stricter Christian teachings (Yang, 2018, 132).

Moreover, these modifications often involve changes in the purpose of Ceng Beng itself. In Chinese tradition, Ceng Beng is often understood as a way to care for the spirits of ancestors, in the hope of receiving blessings or protection. In the Christian context, many respondents replaced this purpose with prayers for the souls of the departed, hoping that they would find a good place before God. This suggests an attempt to maintain closeness to ancestors, but within a Christian theological framework that is more consistent with biblical teachings on the afterlife (He, 2012, 81).

According to He, such modifications are not uncommon among Chinese Christians. He states that Chinese Christians in some places have long sought to find a balance between their cultural heritage and their new religious beliefs. This involves a dynamic process of adjustment, whereby traditional elements deemed contrary to Christian teachings, such as ancestor worship, are replaced with ways that are more compatible with the Christian faith (Lee, 2020, 41).

The Role of Family and Church in the Adaptation Process

One of the main factors influencing how Chinese Christians respond to the Ceng Beng tradition is the influence of family and church. In Chinese society, families have a very important role in maintaining and preserving traditions, including the Ceng Beng tradition. Many families expect their children to continue practicing this tradition despite embracing Christianity. This social pressure often causes tension between the younger generation, who feel bound by their religious teachings, and the older generation, who hold on to traditional values. According to Zhang, Chinese families are often the main source of pressure to perform Ceng Beng, even if the individual has converted to Christianity (Zhang, 2017, 112).

The church also plays a significant role in this adaptation process. Most Chinese churches, particularly the more conservative ones, tend to respond to the practice of Ceng Beng with strictness, viewing it as a form of deviance that needs to be abandoned. Some churches even provide clear theological direction on why Christians should not engage in Ceng Beng practices, arguing that biblical teachings emphasize that believers should avoid any form of worship or reverence to other than God. However, more liberal churches

are more likely to give congregants the freedom to adapt the tradition to their beliefs (He, 2012, 92).

In this study, many respondents revealed that the influence of the church and family largely determined their decision to participate or not in Ceng Beng. For some individuals, the church became a place that provided guidance in navigating this cultural and religious dilemma, whereas for others, their decision was influenced more by family expectations to maintain tradition (Yang, 2018, 151).

Awareness of Diversity of Views in Chinese Christian Communities

One of the key findings of this study is the diversity of views among Chinese Christians regarding the practice of Ceng Beng. Some individuals cling to a theological rejection of the practice, while others choose to accept or modify it to make it more compatible with Christian teachings. This suggests that there is room for more flexible interpretation of Christian teachings within the local cultural context (Wong, 2015, 1-22). As noted by Lee (2020, 45), although many conservative Christian churches view certain cultural practices as a threat to the sanctity of faith, the reality is that many Chinese Christians are able to find a middle ground that allows them to stick to their faith while maintaining cultural elements that are important to their identity.

This view is also in line with He's (2012) idea that the understanding of religion is not monolithic among Chinese Christians. He notes that many churches in Asia, especially those in multicultural communities, tend to be more open to local cultural appropriation, including in the case of Ceng Beng. This means that local cultural influences can play an important role in shaping the way Chinese Christians respond to their ancestral traditions.

Implications for the Chinese Church and Chinese Christian Community

The implications of this study for Chinese churches and Chinese Christian communities are quite significant, given the challenges faced in harmonizing Christian teachings with Chinese cultural traditions, especially in the context of Ceng Beng practices. Some important implications that can be identified are as follows:

1. **The Importance of Culturally Sensitive Pastoral Approaches.** Chinese churches need to develop pastoral approaches that are more sensitive to the local cultural values upheld by their people. In the context of Ceng Beng, many Chinese Christians feel the tension

- between following the traditions of their ancestors and embracing the monotheistic Christian faith. Therefore, churches should be able to provide understanding guidance, helping congregants to understand Christian teachings without losing their cultural identity (Lee, 2020, 39). A flexible and loving pastoral approach can help believers feel welcome in the Christian community without having to unilaterally abandon their cultural heritage (1 Corinthians 13:4) suggesting that the church needs to respond to this challenge with love and patience
2. **Church Empowerment in Providing Relevant Theological Education.** Churches need to play an active role in providing relevant and contextualized theological education to their congregations, especially regarding theological understandings that relate to ancestral cultures and traditions. Such education can help Chinese Christians to understand why certain practices, such as Ceng Beng, may be seen as contrary to Christian teachings, as well as provide alternative ways of honoring ancestors that are in line with the tenets of the Christian faith. In addition, churches should provide space for open discussions on these cultural issues, so that congregants feel empowered to make wise decisions (Zhang, 2017, 105). 2 Thessalonians 2:15 reminds us of the importance of firm teaching based on the Word of God
 3. **Accommodating Different Views in the Church.** Within the Chinese Christian community, there are various views on how cultural traditions, including Ceng Beng, should be addressed. Some more conservative churches may emphasize the importance of a strict separation between culture and religion, while more liberal churches are more open to the appropriation of traditions. Churches need to accommodate these different views and give congregants the freedom to determine their stance, as long as it does not contradict the basic tenets of the Christian faith. The church can serve as a space for congregants to share their views and seek middle ground, while maintaining unity in faith (Yang, 2018, 132). Galatians 3:28 indicates that the church should accept differences in faith without compromising the unity in Christ
 4. **The Importance of Family Involvement in the Faith Formation Process.** Family is a key element in the lives of Chinese Christians, both in maintaining cultural traditions and in shaping theological understanding. Churches should recognize that families play an important role in decision-making regarding participation in traditions such as Ceng Beng. Therefore, churches need to work with families to provide a balanced

understanding of the values of the Christian faith, while respecting family traditions. This approach can help reduce tensions between the older and younger generations that often arise in discussions about culture and religion (He, 2012, 81). Matthew 22:37-39 recalls the importance of love in family and community relationships, as a basis for guiding family members in their decisions.

5. **Encouraging Cross-Cultural and Interfaith Dialogue.** The Chinese church can also expand its role by encouraging cross-cultural and interfaith dialog in society. In many areas, Chinese Christian communities live side by side with Chinese people who still maintain ancestral traditions. The church can be an agent in building a better understanding of how the Christian faith can interact with Chinese culture without damaging social or spiritual relationships. In this context, the church functions not only as a place of worship, but also as an institution that educates and builds bridges between communities, including with those who cling to traditional practices (Lee, 2020, 41). Matthew 5:16 teaches the importance of being a witness for Christ in daily life, including in cross-cultural contexts.
6. **Understanding Social Dynamics in the Chinese Christian Community.** Churches need to better understand the social dynamics within Chinese Christian communities, which are often positioned between two worlds-traditional Chinese culture and Christianity. Chinese Christian communities have diverse social backgrounds, and an understanding of how traditions such as Ceng Beng are practiced can provide deeper insights into the challenges people face. By understanding these complexities, the church can more effectively respond to the needs and concerns of its congregation, while avoiding hasty judgments or imposition of certain views (Zhang, 2017, 112). James 1:22 emphasizes the importance of the church to listen to and understand the various views that exist within the congregation.
7. **The Impact of Multiculturalism and Globalization.** Chinese churches, especially those overseas, need to consider the impact of multiculturalism and globalization on their communities. Globalization has brought Chinese Christians into greater interaction with other cultures, and this affects the way they view religion and tradition. Overseas Chinese churches, for example, often have to navigate the challenges of interacting with Christians from different cultural backgrounds. Here, the church can play a role in facilitating a healthy acculturation process, which not only maintains Christian values, but also accommodates positive local cultural heritage (He, 2012, 92). Isaiah 49:6

indicates that the church should be a light to the nations, including in this multicultural world.

8. **The Role of the Church in Strengthening Chinese Christian Identity.** The church has an important role in strengthening Chinese Christian identity that does not only focus on rejecting local culture, but also on finding ways to integrate the two in harmony. Churches need to emphasize that being Christian does not mean abandoning Chinese culture, but rather how to live the culture in the light of Christian faith. Therefore, churches can provide training and guidance that teaches that Chinese Christian identity is the result of a spiritual journey that involves the integration of faith and culture (Lee, 2020 50). Ephesians 2:10 indicates that everyone is called to live according to their God-given identity, which can integrate faith and culture.

This discussion also underscores the important role of the church in providing thoughtful guidance on how Chinese Christians can harmonize their faith with their cultural traditions. Overseas Chinese churches, particularly those in large Chinese communities, are often faced with the challenge of maintaining a balance between theological integrity and the need for cultural inclusiveness. For more conservative churches, it is important to affirm the teaching of worshiping only God, while for more liberal churches, it is important to provide space for people to adapt to their culture without sacrificing deep faith convictions (He, 2012, 107). This suggests that churches should consider the local context and rich history of Chinese culture in determining their stance on traditions such as Ceng Beng. Churches need to promote a pastoral approach that is sensitive to the cultural needs of the congregation, while still paying attention to the basic teachings of the Christian faith (Lee, 2020, 50).

CONCLUSIONS

This article concludes that the relationship between Chinese culture, particularly the practice of Ceng Beng, and Christian faith among the Chinese community is complex and diverse. There are different perspectives that emerge in the face of the dilemma between maintaining ancestral traditions and following Christian teachings. In general, Chinese Christians try to balance the two in different ways, depending on the influence of the church, family, and their personal views on faith. The three main approaches found in this study are: first, the rejection of Ceng Beng practices based on theological understandings that teach the worship of God alone; second, the modification of Ceng

Beng traditions by adjusting the rituals to be more in line with Christian teachings, such as avoiding elements of ancestor spirit worship; and third, the acceptance of Ceng Beng practices in a less ritualistic form, in which ancestor veneration is performed without involving elements that are considered contrary to the Christian faith.

In this case, the role of the church and family is crucial in influencing the individual's decision to carry on this tradition. Some conservative Chinese churches emphasize the importance of abandoning cultural traditions that are considered contrary to Christian teachings, while more liberal churches are more open to cultural appropriation. In addition, pressure from family, especially the older generation, is often a factor that influences whether or not an individual keeps the Ceng Beng tradition. Overall, Chinese Christians show flexible adaptation to their cultural heritage. They tend to seek a middle ground to maintain harmony between religious belief and cultural identity. Therefore, Chinese churches need to provide guidance that is sensitive to the cultural and social context of their people, in order to help congregants address this dilemma with wisdom and understanding. This also shows that religious interpretation is not monolithic, and that the Christian faith can coexist with local culture, provided there is a wise adjustment to religious teachings and local traditions.

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