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Just another Chinese Christian?

Justin Tse K. H.

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<https://schemamag.ca/2012/05/07/but-where-are-you-really-from-justin-tse/>

At a lunch reception for a religious event, I got hit with a double whammy: Where was I really from? And did I know anything about Ming vases?

To the first question, I told the guy that I was from Vancouver.

“Really, where?” he prodded.

“Richmond,” I said and added with a smirk, “Where all the Chinese people live.”

“No, really, where are you really from?”

“San Francisco.”

He ignored me and asked if I knew anything about Ming vases. His daughter was an archaeologist in Beijing, apparently, and he wanted to know if I knew anything about what she was digging up. He also wanted to know about how the house churches were doing and how bad the persecution of religious freedom was getting. I replied that I had no clue.

I think if all of these people knew where I was really from, it would blow their minds.

I get the feeling that these kinds of questions come to me because of the way I speak English. When I approached a guest preacher after one service at my home church, he asked what he could pray for in my personal life. I told him that I was having a hard time revising an academic article for publication.

“It must be difficult for you,” he said, “because English isn’t your first language.”

Because my Chinese language abilities are the butt of jokes for my fiancée’s mother, I wondered if I was really just a bad talker, period.

Or perhaps my religion is the problem. I happen to be a Christian of Chinese ethnicity who studies Chinese Christians.

As if being asked to comment on house churches wasn’t bad enough, some people in my profession have told me to hide my Chinese Christian background for fear that being from this community would be detrimental to my career.

The assumption, of course, is that we Chinese Christians are conservative fundamentalists, anti-intellectual and obstructive to a progressive agenda, and if I’m going into academia, it’s because I want to justify their exclusionary practices.

I think if all of these people knew where I was really from, it would blow their minds.

In response to the Ming vases: no, I don’t know anything about them because my parents aren’t even from China. When I was four, my preschool teacher asked me, “Are your parents from China?”

I replied, “No, they’re from Hong Kong.”

“Isn’t that in China?” she prodded on.

“No,” I said—and this was before 1997—“it’s Hong Kong.”

At the tender age of four, my parents had taught me that if you spoke Cantonese, you were probably from Hong Kong, and that wasn’t the mainland. Because we weren’t from mainland China and despite that fact that we were Christian, we had no connections with either the house churches or the government-sanctioned ones.

And yet, for all the stereotypes about how Hongkongers came to Canada because they were scared about the 1997 handover and their political and economic freedom, I need to add that my parents got to Canada before there was even a handover in the works.

Perhaps it's just that my English isn't Canadian or British Columbian because I didn't grow up in Canada.

My dad studied in Winnipeg to be an engineer in the 1970s. He married my mom in 1980 when he returned to Hong Kong to work and then told her about a mythical land called Canada with lots of space and fresh air. They moved to Calgary a year after marriage—into the middle of a recession in 1981. They subsequently moved to Vancouver. This all happened before the Sino-British talks in 1982-1984 about putting Hong Kong back under Chinese sovereignty.

After working odd fried chicken jobs and being hired as the 24-hour engineer to build the only tunnel on the Coquihalla Highway, my father was head-hunted to the San Francisco Bay Area to work in an engineering firm. I was born before we left. My parents came to and left Vancouver before all the hype about Hong Kong migrants changing the city, and we moved back after it all happened to find ourselves with a family income below our friends because my dad had left his engineering job to be a pastor with a salary, as he later told me, below that of an average elementary school teacher.

For the kind preacher who wanted to pray past my language disabilities, perhaps it's just that my English isn't Canadian or British Columbian because I didn't grow up in Canada. An English professor I was having lunch with was confused for the longest time when I told him that I researched religion among Hong Kong people in Vancouver. When I finally told him that I was from the Bay Area, he exclaimed, "No wonder! I thought I heard some Californian in there."

I wanted to reply that it wasn't just some Californian—it's all Californian, and it's Northern Californian, ahem, Norcal to be exact. I make this clarification because I was asked when I moved to Vancouver if I lived next to a movie star and surfed. I replied: that's SoCal—Southern California. Yes, we do speak English (and Spanish and Cantonese and Mandarin and Korean and Tagalog) in California. But I know that I speak Norcal in particular because when I moved to Vancouver, nobody knew what I was talking about when I used adjectives like "hella" (and its less vulgar cousin "hecka"), described interesting phenomena as "tight," and exclaimed that very fascinating things were "hella tight." Norcal lingo has probably changed dramatically since I've been gone, of course, so I'm perhaps better off saying that I am from the Norcal of the late 80s to the early 2000s.

As far as my religious background leading to professional suicide is concerned, just because I happen to have grown up in Chinese Christian churches doesn't mean that my religious experience was and is totally framed by an insular ethno-religious community.

My parents sent me first to a Pentecostal elementary school that glorified the American military, then to a Catholic school that verged on pacifism.

My engineering dad became the lay pastor of a Cantonese-speaking congregation in a Mandarin-dominant church with people mostly from Taiwan who also said that they weren't from China. We had more connections with Taiwan, Hong Kong, and American evangelicals than with Christians in China, and yes, as good evangelical Christians, we read the Bible, memorized Bible verses, and really believed that it was the Word of God.

My parents sent me first to a Pentecostal elementary school that glorified the American military, then to a Catholic school that verged on pacifism and taught us to work for social justice because Jesus lived among the poor.

At both of these schools, my supposedly homogeneous friends ran the gamut from Latino Pentecostals to Filipino Catholics to (yes) Chinese Christians and Buddhists to complete atheists.

To boot, when a conservative Chinese church refused to grant my father ordination, i.e. put the "Rev" credential in front of his name, his African-American preaching professor at his progressive seminary in Berkeley made him the first (and probably only) Chinese guy to be ordained with the Progressive

Baptists, a denomination that has worked tirelessly for racial reconciliation and economic justice in the Bay Area.

Being part of both conservative evangelical and mainline progressive Christian communities in the Bay Area has shaped our whole family to thump our Bibles less and work more for justice for the marginalized, especially when we supported my father's transition from being a Chinese church pastor to a multifaith hospital chaplain and counseling psychotherapist. But then, we all still attend fairly orthodox churches that, believe it or not, actually still believe in strange teachings like the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

Do I have a conservative evangelical background? Sure. But do progressive Christians have a hand in my education and upbringing? Absolutely, and in fact, more than two hands. It might be hard to believe, but I like to think of myself as a simultaneously conservative and progressive Christian because they're all part of my extended religious family, even if all too often, they hate each other's guts.

Don't deny me my Latina/o, Filipina/o, Anglo-American-Canadian, African American, and everything-in-between brothers and sisters.

So what's my ulterior motive for being a Chinese Christian studying Chinese Christians in academia? I'd like to think that I don't have one, but if I had to have one, it's perhaps to promote what my faith has to say about love for enemies in a divisive, polarized world.

Yes, I happen to have grown up in Chinese Christian churches, but don't deny me my Latina/o, Filipina/o, Anglo-American-Canadian, African American, and everything-in-between brothers and sisters.

Sure, some of the churches at which I've been a part have verged on being fundamentalist, but don't deprive me of the progressive saints in my life who are still out there fighting for racial reconciliation and social justice.

Fine, I'm ethnic Chinese, but no, I don't know anything about Ming vases or house churches because even if you asked the Chinese immigrants who raised me, they weren't from China either.

And okay, so my English does have an accent. It's because I'm from Norcal.