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## The principle of *hou*: A source for Chinese Christian ethics

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THE PRINCIPLE OF *HOU*:  
A SOURCE FOR CHINESE CHRISTIAN ETHICS

by

Ambrose Tsui

B. A. Hwa Kiu College, 1973  
M. Div., Wilfrid Laurier University, 1984

THESIS

Submitted to the Faculty of Waterloo Lutheran Seminary  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Theology in Christian Ethics

1992

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I have no intention to write about Chinese culture as such. The only purpose is to arouse the interest of thinking about Chinese culture in relation to Christian Ethics.

To begin with, I write about the structure of Chinese society in which family is the base of it. In order to relate how the spirit of *hou* is in relation with Chinese culture, I try to explain how the principle of *hou* knits the Chinese society together. Then I go on to show how *hou* is related to all aspects of Chinese social life and how *hou* is being practised in the daily living of the Chinese. Finally, I discuss the place of religion in Chinese society and from this I go on with the practise of ancestor worship in China and how this practise is in relation with *hou*.

In the appendix, I analyze the different points of view of how the principle of *hou* is practised among the Chinese today. The final conclusion is that it is not so much a matter of what approach should be used but is the issue of how the spirit of *hou* is promoted and practised in whatsoever situation we find ourselves. The commitment to *hou* can build a bridge of understanding and acceptance even in times conflict. For me, the love and respect of God revealed through His Son to which the Bible gives witness is the most significant source to empower the spirit of *hou*.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I do deem that I am privileged to be a student of Waterloo Lutheran Seminary and I treasure the fellowship with all those whom I spent with during the last few years. It is my sincere thanks to all the staff members for the help they rendered to me. I am greatly indebted to the members of the faculty that they have been so good to me and learned a lot from their personal lives as well as in the class room. Specially, I thank Dr. Delton J. Glebe, my supervisor of this paper. His encouragement and advice I will never forget.

At last I have to thank my wife for her support and understanding during the period in Waterloo Lutheran Seminary as a part-time student.

THE PRINCIPLE OF HOU:  
A SOURCE FOR CHINESE CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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THE PRINCIPLE OF HOU:  
A SOURCE FOR CHINESE CHRISTIAN ETHICS

INTRODUCTION:

I was born in a Chinese pastor's family in China. My father and my grandfather were pastors. My great, great grandfather was the first Christian in the district, which I claim to be my native village. I am also a pastor and it was twenty five years ago when I completed my theological training in Australia.

As a Christian, I was brought up in the atmosphere of Christian faith; being Chinese, I was brought up like any other Chinese person exposed to the traditional culture. Some would presume that it would be impossible to be a faithful Christian and, at the same time, to be a traditional Chinese gentleman. I believe that I am faithful to my Christian beliefs although I am also quite sure that I am a traditional Chinese person. Being Chinese by birth and having been reared to be a Chinese gentleman, I find myself adhering to the teachings which are valued by our culture which thereby characterizes me as "a man of benevolence". To some people, such might be seen as being in conflict with Christian teachings. I do not feel such conflict myself; on the contrary, I think that Chinese and Christian values can be in harmony with one another.

Christianity stresses love as the intrinsic quality for social life. As for the Chinese traditional culture, the esteemed family stresses *hou* (孝)<sup>2</sup> as the intrinsic quality of social life. As a Christian, if he or she understands the meaning of *hou* and how it relates to the Chinese society, then I hope that he or she would agree with me in sharing my point of view that a Chinese Christian may still adhere to his Chinese traditional culture and also be a Chinese gentleman. For me, *love* and *hou* inform one another and complement one another in identifying a social ethic.

In this paper, I hope to explain the Chinese traditional culture and also show how family is the base of our society. As well, I will demonstrate how *hou* is the spirit of our social system which relates to all aspects of our social life. It is my sincere hope that this paper may help those who intend to do mission work among the Chinese in order to have a general idea of the way that some Chinese people feel about their traditional culture. In addition, to grasp the concept that Christianity can supplement and fill the gap of inadequacy of Chinese traditions rather than ignore or even overthrow it completely.

Looking back in the Christian History of China, we discover that Christianity had been introduced in China

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<sup>2</sup>hou means to honour parents by all means.

a long time ago. Actually, Christianity had made several attempts to establish itself in China but did not succeed and vanished from China until the early nineteenth century. The explanation for the failures of Christian missionaries, of course, are many such as that the Chinese language was difficult to learn, and also that the government changed its attitude towards Christianity while having the opposition from other religious bodies. In this paper, however, I would like to point out one of the most fatal factors, which is that the missionaries did not try to understand the Chinese culture. Their efforts were more directed at wanting to westernize the Chinese culture. They were ignorant about the social structure of the Chinese society and did not get into the life of Chinese people, especially the ordinary, poorly educated individuals.

The Nestorians reached China in 635 A.D. during the Tong Dynasty (唐朝). Emperor Tong Tai Chung (唐太宗) sent one of his high officials, Premier Fong Yuen Ling (房玄齡) to welcome them to the Capital City Cheung On (長安京城). The Emperor gave them permission to build churches and the right to preach the Christian faith in China. Unfortunately, after nearly two hundred years, in 845 A.D., the ruling Emperor Tong Wu Chung (唐武宗), influenced by Taoism (道教), ordered all foreign religions to be banned in China. Christianity vanished

from China without a trace. Again in Yen Dynasty (元朝), the Nestorian missionaries returned to China followed by other Christian missionaries. The Roman Catholic missionaries arrived to China in 1280 A.D., and at that time, the Nestorians had already built twelve churches in China. In 1294, Emperor Yen Sai Chung (元世宗) asked the Pope for permission to work in China, and so Monte Carvine was sent to China. Later on, without any logical explanation, Christianity vanished from China once again. To me, the question is, "Why couldn't Christianity, like Buddhism (a religion originating from India) root itself and stay among the Chinese in China?" The only answer appears to be the one I pointed out before, namely that Christians did not get into the life-stream of the ordinary Chinese people. The missionaries only associated themselves among the scholars and high officials, the executives of China.

With a different approach, some Christian missionaries came to China during the early nineteenth century. Among them was Dr. Robert Morrison from England of the London Missionary Society. Among the first things that Dr. Morrison did was to learn Chinese; to translate the Bible into the Chinese language; to write Chinese Gospel tracts; and to live with the ordinary Chinese people in order to gain an understanding of Chinese daily living. Between 1816 - 1846 A.D., there were quite a few

missionaries who came to China. They followed Dr. Morrison's approach to work among the Chinese. This time, the Christian faith became strongly rooted among the Chinese people in China. In fact, Chinese Christians proved themselves to be faithful to the Gospel through many persecutions and sufferings from the government and from the people. Even through several decades of hostility from the Communist regime, the Christian faith remained strong and alive among the Chinese Christians.

I believe, deep down in my heart, that one day God will open the Gospel door of China so that the millions and millions of Chinese will be able to hear the old, old story of our Lord Jesus freely again. For those who are willing and prepared to go to China to work among the Chinese, it will be helpful for them to equip themselves with some knowledge of the Chinese traditional culture in bringing the Gospel to the Chinese. As Apostle Paul says, "And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews....To them they are without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ), that I might gain them that are without law".<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>I Cor. 9:20-21.

I. THE FAMILY IS THE BASIC STRUCTURE OF THE CHINESE SOCIETY:

The basis of the Chinese social system is the family; therefore, it is the foundation of the Chinese culture. Chinese society values family solidarity a great deal, whereas the individual is valued less. In other words, one has the duty to sacrifice oneself for the sake of the family or for the well-being of society rather than serve self-needs and wants. According to the traditional Chinese culture, social life starts with the nuclear family, then relatives, neighbours, friends and country. Within these circles of daily living there are certain rules, principles and moral obligations that everyone is expected to follow. The most particular element in our social system is that the family is always standing between the individual and the society. So says Mencius ( 孟 子 ) born in the country of Lu, like Confucius, he lived from 372 - 289 B.C. Very little is known of his life. He wandered, almost as Confucius, seeking those to whom he could give his lessons on politics. Nobody has contributed so much to the preservation and diffusion of the original Confucianism of the Utopian Confucianism, as Mencius, (who is the second Sage of this Sect). "The foundation of the world is country and the foundation of the country is

family".<sup>3</sup> A country is a society and the world is a larger society. According to common sense, a society consists of many individuals but to the traditional Chinese culture, a society consists of many families. A Chinese saying states, "If one wants to rule the country well, he must first be able to rule his family well"<sup>4</sup> and another saying states, "If the family is benevolent, then the country is and if the family is in harmony, the country is also".<sup>5</sup> Another saying notes, "If one is not able to teach one's family, then definitely not the country".<sup>6</sup> How the family is experienced and managed is pretty much how the country is experienced and managed. That is to say if one can lead the members in one's family in harmony and peace, then one is also able to lead a country in harmony and peace. It is my observation of the Chinese society that what is traditionally true, namely, that family life is at the core of how Chinese culture is structured, characterized and experienced, is still the case today. And many Chinese coming to Canada bring these values, this social fabric, to this country. Therefore, whether one works in

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- 3 天下之本在國,國之本在家.
  - 4 欲治其國者,先要齊其家.
  - 5 一家仁,一國興仁,一家詘,一國興詘.
  - 6 其家不可教,而能教人者無之.

Canada with Chinese people, I would contend that such an individual needs to learn and get to know the Chinese culture.

## II. THE IMPORTANT ELEMENTS WHICH SHOW THAT THE FAMILY IS THE BASIS OF THE CHINESE SOCIETY:

The Chinese society begins with the family, then followed by the clan. If one is keen enough in one's observations, one can recognize this element within all kinds of Chinese organizations, such as welfare organizations, mutual beneficial organizations, or even some of the cultural organizations. The family, or clan, is the centre of Chinese society; people who share the same name live together in a certain area, so we can often say that the boundary of a village is the family or clan. An individual has to be responsible for the family as a member of the family, and the family represents the solidarity with its elders to exercise the authority of a family court. The Chinese culture has incorporated the rules of the family and these rules are used to render judgement upon the individual who fails to live a worthy life according to one's family traditions or who commits crimes. Punishment could lead to the expulsion from one's own family. Through this system, many social problems would be solved inside of the family circle. If anyone loses the support of one's own family or clan, he

or she would suffer social setback and would then be regarded as untrustworthy. Due to these consequences, he who loses support eventually would not be able to live in that society. China has been an agricultural country for thousands of years and is still such now. Eighty percent of the population in China are still farmers. The economy in China depends heavily on farming; this is the primary reason why the family as the base of the Chinese society can still be maintained.

The spirit which maintains the Chinese traditional social system is *hou* and one might even say that it is the living soul of the Chinese culture. The Communist regime tried very hard to get rid of the traditional Chinese culture resulting without much success. They even taught the younger generation to sing the song "I do not love my parents but my party and my country". The spirit of *hou* has been so deeply rooted in the Chinese society for thousands of years that it has become part of their life. *Hou* is the very fibre of Chinese culture. Therefore, it is quite futile and even impossible for anyone to eradicate *hou* from the hearts of the Chinese.

### III. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHINESE SOCIAL SYSTEM:

During the legendary period of Chinese history (3000 - 1700 B.C.) there was nothing like husband and wife as a kind of permanent relationship. In other words,

marriage as a union between husband and wife did not exist. The children, as a result, only knew their mothers and usually did not have any ideas of their fathers. Therefore, there were quite a lot of legends that some people were conceived by a certain spirit, gods or even dragons. For certain reasons, man gradually became the dominating authority of society. Within this society, needs for mutual support led the people to form some kind of family system. Within this patriarchal system, the man was identified as more free and even more available to provide for the needs of the family. As such, he ruled the family too.

Since the time of Yiu (堯), Soon (舜) and Yee (禹), the family system was already well established. From Shen Dynasty (商朝) until Ching Dynasty (清朝), China had Kings and Emperors to rule their people and the kingship and the emperorship was handed down to the male heir as an inheritance. The Chinese government system was that of family business so was called "one family's world".<sup>7</sup> This means that this one family is in control of the country and has what appears to be the ownership of the country.

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<sup>7</sup> 家天下。

IV. THE MORAL PRINCIPLE *hou* IS THE SPIRIT WHICH KNITS THE CHINESE SOCIETY TOGETHER:

The base of the Chinese society is the family. To maintain the system, certain rules are needs and the moral spirit of these rules is *hou*. Without the spirit of *hou*, Chinese traditional culture could not be continued until now. Some scholars even call Chinese culture "the culture of *hou*". A Chinese scholar, Mr. Yeu Lan Fong (馮友蘭), says "Traditional Chinese society is built on a family system and the moral principle *hou* which binds the family together".<sup>a</sup> Another Chinese scholar even says, "Within the Chinese traditional society, *hou* is not only the most important element but also the foundation of all benevolence:."<sup>b</sup> Confucius (孔子) was born in 551 B.C. and died in 479 B.C. A native of Lu and he had married at the age of nineteen; he had become a politician and was so disappointed. In 494 B.C., after many years of wandering life, he returned to Lu and kept a private school until the end of his life. He successfully taught, so tradition relates, about three thousand scholars of whom seventy-two, who especially pleased him, were called his disciples. Confucius was not the author of what he taught; it was the teachings of the Ancients. The mission he believed

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<sup>a</sup> 彷彿中国社会建立在家族制度上,而孝道是使家族扣紧在一起的德性.

<sup>b</sup> 孝不仅居於首要地位,且为一切德行之本.

he had was to preserve those traditional principles of Chinese culture from decaying. He was the founder of the Confucianism and is honoured as the first Sage in China.

He says, "*Hou* is the foundation of morality and from this comes all teachings"<sup>10</sup> and again, he says "*Hou* is the rule of heaven, the righteousness of earth below and the daily living of the people".<sup>11</sup> Tsang Tze (曾子), Confucius' favourite disciple, says, "There are three kinds of *hou*. The first is to make your parents feel good and respected; the second is to not make your parents feel ashamed; and the third is to provide for your parents with daily material needs".<sup>12</sup>

If one wants to make one's parents feel good and respected, then one must do something good. In this way, one's parents are honoured. If anyone does not want one's parents to feel ashamed, then one is not going to do bad things. *Hou* then is the source of all good deeds. If anyone wants to fulfil his duty of *hou*, one has to be a person who loves his country, be loyal to one's king or emperor, love one's brothers and sisters, be trustworthy to one's friends and respect one's spouse. From this we can see how *hou* is the moving power for people to fulfil their social and ethical obligations.

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<sup>10</sup> 夫孝德之本也。教之由生也。

<sup>11</sup> 夫孝天之經也。地之義也。民之行也。

<sup>12</sup> 孝有三：大孝尊親，其次不辱，其下能養。

*Hou* is the highest moral standard in traditional Chinese culture. It is the source of all good deeds. An old Chinese saying goes, "hundred of good deeds (all good deeds) *hou* is at the first position".<sup>13</sup> This kind of thought has been dominating the Chinese culture for thousands of years; from very early stages of Chinese culture, *hou* has been diligently practised among the Chinese people. One ancient book says, "One uses *hou* to be one's moral standard to live harmoniously with his nine family clans and if one can achieve this, one can rule the country also".<sup>14</sup>

According to a certain Chinese book, it is said that Yiu (堯), the Emperor, asked his official to recommend someone to take over his position as Emperor. The high official recommended Soon (舜) and the reason for recommending him was that Soon was a man who practised *hou* to its utmost. Apparently, the father of Soon was an obstinate person, the mother was an unreasonable woman, and the brother of Soon was a very proud and difficult man. Living in such a family, Soon still tried his very best to please, love and respect them. When Yiu the Emperor retired, he gave his domain to Soon because he deemed Soon worthy to rule the family and he also believed that such a man was able to rule the country

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<sup>13</sup> 百行孝为先

<sup>14</sup> 堯明俊德、以親九族、九族已睦、平章百姓。

well also. This is a famous and highly esteemed story in Chinese history. In fact, all Chinese children were taught this story at a very young age.

The spirit of *hou* has been handed down from the beginning of Chinese history and it has become the standard way of living in the Chinese culture. This spirit has influenced the society of China for many thousands of years and until now, Chinese still keep it as the only way of living.

Confucius was the one who systemized and explained the principle and meaning of *hou*. During his life time he taught and exhorted the people to live in accordance with the principle of *hou*. He held that *hou* was the root of all morality and ethics; he wrote, "*Hou* is the root of morality and from it comes all teachings".<sup>15</sup> He taught people how to practise *hou* in order for a society of harmony to be created. His idea is that if people learn how to honour their parents, then they would also know how to honour the parents of others; people who learn how to love their brother and sisters would also know how to love the brothers and sisters of others. When this human respect and love pervades all the people, then a society of harmony will appear.

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<sup>15</sup> 夫孝德之本也。教之所由生也。

## V. THE EXPANSION OF *HOU*:

The original meaning of *hou* is quite simple; *hou* means to treat the parents well. But beyond that simple meaning, *hou* becomes complicated and includes a lot of implications. The principle and the word *hou* has implications for all aspects of social life and such has become the binding principle of the Chinese society.

There have been a lot of books written to explain *hou* and its relationship with all aspects of the Chinese social system. For example, a book of criminal laws states that the worst type of crime is that against *hou*. This text identifies its punishments as severe. Another book notes that one must satisfy one's needs sparingly and according to what has been given by heaven in order to be able to look after one's parents. Confucius once said when he explained *hou*, "Anyone who is able to serve both his parents and country well; though he says he is unlearned yet I will esteem him as learned".<sup>16</sup> Therefore, no one has trouble accepting the principle of *hou* as the dominating spirit which has pulled the Chinese social system together. One can even say that *hou* has also related to the economy and to the ecology. An ancient Chinese book says, "If one is going to kill an animal or a bird, one has to do it in the right season,

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<sup>16</sup> 事父母能竭其力,事君能致其身,雖曰未學,吾必謂之學矣。

otherwise such an action is against *hou*".<sup>17</sup> Some other books also mention that the fish and the turtles of the water do not try to eat them all; there is respect for life. Chinese, for a long time, have been aware of the principle of *hou* for the economy and ecology, people have been admonished not to waste natural resources excessively but to preserve them.

From what we have discussed above, we can conclude that *hou* is the central guiding rule of the Chinese traditional society and it is the living spirit of Chinese culture. *Hou* has been influencing the lifestyle of Chinese people for a long, long time. It has become something precious which is indelible in their mind. We can even say that *hou* has become "the faith" in Chinese culture; Chinese believe it and willingly obey it. Among Chinese this is so, whether one is man or woman, old or young, rich or poor, good or bad, smart or less smart, educated or not so well educated. Everyone in daily living does and is expected to more or less, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly express the spirit of *hou*. If one wants to understand the Chinese, then one has to understand the traditional Chinese culture first. To understand the traditional Chinese culture, the most important thing is to understand the principle and the word *hou* and how it relates to all

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<sup>17</sup> 草木以事伐焉。禽獸以時殺焉。夫子曰伐一木。殺一獸。不以其時非孝也。 16

aspects of the Chinese social system.

#### VI. HOW *HOU* IS BEING PRACTISED IN THE DAILY LIVING OF THE CHINESE:

For the sake of clarification, I am going to divide the practise of *hou* into four categories.

The first category is being able to look after one's parents. Tsang Tze says, "*Hou* is the foundation of all teachings and in practise is the ability to look after one's parents".<sup>18</sup> What does this mean? Basically, according to Tsang Tze, in this category there are three degrees of *hou*. "The first is to make parents feel good and respected. The second is to prevent parents from feeling ashamed. The third is able to provide parents with daily material needs."<sup>19</sup> The first two kinds concern the spiritual needs and the third attends to the physical needs of the parents. *Hou* requires attention not only to material needs but also to spiritual needs of parents. Therefore, if one wants to fulfil this duty to one's parents, positively he has to try to be a good and successful citizen and negatively at least he is not to do something which would make his parents feel ashamed. Confucius says, "People of today take the meaning of *hou* as if it is only to provide material needs to parents but

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<sup>18</sup> 民之本教曰孝,其行曰养.

<sup>19</sup> 大孝尊親,其次弗辱,其下能养.

how about some people who also look after horses and dogs? If providing the needs to one's parents without the respect of the heart, then there is no difference between humans and animals."<sup>20</sup> From this explanation of the meaning of *hou*, Confucius emphasizes honouring parents both in physical and spiritual matters: both aspects are mutually inclusive in the principle and meaning of *hou*.

The second category of *hou* is to look after one's body. It means one must not do something willingly to harm one's body; on the contrary, one has to be very careful to look after and protect it from any harm. According to Confucius, "My body, hair and skin are all from my parents; I dare not let be harmed and this is the beginning of *hou*."<sup>21</sup> Anyone who wants to fulfil the duty of *hou* must then treat the body well. When one becomes sick or physically unhealthy, it is difficult for that person to perform the duty of *hou*. Therefore to keep fit and healthy is important according to *hou*. Another reason for not doing harm to one's body which includes hair and skin is that such is from one's parents. To do harm to one's body would make one's parents worry about one's condition. Confucius says, "Parents are always sad and worry when children get

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<sup>20</sup> 今之孝者，是謂能養。至於犬馬，皆能有養。不敬何以別乎。

<sup>21</sup> 身體髮膚，受之父母，不敢毀傷，孝之始也。

sick."<sup>22</sup> Chu Hei ( 朱熹 ), a famous Chinese philosopher (born in 1130 A.D. - 1200 A.D.) explained this sentence in this way, "Parents love their children so much that they worry when their children get sick. If anyone understands the feelings of parents, definitely one would be careful to look after the well being of oneself".<sup>23</sup> As for Chinese, whenever one does something, one thinks about one's parents first. Family and parents have a very important place or have great deal to do with one's life.

The third category of *hou* is to be careful and lead one's life in a respectable manner. We have already discussed the two aspects of human needs: physical and spiritual. As humans, we are intelligent beings, we are able to distinguish what is right and what is wrong. Our behaviours become the object which judges us to be good or bad. When we do something bad, we would be sad and ashamed of ourselves. So *hou* demands respectful and upright living. Why? The answer is that one's evil deeds would make one's parents worry about him and even bring shameful feelings upon them. Mencius spoke about five things which are against *hou*, "The first is laziness, which is neglecting the needs of parents. The second is indulgence in oneself with gambling and

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<sup>22</sup> 父母唯其疾之憂。

<sup>23</sup> 言父母愛子之心無所不至，唯恐其疾病，常為憂也。人子體此，而以父母之心為心，則凡所以守身者，自不容於不慎也。

drinking, which ignores the needs of parents. The third thing is craving money only for the sake of one's wife and to overlook the needs of parents. The fourth thing is licentiousness which ignores the advice and wisdom of parents. The fifth thing is always looking for fights, which makes parents worry about one's safety".<sup>24</sup> These are the five negative things which are mentioned by Mencius that one should not do so as to respect *hou*. Tsang Tze also says, "The body is inherited from parents and one is living with the body which is given by parents so one dares not to lead a disrespectful life. Therefore if one does not live in a respectful manner, one is against *hou*".<sup>25</sup> Then he goes on to say, "Anyone who is not trustworthy to one's friends is therefore against *hou*. Anyone who does not justify bravery in the battlefield is against *hou*. Anyone who does not serve their country faithfully is against *hou*".<sup>26</sup> These are the things in which Chinese are being educated to grow up to become real good citizens.

The fourth category of *hou* is to continue the will of parents. Confucius says, "When parents are still living, we have to learn what their goals and ambitions are; when they have died, we have to be careful to

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世俗所謂不孝有五：惰其四肢，不顧父母之養，一不孝也。博奕好飲酒，不顧父母之養，二不孝也。好貨財，私妻子，不顧父母之養，三不孝也。從耳目之欲，以父母之體，四不孝也。好勇鬥狠，以危父母，五不孝也。身者父母之遺體也，行親之遺體，敢不敬乎，故居住不莊，不孝也。  
<sup>24</sup> 朋友不信非孝也。戰陣不勇非孝也。事不忠，非孝也。

recollect how they lived their lives and remember them well".<sup>27</sup> It means that we have to continue the will of our parents, learn from them and imitate their good behaviours. Why? So that the family name may be glorified.

Therefore, we learned that the meaning of *hou* is not some superficial attitude or external behaviour but *hou* is the spirit which expresses the love and respect in daily living which springs up from deep down in the heart. To practise *hou* we need to know and respect that *hou* is the principle of daily living where it starts from parents then upward to parents' parents and up; then downward from children's children and that means from generations to generations. Last but not least is the sideways dimension of *hou* which is to brothers and sisters, cousins, those who bear the same name and to everyone who lives in the world with us. The end purpose of *hou* is to make this world a society of harmony in which everyone can live a meaningful life. To achieve this goal, we must practise *hou* which is the spirit that knits and unites all people together in the spirit of love.

#### VII. THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN THE CHINESE SOCIETY:

The place of religion in the Chinese society has

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<sup>27</sup> 父在觀其志，父歿視其行，三年不改於父母之道可謂孝矣。

been a controversial subject for a long time. There are a number of seemingly contradictory points of view. Looking at the religious life of the Chinese at the folk level, one is certainly struck by the great number of magical practises and beliefs. The mental picture of the universe of some Chinese minds were heavily coloured by a shadowy world of gods, spirits and specters. According to some people, a great number of such beliefs and practises carried no clear-cut ethical connotation. Because of this, many regarded the Chinese as superstitious people. This view was most popular in the Western world, as it was popularized by Western missionaries for nearly two hundred years since the beginning of the nineteenth century. They found that the religious situation of the Chinese culture was totally incompatible with the Christian faith and regarded it as the most convincing for their evangelical zeal. That is, they felt compelled to westernize the Chinese and the Chinese culture.

Legge and Giles, the two great Western scholars, have stressed the agnostic character of Confucianism. Some later Western scholar influenced by Legge and Giles, who also became acquainted with Chinese culture through association with the Chinese learned class, assigned a relatively unimportant place for religion in Chinese society.

Some modern Chinese scholars also toned down the importance of religious elements in Chinese culture. The reasons, as listed by C.K. Yang in his book are, "Argument for the insignificance of religion in Chinese society was partly a reflection of the world trend towards secularization. Modern Europe emerged from a violent reaction against the medieval church. Science has given man the most powerful weapon yet known for unlocking the secrets of nature and for providing hitherto undreamed of tangible benefits. Intellectually, this is an age of rationalistic orientation which waves off religion with defiance and even contempt. It is quite natural for modern Chinese intellectuals, who have followed the West in exalting science, to catch the spirit of the times and to shun religion. But perhaps and even stronger motivation for the assumption of an "unreligious" or "rationalistic" society for China lies in the Chinese intellectual's necessity of emphasizing the dignity of Chinese civilization in the face of the political and economic superiority of the nationalistically oriented Western world".<sup>25</sup>

In this paper I am not going to get involved in the debate of whether there are organized religions in China or not. My only interest is to show that the Chinese are

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<sup>25</sup>Religion in Chinese Society, by C.K. Yang, pub. The Regents of the University of California. 1961 p.6.

religious people and that religious activities are quite common in the Chinese culture.

Confucianism, although it is the main stream of Chinese culture, is really only one of the schools of thought in China. Confucius has solemnly affirmed that he is not the author of what he taught; rather he was involved with the teaching of traditional Chinese principles. Confucius' mission was to preserve those traditional principles from corruption. When he began to systemize traditional Chinese principles of life, he did it as a teacher and a politician. His goal was to teach the people how to be good citizens. He aimed at a society of harmony; with a humanistic approach he sought to reach his goal. Confucius was not a teacher of religion, so he wilfully toned down the religious aspects of Chinese ancient thoughts. In certain ways, Confucius was influenced by the scholars of Chu Dynasty (周朝), which had gone through such things as the Western Renaissance. Such a renaissance marked a movement from a theistic culture to a humanistic culture and made God into something which the human being was not able to understand. This is probably what Legge and Giles called an agnosticism of Chinese culture. In fact, Confucius never denied the existence of God. When he said, "If one does not know living, how does he know death".<sup>29</sup> or

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<sup>29</sup> 未知生焉知死。

"Respect ghosts and gods and distance from them".<sup>30</sup> These two sayings some take to mean that Confucius did not believe in the existence of gods and spirits. To me, Confucius merely said that one should care about things which are present in this life rather than to care for things which are after death; secondly, he stressed that things of the supernatural are impossible for us to understand. Although he encouraged people to respect "Heaven (Tian)" and to him "Heaven " was the name of supreme authority. Actually, Confucius did not invent the word "Heaven", The word "Heaven" has been used as I said before in this paper by the Chinese since the beginning of history. According to ancient records, when Chinese refer to "Heaven", they meant the supreme ruler of the universe as a God who blesses the good and punishes the bad. I deeply believe that at the early stage of Chinese history that the Chinese already believed in a God of moral attribute. Another important thing which I would like to mention is that Confucius also promoted the rite of sacrifice and the most obvious proof was that the kings of China from Chu Dynasty (周朝) to Ching Dynasty (清朝) during these two thousand years. Every year the king had to offer sacrifices to "Heaven" on behalf of the people to ask for the well being of the country.

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<sup>30</sup> 敬鬼神而遠之。

When we look at the day-to-day living of the Chinese society, we find that the undervaluation of the place of religion in Chinese society do not find much support from reality. As C.K. Yang points out in his book, "There was not one corner in the vast land of China where one did not find temples, shrines, altars and other places of worship. The temples and shrines dotting the entire landscape were a visible indication of the strong and pervasive influence of religion in Chinese society, for they stood as symbols of a social reality".<sup>31</sup>

#### VIII. THE NATURE OF ANCESTOR WORSHIP:

Temples and shrines are the places of public worship. Besides these temples and shrines there are quite a lot of religious activities which did not take place in the public. If one is familiar with the Chinese social system, one would be able to notice that in a sense, every home is a religious shrine. There are spirit tablets of ancestors, pictures and idols of so called household deities. Household deities are regarded to be very important for the protection of the property and health of the family and for the promotion of the prosperity and harmony in the home. The most vital religious function of family life is the worship of the ancestors.

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<sup>31</sup>Religion in Chinese Society, by C.K. Yang p.6

The reason for the Chinese to have so many household deities, with the practise of the ancestor worship, is that they always feel the threat of unseen forces within daily living, human ability and efforts are not sufficient to guarantee their well being, economic success and family harmony. So they invite the spiritual force to help them to ward off evils.

The cult of ancestor worship according to C.K. yang was basically a device to cope with the emotionally shattered and the socially disintegrating event of the death of an intimate member in the family group. The occasion of death besides the feeling of a lost companionship of a loved one, also was a time for them to think of what is after death for the dead and for the one who witnesses the death. C.K. yang says, "One alternative to the tragic situation was to assume the continued existence of the deceased and use this assumption to mitigate emotional grief and demoralization, and for the family group to rally their efforts and carry on the business of the living. One expression of this assumption was the belief in the existence of the soul, another was the perpetuation of the memory of the departed".<sup>32</sup> To me I would take a more positive attitude on the assumption of the on-going existence of the soul. I believe that the Bible tells us

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<sup>32</sup>Religion in Chinese Society, by C.K. Yang p.30.

that we are created after the image of God; deep down in our heart we have the sense of immortality. People long to be redeemed after the fall of mankind. This is the image which remained in everyone of us although tainted by sin yet still gives us a spark of light that we belong to God.

Technically, the ritual of ancestor worship is composed of two parts. The rite which is performed right after the death is called mortuary rite. This is the rite for parting the dead which includes the burial ceremony. Then there are sacrificial rites which affirm that the living continue to offer sacrifice to the dead in order to maintain the long term relationship between the dead and the living. The element of remembrance of the dead is very much emphasized in Chinese traditional culture and this is also being regarded as my responsibility of fulfilling *hou*.

From the rites of the mortuary we can get some kind of religious implications. First, such rites imply benefits and salvation for the dead which was to report to all the gods and spirits (just like obtaining the visa for the dead) to protect the spirit of the dead and ask for a safe journey from this material world to the spiritual world. Within the Christian faith it means that the dead is going to Heaven. Secondly, this is for the protection of the living inviting the dead in his

spiritual world to render blessing for the living. The third is to refer some kind of grief therapy through love and solidarity with the family.

From what I said about ancestor worship, my only purpose is to show that Chinese are God-fearing people. The expression of their deep sense of the presence of god or gods is in all aspects of their lives. I agree that such does not necessarily mean that Chinese culture, although strongly influenced by the sense of God's presence, can through its own culture know "the true God". My point is that Chinese culture, like any other culture without the special revelation of God, is not enough for Chinese people to know God. Like in any other culture so in Chinese culture, except through the highest revelation of God, namely Jesus Christ, we are not able to know God and serve Him. Through Jesus Christ - the special revelation of God - the Chinese people will be able to discern God in Chinese culture as the general revelation of God. The very thing I like to point out is that there is no such thing as a Christian culture. When a person comes to know Jesus, that person is a new creation by God's grace and in his/her own culture, he/she is going to serve God.

#### IX. CONCLUSION:

From what I have been saying, I want to relate *hou*

to religion. In other words, how does *hou* fit into the religious faith in Chinese culture? The definition of religion varies among different schools. The most simple definition I can think of is "The belief in a certain supernatural power which is above the power of human beings. In this faith, people look for satisfaction of spiritual needs and the stability of human life. Therefore special actions are practised to show reverence, worship and service". The object and the name of worship is different for various people and cultures and the ways in which worship is practised vary. The most common names given by the Chinese from time of old until now are Tien (天 Heaven) and Shan Tai (上帝 the Emperor Above) and actually they are interchangeable according to ancient records.

According to Chinese traditional culture, when Chinese speak about Tien (天 Heaven) or Shan Tai (上帝 the Emperor Above), they refer to a god of might who is the source of everything and a god of righteousness. Tong Sai (湯誓) says, "I fear Shan Tai (上帝 the Emperor Above) so I dare not do wrong".<sup>33</sup> Just like I mentioned before in this paper, the god in whom Chinese believe is "a god who knows right and wrong". He is a god of morals and blesses the good and punishes the bad. Due to the good nature of this god, the universe is kept

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<sup>33</sup> 予畏上帝,不敢不正.

~~Due to the good nature of this god, the universe is kept~~  
in order and human history is able to go on. Yiu (堯)  
and Shun (舜) say, "The nature of Tien (天 Heaven) is  
love".<sup>35</sup> From this we see that Chinese believe a god of  
love and who also is gracious to all living things.  
Chinese traditional culture is based on this concept  
about god, with an emphasis on imitating the way of Tien  
(天 Heaven). *Hou* is the principle which the Chinese use  
to demonstrate the love of Tien (天 Heaven) among the  
people on earth. The Chinese revere god as the source of  
everything and compare this to parents as the source of  
children. From this principle the Chinese practise *hou*  
to show their love to parents and in doing this, they  
also believe at the same time that they are rendering  
adoration to Heavenly Grand Father (天阿公). The name  
"Heavenly Grand Father" is a name used by common Chinese  
people the same way they use Tien. "Grand" is to show  
that the god is without time and "Father" means the  
source of our beings. From this point of view, Chinese  
*hou* contains the moral and the ethical. Because the  
reverence to Tien (天 Heaven) or Shan Tai (上帝 the  
Emperor Above), the Chinese direct their reverence to  
parents. In doing this they show, first of all, that  
they are following the love way of Tien (天 Heaven) and  
secondly, they believe that parents take the place of

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<sup>35</sup> 天德在仁.

Tien (天 Heaven) on earth. To love parents is the act of revering Tien (天 Heaven). This love extends from parents to all people. *Hou* therefore has its religious roots and meanings. I always will believe that China can last for a few thousand years after most of the ancient empires have collapsed. One of the most important reasons is that the Chinese have *hou* as the foundation of their culture. God is keeping His promise when He says in the Ten Commandments, "Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy day may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee".<sup>36</sup>

In concluding my paper I would like to share a few questions of mine for further pondering. How should the Christian faith be proclaimed and propagated in China? Is it necessary for the Chinese to give up their own culture in order to be good Christians? Is it necessary for the missionaries to bring all the Western traditions to Chinese Christians? Can Chinese Christians use their culture to practise Christian faith? Can Chinese Christians, through their culture, serve God? There are a few verses from the New Testament which Paul said while he was doing mission work which I think are worth pondering. "Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious. For as I passed by, and beheld

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<sup>36</sup>Exodus 20:6

your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription,  
To The Unknown God. Whom therefore ye ignorantly  
worship, him declare I unto you. God that made the world  
and all things there in seeing that he is Lord of heaven  
and earth, dwelleth not in temples with hands; neither is  
worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed  
anything, seeing he giveth to all lives and breath, and  
all things;.....".<sup>37</sup> "For I determined  
not to know anything among you, save Jesus and Him  
crucified".<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>Acts 17:22-31

<sup>38</sup>I Cor. 2:2

## APPENDIX

### THE RELEVANCY OF *HOU* TO THE CHINESE TODAY:

After reading what has been written, I feel that there is still a question needed to be answered to complete the discussion. Namely, how *hou* is related to the Chinese today. To begin with, I would like to point out that *hou* is the fundamental spirit of the Chinese culture and it relates to all aspects of Chinese social life. In fact, when people speak about *hou*, in most cases it refers to Chinese culture.

Since the Opium War, China was forced to open her door to the Western countries, which means the exposure to the Western culture for the Chinese. This created a tremendous change for the Chinese community. Due to the influence of the Western culture, the Chinese ruling class was alarmed to see that China, in many ways, was behind the Western World and this was especially apparent in the realm of scientific technology. Awakened by the Western culture, the Chinese reacted in different ways. Some suggested that China should go back to her original culture without thinking of doing anything to change it. Some wanted to abandon Chinese traditional culture to adapt to the Western culture. Some chose to go mid-way and wanted to combine both the Chinese culture and the Western culture to create a new culture.

According to my judgement, these three schools of thought are inadequate to the needs of Chinese today. As to those who wanted to stick to the old Chinese way without any change, it is not practical and will not help the Chinese to face the challenge of a new situation. The Chinese should acknowledge that Chinese culture is far from perfect and it needs better adjustments to eliminate its defects and to improve its weaknesses. As for those who wanted to get rid of Chinese traditional culture and adapt to the Western culture, this idea is not acceptable either. The simple reason is that to replace the Chinese culture, which has been the way of living for the Chinese for over two thousand years, with the Western culture is like building a castle in the air. It will not work because it has no foundation. As to those who suggested the mid-way, this idea seems quite appealing yet it is impossible to put into practise. It is impossible to have a black and white view of culture to determine which part is good and which part is bad. Good and bad sometimes are closely related or even mutually inclusive. The system of strong family ties in China is one of the strengths of the Chinese social structure yet on the other hand, it also proved to be harmful to Chinese society throughout the course of history. For example, the Chinese always put the family first without discretion, then the society would not be

able to achieve its best interests because of the prejudices against those who are not related. Therefore, this prevents the society from getting the qualified people for the right jobs. There is also another problem which has to be solved which is how are we going to distinguish between Chinese culture from the Western culture?

The purpose of this paper is not to debate the differences of cultures. The only reason why I related to it is to point out that every culture contains the general revelation of God and is acceptable to God. To me, God is the Creator of all human race. To Him, there is no difference between West and East, Chinese and English, Colour and White. All people and cultures are directed to serve God and all cultures are blessed by God in serving Him. All people and all cultures should look for God for His guidance in our daily lives. I believe that the Bible is the highest authority for all people to be the standard of living.

In order to come back to the topic of *hou*, I would like to say something about *hou* as form and spirit. The word form means the rules which are made to be followed to practise *hou*. In other words, it is the system which people are expected to follow. The spirit of *hou* which is love and respect is the intrinsic value of *hou*. From this spirit comes the system of *hou*. The system of *hou*

starts with the family and it ties the Chinese society together. The basic meaning of *hou* is the duty of children to their parents which is to respect and love them. On the other side of the same coin, parents are required to fulfil their duties as parents of good and loving kindness. The parents are expected to live up to the standards of *hou* for the children to follow their examples. As I mentioned before, like any other system, the system of Chinese traditional culture of *hou* is far from perfect. This system of *hou* being handed down from generation to generation was quite often misinterpreted either because of the different circumstances or being wilfully misused to serve one's own purpose. For example, the ruling class deliberately taught that children obey their parents without any reservation. The purpose of this indoctrination was to keep the people in control. The officials referred to themselves as the parents of the people so the people would have to obey them in whatever was asked. This "blind *hou*" is not the intrinsic meaning of the spirit of *hou* and in fact, it is something which is against the spirit of *hou*. It is our duty to find out the true and real meaning of *hou* and to practise it with love and respect.

As to the Chinese who live in China, I would say it is best for them to continue with their culture. With care and wisdom to find out the true meaning of *hou* which

I mentioned before is love and respect to further the culture which is so dear to all the Chinese. On the other hand, we should not despise other cultures and there are a lot of things that we can learn from them in order to improve what we have in our culture. The most important thing is to know God, that God is the perfect One. Recognizing the Word of God is the only perfect guide for our living. Chinese culture needs God's Word to purify its weakness and the Spirit of God to transform the life of the Chinese.

For those who live in Canada, I would like to advise them to have an open mind for Canadian culture. As to the question, "What should the Chinese immigrants do with their Chinese heritage?", I would strongly recommend them to keep their culture and I do deem we are lucky to have this heritage as another source to help us to be better people and to be more useful to the society in which we live. Deep down in my heart, I believe that there is one common goal in every culture which is to propagate understanding and to promote a harmonious society. The method or the way to achieve it could be different, yet the goal is the same. The spirit of Chinese culture is *hou* which is love and respect to our parents. I do believe that every culture needs to foster the spirit of love and respect to the parents so that love and respect can permeate the society. When the Chinese immigrants

first arrived to this country, they may have erroneously concluded that the Canadians do not value the spirit of honouring one's parents. The reason is that Chinese culture places the responsibility of looking after the elderly people to the families; Canadian culture places this responsibility to a bigger circle, the society of the government. The way of looking after the elderly people is different yet the purpose is the same, that they may have a secure and dignified life after they have retired. To new Chinese immigrants, I do hope that they are able to distinguish the spirit of their culture instead of laboriously trying to keep their rules. As Chinese Canadians with the knowledge of their own heritage, we are able to contribute a lot to the multicultural society of Canada.

In conclusion, it is not so much a matter of which of the three approaches mentioned at the outset are used in various situations. The issue is that the spirit of *hou* be promoted and practised in whatsoever situation we find ourselves in. The commitment to *hou* can redeem the lives of those who "stick to the old ways" to those who "turn only to the new ways" as well as those who live mid-way and combine the cultures. *Hou* can build a bridge of understanding and acceptance even among those living in these differing and sometimes conflicting ways. For me, the love and respect of God revealed through His Son

to which the Bible gives witness is the most significant source to empower the spirit of *hou*.

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