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How best to evangelize to nonbelievers: Cultural persuasion in American and Chinese Indonesian evangelical Christian discourse on relational evangelism

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ABSTRACT

In this analysis, I present a cross-cultural comparison of U.S. mainstream evangelical and Chinese Indonesian Evangelical Christian (CIEC) discourse on best ways to implement a popular evangelical Christian practice known as "relational evangelism." My aim in conducting this comparison is two-fold: (a) to demonstrate how religion and ethnicity intersect in the communicative act of persuasion and (b) to unveil how these persuasive acts reflect differing cultural premises of personhood and relations. As each group attempts to persuade their members to share their faith with non-Christians in their lives, they reveal culture-specific limits of what counts as reasonable action.

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Every Tuesday morning in Lansing, MI, a group of middle-aged, White American, evangelical Christian men gather to participate in the religious practice of Bible study. As believers of this particular branch of Christianity, these men are called to spread the message of salvation and eternal life through belief in Jesus Christ, otherwise known as the gospel. They often meet to discuss effective ways to share this message with individuals they encounter in their daily social lives. That they are individually responsible for sharing the message is never questioned. In addition to their basic knowledge of the gospel, they also believe they have unique insights into what people in their lives need to hear about it and when. Their pastor, a man in his early fifties who is the leader of the group, is there to support their individual efforts, providing feedback when necessary, never issuing authoritative commands. Best practices these men agree upon include: building personal and meaningful relationships with nonbelievers and presenting the gospel in an accessible manner to a contemporary audience.

On the Eastern coast of the United States, a group of 18-to-25-year-old Chinese Indonesian Evangelical Christians (CIECs) also meets on a weekly basis for Bible study. Similar to their Midwest counterparts, they also often discuss best practices for sharing the gospel to nonbelievers. However, in this church community, individual effort is concentrated on supporting their leaders' evangelical efforts. They believe that only their leaders are properly trained to preach the "true" gospel to nonbelievers. Their main task, then, is to share

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the gospel "just enough" to pique the interest of their nonbeliever friends and acquaintances. Once these nonbelievers are intrigued, they are then invited to attend church events such as gospel rallies, where leaders are able to perform the job for which they are trained: properly explicating the Bible in order to unveil the central Christian message of the gospel. What seems similar on the surface—two evangelical Christian groups discussing best evangelical practices—differs quite a bit when deeper discussion on the practice is unveiled.

One aspect they do have in common in their discussions is that they are conducted in the absence of nonbelievers. Each group's discussion on how best to persuade nonbelievers to adopt Christianity could be viewed as a persuasive attempt to convince its members to evangelize. This persuasive attempt is done within the boundaries of each group's cultural logic. Convincing members to evangelize is easier when the act of evangelizing is presented as "reasonable action": an act that is persuadable within each group's cultural system (Fitch, 2003).

In this analysis, I present a cross-cultural comparison of U.S. mainstream evangelical and CIEC discourse on best ways to implement a popular evangelical Christian practice known as "relational evangelism." My aim in conducting this cross-cultural comparison is two-fold: (a) to demonstrate how religion and ethnicity intersect in the communicative act of persuasion, and (b) to unveil how these persuasive acts reflect differing cultural premises of personhood and relations (cf. Carbaugh, 2007), which in turn highlight the plurality of Christian practices around the world.

The ethnography of communication (Carbaugh, 1988, 2007; Fitch, 2003; Hymes, 1962, 1972; Philipsen, 1987, 1989, 2002), the theoretical framework upon which this analysis is based, provides a useful perspective for uncovering local and emic characteristics of religious discourses around the world. It highlights how communication is both reflective and constitutive of culture. As the diversity of followers of world religions such as Christianity increases, this perspective focuses attention on the dynamic and ever-changing nature of religious communicative practices, as opposed to essentialist characteristics of their followers. This study propagates the view that Christianity, like Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism, among other world religions, should be studied as plural manifestations of religious beliefs, with communication as their main expressive tool.

The Gospel, relational evangelism, and Bible study in evangelical Christianity

The term "evangelical" is derived from the Greek word *euangelion*, which means "the good news" or the "gospel." Historian David Bebbington (1989) laid out four key traits of evangelical Christians, among which is *crucicentrism*, the emphasis on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as the only possible redemption for humankind. Traditional reading of the Bible, both the Old and New Testament, dictates that when read correctly all narratives point to the gospel (John 20:31; Rom. 5:1; Eph. 2:8, New International Version). It is considered the essence, the main message of the Bible.

Recent U.S. evangelical interpretations have placed less emphasis on highlighting different Biblical messages containing the gospel and more on relevant interpretations of the scripture as they suit modern day preferences and needs (Bielo, 2009; Jeung, 2005). Both the American and CIEC groups place a different emphasis on the degree to

which the gospel needs to be included in their evangelism. This differing emphasis influences each group's enactment of relational evangelism, the second distinguishing feature of evangelical Christianity.

According to Bielo (2009) "relational evangelism," also known as "friendship evangelism" (Jeung, 2005), is an evangelizing style that "prioritizes one-on-one interactions with non-Christians and the sustained attempt to build meaningful relationships with the 'lost'" (Bielo, 2009, p. 116). Characteristics of this style include a focus on building deep and meaningful relationships with nonbelievers and introducing nonbelievers to other church friends, eventually incorporating them into one's church community. It is important to note that extending kindness and friendliness to others is not a uniquely evangelical Christian feature, but that evangelical Christians make more of a conscious effort to befriend non-Christians for the sake of sharing the gospel and, eventually, conversion into Christianity.

This analysis features discourses of both groups on effective strategies for sharing the gospel with nonbelievers they encounter in their daily social lives. They do not use the term "relational" evangelism, per se, yet their emphasis on one-on-one encounters and building rapport with nonbelievers is reflective of this popular practice. As explicated by Bielo (2009), members of the American group featured in his study use the term "witnessing" to refer to one-on-one encounters they have with nonbelievers, in which their faith was rendered relevant. As such, discussions on best evangelical practices featured in this analysis are discussions on how to best practice *relational* evangelism. Henceforth, the terms "evangelism" and "witnessing" (as used by participants in Bielo's study) will refer to different interpretations of relational evangelism.

Studies on mainstream U.S. evangelical groups confirm that most encounters recounted by evangelical Christians are those that occur spontaneously (Hybels & Mittelberg, 1994; Ortberg, 2001; Vander Lann, 1995). This emergent performance is based on one of the main guiding principles of evangelizing: "God uses us when we least expect it" (Bielo, 2009, p. 117). Because it is difficult to empirically document the practice as it occurs, the focus of my analysis is American evangelical and CIEC discussions during Bible study on encounters with non-Christians and/or nonpracticing Christians that occur prior to those encounters and in preparation for them.

Theoretical framework and methodology

Data for this analysis consists of discourse on relational evangelism active during Bible study in an American mainstream evangelical group called Tuesday Men (TM) and a CIEC group called the Indonesian Reformed Evangelical (IRE) church (both groups and their members have been given pseudonyms for privacy purposes). Second-hand data for TM were retrieved from a chapter in cultural anthropologist James Bielo's (2009) ethnography of Evangelical group Bible study in the U.S. titled *Words Upon the Word*. Bielo (2009) conducted extensive ethnographic research on Bible study sessions of six Protestant congregations (three United Methodist, one Lutheran/Missouri Synod, one Restoration Movement, and one Vineyard Fellowship) in Lansing, MI, from June 2004 to December 2005 (p. 5). In total, he observed 324 Bible study meetings with 19 groups and audio-recorded 167 of these meetings. TM is an all-male group affiliated with one of the three United Methodist churches he observed. To this day, his published

research remains the most comprehensive ethnographic analysis on Bible study among evangelical Christians. I chose to include his chapter on TM in my cross-cultural analysis because it focused on the group's discourse on effective strategies to evangelize to non-believers on a one-on-one basis, similar to discussions occurring in the IRE church.

Data for analysis of the IRE's discourse on evangelism is based on first-hand data I collected during a 2-year ethnographic fieldwork period (2009–2011) with leaders and members of this religious community. They include field notes from my participation in Bible study sessions, prayer meetings, and Sunday services, as well as audio recordings of these events. In addition, I also conducted and recorded semistructured interviews with IRE church leaders and members. Last but not least, with the permission of some leaders and members with whom I have had informal interactions, I include relevant personal conversations in this analysis.

Pertaining to the theme of best practices in relational evangelism, I focus on an audio recording of a Bible study session where a member lectured other members on how best to support IRE leaders in their efforts. I transcribed two and a half hours of audio recording of this session. Transcripts featured in this analysis are in English. IRE church leaders and members are fluent in both English and Bahasa Indonesian. For the most part, they code-switched (Gumperz, 1977) between the two languages, with English being more frequently used than Indonesian.

Analysis featured in this study consists of descriptive and interpretive analyses. I conducted descriptive analysis by extracting main themes in both groups' discourse on relational evangelism. I then distilled the themes and put them into categories such as participants, message, methods of witnessing, etc., in an effort to compare both groups' preferred approach to relational evangelism.

I conducted interpretive analysis by applying Fitch's (2003) cultural persuadables to the data. According to Fitch, cultural persuadables are "a specific class of communicative phenomena that take form within the unspoken premises of a cultural system" (2003, p. 109). A key idea of this framework is that within every culture, there exists a set of actions that is susceptible to persuasion (Fitch, 2003, p. 115), as long as it remains within the realm of "reasonable action" (Fitch, 2003). Cultural premises, assumptions about people, actions, and relationships (Fitch, 2003), account for what is considered as reasonable. The three key questions regarding persuasion addressed in this framework are: of what can people be persuaded; with what can they be persuaded (cultural norms, premises, and relational codes); and specific methods of persuasion that are acceptable within cultural boundaries (Fitch, 2003, p. 116).

As we delve deeper into the analysis, I shall explicate the "what" of both groups' persuasive attempts (i.e., witnessing), the sociocultural symbolic resources such as cultural premises surrounding personhood and relations (cf. Carbaugh, 2007) they utilize to justify witnessing in certain ways, and how these symbolic resources manifest in their persuasive efforts to convince their members to adopt certain witnessing strategies.

Last but not least, I end this section with a commentary on my role as a native ethnographer who spent two years conducting fieldwork with members and leaders of the IRE church. As a Chinese Indonesian, I was considered a member of the in-group. Yet, as a non-Christian, I was also an outsider whose religious identity was a topic of interest among members (as reported to me by Gary, the lay leader at the time). Initially, I was welcomed with open arms because it was hoped that I would eventually convert to

Christianity and join their group. When it was apparent that I was not going to do either towards the end of my time with them, an IRE leader approached me and openly shared his discomfort with what he perceived I was doing, which was treating "the word of God as an object of analysis" (personal communication, April 13, 2011). I reassured him that my research interest lay not so much in the Bible as text, but rather on how members of his congregation negotiate their identity as Chinese Indonesians through their engagement with Christianity. We parted amicably, yet it is in moments such as this one that I could not help but be reminded how my presence was affecting IRE members and leaders despite my best efforts to present myself as a neutral observer.

My reflexivity is based on Myerhoff and Ruby's (1992) notion of reflexivity as a system turning on itself (p. 307). This relates to the concept of discursive reflexivity (Carbaugh, Nuciforo, Molina-Markham, & van Over, 2011), when we as ethnographers are fully aware of our use of one discourse to explain another. This awareness should encourage us to treat our data carefully: reflecting on choices we make concerning the body of data we choose to analyze, our analyses of these data, and our reporting of the findings.

Descriptive and interpretive analysis

Tuesday men: Meeting people where they are and reaching out to service people

As previously mentioned, TM is an all-male Bible study group affiliated with a Methodist church located in Lansing, MI. There are seven members in the group, and the average age of the members is 60. Their leader is Pastor Bill, an authoritative voice in the group and its youngest member at age 51 (Bielo, 2009, p. 113). In his report, Bielo (2009) recounted how this particular group often engaged in long and thoughtful discussions on how to increase their effectiveness in evangelizing to nonbelievers. In this analysis, I highlight two themes that emerged from their discussions: (a) finding connections between the gospel and popular culture and (b) the ability to share the gospel to people they encounter in their daily lives on a one-on-one basis.

The first theme pertains to making connections between popular culture content and the gospel. It is based on the belief that although nonbelievers often may be anti-institutional, they are not anti-spiritual and are presumed to be interested in matters of faith and spirituality (Bielo, 2009, p. 123). They simply require that the gospel appears to them in familiar "packaging" (p. 123). Pastor Bill gave as an example the famous rock band Coldplay and how their music contains traces of the gospel:

> One of the things I was listening to lately, there's a band called Coldplay. They have a song that closes their concerts called "The Gospel." And it's not the gospel that we know. It doesn't talk about Jesus and it doesn't talk about the cross or anything like that. It talks about human situations and human life and struggles and what we hope for, what we wish for. And at their concerts, they always do it as the last song. They do it as their encore. People in their concerts, by the thousands, will stick around and sing the chorus of that … See, we have two ways of approaching that, I think, as the Church. And the first way we often do: "That's not the gospel. That's not the Truth." We just crush it. And people respond to that pretty poorly … We tend to just kind of come down hard in a judgmental sense because it's not perfect … and people are seeking the wrong thing so we need to set them straight and get them to the truth. And I don't disagree with that. We do need to do that. But unless we're willing to listen to what their heart's cry is and help them in relationship to understand

> that their heart's cry and the offering of Jesus match up, then, we just sound judgmental. We sound like we've got it all together and they don't. (p. 122)

To be an effective evangelical Christian is to be a relevant one, but one cannot be relevant if one is busy harshly judging others. Instead, one should be able to listen to people's "heart's cry" (p. 122) and make connections between this need and the message of salvation through belief in Jesus Christ. The goal, then, is to "meet people where they are" (p. 123) and proceed to adapt one's message to what is relevant in that particular context.

During another session, TM members discussed the act of witnessing or sharing Christian teachings with individuals they encounter in their daily lives. As they thought about people in their lives whom they should approach, it emerged that they did not consider those with whom they have service relations, such as their hairdressers or a server at a restaurant, as potential spiritual seekers to whom they could witness. It was then that Ron shared his encounter with his family veterinarian, who had been caring for his son's dog for several years and had attended two Christmas Eve services at their church:

> … they've told us that "Church, it isn't our thing." So I walked into the vet's office. She came out and I said "How you doing?" And she said, "I'm doing okay." And I looked at her and she didn't look okay. So, I put my arm around her and I said, "Now, how are you really doing?" And she started to open up. And I said, "This isn't a commercial or anything." I said, "I've been praying for you," because she's had some other issues. Cancer. I said, "We're starting this new service." I said, "I'd like the opportunity, when it does start, to ask you and your husband to join us." She says, "Well, talk to me." And I thought, "Wow! That's the furthest she's gone." (Bielo, 2009, p. 126)

Pastor Bill responded to this story positively by reiterating the importance of not overlooking individuals with whom they have service encounters as potential receivers of their witnessing:

> Well, and a piece of that that I think is so important is, she was your vet. So, you were there for a service from her. And I think so often we look at the people around us like that. (p. 127)

Relationships TM members have with service people could be used for witnessing purposes. When they ask God to lead them to people, those with whom they engage in service encounters arise as potential receivers of the gospel. They are regular "folks," people who have lives and struggles not unlike TM members. Using Ron's encounter as an example, they could find points of similarities in an effort to engage and connect with them. Although it would be ideal if they started coming to church and attending service, the fact that they might not be currently interested does not erase the importance of establishing relationships with them. As Pastor Bill concluded, the biggest aspect of evangelism is precisely the ability to engage and connect with these individuals whom members encounter on a regular basis as they go about their daily lives.

The IRE church: The importance of the Gospel and supporting leaders in their evangelism

The IRE church is a New England branch of a widely popular CIEC church based in Jakarta, Indonesia (henceforth, the church in Jakarta will be referred to as the central

church). The central church is one of the biggest Chinese Indonesian evangelical churches both in Indonesia and abroad (Soebagjo, 2008). Other evangelical churches operate in Indonesia, but none possess the scope or reach of the central church. Its international branches are located in prominent cities such as Shanghai, Melbourne, and Berlin. Its branches in the United States are located in Philadelphia, Washington, DC, and Los Angeles, among others.

IRE members are predominantly students and/or young professionals between the ages of 18 to 25. All U.S.-based branches are under the care of one evangelist leader from the central church, who splits his time between the branches and travels regularly around the country to manage his congregations. Because he is unable to supervise each church on a full-time basis, a lay leader is chosen among active members in each branch to run daily administrative duties, including organizing Bible study and other church events. The relatively unsupervised daily functioning of the group impacts its evangelical practice, especially when it comes to church leaders' reliance on members' initiative to ensure a high level of attendance at their events. The two themes I explicate regarding the IRE church's discourse on evangelism are: (a) the importance of staying true to the gospel and (b) the obligation members have to support their leaders in their evangelism.

An attribute the IRE church shares with evangelical movements in the United States is its treatment of the Bible as God's inerrant word, worthy of being presented in its purest essence. According to its belief, the Bible's purest essence is the gospel: the promise of salvation and eternal life through belief in Jesus Christ. In their daily talk, IRE church members often compare themselves against other Indonesian Christian groups in the area, which include an Indonesian Catholic group, a nondenominational Christian fellowship, and a Charismatic/Pentecostal group. According to them, instead of focusing on the message of salvation through Jesus Christ, other Indonesian Christians have a tendency to focus on generic Christian themes such as love, honesty, or compassion, which diverts believers from the true message of the Bible.

A member named John commented how their leaders are different from other church leaders because instead of "randomly pulling things out from the Bible" and claiming that it's the "true Christian message" (personal communication, May 25, 2011), they focus on the message of the gospel. IRE leaders do not "edit" Biblical content for the sake of pleasing the congregation (personal communication, May 25, 2011). As a member named Carl remarked:

> Most other churches focus on pleasing the audience, whereas our church, well, we never really compromise. We just give the gospel message as it is, the good and the ugly, as it is. There may be some churches that preach twisted messages. They preach good things, only socially acceptable things. (Personal communication, May 25, 2011)

Presenting the gospel "as it is," without it being "compromised" by the inclusion of less relevant Christian-themed messages, requires a significant amount of training in Christian theology. The central church in Jakarta houses a theological seminary that provides training for its leaders and preachers. As such, the task of delivering the gospel falls on the shoulders of trained IRE leaders. Members, on the other hand, are there to "support [our] leaders in their effort to expose non-Christians to the true Christian teaching"

(personal communication, May 25, 2011). This belief influences how church members view their role in evangelizing.

The second theme pertaining to the IRE church discourse on evangelism is members' obligations to support their leaders in their evangelical efforts. This was a prominent theme in a Bible study session on the subject of Andrew, one of the twelve apostles, and his brand of evangelism. The session was part of a special series on the twelve apostles and their varying evangelizing styles. The study on Andrew was titled the "Apostle of Small Things" (audio recording, November 27, 2011), referring to Andrew's unique ability to notice and utilize "small things" for evangelical purposes. The session on Andrew came a week after studying the Apostle Peter, Andrew's brother, who is famous for his strong oratorical skills and ability to deliver passionate and compelling sermons. Andrew was contrasted as the quiet one who "gets things done behind the scenes." An IRE church member named Aaron led this study.

Being the "apostle of small things," Aaron depicted Andrew as a very personal evangelist, someone who engages with nonbelievers one-on-one, unlike his famous brother Peter:

> Peter is the dominant brother. Andrew is the supporting leader. He's not the type that's like Peter, who preaches to thousands of people. He's a very one-on-one evangelist. He's the one who is able to individually introduce people to Christ. He's the one that's very personal. People would go to him to meet with Christ one-on-one. In fact, he was the one who introduced Peter to Jesus Christ in the first place. (Audio recording of Bible study, November 27, 2011)

Towards the end of the Bible study, Aaron encouraged members to see the value in individuals like the Apostle Andrew, by inviting their friends to attend an upcoming church service:

> … we have someone who impacted us, who brought us to Christ. If you think about it, who have you impacted? Who have you brought to Christ? If not, let's learn from Andrew. To see the value in individual people. As our Christmas gospel rally is approaching, who would we like to introduce to Christ by bringing them to our church event? Who will you be bringing to the rally in a few weeks? Who would you like to invite to listen to the true interpretation of the Bible? (Audio recording of Bible study, November 27, 2011)

According to Aaron, seeing the value in individual people is not only manifested in the act of introducing nonbelievers to Christ on an individual basis, it also includes inviting them to attend IRE church events where they would be exposed to the "real" interpretation of the Bible, which leads to the gospel, as preached by their leaders.

The emphasis on Andrew's role as a "supporting leader" provides us with a glimpse of what is considered as ideal acts of evangelism in an IRE church context. Whereas evangelism in a TM context is framed as a direct, individualistic, one-on-one effort to convert nonbelievers into believers, IRE members are encouraged to treat it as a two-step process: step one involves providing a general introduction to Christianity to nonbelievers, then to be followed by an attempt to expose them to the gospel as preached by their leaders. For TM members, the onus is on them whether they are able to bring souls to God. For IRE members, their individual effort to introduce nonbelievers to Christianity should be followed up by an attempt to expose them to the "correct" interpretation of the Bible, which as previously discussed, could only be provided by their leaders.

Table 1. Cross-cultural comparison of IRE church and TM discourse on relational evangelism.

Categories of witnessing	IRE church	TM
Participants in witnessing	Members first, to be followed by leaders.	Individual members.
Main message of witnessing	The gospel, believed to be the true essence of the Bible.	The gospel, but also daily Biblical wisdom applicable to modern day concerns.
Methods of witnessing	Members conduct initial witnessing in the form of a brief introduction, to be followed by extending an invitation to a church event, where leaders give proper sermons about the gospel.	Biblical wisdom could be presented in an appealing way for a contemporary audience, sometimes through pop culture formats like music and TV shows.
Targets of witnessing	Friends, acquaintances.	Acquaintances, service people they encounter in their daily lives.
View of nonbelievers	Nonbelievers are "lost souls," who have been misinformed by those who deviate from the main message of the Bible (which is the gospel.) They need to be exposed to the correct version of the gospel.	Nonbelievers are spiritual seekers who need to be approached in the right way, through more appealing channels and formats, in order to for them to positively respond to the Bible.
Relationship between group members	Supportive and collaborative, helping each other as they support their leaders' evangelism.	Supportive yet independent, each member is responsible for his or her own witnessing.
Relationship between members and leaders	Members' relationships with leaders are highly valued. They try their best to support their leaders in any way they can.	The leader is there to provide minimal support to members' individual efforts. It is understood that members know how best to approach people in their lives.
Relationships between members and nonbelievers	Less emphasized than the relationship between members and leaders.	Genuine and meaningful relationships between members and nonbelievers are valued.

Cross-cultural comparison of IRE church and TM discourse on relational evangelism

Table 1 provides a cross-cultural comparison between the two groups' approaches to witnessing as expressed through their discourses on relational evangelism.

Discussion

"Face wants" of IRE church and TM in their discourse on relational evangelism

So far, we are aware of both groups' attempts to persuade their members to engage in certain forms of relational evangelism. Now I will discuss how they make the act of evangelizing more appealing to their members through the utilization of facework (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998) and politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Witnessing is a potentially face-threatening act (Brown & Levinson, 1987). It has the potential to threaten a member's face or "sense of favourable social self-worth" (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). Imagine the discomfort one feels when one's conversational partner intentionally puts down one's faith and beliefs, which one holds dear. In order to satisfy all parties' needs for face, one has to engage in facework as "a set of communicative behaviours that people use to regulate their social dignity and to support or challenge the other's social dignity" (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998).

Although face is valued across cultures, how one enacts facework differs from culture to culture. Those who belong in individualistic cultures such as TM members tend to emphasize the importance of the "I-identity" over the "we-identity": individual rights over group rights and personal self-esteem over social self-esteem (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). On

the other hand, those who belong in collectivistic cultures such as IRE church members tend to prioritize the "we-identity" over the "I-identity." I argue that each group's preferred method for witnessing reflects said group's effort to satisfy members' "face wants," as well as those of their interlocutors during an act of witnessing.

Facework in the IRE church

As previously discussed, IRE church members advocate for a two-step witnessing method. First, members are encouraged to provide a brief introduction to Christian teachings to their acquaintances and friends. Then they are asked to invite members of their social circles to church events, where their leaders will give sermons. Considering that the worst thing that could happen is for either the interlocutor to cut short a member's sharing of Christian teachings or to turn down their invitation to attend a church event, both highly unlikely occurrences considering Chinese and Indonesian cultural norms that emphasize politeness and harmony maintenance (cf. Benton & Setiadi, 1998; Redding & Witt, 2007), this is a communicative act with relatively low chance of threatening one's face.

Once a friend/acquaintance attends a church event, he or she will be subjected to a fiery sermon given by an IRE leader. Since the sermon is unidirectional with no opportunity for audience members to provide direct feedback, there is no chance for either IRE leaders or members to experience face-loss due to a direct questioning/rejection of their faith/religious beliefs. Based on my fieldwork observation, neither IRE leaders nor members have ever engaged in a one-on-one direct act of sharing the gospel. What usually followed the formal portion of the church event was an informal social gathering where church members introduced their guests to leaders who, contrary to their "fire and brimstone" performance on the church platform, displayed an affable and approachable demeanor. The IRE's approach, which showcases its leaders' competence in delivering the "real" message of the Bible, enhances its members' social self-esteem (we-identity) as a legitimate religious group because its leaders have strong backgrounds in theological training.

Facework in TM

As an evangelical Christian group, TM upholds the mission of "sharing the good news of Jesus Christ" through the spreading of the gospel. However, following current U.S. mainstream evangelical trends, TM's distinction between Biblical teachings and the gospel is not as clearly defined as that of the IRE church. Adapting Biblical wisdom to contemporary concerns is viewed as equally important as sharing the message of salvation through Jesus Christ. In fact, as their discussion on popular culture illustrates, they are not averse to highlighting Christian-themed messages as found in media content.

From a facework perspective, having a less stringent view of the Bible and the gospel serves to fulfill members' positive and negative face wants (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Brown and Levinson's (1987) classic study on politeness posits that as members of social groups, people need both to be liked (positive face) and not to be imposed or intruded upon (negative face). Adapting one's message to meet one's interlocutor "where they are" makes one more relatable and hence likeable. Members' negative face needs are fulfilled through the autonomy they have in managing their own evangelism. Pastor Bill has very little authority over members' witnessing in their personal lives. He is there to support them in their efforts, yet he would never impose his way of witnessing

upon them. Members are given full autonomy because they are believed not only to have a strong grasp of the Bible and gospel, but more importantly, they know how best to approach people in their lives to whom they are called to witness. To be the authority of one's own evangelism highlights the importance of the I-identity in TM's approach.

Unspoken premises of personhood in the IRE church and TM discourses on relational evangelism

Now that we know the "what" (the act of witnessing to nonbelievers) and the "how" (persuasive attempts to convince members to engage in certain forms of witnessing), I explicate the "with what" aspect of their cultural persuadables (Fitch, 2003), in this case the symbolic resources that serve to explain each group's preference for certain strategies over others. Specifically, I explicate premises surrounding personhood that could account for what is considered as "reasonable action" (Fitch, 2003) when it comes to convincing members to engage in relational evangelism.

A prominent quality of TM discourse on evangelism is that of individuality. Members' evangelical efforts are conceptualized as individual efforts, where a member reaches out to individuals they encounter in their daily social lives. In an effort to connect these qualities with American notions of personhood, I turn to Carbaugh's (1988) conceptualization of U.S. mainstream discourse on personhood. According to Carbaugh (1988), a person is conceptualized as an "individual" with "rights" who makes "choices" (p. 18). This "individual" has a "self" (p. 18).

The "self" is composed of three main symbolic dimensions: independent–dependent, aware–unaware, and communicative–closed (Carbaugh, 1988, pp. 62–63). The first dimension refers to a preference for an independent self, a self that is perceived to be relatively stable across contexts, and contains a unique set of personal qualities (p. 64). The second dimension refers to a preference for self-awareness, a recognition on an individual's part not only of one's sense of self or self-concept, but also of another's sense of "his or herself." The third and final dimension refers to a preference for these qualities to be expressed through communicativeness, where one is demonstratively expressive and talkative, always ready to share one's sense of independence and self-awareness.

All three dimensions are embedded in TM's discourse on relational evangelism. Elements of independence are manifested through members' preference for connecting with potential audience members on a one-on-one basis. One's unique individual ability (as opposed to their leader's ability) to determine who needs to be approached, how and when, and to what degree, is taken for granted. One's ability to strategize when approaching a potential audience member is determined by one's sense of self-awareness and other-awareness. This was demonstrated through the discussion of the use of popular cultural content to connect with nonbelievers in order to "meet them where they are." In adjusting Christian teachings to contemporary tastes and needs, one is also able to demonstrate an understanding of the "other's" self-concept through an awareness of elements in the Bible and gospel that are relevant to nonbelievers and how to present the gospel to them. TM members' preference for one-on-one evangelism also embodies the ideal concept of "communicativeness": interpersonal communication between oneself and a nonbeliever, where one is able to express one's faith while acknowledging the other's sense of self in a sensitive manner. Within the limits of TM premises of

personhood, approaching a nonbeliever on a one-on-one basis using media they may find appealing counts as "reasonable action" (Fitch, 2003, p. 112).

Unlike TM's premise of personhood, which emphasizes the individual "self," the IRE church's discourse on relational evangelism reflects a Confucian sense of "relational self" (Ho, 1995), one that is embedded in social groups (Jacobs, Belschak, & Krug, 2004). Instead of expressing a distinct awareness of one's unique personality, and that of the "other," the "relational self" is a subdued self (Chen, 2014, p. 65), one whose identity gains meaning in the social presence of the other (p. 65). An emphasis on a subdued sense of self corresponds with the upholding of Apostle Andrew, the behind-the-scenes "apostle of small things," as a role model for IRE church members' evangelism. Moreover, this subdued "relational self" gains more meaning in the presence of IRE leaders than nonbelievers.

Instead of the individual "self" as the locus of meaning, the emphasis of the IRE church's discourse on relational evangelism is on social roles and the responsibilities that correspond to them. The enterprise could work only if everyone plays their part and does not overstep their boundaries. The emphasis on social roles is also accompanied by a Confucian sense of trust of and respect for authority (Chen & Chung, 1994; Yum, 1988; Zhang, Lin, Nonaka, & Beom, 2005): that those in authoritative positions are there because they are qualified to assume responsibilities inherent in said positions. Unlike their own inadequate knowledge of the Bible, IRE church members believe their leaders' possess the correct interpretation of the Bible, which points to the gospel. When it comes to relational evangelism, their main role is to support their leaders' efforts in spreading this correct interpretation by first sharing a bit about the gospel and then inviting people in their social circles to attend IRE church events and listen to their leaders' explanation of it. Within the limits of their understanding of the self as part of "an interdependent system of well-defined roles" (Fitch, 2003, p. 108), members playing their roles in supporting leaders in spreading the gospel constitute a "reasonable action" (Fitch, 2003, p. 112).

Cultural views of relationships in TM and IRE church's discourse on relational evangelism

In addition to premises of personhood, both groups' discourse on relational evangelism also reflects cultural views of relationships. According to Carbaugh (2007), as we engage in communicative practices, we relate to one another in certain relational configurations (p. 175). When considering both groups' cultural understandings of relationships, there are three types of relationships to consider: members' relationship with their leaders, relations among fellow members, and last but not least, their relationship with nonbelievers. TM members' relationship with their leader, Pastor Bill, is one of equality. Even though he occupies an authoritative position in their group, he supports them in their individual evangelical efforts. Given TM's view of evangelism as an individual effort, Pastor Bill's evangelism is not considered as more valuable than that of its members.

When it comes to their practice of evangelism, IRE members are related to their leaders in a hierarchical manner. Leaders' evangelical efforts are considered as more significant than that of members'. Their view of evangelism as a collective effort calls for the establishment of different sets of roles and accompanying responsibilities. The more significant

one's role in evangelizing, the larger the burden of responsibility ones has to carry. It is IRE members' responsibility to support their leaders in any way they can, as they shoulder the burden of spreading the correct version of the gospel.

By adopting a supporting, behind-the-scenes role in their practice of evangelism, IRE members cultivate a strong camaraderie amongst themselves. They spend most of their weekends together, assisting one other in organizing church events. After the completion of their tasks, they often socialize outside of church settings. Through these collective efforts, they form a strong bond with one another. TM members, on the other hand, are individually dispersed in their evangelism. Camaraderie among members is neither a preference nor a priority in supporting the success of individual evangelical efforts.

Last but not least, our discussion on cultural relationships would not be complete without a commentary on how both religious groups might be related to one another. Since both studies were conducted in different locations across different time spans, it is safe to say their paths did not cross. In terms of cross-cultural relating between Chinese Indonesian Evangelical Christians and their U.S American counterparts, my study of the IRE church (Lie, 2015, 2017) led me to conclude that both members and leaders of this group treat the group as a space to enact their ethno-religious identity as Indonesian Christians of Chinese descent (Lie, 2015). Although it was never stated that the group is exclusively Indonesian, practices such as giving sermons solely in Indonesian, as well as distributing generic Christian flyers in public without including the group's contact information (Lie, 2015) are indicative of the group's effort in maintaining its boundaries. Members I interviewed mostly claimed to be sojourners, who utilized the space to maintain their religious practice as they bide their time until they are able to head home and resume their practice at the central church. Their disinterest in including U.S. Americans in their evangelism is reflective of their planned short-term residence in the country.

Conclusion

The purpose of this analysis is to demonstrate how religion and ethnicity intersect in the communicative act of persuasion. I also intended to reveal how these culturally sound persuasive acts reflect differing face wants and boundaries found within each group. Culture-specific limits within each group's discourse reflect contrasting premises of personhood and relations (Carbaugh, 2007). Emphasis on individual effort reflects U.S. American cultural logic, whereas emphasis on collective effort reflects a Chinese Indonesian one. Individuality as the guiding principle of personhood in TM discourse informs us of their view on relationships: they are related to one another, their leader, and nonbelievers in their talk on a relationship of equality.

Similarly, the IRE church's emphasis on a two-step process in implementing relational evangelism reflects their premises of personhood and relations. Their personhood is that of the "relational self" (Ho, 1995), bounded to each other and their leaders as they assume interdependent roles in their group's evangelism. What seems similar on the surface, evangelical Christian groups practicing a certain form of evangelism, contrasts quite a bit when deeper discussions on the practice in question were unveiled. In fact, one could argue that they are different practices altogether, masquerading under the same name. This is not to say that there are not U.S. American groups that are more collectivistic in their persuasive

efforts, just as there quite possibly exists a Chinese Indonesian evangelical Christian group that encourages individual effort in witnessing to nonbelievers. However, each group's practice is "deeply sensible or intelligible" (Carbaugh, 1996, pp. 13–14) within its respective social and religious scene.

In our current reality of global interdependency, it is imperative for us as intercultural communication scholars to promote interreligious understanding among followers of world religions. One way to promote a pluralistic view of these religions is the explication of different ways of "doing" "being" (Wieder & Pratt, 1990) members of certain religious faiths. This, in turn, helps us move away from a singular notion of Christianity, for example, to one that accounts for the plurality of expressions found around the world. As many scholars have forecasted (Cimino & Lattin, 1998; Davie, Woodhead, & Heelas, 2003; Jenkins, 2002, 2006, 2007; Wijsen & Schreiter, 2007; Wuthnow, 1993), Christianity as we know it—a predominantly "Western" religion, based on "Western" cultural sets of values, with accompanying expressions of these values—is no longer an accurate depiction of its manifestation in the twenty-first century (Bediako, 2000; Moyers, 2004; Sanneh, 2003). The majority of present-day Christians live outside Europe and North America. The ethnography of communication provides a useful perspective for uncovering local and emic characteristics of religious discourses around the world. Thanks to the diversity of their followers, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism, among others, should be studied as plural manifestations of religious beliefs, with communication as their main expressive tool.

Notes on contributor

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