FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

CULTURAL HINDRANCES ASIAN AMERICAN LEADERS FACE IN GROWING THROUGH CONFLICT

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1. Introduction

Asian American Churches, their past, present, and future are important to me because I became a Christian through one, I am still going to one, and I envision working with Asian Americans in the future. While my spiritual history owes a lot the fruit of the local Asian American church, my experience with them is mired with disappointments as I have witnessed the tragedies that occur when conflicts arise within the leadership of these churches.

My own experience prior to coming to seminary involved a conflict that arose in the church I grew up in. The English pastor of our congregation’s contract was up for renewal. After long discussions, the board of elders decided not to renew his contract accusing him of being ineffective and greedy. Conflicts, gossip, and banter ensued. The congregation was divided over whether to support him or not. In a matter of weeks after I arrived in California for seminary, the church had split due to irreconcilable differences.

When I arrived in California, I became the pastoral intern of a healthy predominantly Asian American church. A fellow intern who had moved at the same time explained that he had just come from a similar situation with the leadership from his home church, which is a common experience that is not enjoyable to share with another.

What I have noticed from my own experience as well as the experience of friends is that the type of “church drama” that occurs among Asian American churches face is a reoccurring phenomenon that is not exclusive to any geographical area. The Asian American churches I observed in the Midwest suffer from the exact same problems as churches I have observed in Los Angeles and in other places as well. As I keenly listened to people’s experiences in multi-congregational Asian American churches, it just seemed to me like there is a cruel drama reel playing over and over again. It is a show those who are old enough have seen enough times and in various places. It is the show of watching another Asian American church split or self-destruct because of the way the leadership handles conflict.

These churches initially blossom with the fervency of the Asian spirit. Multitudes are saved and are discipled. But suddenly, the TV turns on and we are watching the same show again, rampantly running and ruining the well being of these churches. What once was a healthy church is now perpetually hurting church. It begs congregants the questions: Why does this keep happening to leadership in Asian American Churches?

It is easy to suggest that, of course, sin is the problem. Sin is what is causing all these problems. But sin itself is an insufficient reason to explain problems that are occurring consistently across the country and within different contexts. I observe that it is not just sin alone that is causing these problems in Asian American churches, but it is sin within a system. It is sin operating within the system of the Asian culture. As John Stott astutely noted, “our model of leadership is often shaped more by culture than by Christ”[[1]](#footnote-1) When the Asian culture conflicts with the culture of Christ, troubles arise, and thus, Asian American cultures find themselves stagnating, in decline, or worst still, dying when conflicts arise.

There seems to be some things inherent within our cultural DNA which are causing Asian American churches to repetitively seeing the same problems. The scope of this paper is concerned with analyzing a few distinct cultural values that are hindering leadership in Asian American church from handling and growing through conflict, and ultimately, from accomplishing God’s mission in the world.

2. Why Reconciliation is the Focus

As previously stated, this paper is concerned with what hinders leadership in Asian American churches from healthily working with conflict. Of the many angles that could be taken in observing Asian American Christianity, I felt that this angle was one of particular importance for the following conviction. As in any relationship, it can have the most dynamic vision, the most engaging interests, the most connective personalities, but if reconciliation is not an integrated necessity and value in that relationship, that relationship will not last.

It is my conviction that if people don’t learn how to deal with conflict and learn to forgive, relationships will not last. And it is in this very necessary self-mediating act of reconciliation that Asian American leaders have a tendency of having trouble engaging in because of cultural blind spots that are at work within the church family. The fruits of this are painful to bear.

When conflicts arose in the church, news of it comes first generally in the form of gossip, and leadership is generally quiet about the details. The end of conflicts generally divides the church into two groups: those who have “inside information” and those who do not. It has been reported that Korean churches have a greater tendency to split rather than to work through differences.[[2]](#footnote-2) In the aftermath, the separated groups rarely associate with one another and will continue to foster a spirit of animosity and competition. There is a phenomenon known among Asian American churches now known as the “Silent Exodus”, where second generation members who are more distanced from their cultural origins, are leaving the Asian American church because of these cultural difficulties.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Conflict and reconciliation seem to be a large wound from which Asian American churches are bleeding and it is for this reason that the focus of this paper is on cultural oppositions to biblical reconciliation.

3. Cultural Strongholds which Hinder Reconciliation

There are several Asian values that are clashing with Biblical values that cause such cyclical conflict issues. They are the legs of the system which accentuates sin when introduced into it. It is therefore important to bring them to light to understand what they are doing and why they are doing it.

We will now introduce several concepts and paradigms operating within the Asian culture which hinder biblical living of conflict and reconciliation. These concepts are not mutually exclusive, nor are they exhaustive. They are: the culture of shame, commitment to honorable public appearances, gracelessness and forgiveness, and the imposition of the Asian culture’s hierarchical Assumptions.

3.1 The Culture of Shame

Nancy Sugikawa reports a few accounts that are very common among Asian American churches:

A Korean senior pastor rebukes a younger pastor for mission morning prayer twice a week, challenging his devotion to God. He upholds as a better example of faithfulness another leader who works long hours and does everything he is told. A Chinese church elder scolds a pastor for not being spiritual enough because he has expressed his fear of failure or asked for a raise. A Japanese pastor has been having serious marital conflicts but urges his wife never to reveal their problems to anyone in the church.[[4]](#footnote-4)

These are all examples of a cultural system whose relationships operate within a culture of shame. This culture of shame is essential to understanding why it causes difficulties in Asian American Leadership. It is how we police our members and enforce our moral principles. Families raise their children under the principle that they act correctly or else they will endure the shame of their most trusting community.

This concept of shame is first integrated within Asian nomenclature for new babies. Greg Jao explains how Asian names come to be.

Group-oriented Chinese names often are composed of three characters. The first character, “the family name,” identifies our family or clan, and the second character often marks which generation of the family we belong to. The third–and last–character distinguishes us from our siblings and cousins, identifying us as individuals. [[5]](#footnote-5)

This nomenclature is interesting because for Asian names, the last name is first and the first name is last. The first identity therefore, of any given person, is not their individual name, but their family name. It is to show that they are not first individuals, but that they first belong to the family unit. Steve Kang notes that, “in a society that is based on the collective identity of community or family, hierarchy gives the individual his or her identity.”[[6]](#footnote-6) American names (not to say American names are biblical, just for contrasts’ sake) are ordered first name first and then the family name, indicating that a given person’s identity is first their individuality, and then the family they belong to.

It is in the nomenclature where the culture of shame is birthed. For an Asian person, everything that person does, whether for good or for bad, is tied to their familial identity. If they do good, they bring honor to the family; if they do bad, they bring shame. In the context of an Asian American Church, the church is the “family” and individuals and their actions represent the honor of the church family. It is for this reason that shame exists so powerful in an Asian context.

Shame is proven to be a powerful and sometimes devastating emotional experience. As Christian psychologist Lewis Smedes famously writes, “We feel guilty for what we do. We feel shame for we are…”[[7]](#footnote-7) Within the Asian context, shame is a powerful motivational factor for correcting and policing behavior. Sociological researchers Karen Huang and Christine affirm the presence of this powerful agent within Asian culture:

“The process of ethnic identification is unique for Asian Americans in that shame…is a culturally powerful motivating force in defining oneself.[[8]](#footnote-8)”

Because the value of not being shamed is prioritized and upheld within the community, any problems that arise are best dealt with by having the leaders suppress them so that the guilty parties will not have endure the emotional experience of shame. The consequence of this culture being operant within Asian churches is that problems that are never exposed are never dealt with. And problems that are never dealt with will never be solved or healed. In short, a culture of shame promotes a culture that endlessly suppresses its problems. Helen Lee, a serious contributor in Asian American Christianity notes:

Coming from a cultural perspective that views conflict in a negative light, many Asian American churches have not had sufficient opportunities to practice healthy conflict resolution, either in their own personal relationships or in a congregational setting…a prerequisite for developing healthy churches is accepting it and dealing proactively with it when it occurs.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

This unfortunate paradigm causes leaders in Asian American churches to deal with problems by denying that there is a problem. And so to explain why the problems found in Asian American churches are cyclical, it is because the rug can only hide so much dirt. Neglected issues become the seed for repetition. Any problem that was not dealt with will remain and subsequently explode the next time a problem arises. The lessons that should have been learned from leaders in healing and solving problems were never learned in a culture of shame. Asian culture only knows how not to be shamed; not how to mediate.

3.2 Commitment to Honorable Public Appearances

When problems arise in the church, it is generally in the leaders of Asian American church’s best interest to naturally engage in the alternative option to enduring shame: saving face. Huang and Yeh explain this phenomenon:

Asian culture teaches individuals to worry about how others will react so that they can maintain face. Face includes the positive image, interpretations, or social attributes that one claims for oneself or perceives others to have accorded one. If one does not fulfill expectations of self, then one loses face…when one loses face, one feels tremendous shame.[[10]](#footnote-10)

With (perhaps) honest intentions of preserving the well being of the community, leaders in Asian American churches will do their best to reassure their members that everything is okay. This tactic is personally an all-together familiar one as I remember how the leadership of the church I left in Chicago quickly, and with great intention, brushed off the conflicts they were having within the elders’ board which led to the church split. While leadership believed that saving face would protect the honor and thus the viability of the church, they failed to see that it only compromised the necessary steps for the church to move forward. Greg Jao notes that the value of saving face means,

“Preserving the dignity, identity, and appearance of ourselves or our families…As a result, Asian cultures typically avoid putting people in a position which they might lose face…[Therefore], it is impolite and improper to [communicate] directly.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

So in a variety of ways, there is a natural tendency for leadership to cover up significant issues, downplay situations, or promote a hush-hush environment. The prepared statements given to the congregation never tell the whole story. They rarely include any confession of sin, or more importantly, an appeal for forgiveness. They are often politically correct, responsibility-avoiding in nature, and non-disclosure, revealing just enough details to show that there was a problem, but not enough for the community to believe that the problem was actually healed.

Because disclosure and openness are both deep Biblical principles (2 Cor 7) within the family of God, Asian Americans leaders’ commitment to honorable public appearances do more harm than good. It fosters serious distrust and frustration in the lack of full disclosure and integrity. Accepting that problems are a natural part of being human is not a problem. But when involved in a church where its tendencies lean towards more in appearing right than in handling issues truthfully, it advocates the idea that the church cannot handle problems healthily.

And because healthy long term relationships are dependent on the ability for the people in the relationship to be able to face its issues, and because talking freely and openly about issues is a necessary step in that process, the desire to appear “okay” within the community’s eyes brushes even more dirt under the rug, thus further contributing to the cycle.

3.3 Gracelessness and Forgiveness

Because the culture of shame and the commitment to honor are powerful forces within the Asian culture, Asian American churches often experience and receive little amount of biblical grace. The culture pressures people to never reveal their problems, and worst still, those that boldly step forward and do so receive the lash of the community. Nancy Sugikawa shares a provoking yet incredibly common story among Asian American churches:

A young Chinese American Pastor has a brief affair with a woman at his church. The elders of the church quickly confront the pastor, who confesses everything…The pastor is quickly dismissed on the grounds that he has shamed the church and he can no longer be a godly role model for other church families…Forced to find a secular job, the now-divorced pastor slowly rebuilds his life. After a year, he applies for another pastoral position but is told that the elders of his previous church would not give him a recommendation without commenting on why. He grows hurt and angry at both the church and God, and thoughts of reentering the pastorate or even attending another church leave him both bitter and broken.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Unfortunately, stories like these happen frequent enough to produce many Asian American Christians who have been deeply wounded and hurt by their home church. They feel judged, unable to share, trapped and end up being very disillusioned with church and God. It is a troubling thing when the church of God, who has received grace upon grace, cannot give grace to its own members.

A culture of shame is the seeds of producing a graceless church. Conflicts are sometimes a God-given opportunity to display the grace and forgiveness of Jesus towards others. Without that grace, the church is mired with religious performance and inauthentic Christianity. Grace is necessary for relationships to grow because grace is how we grow in our own personal faiths. Asian American leaders must recognize how those cultural paradigms inhibit their ability to give and to show Jesus’ grace to others.

3.4 Imposition of the Asian Culture’s Hierarchical Assumptions

Within the Asian culture, there is a strong hierarchical system ingrained in our family system that’s at work within the church. It’s this one: Children are children and parents are parents. There is in impenetrable wall between them and diving the two is the wall of hierarchical respect.

Voices in the Asian American Christian community all trace the rigidity of this wall to Confucian ideals that are deeply embedded into the Asian Culture. Helen Lee explains:

Confucianism is defined by hierarchy and patriarchy–in the simplest terms, there is a distinct leadership structure defining who is above whom; that is, those who are younger serve those who are older, and women serve men.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Myungseon Oh adds his observation about Korean-American churches:

Due to such influences of Confucianism, Koreans tend to define all human relationships in terms of superior versus subordinate, the ruler versus the ruled, including gender and age. Such authoritarian persuasion permeates the society.[[14]](#footnote-14)

While this wall is a natural God-given wall of distinction in human relationships, in an Asian context, it is often thicker than other cultures, and a lot less permeable. The thickness of this wall disallows upward communication. Messages are mostly sent down, not up. It is because of this hierarchy that you find Asian children having a hard time seeing their parents eye-to-eye as functional independent adults and friends.

Now because the general culture of a church is based on the collective dynamics of the family constituents within the church, it is natural to find this hierarchal dynamic at work within the Asian American churches. Just as Asian families see the relationship between parents and kids as “parents are parents and kids are kids”, so in Asian American church dynamics, church leadership (the parents) are church leadership, and congregations (kids) are congregations.

This is not to say that this is a position that Asian American Church leadership chooses to take intentionally; it’s just a position that has already been established in the family, and therefore easy to fall into in the context of a church family. Translated over from the dynamics of the Asian family is the hierarchal assumption that there is an indivisible wall between the leaders of the church and the rest of the congregation. They are, with or without them realizing, functioning as “parents”. And just as in families, the symptoms of this can be seen by what happens when conflicts come their way.

When issues arise in the church, just like in Asian families, the “adults” will deliberate, and the children will be sitters in that process. Helen Lee adds,

“given the Asian tendency towards authoritarianism, members of Asian American congregations may not feel the freedom to disagree with pastoral leaders or even may be discouraged from doing so by the leader(s).”[[15]](#footnote-15)

That is not to say that Asian leadership is operating out of a pride agenda (though they very well may be), but they are more inclined to be exclusive in who they involve in the process of discerning issues when problems arise. For this reason, one will find that the communication dynamics in Asian American churches between church leadership and the congregational is often not open, seldom done as equals, and most importantly, seldom inclusive of each other.

Church members are generally lost as to what is going on, and only hear about details (accurately or inaccurately) from each other. This further adds to the cycle because the very people that could have helped solve the problem, the entire church family, is estranged and disjointed. I have spoken with numerous individuals who, after consistently seeing their contributions going nowhere (or seeing the lack of an avenue for any sort of contribution), have felt separated from the church leadership without (or with) the church leadership’s best intentions.

Family members who feel they have no place to contribute to the well being of the family will soon not feel like family anymore. And that is exactly what happens when this Confucian-based hierarchical system is in place–people begin losing interest, leaving, and dividing when they receive enough of the dead end of their well-intended contributions.

4. Conclusion

These are the conflicting cultural values commonly operating within Asian American leadership are synergistically contributing to the problem of Asian American churches self-destructing.

The culture of shame suppresses problems and disallows for healing by neglecting those very problems. A commitment to honorable appearances fosters distrust and confusion within the community, further exacerbating the issues. A grace-less church discourages openness and Christ-like forgiveness. The hierarchical values of the Asian family at play within the church family disengages the entire church family, divides the body, and neglects the utilization of perhaps the most powerful tool in solving problems: a committed, engaged, and contributive community.

I hope that some of these thoughts are helpful in seeing the way Asian American leadership can often contribute to the self-destruction of their churches This is meant for us to see and realize what it is about our culture that stands in stark opposition to the way the family of God should operate. I hope that this will open the discussion on how to stop the bleeding in these types of churches as the growth of the Asian-American demographic is not slowing down anytime soon, and they will be in need of healthy churches.

Words: 3893

1. John Stott, *Basic Christian Leadership* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), p. 113 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Lee, Helen. "Healthy Leaders, Healthy Households 1: Challenges and Models." Ed. Steve Kang and Helen Lee. *Growing Healthy Asian American Churches*. Ed. Peter Cha. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006. 66-67. Print. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The term “Silent Exodus” is coined by Helen Lee in her article “Silent Exodus: Can the East Asian church in American reverse the flight of its next generation?” originally published in *Christianity Today* Magazine. Vol 40, No. 12 (Aug 12, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Sugikawa, Nancy, Steve Wong, and Helen Lee. "Grace-Filled Households." Ed. Peter Cha and Steve S. Kang. *Growing Healthy Asian American Churches*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006. 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Jao, Greg. "Honor And Obey." *Following Jesus Without Dishonoring Your Parents*. Ed. Jeanette Yep. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998. 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Sugikawa, Nancy, and Steve Wong. "Grace-Filled Households." Ed. Peter Cha, Steve S. Kang, and Helen Lee. *Growing Healthy Asian American Churches*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006. 32. Print. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Smedes, Lewis B. *Shame and Grace: Healing the Shame We Don't Deserve*. [San Francisco]: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993. 6. Print. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Christine J. Yeh and Karen Huang, “The Collectivistic Nature of Ethnic Identity Development Among Asian American College Students,” Adolescence, September 1, 1996 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Lee, Helen. "Healthy Leaders, Healthy Households 1: Challenges and Models." pp 66-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Christine J. Yeh and Karen Huang, “The Collectivistic Nature of Ethnic Identity Development Among Asian American College Students,” Adolescence, September 1, 1996 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Jao, Greg. "Relating to Others–Understanding Yourself." *Following Jesus Without Dishonoring Your Parents*. Ed. Jeanette Yep. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998. 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Sugikawa, Nancy, and Steve Wong. "Grace-Filled Households." Ed. Peter Cha, Steve S. Kang, and Helen Lee. *Growing Healthy Asian American Churches*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006. 19. Print. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Lee, Helen. "Healthy Leaders, Healthy Households 1: Challenges and Models." p61. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Oh, Myungseon. "Study on Appropriate Leadership Pattern for the Korean Church in Postmodern Era." *Journal of Asian Mission* 5.1 (2003): 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Lee, Helen. "Healthy Leaders, Healthy Households 1: Challenges and Models." p62. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)