Constructing Chineseness in Ministry: A Contextualized (Re)thinking with Special Reference to Chinese Church in Indonesia and Singapore: Part 2

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Introduction

This part examines the issue of constructing Chineseness in ministry in Singapore. The issue of bilingual services will be explored using three Christian churches as examples. This part will conclude with the author's recommendations and global applications.

Constructing Chineseness in Ministry in Singapore¹

There are about 243 churches under the umbrella of National Council of Churches of Singapore (NCCS).² Additionally, there are thirty-two churches belong to Bible Presbyterian churches,³ and forty-two churches are listed as Independent,⁴ making a total of approximately 317 churches.⁵ This paper does not attempt to conduct a detail field survey of the demography of Chinese churches in Singapore. To analyze

¹Singapore is a country with a total population of 5.6123 million people, in which 3.4392 million are citizens, 0.5266 million are permanent residents.¹ The population by ethnic groups at the end of June 2016: Chinese is 2.9231 million, Malays are 0.5258 million, Indians is 0.3568 million, others is 0.1276 million.¹ This paper is focusing on the Chinese population as the topic suggested.

²NCCS Website, https://nccs.org.sg/about/members/ (accessed 13 June 2018).

³Wikipedia Website, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bible-Presbyterian_ churches_ (Singapore) (accessed 13 June 2018).

⁴A Guide to Churches & Organisations in Singapore 2009-2010 (Singapore: National Council of Churches in Singapore, 2009), 171-235.

⁵By definition, "churches" here refer to Protestant Churches. It is a challenge to have an accurate account of number of churches in Singapore. References cited in this paper have different cut-off dates, and some churches do not belong to any of the mentioned systems. I was not able to access accurate data from the government so this paper does not present a comprehensive account of the total number of churches in Singapore.

the issues related to the study of this paper, this writer proposes that a collaboration of selected churches data would surface the crux of the matter. The Chineseness of the Chinese church is to be identified and studied in terms of the language used in Sunday services. The parallel paradigm has been investigated through the study of the Indonesian Chinese Christian church in this paper. Therefore, this paper will analyze the Chineseness and language issues with reference to three churches that conduct Sunday services in Mandarin co-existing with services in English and other languages or dialects. Their models demonstrate the uniqueness of Chinese services and their contribution to the understanding of Chineseness, which may orientate the direction of the ministry of the Chinese church in Singapore and beyond Singapore.

This paper began its analysis with a brief sketch of the language policy of the government of Singapore and its impacts on education and the Christian community. Then, I will present three churches to showcase the strategy of launching a Chinese service under special circumstances, and the results of starting Chinese services. Recommendations will be formulated through interviews with respective church leaders, with suggestions for further study.

The National Interest

The specific and strategic language policy began with *Report on the Ministry of Education 1978* (also known as *Goh Report*). Deputy Prime Minister Goh Kheng Swee was commissioned to lead a team to investigate the problems of the education system.⁶ Several findings in *Goh Report* redefined the landscape of education in Singapore:

- a. The policy of bilingualism was not "universally effective."
- b. English and Mandarin were new languages to most of the Chinese students as 85 per cent of them spoke dialects at home.
- c. The one-size-fits-all education program did not cater to students with differing abilities, mainly when most of the students were learning two languages they were unfamiliar with.

⁶A brief sketch of the education system and bilingual policy is summarized in an article by Cheryl Sim, "Bilingual Policy," http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2016_09_01_093402.html (accessed 14 June 2018).

- d. Students were unlikely to achieve the same level of proficiency for both English and their mother tongue.
- e. A new education system with ability-based streaming at the primary and secondary levels was introduced in 1979.⁷

The Goh Report resulted in many changes in Singapore, both in the education system as well as in its impact on the landscape of the Chinese churches. In 1979, two significant events related to language policy took place. The Special Assistance Plan (SAP) was introduced in nine Chinese stream secondary schools to preserve the culture and traditions of the best Chinese schools and to develop these schools into effectively bilingual institutions.⁸ The other event was the official launch of the "Speak Mandarin Campaign" by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew on 7 September 1979. It aimed to simplify the language environment and improve communication among Chinese Singaporeans.9 In 1984, Chinese-as-one-subject-in-school policy was introduced, and a Singapore school was formed in 1987 where English was taught as the first language.¹⁰ The education policy with reference to language had an impact on Chinese churches. There was a concern about the future of the Chinese churches with who used Mandarin as a main communication medium.¹¹ Christianity in Singapore has since responded to the change

¹¹In 1985 there were forums organized by Chinese churches to discuss the future of Chinese speaking church due to the change of education policy. The atmosphere was worried and down hearted. Surprisingly there wasn't any documentation to record the discussions for that period of time. In a paper, Bishop Dr Robert Solomon of the Methodist Church in Singapore briefly sketched the situation of Christianity in that era that could be read, the paper suggested, as a reaction as a counter proposal to the impact of education policy had on the church life especially to the Chinese speaking church. He said, "The regular church services have also seen an increasing number of expatriates attending and participating in church life. These would include, for example, professionals and workers from China, India, Philippines, Myanmar, Indonesia and a host of other nations. This has further enriched the church as a Multiracial Community," http://www.hcf.org.sg/resources/the-church-as-a-multi-racial-community (accessed 21 June 2018).

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹"Speaking Mandarin Campaign is launched 7 September 1979," http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history/events/0daaa112-a100-4bbf-8907-8ea4472c26c3 (accessed 20 June 2018).

¹⁰"Bilingual Policy," http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2016-09-01_093402.html (accessed 20 June 2018).

of education policy.¹² The responses of churches in Singapore deserve an in depth study to demonstrate the dynamic of church life as well as to gather details on the Chineseness of Chinese church. For the limitation of the scope of the study, this paper will only look into the Chineseness of the Chinese churches.

The Establishment of Chinese-Speaking Ministry in an English-Speaking Church

While Chinese-speaking churches were striving to keep their younger members because of the education policy, English-speaking churches had also started Mandarin services. This paper will map out the Chineseness in these Mandarin services. What drove the leadership of an English-speaking church to start a Mandarin service? What were the challenges when it first began? What Chineseness has been demonstrated through the Mandarin service?

Trinity Christian Centre

Trinity Christian Centre (TCC) started with a prayer meeting in September 1969. In April 1970, the first Sunday service was launched.¹³ When Naomi Dowdy was installed as the senior pastor, the Chinese service was born.¹⁴ TCC was worshipping at the World Trade Center in 1983. There was a small hall available beside the main English service. At that time, there was no Chinese pastor to shepherd the flock. There was interpretation through the headset for Cantonese-speaking attendants at the English service. Soon after, Bible study groups using Mandarin and other dialects were launched. In 1987, Dowdy started a Chinese service with Patsy Wong then Dowdy's secretary, as interpreter. The sermon was translated into Mandarin. The congregation spoke

¹²Robert Solomon stated, "Some churches have crossed linguistic and ethnic boundaries to do this. For instance, while traditionally Chinese-speaking churches started English services, partly to retain the English-speaking children of their members in church, traditionally English-speaking churches have also started services in Mandarin and dialects to cater to the Chinese-speaking parents of their members who are being reached out with the gospel." "The Church as a Multiracial Community,"

http://www.hcf.org.sg/resources/the-church-as-a-multi-racial-community (accessed 21 June 2018).

¹³Trinity Christian Centre website, http://trinity.sg/Welcome/Our-Leadership-Team/ (accessed 21 June 2018).

¹⁴Naomi Dowdy, interview by Bernard Koh, 4 May 2018, TCA College, Singapore. Report and Information on the TCC Chinese service is based on this interview.

Mandarin, Hokkien and Cantonese. There were Mandarin and dialect services. Those who attended were parents and grandparents of the members of the main English service. They were also a group of middleaged Christians. The strategy then was to reach the older generation through the first generation young Christians.

The vision for launching a Chinese service was crystal clear. The Chinese service was not designed to accommodate aged Chinese or the elderly of the English congregation who prefer Chinese, but to bilingual youth. These intended to preserve their Chinese roots, and were not fluent in English, though they were bilingual under the Singapore education system. Dowdy had witnessed vibrant youth in Taiwan attending contemporary Chinese services. She was convinced to make the Chinese service vibrant and colored with Chineseness in order to make it attractive for people to attend. Chinese music, instruments, and language were important factors.

It is important to the Chinese to preserve Chineseness. In those days, and even now, a segment of society prefers Chinese. Children were raised in Chinese homes. They spoke mixed languages and dialects, a *"rojak"*¹⁵ with a mixture of a little of everything. The ideology of this new approach, and not the western approach, to the service is essential. The key is identification. People who attend the Chinese service must be able to identify with the order and pattern of service. In another words, members have the sense of ownership.

To launch a Chinese service, Dowdy shared her vision of the Church with the board and they prayed over it. The charisma and leadership of Dowdy was key to launching a Chinese service. Between thirty and forty members attended the first service. The church was glad to start a Chinese service. Initially, Dowdy was the speaker for the Chinese service. Later, Patsy Wong also preached in Mandarin.

Dowdy commented that in Genesis 11, language was a unifying factor. Therefore, language determines your mentality. Dowdy observed that in Taiwanese churches there was Chinese music, songs and hymns. It was vital to have Chinese songs and not a translated version of the English songs for the Chinese service. Chinese service also needed to have Chinese décor to demonstrate and enhance Chineseness. We can

¹⁵*Rojak* in Malay means "mixed", is a local salad of mixed vegetables and fruits, drizzled with a sweet and sour sauce comprising local prawn paste, sugar and lime, http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_392_ 2005-01-06.html (accessed 22 June 2018). *Rojak* as a local colloquial means a mixture of everything, is Manglish, and is an English-based pidgin or creole spoken in Malaysia. cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manglish (accessed 22 June 2018).

learn a principle from Paul the apostle as he writes in First Corinthians 9:22, "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some."(NIV) We should be reminded of a missiological principle: we enter into a community not to take a culture but to take a kingdom. Flexibility in the way we handle a service to cater to the particular need of a special group shall shape our perspective. There is a call to find a bridge to reach the Chinese. And we need to focus on the Chinese as Chinese. Therefore, starts with the right vision. And there will be a good response as we did it many years ago. There were more young people to commit in the Chinese service. The TCC Chinese service has captured and preserved the Chineseness through its order of worship since it was launched. The foundation to maintain the Chineseness lies in the heart and vision of the leadership. A proper understanding of the demography of the congregation strategically orientates the Chinese ministry.

Church of Singapore¹⁶

Huang Jen Sen, Cheng Kai Ho, and Goh Ewe Kheng were the founding elders of the Church of Singapore (COS) in December 1963. The church started as a Mandarin and Hokkien service. Toward the end of 1964, COS began a bilingual service with English and Mandarin. The change in language came when a teacher in an English school brought a few hundred secondary school students. A *peranakan* elder also brought his relatives and friends. At that time, the late Goh Ewe Kheng had an excellent network with foreign speakers from the English speaking world and Taiwan. All these factors contributed to the launching of a bilingual service so that the church could better serve its congregation. Right from the beginning, COS adopted an important principle: all communication was bilingual. Half of the leadership of the church is English-educated and the other half is Chinese literate. Meetings, committees, songs of worship are bilingual.

In the years 1964-1965, special services were held in conjunction with Chinese festivals. There was the First day (*Chu Yi*) of Lunar Chinese New Year Thanksgiving service. And it has now become a tradition in COS. The mid-Autumn festival outreach program was organized to encourage members to invite relatives to the evangelistic meeting.

¹⁶Elder Peter Phua, interview by Bernard Koh, 30 May 2018, Church of Singapore, Singapore. Report and information on Church of Singapore is based on the interview.

The socio-cultural environment of the sixties was the unique setting in which COS developed its ministry. COS had its initial gathering at Siglap, where *Peranakan* gathered. The joining of a *Peranakan* elder verified this demographic. The majority of attendees were not from the affluent class. Many of them attained general education. The spiritual drive was extraordinary at the inauguration. The Holy Spirit filled the three founding elders after they attended the special meeting led by Jiang Duan Yi, a former Hong Kong movie actress converted to Christianity. The charismatic movement ignited the formation of COS. Members were devoted to personal evangelism, giving out gospel tracts by visiting house to house every Saturday. Evangelistic meetings were frequent.

The leadership established a healthy structure to set up bilingual services. Recognizing the differences in mindset of two groups, namely, the Chinese-educated and the English-educated, leadership committed to carrying out the task which God had entrusted to them. They learned to accept, to respect, and to have one mind with one another. This model of leadership has attracted the attention of many other churches. They work hard to nurture the concept of bilingualism through interpretation and translation. Sermons and songs are translated to allow both parties to understand and participate. Leadership fights the wrong thinking of a "second class or underprivileged member" in the church due to a language handicap. In 1977, COS started its second bilingual service, and in 1980, launched a third. The growth of each service ended up in beginning an English service and a Mandarin service in 1987. The golden time of ten-thirty on Sunday morning is still reserved for the bilingual service.

A bilingual service fosters a closer relationship among the leaders. It allows couples with different language backgrounds to worship together. Guest speakers are freer to preach at the bilingual service. It also creates a better networking for the church to invite guest speakers. These bilingual services focus on the Chinese festivals, giving the church the opportunity and multi-dimensionalism to embrace the goodness of Chinese culture. In the Chinese Lunar New Year Thanksgiving service, members celebrate the festive season by giving Mandarin and Chinese cake (*nian gao*). In Qing Ming (remembrance of the ancestors), and Parents' Day Sunday, messages related to fidelity, honoring parents and the elderly are shared. The Duan Wu, or double five, festival (rice dumplings) witnesses the evangelistic outreach. Members are given and share moon cakes at the Mid-Autumn festival. Dinner is organized, members learn to appreciate creation and pay tribute to God the Creator.

Till this day, members of COS look forward to Chinese festive services that are organized under the church master plan.

The Chineseness depends on the Mandarin language. Messages preached in Mandarin are closer to Chinese hearts. Stories and fables are good carriers for the moral teachings, which can be linked with biblical truth. Speaking Mandarin conveys culture, values and passions effectively.

In conclusion, Chineseness in COS is being preserved and demonstrated through the special services related to Chinese festivals. The church encourages members to practice the customs of giving and sharing during those services. The leadership guards the use of languages as the key to establish a fruitful and blessed ministry.

The Bible Church, Singapore¹⁷

The Bible Church, Singapore (TBCS) at the West Coast Road, Singapore is an independent church. It is an English-speaking church. The existing church building, named Clementi Bible Centre (CBC), was built in 1985 by the joint efforts of two churches, The Bible Church, Singapore and Mount Carmel Bible Presbyterian Church (MCBPC). Before 1985, TBCS had five meeting points for its members.

Before launching the Mandarin service, TBCS had already begun community outreach program in the West Coast district, led by a church elder. It was a community care service. Evangelistic meetings were held, but new converts were redirected to neighboring churches due to language issues. Many of the new converts spoke only Mandarin and Chinese dialects. Meanwhile, members of TBCS were also facing challenges in bringing their parents to attend Sunday service due to language. A group of ten people (aged 30-40) were regularly absent from the Sunday service because they were accompanying their non-English speaking parents to other churches. These elderly (aged 60 and above) only spoke Mandarin and dialects, and most of them had received formal education up to Primary level.

In 1998, TBCS held several discussions to address these constraints. The consensus was to start a Mandarin service. Sixty-four members attended the discussion and endorsed the plan. One-third of those who attended formed the core group of the first Chinese service. A soft launch of the Chinese service with activities prepared the church. The Chinese service of TBCS officially started in 1999. The core group was

¹⁷This section is based on an interview with Dr Mee On Tong, the ministry staff worker of The Bible Church, Singapore. Cf. Mee On Tong, Interview by Bernard Koh, 3 July 2018, TCA College, Singapore.

comprised of members between the age of 30 to 40, who had formal education from Pre-University and above. Chinese-educated, some were from the nine secondary schools under the Special Assistance Plan (SAP) who emphasized Chinese culture and language.

In 1985, CBC set up a kindergarten that has become a much soughtafter pre-education institution in the West Coast district. The board of the kindergarten is constituted by an equal number of representatives from TBCS and MCBPC. The neighboring community sees the CBC as an institution of Christianity that provides a good-quality pre-education program for children before the age of 7. Regardless of race and religion, parents are comfortable to enroll their children into the kindergarten for proper education. The kindergarten holds many different celebrations in accordance with the policy laid down by the Ministry of Education. These include different racial festivals. During Chinese Lunar New Year festive season, the kindergarten is décor with elegant and beautiful Chinese ornaments. TBCS Chinese service also works together with the kindergarten in reaching out to the parents and relatives of the students. Brochures and information leaflets are sent to parents and guardians of the children during Chinese festivals such as Chinese Lunar New Year, Mid-autumn (mooncakes) festival.

The challenges of launching a Mandarin service at TBCS included the inadequacy of the knowledge of Chinese culture and the mastery of Mandarin. The mindsets of an English church and a Chinese church are different. The Chinese service also faced the challenge of engaging members to lead the prayer and read the Scripture in Mandarin and to find suitable Chinese hymns and songs for worship.

The benefits of launching a Chinese service are that members need not attend two churches as it was, and new volunteers are raised to serve in the ministry. In addition, sermons were preached in Mandarin then and until this day. The Pastoral staff and leaders come together to discuss and find solutions to these issues.

The Chineseness of TBCS is expressed in many ways. First, special services are organized throughout the year in accordance to the Chinese Lunar calendar. In the Chinese Lunar New Year service, antithetical couplet (*dui lian*) is seen in the worship hall together with auspicious flowers (*nian hua*), and Chinese Lunar New Year songs are sung. Special services of Parents' Day and Mid-Autumn festival are held in time to commemorate the sacrificial love of parents and the aspiration for (re)union with loved ones. Second, the traditional values embedded in the Chinese culture such as filial piety, honor for the teachers and respect for his/her teaching are enhanced and elaborated through the pulpit, church bulletin and other means.

In conclusion, TBCS upholds the traditional values in the Chinese culture as a way to express its Chineseness. TBCS also organizes activities revolve around the Chinese festivals. One unique approach of TBCS on issues related to Chineseness is through the establishment of a kindergarten. A proper channel has been installed through the kindergarten to convey the position of the church to the neighboring community on the affirmation and promotion of Chineseness.

Recommendations: Constructing Chineseness for Chinese Church

I would like to recommend the following issues for future discussion on contextualizing thinking of Chineseness with reference to Chinese ministry in Singapore. First, from the model of TCC, Chineseness can be expressed through the order and content of worship. The Hakka church in Taiwan is pioneering in its practices in the area of funeral rites which can be a showcase for further investigation.¹⁸ Second, as the COS model illustrates, the church encourages members to practice the customs of giving and sharing during Chinese festivals. It is a custom that the Chinese would endorse as a unique way of expressing Chineseness. Biblically, it is interesting to note that the celebration of Purim comprises of giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor (Esth. 9:22). Perhaps, we may investigate the instructions on Purim and related texts in the Holy Scriptures to establish comprehensive guidelines on giving and sharing. Third, as TBCS demonstrates, traditional Chinese values are conveyed through the pulpit and church bulletins. Messages are communicated with a valid and powerful tool-the outreach program of the church. Whether through community outreach or the kindergarten, the church is careful and diligent to state its commitment to uphold the core of the gospel while the colorful beauty of Chineseness is engraved on the hearts of attendees.

¹⁸Wai Min Tsai, "The Research of Taiwanese Renewed Funeral—For the Example of Hakka Church's Three Ceremonies of Memory,"《新世纪宗教研究》(New Century Religion Study) Vol.8, No3 (March 2010):51-94. Also Chien-Jung Lin, "A Research of Interaction Between the Presbyterian Church and Local Community in Taiwan—An Example of Linzenei Presbyterian Church" (MA Thesis, National Taitung University, 2009).

Global Applications

In a research paper, Edgar Wickberg discussed the Chineseness of Chinese in the city of Vancouver, Canada.¹⁹ What is Chineseness? Wickberg illustrated the visibility of Chineseness, first, to the language spoken on the streets, and Mandarin speech was increasingly heard.²⁰ Second, in Canada, multiculturalism has become one of two Canadian characteristics. ²¹In Vancouver, practical multiculturalism includes conspicuous sharing of cultural features with one another, encouraged in school and elsewhere.²² The Dragon Boat Races, promoted by two leading Chinese Canadians, became a multicultural festival celebrating Vancouver.23 The Chinese New Year Parade began to include non-Chinese ethnic organizations.²⁴ Chinese New Year became a recognized event for the city. One version of a Chinese New Year celebration, called "Gung Haggis Fat Choy," a dinner combining supposedly Scottish and Chinese elements, has become well attended.²⁵ The pictures painted by Wickberg vividly illustrated the Chineseness perceived by the Chinese and non-Chinese communities in Vancouver in particular. The study proposed by Wickberg once again confirms that Chineseness is best expressed through the use of language and the celebration of Chinese festivals. Chinese churches may want to seriously consider adopting these approaches and blending them into their programs to reach out to both the faith community and the faith-seeking community. This writer has already witnessed some churches are advocating and implementing the said proposals. Perhaps it takes a bigger force to create a momentum that will drive the Chinese church one step further.

In his concluding remarks, Wickberg suggests three factors of note. First, the study of Chinese families should help all of us better understand the varieties of Chineseness, past and present.²⁶ In Vancouver, there is a trend now in literature and fuelled by personal stories told by non-academics: to bring the study of Global Chinese identities down from the "community" to the family and individual level.²⁷ Live stories of family and individuals showcase the Chineseness of the storyteller. Second, Wickberg suggests, "if everyone eats Chinese

²⁰Ibid., 47.

¹⁹Edgar Wickberg, "Global Chinese Migrants and Performing Chineseness," *Journal of Chinese Oversea* 3:2(November 2007): 39-55.

²¹Ibid., 48.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid., 50.

²⁴Ibid. ²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid., 53-54.

²⁷Ibid., 54.

food and celebrates Chinese New Year, then the marker of Chineseness may be subject to appropriation and modification by people with no Chinese background.²⁸ Ethnography is always a subject of interest both to the ethnographer and the anthropologist. This is an area that the Chinese church needs to investigate the pattern and illustration of Chinese culture through integrating the elements of the Chineseness in the preaching of the gospel. In Vancouver where the Global Cities concept is embedded, multicultural sharing may become a new and influential shaping force.²⁹ Third, Wickberg strongly advocates "that possibility, along with changing attitudes in Global Cities toward the rise of China, changing attitudes toward religion, and changing meanings of nationalism and modernity may yield totally new perspectives in the history of Global Chineseness and its performances."³⁰ Wickberg is presenting a new scenario where Chineseness is being defined by the strong influential force of a politically and economically strong China.

Conclusion

In examining existing models of promoting Chineseness, the church uses language to share the Gospel. The Chinese church in Indonesia and Singapore may seek the wisdom of God and to tab-on the strategies of these two governments in dealing with China and grasp on the opportunity to use the influence of China to reach a new destiny.

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²⁸Ibid

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²⁹Ibid.

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