INCULTURATION IN THE CHINESE-FILIPINO CONTEXT
A Response*

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Reading the paper of Father Jose Vidamor Yu provided me the opportunity to get reacquainted with my roots, and better appreciate the work of those who sought to bring the faith to the Chinese in the Philippines. He is correct when he says that, “while culture is not history, it is history that reflects the culture of a people and its development.”

Yu’s comprehensive and illuminative account of how the evangelization of the Chinese in the Philippines came about serves as an excellent backdrop for understanding better the Chinoy (Chinese-Filipino) Christian today. It also brings to the fore images that many in my generation have kept close to their hearts, not to be forgotten—such as the struggle to find one’s rightful place among the mainstream Filipino populace, the sacrifices and oftentimes feelings of alienation from the clan or race for having embraced the Christian faith, and the difficulties of trying to live by Gospel values that sometimes went against cultural norms.

*First response to Jose Vidamor Yu’s keynote address at the “Mission Congress 2003.”
It might be useful to bring to light certain things that may complement what Yu has already brought out in his paper. My comments, limited to three points, are generally culled from my experiences both as evangelized and evangelizer.

First, inculturation is a dynamic and never-ending process. *Ecclesia in Asia* (21) speaks of inculturation as a dialogue between the Gospel and culture. One characteristic of culture is that it is always changing. Many things cause change to come about, among them: demographic and economic development, education, exposure to other cultures, intermarriages, and technological discoveries whose great influence we have all seen and felt. Thus, generations keep changing. The mind-set of the older Chinese-Filipinos, for example, is very different from that of the younger Chinoys, and even further from that of the emerging generation. Within the Chinese-Filipino community itself, differences can be felt among the sectors that comprise it. This can be attributed to many factors, such as the places where they have been lived and raised, the kind of education and exposure they have received, the friends they have made, the loyalties they have formed, the faith they have embraced. New issues arise with the changing generations, an example of which is the difficulty of imparting the Chinese language to the younger generation, something that was unheard of decades ago.¹

Another example is the dilemma faced by the young Chinese-Filipino girls that I minister to—that of going to Sunday Mass and then on to the Chinese temple afterward; there is also the confusion arising from wanting to be better Christians, but being afraid of losing their cultural traditions. Then, there is the new mass of Chinese immigrants from the Mainland, which Yu mentions in his paper. It would be a mistake to lump together all the different groups that make up the Chinese-Filipino and then come up with a stereotype of the Chinoy. In addition, one must not imagine that there is one sure

way of evangelizing them. Because of this reality, the process of inculturation will always be ongoing. Nicolas Standaert, the Jesuit sinologist, warns against falling into the illusion that we will ever be able to complete the process of inculturation. He says:

If you do complete it—or rather, if you think you have done so—it means that you have probably paid too little attention to the changes a culture is continually subject to. It could also mean that you have reduced the liberating Gospel message too much to purely human or cultural norms and values.

To be unable to realize full inculturation does not mean, however, that you should give up striving for it. It is only in the measure of your striving that you will come to know how inculturation can always be improved or renewed.²

My second point concerns the agents of inculturation. While the Holy Spirit is the prime agent of inculturation, he does make use of human means to carry out his work. The fruits of the Chinese-Filipino apostolate have been largely due to the zeal of the missionaries who came from Mainland China after the events of 1949, as Yu has noted. Their work has been admirable and the establishment of schools, parishes and other institutions bears witness to their heroic efforts.

In recent years we have begun to see more and more Chinese elements in eucharistic celebrations when certain great feasts close to the heart of the Chinoys are celebrated; these include: homilies in Chinese, joss sticks used at Mass, red lanterns decorating the Church during festivals, the veneration of ancestors. The use of symbols that allows Chinoys to better express their Christian faith has been a source of inspiration to many. There is also the perceived presence of a younger set of Chinoy clergy whose creativity and passion for the mission are notable; one sees the greater involvement of lay groups who help in the preparation of a more inculturated liturgy. They point

to a genuine growth in the faith life of the local Church, in this case, the Chinese-Filipino Christians.

This is the point that I would like to bring out. The older generation of missionaries whose work of evangelization cannot be equaled were, however, not born and bred in the Philippines. They had many insights, but did not have the experience or the angst of having to straddle two worlds—the Philippine society into which they were born, and the Chinese cultural heritage that is their legacy. The older missionaries have successfully adapted many of the cultural elements to make the Christian message more receptive to the Chinese in the Philippines, but they could not have known, first hand, what it is to be a Chinoy.

There comes a time when the evangelized, the people to whom the Gospel message has been proclaimed, become the main agents of the process of inculturation. It is the people, born into the culture, rooted deeply in the culture that can continue to give new expression to the Gospel from within a culture that is part of themselves. It is here that a true renewal of the Gospel message takes place. The younger generation of Chinese-Filipinos today is a hybrid of two cultures—the Filipino and the Chinese—with a lot of Western influence on the side.

Yu talked of the concern that the younger generation may not truly value or care about preserving their cultural traditions; I fully agree with this point. Perhaps this is the very challenge for the Chinoy Christian of today: how to be truly Filipino without losing one’s Chinese roots, and to be genuinely Christian in one’s values and way of life.

Lastly, I have some comments regarding the person of Jesus Christ. There is a statement in *Ecclesia in Asia* (29) that captures perfectly my sentiments about the work of evangelization: “The question is not whether the Church has something essential to say to the men and women of our time, but how she can say it clearly and convincingly.”

There has been a lot of discussion and much needed study on
inculturation, a topic that is broad; universal norms are hard to come by, given the uniqueness of each culture. And yet, for all the pedagogy that we use, all the cultural elements that we employ, all the lectures that we give, and all the theological debates that we engage in, the crux of the matter is whether or not, in the dialogue between Gospel and culture, there has been an encounter with the Person of Jesus Christ.

Ultimately, the success or failure of inculturation will be known by its fruits: whether we have greater faith and hope in Jesus, if we have truly fallen in love with the beauty of his Person, if we take on his values and assume the consequences of following him in discipleship. If inculturation is to reveal to the culture its own beauty and the face of God in it, then we must not lose sight of this goal, this vision.

Inculturation is a process that takes a long, long time. It cannot be achieved in a hurry and certainly not by one person alone. But, as Standaert notes: “you know there is a melody, from hearing the first notes of it. In fact, you continually move between two fields in tension: the renewal that the Gospel can bring to a culture, and the new expression that the culture can bring to the Gospel.”

As for us—the evangelizers, agents of inculturation, in a world that values God less and less—our presence and our witness, whether as consecrated or lay people, should testify to the primacy of God and life with him in eternity. Through or in spite of the language, the culture, the elements employed to make the Gospel message better expressed and understood, I think the responsibility rests upon us to continue to point to the reality of a God who is full of mercy and compassion. And hopefully, in leading people to a deep personal encounter and interior knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, we will have contributed to making our world more humane and just.

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3Ibid., 91.
I would like to end with a vignette taken from Laurie Beth Jones’ book, *Jesus in Blue Jeans*:

Many years ago I dreamed that I was standing in a meadow. Suddenly I saw a man approaching me. As he got nearer I gasped to realize that it was Jesus in Blue Jeans. When He saw the expression on my face, He said, “Why are you surprised? I came to them wearing robes because they wore robes. I come to you in blue jeans because you wear blue jeans.” I fell in love with Him at that moment.⁴

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Aristotle C. Dy, S.J.

Father Jose Yu has provided us with an informative and provocative paper on inculturation in the Chinese-Filipino context. After briefly describing various terms used to define the relationship between faith and culture in the last forty years, Yu outlines four phases of inculturation in the Chinese-Filipino context. Allow me to complement what he says in each phase.

The first phase is that of migration and colonization. One of the most prominent streets in Manila’s Chinatown is named Salazar, after the Dominican first bishop of Manila who can be considered the founder of the Chinese apostolate in the Philippines. He it was who ordered the establishment of a parish to care for the Chinese, a practice that continues to this day, replicated in many parts of the archipelago. In the contact between the Spanish missionaries and the Chinese in Manila, Yu describes the need of the missionaries to appreciate the Chinese language and culture, and their desire to use Manila as a springboard for doing missionary work in China. Again, these

*Second response to Jose Vidamor Yu’s keynote address at the “Mission Congress 2003.”
are practices or attitudes that we still find today. Yu belongs to a missionary society of apostolic life that is dedicated to ministry to the Chinese both locally and internationally. Several religious communities (e.g., Hijas de Jesus, Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, Society of Jesus) have established formation houses in the Philippines where vocations from Mainland China are nurtured. Slowly, Chinese-Filipino Catholics are also beginning to look at China not only as the country of their ancestors and a place to do business, but also as a mission field, an opportunity for them to proclaim and witness to their faith.

In the first two phases (the second phase is the establishment of the local Church and Chinese communities) presented by Yu, inculturation, strictly speaking, was not yet taking place. The local Church had simply set up structures like schools, hospitals, and parishes to cater to the Chinese, and over time, the majority of the Chinese in the Philippines became Christians, but was there already dialogue between faith and culture? I have not come across any research regarding the customs and traditions of Chinese Catholics in the Philippines prior to 1950.

Prior to 1950, the percentage of local Chinese who were Catholic was rather small, and there are indications that culture and politics were obstacles to Chinese acceptance of the Catholic faith. But that is the subject of another area of study. However, we do know that from 1950 onward, when a network of schools and parishes to serve the Chinese were set up across the country, the number of Chinese Catholics increased dramatically. In terms of pastoral care, the missionaries began to face questions that had to do with the relationship between faith and culture.

Can Chinese Catholics venerate their ancestors? If so, in what form can it be done? What was “allowed”? If Ash Wednesday falls on the same day as the Chinese New Year, can Chinese Catholics be dispensed from fasting and abstinence? Is it permitted to select a wedding or burial date based on the principles of feng-shui and geomancy?
These were very concrete questions encountered by the missionaries, and signaled the beginning of a more conscious effort at inculturation among Chinese Catholics in the Philippines. Inculturation was perhaps not yet taking place when the Chinese embraced the Catholic faith. Many did so out of a desire to gain social acceptance rather than out of genuine religious conviction. Only when Catholic faith and practice was brought to bear on Chinese customs and traditions can we say that inculturation began taking place. Compared to the Catholics of Mainland China in the seventeenth century, when the Chinese Rites Controversy unfolded, the dialogue of faith and culture among Chinese Catholics in the Philippines is a relatively recent phenomenon.

Yu’s third phase, shaping Chinese-Filipino mentality, is about “a process of shaping mentalities in the light of the Gospel.” He identifies three levels of culture—material, cultural, and psychological—as the aspects that must be shaped or addressed by the Gospel. Yu presents the Chinese quest for environmental and social harmony as they are experienced in the Philippines as the “places” where inculturation is necessary.

_Feng shui_ or geomancy as the quest for environmental harmony is not necessarily incompatible with the Christian faith. As Yu rightly notes, _feng shui_ is widely practiced by both Chinese and non-Chinese, but it seems to have become a kind of folk religion that is full of superstitious elements. Properly understood, _feng shui_ can become an integral part of creation spirituality, especially if its scientific origins and the worldview attached to it are recovered. We need scholars who will work along these lines.

The quest for social harmony has experienced great progress. The spate of kidnappings of Chinese-Filipinos in the last fifteen years has also served as the occasion for Chinese-Filipinos to claim their place in Filipino society. Indicators of this are the recent box office success of _Mano Po_, a film about a Chinese-Filipino family, and the first-ever public parade in Iloilo City to celebrate the Chinese New Year. However, the quest for social harmony can also challenge the
integrity of the Catholic faith. Religious syncretism, or the simultaneous practice of elements of more than one religion, is a significant reality among Chinese-Filipinos. It is fertile ground for the work of inculturation.

The preservation or the loss of Chinese language and culture is a crucial issue. Language and culture are sources of social harmony, so if the Chinese-Filipinos eventually lose these, would they still constitute a distinct segment in Philippine society, or would they simply become part of the mainstream, fully assimilated? This is the pattern we can observe in the world’s immigrant communities, that they eventually lose their original language and culture. Whether this is also the fate of the Chinese-Filipinos is an open question. For now, there are heroic efforts in the schools and parishes for the Chinese to preserve their language and culture.

In both Cebu and Iloilo, I have witnessed Chinese New Year liturgies that included the use of Chinese incense, hymns, colorful liturgical dances, and the Catholic rite of ancestor veneration. In Iligan, the Chinese parish has just finished constructing a new church, perhaps the only church in the Philippines built with a Chinese architectural style. These are all efforts at cultural preservation, helped in no small measure by the emergence of China as an economic power in the present century. As some writers have said, it is fashionable to be Chinese these days.

Finally, in the fourth phase of inculturation, Yu envisions a new way of being Chinese-Filipino community in the third millennium. He identifies several trends that must be addressed by the Christian faith—migration, family orientations, work and success, generation gaps, and mission orientation—and outlines the Church response to these trends. To the observation that the number of Mainland Chinese arriving to settle in the Philippines is increasing, I can only add that most of the Chinese-Filipinos’ ancestors came in the same way—as illegal aliens desperate for survival. If the local Chinese-Filipino Church can now be a welcoming Church, as Yu envisions, then things will have come full circle.