



Interview

*A Missionary from
a Patronage Culture*

Is the Chinese language missing a word?

“Patronage...” the translator paused, “It’s a technical term Westerners say when they talk about Asians. In Chinese, we just say ‘*guanxi*.’”¹³³

The Chinese word *guanxi* is usually translated as ‘relationship.’ The word is made of two characters: *guan* means ‘a guarded passage’ or ‘to close (a door),’ and *xi* means ‘system.’ In Chinese culture, relationships are systems for opening doors.

Sometimes though, we translate *guanxi* to mean ‘problem.’ When someone apologizes to me, I say, “no problem,” in English or “*mei guanxi*” in Chinese. There is even an adage, “One who has *guanxi* (relationships) will have no *guanxi* (problems).” Chinese relationships are systems for opening doors and solving problems.

In Confucian philosophy, there are five key human relationships: ruler-subject, father-son, elder brother-younger brother, husband-wife, and friend-friend.¹³⁴ Depending on how deeply Confucian a particular Chinese sub-culture is, patron-client dynamics are present in at least three, probably four, and perhaps even all five of these kinds of relationships. All of them are reciprocal and all exist for mutual benefit. I do not presume to say that *all* Chinese relationships are unequal, but they do have that tendency. Even in friendships, which Westerners might think of as the most egalitarian relationships, there can be hints of patron-client dynamics. Therefore it makes sense that in Chinese, definitions of patronage such as Jayson Georges’ ‘a

¹³³ Brother Qiu, from Taiwan, translating via Zoom, July 2021.

¹³⁴ Gregg A. Ten Elshof, *Confucius for Christians: What and Ancient Chinese Worldview Can Teach Us about Life in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 13.

reciprocal relationship between two unequal parties'¹³⁵ might be abbreviated to simply 'a relationship.'

In the West, traditional patron-client dynamics have become so obsolete they need to be intentionally learned by Westerners hoping to relate cross-culturally with the majority world. The last few years have seen an upsurge in writing – both popular and scholarly, on the subject. An especially hot topic is how Christians can build gospel relationships with people in patronage cultures. I do not intend to duplicate the good work of others here. Instead, I want to bend the conversation in what I think is a new direction.

We've been talking about *ministering in* patronage cultures, but I want to learn more about *ministers from* patronage cultures.

As the world and the Christians who live in it move 'from everywhere to everywhere,' our missiology is entering a new paradigm. When sending workers from the majority world, we need to consider not only how they will serve but also how they will be sent.

In my quest to better understand mission sending from Asia, I've turned to my friends and coworkers. I learn a great deal by observations, but it's a challenge getting clear answers to my questions. Patronage cultures also tend to be 'face' cultures, speaking indirectly, affirming and agreeing, and rarely daring to risk causing offense.

Thank God I met Penny!¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Jayson Georges and Mark Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures: Biblical Foundations and Practical Essentials*, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016), loc. 741, Kindle.

¹³⁶ Not her real name.

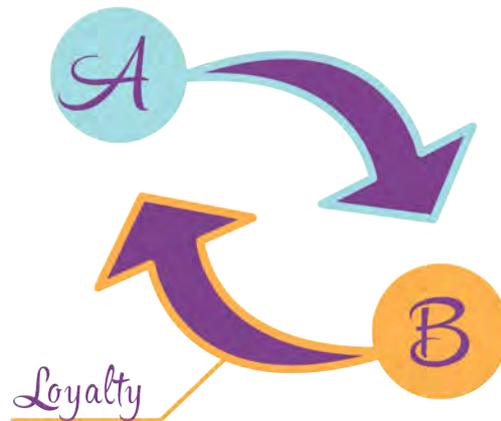
Penny is a Taiwanese missionary sent overseas to serve a Muslim community. Her deeply Taiwanese worldview has been expanded through international experience so that she can speak frankly about her culture, even though that culture practically forbids speaking frankly. After hearing how she adjusted to her mission field, language, and multicultural team, I sensed patron-client themes that set her apart from her non-Taiwanese counterparts.

In Taiwan, traditional Chinese and Japanese social structures persist in modern forms. A complex system of formal and informal rules and relationships has evolved and adapted to make Taiwan the flourishing society it is today. Patronage is so integral to Taiwan that there is no need for a word for it. 'Relationships' will do.

So when I sat down for lunch with Penny, I didn't ask her about patronage. Instead, I asked her about a word I had noticed flowing from her lips often: loyalty. I drew Jayson Georges' simple diagram comprising two arrows forming a circle.¹³⁷ Instead of 'patron' and 'client', I named the parties A and B. The only word I wrote was 'loyalty.'

¹³⁷ Image adapted from Jayson Georges, *Ministering in Patronage Cultures: Biblical Models and Missional Implications* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2019), chap. 1, figure 1.1, Kindle.

The Interview



Loyalty

Julie: “I have noticed that you Taiwanese are very loyal people. As a full-time cross-cultural missionary, who are you loyal to?”

Penny: *My mother church. That’s A, and I am B.*

Julie: “What does your mother church give you that makes you respond with loyalty?”

Penny: *A mother church is what you might call a sending church, but it is more than that. It’s my spiritual home. It’s where my spiritual parents are. For some people, it is where they first heard the gospel and the only church they have ever belonged to. For me, I grew up going to a small traditional church with my family, but this is the church that welcomed me when I moved to the city. Even if they give me nothing more, they deserve my loyalty because of our history.*

When I felt called to go overseas, my pastor prepared the way for me to go to our church’s internal Bible college and missions training center. They have supported me the whole time. They helped me connect with a team overseas, even though not everyone from

that team is from Taiwan. Some churches only send out missionaries to teams entirely staffed by their own church network, but mine is much more open than that.

When I am away, the assistant pastor checks in on my mother. When I am on home assignment, the church provides housing for me.

Together, we wrote these words on our diagram to show what A gives to B: access, opportunities, resources, solving problems. When I tried to find a way to describe having a place in society's system of relational networks – sometimes called 'social capital' – words like status and legitimacy were deemed too crude or too specific. Penny thought a better word was guanxi; the benefit of relationship is more relationship.

Julie: How do you express your loyalty?

Penny: *Mostly by giving thanks and being loyal. Of course, I send little gifts, and I always come back home. I submit, and I follow their advice.*

Julie: Obedience?

Penny: *I guess I am obedient, but I'm not forced to agree with everything. I don't always have to take the pastor's side in a dispute. I can disagree, but I genuinely respect them, so if I listen to them with a humble and prayerful heart, I usually will realize they are right. It would be hard for someone whose pastor is not mission-minded or has a different vision. It can be a source of conflict, especially when a young person receives a calling from God and their pastor disagrees. I thank God that's not my situation.*

Julie: Apart from your loyalty and thanks, what else does your church get from the relationship?

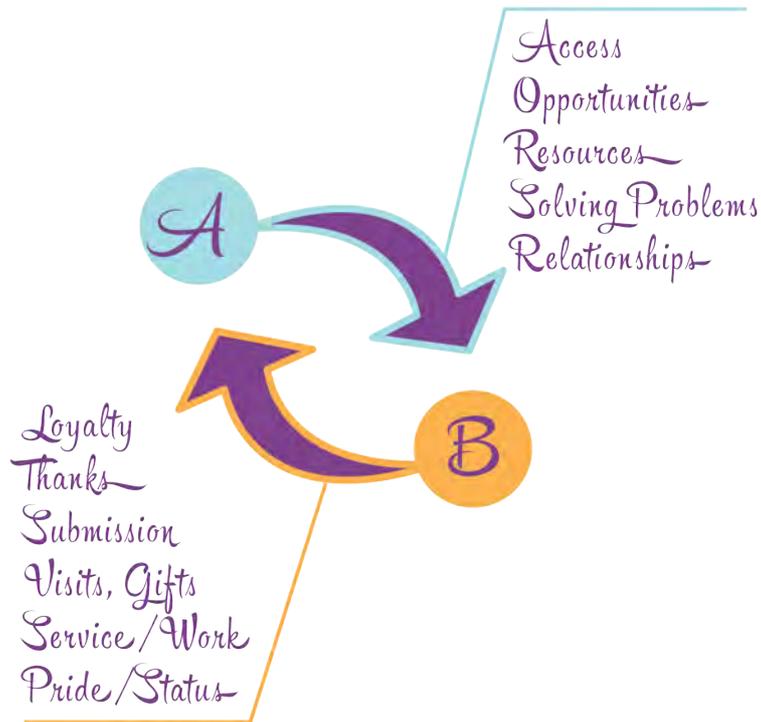
Penny: *You sound so direct! We would never ask that, but I know what you mean. My church is much easier on me than some other churches. They don't require me to work full-time at the church while back home. They give me the freedom to go and spend time with*

my mother, and they let me have time off to do some job training so I can use the skills to work in a job on the mission field.

Julie: Does it also improve their social position – sorry to use these ugly words again – does having you as their sent missionary increase their status?

Penny: *Of course! Everyone wants to feel that kind of pride and talk about their achievements. But instead of saying it so directly, I'd rather say they want to publicly thank God for what he is doing through them.*

Actually, it can be a tricky situation for low-key people like me. We have to be careful because we are in sensitive regions. We could get our visas revoked, Muslim landlords could find out, or the parents might not send their children anymore. In Taiwan, everything has to be on Facebook and out there being spread and promoted. It's tough for my church to keep it low-key. Maybe that's why they don't require me to go and serve at the church as much as some other missionaries do.



“Missionaries”

Penny, and other Chinese speakers, use the word missionary as a title, like Pastor or Doctor. Even in Chinese churches in Australia, I’ve listened to a sermon by ‘Pastor Wang’ one week and ‘Missionary Chen’ the next. I was educated in the West, where the challenge is to shed the baggage of colonialism and serve cross-culturally as partners. I served in mainland China, where mission work is banned, and every Christian is ‘Brother’ or ‘Sister.’ So, I have been conditioned to speak and write about ‘cross-cultural servants’ and ‘global Christians’ rather than missionaries. But it seems that in Taiwan, the word missionary is a source of pride rather than invoking fear of persecution or regret over colonial-era sins.

Julie: You said A is your mother church. Where does your sending agency fit into this picture?

Penny: *Good question. So firstly, a lot of people don't go with an agency. There are just sent out by their church. This way works very well for big churches like Bread of Life, but it is difficult for smaller churches.*

If there is an agency involved, there are two different situations. First, there is the proper mission agency like IMB, where the church essentially hands responsibility to the agency. This is only fair since the agency provides all the resources and relationships, so they are the ones the missionary has to submit to and follow. The mother church still gets the sense of pride and loyalty but has to give up its claim on the missionary to some extent. It can be hard to do, and maybe that is one of the reasons not many Taiwanese join proper mission agencies.

Julie: What is the second kind?

Penny: *So now there are new structures that we call mission networks if your local church is not big enough to support you fully. They can support us in various ways, but they don't replace the mother church. They have the final say on what we do on the mission field, but overall, the mother church is still the one who sends and supports us. This way, your mother church can keep a close relationship with you long term. The mother church needs to accept that they don't know the field and give up that control, but that's only while we are on the field.*

Julie: It sounds like in both these situations, the missionary has two different A's.

Penny: *Right. That's what makes it difficult. In the IMB model, the mother church would worry that the agency has taken their person away from them. In the network situation, they only hand over responsibility for a set time.*

Penny added arrows and dotted lines to the diagram to illustrate the place of a mission agency in relation to the missionary and sending church.

Julie: It all sounds very neat. Could there be a conflict? For instance, what if your church says come home and the agency or mission network says stay on the field?

Penny: *This happens all the time. We can draw these diagrams to make it look neat and clean, but in the end, the mother church is the real A.*

Julie: Ok, now that we have this neat diagram, are you ready to mess it up?

Penny: *Sure. You have a third kind of sending agency to talk about, don't you? Is it the faith mission?*

Julie: How did you guess?

Penny: *OMF is a faith mission, and we haven't talked about them yet. When I said there are two situations, I kind of had in mind that the faith missions work like the proper mission, like IMB. But I get the feeling there is some difference there that you want to talk about. I don't really understand how the faith missions work.*

As an aside, I am not accustomed to using the terms Penny chose to distinguish mission agencies. My friends at OMF might not be very pleased to hear that in Penny's vocabulary being a 'faith mission' means they are not a 'proper mission.' Likewise, I doubt anyone from IMB would say their mission lacks faith. Nevertheless, I didn't press the issue in my conversation with Penny.

Julie: So this is how a lot of overseas agencies do their support raising. Many of them, whether they are called faith missions or not, work on the principle that each missionary needs to raise their own support funds. You might be blessed to have one church with a big budget and a bunch of individual donors so that 100% of your needs come from your mother church, but that's not always the case. In fact, many people

would rather not raise their support that way because it makes the missionary indebted to one church and potentially at the whim of their one pastor.

So I can have A is my mother church, B is me, the missionary, but then C and D are other churches I have visited, and they agreed to support me. E might be the church I went to as a child. Then I've got G, H, I, and a lot of others who are my individual friends, classmates, or family members who give to support me, even if they don't belong to any of these churches.

Penny: *No wonder Taiwanese don't join these. That would never work for us.*¹³⁸

Julie: What do you see as the biggest challenge?

Penny: *Well, first of all, it would be hard to get enough support. People know you have so many other supporters.*

Secondly, what if A and one of these others are not together?

Julie: I see you are being polite. Are you wondering how we decide who to obey? Is it based on who has the longest relationship? Or on who gives more financial support? Or what? As the missionary stuck between two or three warring pastors, you wouldn't know who to side with.

Penny: *Right. An important role of A is to provide direction and good advice.*

138 "Not many Taiwanese join faith missions" would be more accurate. United Mission Of Taiwan (UMOT) published their most recent survey results in 2017. The 32 agencies surveyed reported having a total of 191 missionaries in service at the time (average 6 missionaries per agency) with tenure ranging from 1 year to over 30 years. UMOT estimates that only 30-50% of Taiwanese missionaries belong to a mission agency separate from their church. Less than half of missionaries sent through agencies had multiple sources of funding. https://umot.group/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/下載專區_2017台灣教會跨文化宣教調查報告_書面版.pdf

Julie: So here's where the extra level comes in. All these A's have their own A, and it is God. To be in this system, you need to trust God's wise advice as patron of all these, his clients. These all become brokers. A broker is both a patron and a client. So A and C and D are all patrons to the missionary, but they are all clients of God.

Penny: *This is so Western.*

Julie: How so?

Penny: *It just is. I have to think about it...*

It's Western individualism. It says, 'I know better than my leaders how to discern God's will.'

Julie: Penny, you are the first Taiwanese person to share so openly with me about these things. Thank you so much.

Closing thoughts

More and more, international mission sending agencies are realizing that their established ways of doing things might not suit members from non-Western cultures. Assumptions were made in the past about all manner of things: choice of mission field; who provides pre-field training; the number of supporting churches needed; appropriate ways to ask (or indirectly imply the need) for funds; the degree of an individual's freedom to decide how to use their funds, time and other resources; how to prevent and resolve conflict; and when to come home.

Cultures are complex. They defy simplistic labels such as 'patronage cultures' and dichotomies like 'Western and non-Western.' Navigating the many paths of helping Christians from diverse backgrounds take the gospel cross-culturally is going to take more than just a study of patronage. Nevertheless, I am convinced that a better

understanding of patron-client dynamics in mission sending is an urgent need for mission organisations hoping to become more international.

About the Author

Julie B. Ma (pseudonym) is an Australian who, with her Chinese husband, served among Hui Chinese Muslims for almost ten years. She still serves as a missionary in a Creative Access Community in Asia. She is a graduate of Sydney Missionary and Bible College and a member of the Angelina Noble Centre for women in cross-cultural missions research.