

Jesus Christ for the Chinese: A Contextual Reflection

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Published in *Global Missiology, Contextualization*, Oct. 2003, www.globalmissiology.net

Abstract

The final article in a series, we examine three factors (i.e. historical reality, geographic proximity and cultural identity) that caused the traditional Chinese's perception of Christianity being "Jesus Christ from the West." A Sino-Christology is proposed which includes a method of "relational theologizing", a definition of salvation as reconciled relationship vertically with God and horizontally with fellow man, and an application of Chinese values (i.e. honor and shame).

First published in *Chinese Around the World*, 2000 (A Ministry of Chinese Coordination Centre of World Evangelism) and posted at <http://www.missiology.org>.

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Review:

This is the last of a 7-part series on Chinese culture and Christianity under the major heading-- "East & West" #1 "Sailing in the Western Wind"--dealing with the history of Christianity in China and Western influence on China. #2 "Christianity in the Eye of Traditional Chinese"--Christianity in China was described and Western influences on Chinese Christianity were analyzed. #3 is transitional for #4 - #6 which covered matters related to "the challenge of" and "the change for" contextualization for contemporary Chinese that is both scripturally sound and culturally relevant.

I. Introduction

According to the perception of the "traditional Chinese" (defined as "a non-Christian Chinese with strong Chinese cultural orientation and ethnic pride," Wan 1999a:17), **"Jesus Christ from the West" must be rejected and Christian efforts in evangelizing Chinese must be resisted.** This article will begin with the examination of the three factors (i.e. historical reality, geographic proximity and cultural identity) that caused the traditional Chinese's perception of Christianity being **"Jesus Christ from the West."**

On the other hand, **a contextualized Christianity for the Chinese in terms of "Jesus Christ for the Chinese" can be relatively easier to be understood by traditional Chinese.** Serious efforts in contextualizing Christianity for the Chinese are required so that the **"Jesus Christ from the West"** can become **"Jesus Christ for the Chinese."** This is both the motivation behind this contextual reflection and the focus of the latter part of this study.

FIGURE 1 – PLAN OF STUDY

TYPES OF CHRISTOLOGY	DIMENSION	
“JESUS CHRIST FROM THE WEST” – Traditional Western Theology (TWT)	Review historically	Describe geographically
“JESUS CHRIST FOR THE CHINESE of Sino-theology	Analyze & compare culturally	Sino-Christology

II. Christology and Sino-Christology

Definition of several key terms is to be offered before any meaningful discussion on Sino-Christology. "Christianity" is "the belief of individual follower and the institutionalized community/organization of the faithful that venerate Jesus Christ as Lord, the Bible as truth, the Church as the earthly agent of God, and the Kingdom of

God as the ultimate end of human destiny." (Wan 2000a:18)

"Contextualization" is "the efforts of formulating, presenting and practicing the Christian faith in such a way that is relevant to the cultural context of the target group in terms of conceptualization, expression and application; yet maintaining theological coherence, biblical integrity and theoretical consistency." (Wan 2000a:18-19)

"Christology" can be defined as "the systematic understanding and presentation of the personhood (i.e. his humanity and divinity) and performance (i.e. work and office) of Jesus Christ." "Modern theological discussion continues to be a witness to the centrality of Jesus Christ himself in matters of faith and is dominated by the two closely related questions: `Who is Jesus Christ?' and `What has he done for the world?' The context in which these questions are raised has, however, changed." (Wallace 1984: 226)

"Sino-Christology" is the contextualized version of Christology for the Chinese and is part of "Sino-theology" which can be defined as "a unique theological orientation specifically designed for the Chinese people in contra-distinction from TWT: employing the Chinese cognitive pattern (e.g. 'both-and' vs. 'either-or' of TWT) and Chinese cognitive process (e.g. synthetic vs. dialectic of TWT), the Chinese way of social interaction (e.g. relational/complementary vs. dichotomous/confrontational of TWT), Chinese vocabulary (e.g. 'tien' - heaven), Chinese cultural themes (e.g. group solidarity such as the family vs. self-fulfillment of TWT), etc. The goal is not to transplant Christianity in the 'pot' of Eastern culture but to plant it in the Chinese cultural soil so it can take root, flourish and grow." (Wan 2000a:19)

“Jesus Christ from the West” is Western Christianity transported to China by military force, with foreign concepts, cultural elements, etc.; whereas “Jesus Christ for the Chinese” is contextual Christianity being transplanted in the cultural soil of China and the spiritual soul of the Chinese. The former is historical reality whereas the latter being an ideal with strong desirability.

III. Jesus Christ from the West: Historical reality and geographic proximity

Christianity was brought in by the Nestorian missionaries through the border on the Southwest during the Tang Dynasty. Christianity of the Catholic strand was carried to China by Franciscan missionaries from Europe during the Yuen Dynasty and suffered severe blow due to the internal conflicts of the “rites controversy.” The imperial government, plagued by corruption and many problems, declined in power while European countries had experienced explosive growth (in science, technology, commerce, navigation, etc.) and intensified in colonial expansion and missionary enterprise (Wan 1999b).

Repeatedly China’s imperial government was defeated by Western countries and was humiliated in the hands of Western powers with many unequal treaties, e.g. the Anglo-Sino “Opium War” of 1839-1842 that forced China to open five sea ports to the British in August 1842 in the Treaty of Nanking and other Western countries (e.g. the U.S. & France in 1844, Belgium in 1845, Sweden and Norway in 1847), etc.

“Jesus Christ from the West” was not merely a perception of traditional Chinese; it is a historical reality and geographic proximity due to the Western imports to China, e.g. gunboat policy, colonial expansion, commercial interests, missionary enterprise, etc.

FIGURE 2 - THE TWO PATTERNS OF THEOLOGIZING (Wan 1997a:4)

TOPIC	EITHER	OR
Christology	<u>Either</u> the deity of Christ	<u>or</u> the humanity of Christ
	<u>Either</u> the Christ of kerygma	<u>or</u> the historical Jesus
Soteriology	<u>Either</u> God’s sovereignty	<u>or</u> human free will
	<u>Either</u> faith	<u>or</u> reason
	<u>Either</u> grace	<u>or</u> work
	<u>Either</u> evangelism for conversion	<u>or</u> social gospel as witness
Ecclesiology	<u>Either</u> the universal church	<u>or</u> local congregation
	<u>Either</u> organic unity	<u>or</u> organizational uniformity
Eschatology	<u>Either</u> already realized	<u>or</u> yet to come
Bibliology	<u>Either</u> divine revelation	<u>or</u> human authorship

Jesus Christ from the West as shown in **Figure 2** can be illustrated by the centuries-long christological controversy of the first several hundred years of the Christian church due to the strong hold of the "either-or" perspective on the nature of Christ by Christians of the West. In the last few decades, this "either-or" version of

Jesus Christ of the West debate has been altered by biblical scholars in the New Testament studies of the "historical Jesus" in response to the neo-orthodox insistence on the "Christ of the kerygma".

IV. Jesus Christ for the Chinese

As mentioned before, Christianity has been perceived as **“Jesus Christ from the West”** for many reasons: e.g. factors such as historical reality and geographic proximity of Christianity being imported by missionaries from the West, along with the military domination, political colonization, commercial and industrial expansion, etc. of the West. The propositional conceptualization and impersonal presentation of Jesus Christ and salvation (e.g. the “Four Spiritual Laws”) by Western missionary and westernized Chinese Christian have less appeal to the traditional Chinese.

Another reason for the perceived **“Jesus Christ from the West”** is due to the presentation by Western missionaries at the beginning of Chinese church history. Instead of appealing to the “both-and” mind set of the traditional Chinese, they had promulgated and propounded the type of systematic theology that emphasizes **“either** the deity of Christ” **or** “the humanity of Christ;” **either** “the Christ of kerygma” **or** “the historical Jesus” (see **Figure 2**).

In addition, there can be cultural explanation for the phenomenon of the perceived **“Jesus Christ from the West”** as presented below.

4.1 Cultural analysis and comparison

In TWT as well as the way Chinese converts usually being taught by Western missionary, Jesus Christ is being regarded as the Savior of hell-bound sinners who need God’s forgiveness by justification through personal faith in the atoning death of Christ.

An explanation for the socio-cultural background of this “Western Christology” is in order. As stated in previous articles, “Western culture has a Greco-Roman, politco-legal base and Judeo-Christian ethic foundation. The Greek social system of city-state, the Roman law, etc. have been well developed for ‘millennia’ in the West. The influence of the Judeo-Christian value system and moral code has left its mark in the mind and heart of people in the context of Western civilization, so much so that anthropologists who have conducted cross-cultural comparative studies have classified the Western culture as a ‘guilt culture’ in contrast to the ‘shame culture’ of the East (e.g. Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, etc.)” (Wan 1995a:156). The

modernist Westerner of science background would also appreciate the presentation of the person and work of Jesus Christ in a logical, scientific and rational manner such as the “Four Spiritual Laws.”

Individuals from the low-context of Ameri-European cultural background would appreciate much the emphasis on the individual aspect of salvation (e.g. the saying, “God does not have grandchildren”) and the strong emphasis on the absolute necessity of exercising one’s own will in individual decision in TWT.

4.2 Proposed Sino-Christology

In the light of the previous description and comparison of Ameri-European (AE) and Sino-Asian (SA) cultural differences and the different ways of theologizing in TWT and Sino-theology, three aspects of Sino-Christology are proposed below.

A. Essentially, Jesus Christ as – the “tien-ren-he-yi-di-tao 天人合一的道 “ (heaven-man-unite-one-tao)

As explained previously, the low-context AE cultural tradition with “either-or” way of theologizing led to the emphasis on **either** “the deity of Christ” **or** “the humanity of Christ,” **either** “the Christ of kerygma” **or** “the historical Jesus” (see **Figure 2**) in TWT. In contrast, the high-context SA cultural tradition with the Chinese cognitive pattern/process characterized by “holistic” and “integrative” perspective, emphasis on “unity,” theologizing in “both-and” paradigm, Jesus Christ should be contextualized to be the “tien-ren-he-yi-di-tao 天人合一的道 “ (heaven-man-unite-one-tao). The incarnate Jesus and the resurrected Christ is “Tao – the God-Man” model (Wan 1985) of “both-and” personal being and theoretical/theological paradigm. The richness of the terms “tien天 “ (heaven) and “tien-ren-he-yi 天人合一“ (heaven-man-unite-one-tao) in classical Chinese literature and Chinese religio-philosophical traditions (of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism) cannot be dealt with here due to limitation of space (see Wan 1999a:116-164).

FIGURE 3 – “TIEN-REN-HE-YI-DI-TAO” 天人合一的道 (Christ = “tien : heaven” + “ren: man”)

“TIEN” (heaven) – deity	“REN” (man) -- humanity
Eternal & infinite, changeless & faithful (Mic 5:2; Jn 8:58; Col 1:17; Rev 1:8; Heb 13:8; 2Ti 2:13)	With beginning & end, with flesh & blood (Mt 1; Lk 2:40, 24:39)

<p>all powerful:</p> <p>-creator & sovereign (Jn 1:3,10)</p> <p>-over sin & sickness (Lk 7:48; Mt 8-9)</p> <p>-over satan & death (Jn 5:22, 11:44; Rev 20-21)</p>	<p>seemed powerless:</p> <p>-tired, tempted, wept (Mt 26-27)</p> <p>-betrayed & crucified (Jn 18-20)</p> <p>-lesser than the Father (Jn 5:19; 1 Co 11:3)</p>
<p>all present – not limited by time & space</p> <p>(Mt 18:20; Jn 1:48; Jn 3:13)</p>	<p>limited by time & space (Php 2:5-8; Heb 2:14)</p> <p>-birth & death, on foot & on schedule</p>
<p>all knowing</p> <p>(Mk 11:2-6; Jn 2:24-25; Lk 5:22; Rev 2:23)</p>	<p>not knowing</p> <p>(Mk 13:32)</p>
<p>sinless & holy</p> <p>(Mk 1:24; 1Pe 2:22; Jn 19:4; Ac 3:14)</p>	<p>sin bearer; judged by God</p> <p>(Is 53; Mk 15:34; Ro 4:25; 1 Co 15:3)</p>
<p>equal with the Father, love, mercy & forgiving</p> <p>(Jn 5:18; 10:30, 11:36, 15:13; Lk 7:48; Tit 3:5)</p>	<p>submit to the Father</p> <p>(Jn 8:42; Heb 5:8)</p>
<p>truly God becoming man</p> <p>(Jn 1:1-2, 14; Php 2:5-8; Col 1:15, 2:9; 1Ti 2:5 3: 16; Heb 2:14)</p>	<p>truly man but exhorted and glorified</p> <p>(1Cor 15; Jn 17:2; 17:5; Acts 2:36; Php 2:5-8; Rev 11:15)</p>

Nonetheless, “the dual-nature of Jesus Christ the God-man” is clearly taught in the Scripture and expressed in the Apostle’s Creed and the Nicene Creed. Jesus Christ is the perfect union of “tien” and “ren” in the Person of “God-man Tao” as shown in **Figure 3** and the perfect model of “**both-and**” in Sino-theology.

In addition, this “tien-ren-he-yi-di-tao” is the timeless “logos” or “Tao” (Jn 1:1-5 and 1 Jn 1:1-2 in the Union Version of the Chinese Bible). He is “the Way” to God (Jn 14:6; Heb 7:15) and the One uniting God with man. He is also the One who unites Jews and the gentile (Eph 2:11-22), and eschatologically all things (Eph 1:9-10).

B. Existentially, Jesus Christ as –

- “the en-qing-zhen-zhu 恩情真主“ (grace-passion-true-Lord)

- “the zhong-bao 中保” (middle-guarantor)
- “jiu-shu-zhu 救贖主 ” (save-redeem-lord) and
- “fu-he-zhe 復和者” (restore-harmony-person)

Due to the strong emphasis on “guan-xi 關係” (relationship) in Chinese culture which is of high-context in nature, a method of “relational theologizing” is proposed for Sino-theology. Relational theologizing is a methodology derived from a close analysis of the interaction of the Three Persons within the Trinity as discussed in details elsewhere (see Wan 1996a, Wan 1996b, Wan 1999a:80-114).

Conceptually, relational theologizing is not new for TWT, for there has been the school of "covenant theology" for centuries. In contrast to the rationalistic and forensic presentation of Jesus Christ, Sino-theology is highly relational. This method of relational theologizing is most adaptable to the primarily agricultural mind-set of people from the two-thirds-world (i.e. Asia, Africa and Latin America) where strong personal relationship is of supreme importance. In addition, it is the “good news” to two types of modern man: the post-industrial man (i.e. those of high-tech, high-touch, impersonal and alienated socio-cultural context) and the post-modernist (i.e. those who are being left with nothing after deconstruction and are in search for truth and significance). (See Wan 2000c)

Culturally, Chinese people try hard to avoid confrontation at all time and at all cost. Nobody should cause someone to “lose face” and run the risk of breaking relationship. There are time-honored cultural practices related to avoid “losing face,” e.g. the use of match-making in traditional marriage arrangement, the go-between for business dealing, the guarantee of a reputable person rather than the signing of a legal document, etc. Therefore, Sino-Christology should include presenting Jesus as: “the en-qing-zhen-zhu 恩情真主“ (grace-passion-true-Lord”), “the zhong-bao 中保” (middle-guarantor), “jiu-shu-zhu 救贖主”(save-redeem-lord), “fu-he-zhe 復和者” (restore-harmony-person).

Salvation is best understood by the Chinese in terms of reconciled relationship vertically with God and horizontally with fellow man (wan 1997b; 1999a). Man was created in the image of God and enjoyed close communion with him before the Fall. However, his misuse of the gift of human free will brought him punishment and penalty, and severed his relationship with God and the created order (relationship with others and the natural order included). Yet God initiated the plan of salvation and implemented the process of reconciliation with himself in the Son. This relational reinterpretation of the “**Jesus Christ for the Chinese**” is summarized in **Figure 4** below:

FIGURE 4 – RELATIONAL INTERPRETATION:

JESUS CHRIST FOR THE CHINESE (SINO-CHRISTOLOGY)

“JESUS CHRIST FOR THE CHINESE	HUMAN KIND	CREATED ORDER
“en-qing-zhen-zhu 恩情真主” (grace-passion-true-Lord”)	-passionate: wept (Jn 11:35, Lk) 19:41; with anger (Mt 21:12-13, Rev. 6:16) -with grace, mercy and love (Mt 9:36; Heb 5:2; Eph 1:7; Jude 22)	-creator of all things (Jn 1:3,10) -ruler of all things (Eph 1:21; Php 2:6-10) -sustainer of all things- (Col 1;15-17)
“jiu-shu-zhu 救贖主” (save-redeem-lord) -by blood, Eph 1:7; 1Pet 1:19-20	-from death & destruction, law & sin (Heb 2:2-18; Gal 4:5; Tit 2:14)	-all to God (Isa 49:26) -all finally (Ro 8:19-20)
“zhong-bao 中保” (middle-guarantor)	-mediator of God & man (1Ti 2:5; Heb 8:6; 9:15;12:24) -mediator by blood, of New Test.- (Heb 8:6; 9:12-15; 12:24)	-mediator of all (Heb 7:11-25)
“fu-he-zhe 復和者” (restore-harmony-person)	-reconciling God & man (Ro 5:10; 2 Co 5:17-19; Eph 2:16; Col 1:20)	-reconcile all to God (Col 1:19-20, Eph 1:10-11)

C. Eschatologically, Jesus Christ as – “wan-mei-zun-rong-zhu 完美尊榮主“ (perfect-beauty-revered-honor-lord)

Another Chinese cultural theme is “honor and shame.” As shown in **Figure 5** Jesus Christ is both the shame-bearer for sinners and honor-winner for believers. He did so because of the fall of mankind and the fact that, spiritually speaking, sin and shame are closely related. On the

other hand, salvation/redemption and honor/glory are also closely related. This culturally relevant understanding of the Chinese and doctrinally correct conceptualization of “honor and shame” in the context of “rong-ru-shen-xue-lun 榮辱神學論“ (theology of honor/shame) is summarized in **Figure 5**.

To the Chinese, “saving face” is not just a personal concern but others as well, friends and family included. Honor is more important than personal life, property and power. It is the life goal of an individual to live with and strive for, not personally but for the whole family: nuclear and extended, living members and deceased ancestors. Shame is to be avoided and causing someone to “lose face” is a terrible mistake. Many would rather commit suicide than living in “shame.” Individual and group action, social and religious ritual, ceremonial procedure, festival and anniversary, rule of reciprocity and social obligation, giving and receiving gifts, achievement and punishment, law and regulation, etc. in Chinese custom and tradition are all tied up in the pursuit of honor and shunning of shame.

The “rong-ru-shen-xue-lun 榮辱神學論“ (theology of honor/shame) is an integration of Chinese cultural theme in terms of “honor and shame” and Christian theological teaching of glory/shame. It is in the context of “rong-ru-shen-xue-lun 榮辱神學論“ (theology of honor/shame) that this other aspect of “Jesus Christ for the Chinese” is summarized diachronically in **Figure 5** below:

Figure 5 - “wan-mei-zun-rong-zhu 完美尊榮主“ (perfect-beauty-revered-honor-lord) - (translated from Wan 1999a:102-105)

HONOR\SHAME	HONOR-BEAUTY-REVERED-LORD	HUMAN KIND
Honor (pre-fall)	Pre-incarnation: -glorious prior to incarnation (Jn 17:1) -the fullness and glory of God (Col 1:5-17)	-Were created in the image of God (Ge 1:26-28, 2:7) -Were crowned with glory and honor (Ps 8:4-5) -Were made ruler over the creatures (Ge 1:26-28; Ps 8:6) -Were naked but felt no shame (Ge 2:25)

<p>SHAME</p> <p>(post-fall)</p>	<p>Incarnation & crucifixion:</p> <p>-Incarnation, Christ emptying himself, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness, humbled himself and became obedient to death — the shameful punishment of Roman law of the cross (Php 2:5-11)</p> <p>-Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us (Gal 3:13; 2 Co 5:21)</p> <p>-was forsaken by God the Father (Mt 27:46; Lk 22:44)</p>	<p>-Felt shame and was afraid to see God</p> <p>(Ge 3:9-10)</p> <p>-Every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time: i.e. total depravity (Ge 6:5-6)</p> <p>-Were cursed and punished (Ge 3:15-19, 6:7)</p> <p>-God made garments of skin and clothed them in Christ' righteousness (Ge 3:21; Rev 7:14, 22:14)</p>
<p>Honor</p> <p>(post-reconciliation)</p>	<p>Glorification is:</p> <p>-God the Father exalted the resurrected Son with the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue shall confess that he is Lord</p> <p>(Php 2:9-11)</p> <p>-Was raised from the dead and seated at God's right hand in the heavenly realms</p> <p>(1 Co 15:4; Mk 16:19; Eph 1:20)</p> <p>-Much superior to the angels (Heb 1:4)</p> <p>-Will come back and judge the world</p> <p>(Ac 1:11; 17:31)</p>	<p>-Regain the image of God in Christ</p> <p>(Eph 4:24)</p> <p>-Are new creation in Christ (2 Co 5:17)</p> <p>-Receive power from the Holy Spirit, are transformed by the renewing of the mind after regeneration (Ro 12:1-2)</p> <p>-After reconciled with God, clothed in the righteousness of Christ, will judge angels & receive glory (1 Co 6:3; Rev 21)</p> <p>-Except those who rejected Jesus Christ will suffer eternally the shame & punishment of hell (Rev 20)</p>

V. Conclusion

This contextual reflection on “**Jesus Christ for the Chinese**” is the concluding article of the 7-part series for the column “East & West.” It has been an enjoyable venture for the author and a valuable opportunity to interact with readers. Appreciation must be expressed to the able editors of *CATW* and the readers who wrote in via e-mail and other media. Request was also received to have part of the series posted in certain website by a non-Chinese missions professor in the U.S.A.

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Further response and comments are welcome and can be sent to the following e-mail address: [Enoch Wan](mailto:Enoch.Wan)

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