

# INTERPRETATION OF JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH IN CHINESE CULTURAL CONTEXT

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## INTRODUCTION

Justification by faith is a very important Christian doctrine, which was defended and exalted by German reformer Martin Luther (A.D. 1483-1546) in the Middle Ages. It insists that one can only be justified by God to be righteous by believing in Jesus. Especially when 2017 is the 500th year after Luther nailed his proposition paper on the door of a Wittenberg church in 1517, it is very meaningful to reopen the discussion of the doctrine. When this doctrine is widely accepted by Chinese Christians and expressed from the Chinese social-historical context today, one might ask what contextualization it has undergone as it is already a central belief in guiding Christian lives. This article will explore the interpretation and criterion of righteousness and faith in terms of Chinese traditions so as to explain why Chinese Christians can understand that doctrine differently. I will also review the different propositions of some Chinese pastors and scholars in mainland China of the last 50 years to see the interactive influence between Chinese culture and the Christian doctrine: Justification by Faith. Finally, I will point out what is missing in Chinese missional context regarding this doctrine and what transformation it may bring to the Chinese culture.

## CULTURE AND CHRISTIANITY

Paul Tillich (1886-1965) contends:

Essentially the religious and the secular are not separated realms. Rather they are within each other. . . Religion as ultimate concern is the meaning-giving substance of culture, and culture is the totality of forms in which the basic concern of religion expresses itself. In abbreviation: religion is the substance of culture, culture is the form of religion.<sup>1</sup>

Tillich's scope sheds light on the interaction and interdependence of religion and culture. Certainly, an ultimate concern, which is ingrained within humanity, is the desire to know the purpose of their existence, and this concern is exemplified by religion. At the same time, culture temporarily supplies the answers for human existence and personal identity, while actualizing its effectiveness in humans' meanings and purposes in life. Culture refers to a dynamic, reflective, progressive and transformative process moving towards the

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (ed. Robert C. Kimball; New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 42.

consummative and idealistic reality predicted by religion. Thus, culture is beyond the historical dimension.

H. Niebuhr (1894-1962) identifies culture with several features: (1) “it is always social;”<sup>2</sup> (2) “it is human achievement;” (3) “it is a world of values;” (4) “it is concerned with the temporal and material realization of values;” and (5) it is characterized by “pluralism.” On the one hand, the cultural transformative power is supplied by religion. On the other, religion is mundanely actualized and concretely symbolized by culture. Niebuhr supplies five options in describing the relationship between Christ and culture. “Christ against culture.” “the Christ of culture.” “Christ above culture.” “Christ and culture in paradox.” Finally “Christ the transformer of culture.”

Admittedly, culture and Christianity interactively shape and influence each. Since Christianity was brought by the Nestorian missionary Alopen to China in 635 AD, the encounter of Christianity and Chinese culture has produced conflict and intermixture. Today, there are around 70 million Christians in China, but it is still hard to see how much Chinese cultural value has been transformed by Christianity. We will look at righteousness and faithfulness in the Chinese cultural definition first and then see how the cultural stereotyped view has influenced Chinese Christians’ interpretation of the doctrine—justification by faith.

## **RIGHTEOUSNESS AND FAITHFULNESS IN CHINESE ANCIENT TRADITIONS**

First of all, one needs to review Chinese traditional ideas of justification (*cheng yi*). Justice, or righteousness, is expressed by a Chinese word which consists of a letter meaning “sheep” like a crown at the top of the other letter meaning “me”. The coronary letter (*yang*) conveys man’s dignity and decentness (*wei yi*) which is rooted in his nature and being.<sup>3</sup> In the social relationship, man needs to bear *Yi* as his common identity. Confucius (551 BC-479 BC) defines the word as suitability and appropriateness, regarding it as the essential ethical rule governing social etiquette and personal moral. *Yi* is valued as a behavioral standard by Confucius, in whose mind *Yi* distinguishes the noble man (*Junzi*) from the immature man (*Xiaoren*). A noble man will always place *Yi* as his priority when he makes a choice of action.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, *Yi* is contrasted to *Li* (pursuit of the profits which are driven by man’s selfish desires) in defining social duty and obligation. To pursue profit with noble reason will not betray *Yi*. In other words, *Yi* shall not be defiled or distorted by seeking personal profit. In defining human behavior, Xunzi (313-238 BC) applies *Yi* in a legalistic context and contends if the people ignore *Yi*, issuing laws will be useless.<sup>5</sup>

Mengzi (372 BC-289 BC), a representative of Confucianism, asserts that benevolence and justice are a part of human nature, which distinguishes human beings from animals. The

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<sup>2</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1956), 32-36; the following quotations are from *ibid*.

<sup>3</sup> 杨泽波, “公与私: 义利诠释中的沉疴痼疾,” *CCR* 1 (2002): 43.

<sup>4</sup> 胡启勇, 肖立斌, “先秦儒家礼法正义思想辨析,” *CJ* 1 (2009): 88.

<sup>5</sup> 胡启勇, 肖立斌, “先秦儒家,” 89.

purpose of life is for justice, and even life can be sacrificed for procuring justice (*she sheng qu yi*). Such a claim presents justice as a rooted life principle to follow and keep in mind. Any harm on others' profits and properties should be hated and denounced according to Mengzi.<sup>6</sup> He urges that the ruler should execute a benign supervision and governance (*Renzhen*).<sup>7</sup> Evidently, Mengzi's justice is a very pragmatic concept personified in socio-political and ethical life.

*Yi* in Taoism (600 BC-470 BC, founded by Laozi) is perceived from three points. First, it represents a political and forensic concept, requiring the ruler to give a "fair distribution or fair treatment" to the people. Second, it belongs to a social-relational concept and highlights an impartial and benevolent treatment to each other within society. Both focus on the people's behaviors. Third, Taoism ascribes justice to the order of nature and social body, regarding it as the factor of harmonizing the human being and the nature.<sup>8</sup> However, *Yi* in Taoism primarily inspires the people from its reflection of the cosmic order and how to make peace between man and nature. It seldom conveys the pursuit of the legalistic justice *per se*.<sup>9</sup>

Mozi (468 BC-376 BC), the founder of Mohism, broadens *Yi*'s applicable meaning and defines it with the mutual benefit based on egalitarianism. This point is derived from Mozi's social-political theory which is concerned with how to overcome the chaotic status in society and humanity's heart. According to Mozi, chaos is instigated by the diversity and complexity of the social structure. The task of a ruler is to place society in good order and establish a standard which can deal with the problems derived from diversity. Second, chaos is produced by the people's lack of love for each other. Thus, love can rectify social disorder and create a mutual understanding and respect to accommodate diversity and discordance. Although Mozi offers love and mutual benefit as the solution of the social disorder, he signifies that *Yi* is the highest principle and purpose to measure any socio-political system. *Yi* is demonstrated by social justice, and social justice is a reflection of the universal way (*tian dao*). Only *Yi* can best represent this universal way and is revealed in a just and egalitarian society.<sup>10</sup>

From the aforementioned study, three points come into view. First, *Yi* is exalted as an idealistic human nature worth pursuing which makes man different from animals. An orderly society ought not to leave it out. Second, *Yi* can be understood as an individualistic sanctity and from it one's moral character will be cultivated and transformed. Third, *Yi* can be probed from its social interconnection. It is contrasted to profit (*li*) and carries a strong ethical sense, becoming the highest evaluation of man's behavior as well as social etiquette. In sum, *Yi*, in the Chinese cultural context, has an emphasis on orderliness and fairness but it is less discussed in a forensic or covenantal (a form of legitimate relationship in the Ancient Near East) setting.

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<sup>6</sup> 石永之, "孟子的正义思想," *JPSJMC* 1 (2008): 76-77.

<sup>7</sup> 王晓兴, 易志刚, "Universal Justice for the Humanity and Its historical Evolution," *JLU* 35 (2007): 70.

<sup>8</sup> 陈戈寒, 梅珍生, "论道家正义观的内在因素," *JT* 11 (2006): 42-43.

<sup>9</sup> 吕锡琛, "On the Taoism's Pursuit of the Social Justice," *JHU* 6 (2005): 637.

<sup>10</sup> 张红安, "墨子正义理论探析," *JSWU* 3 (2008): 9-10.

Second, one needs to take a look at faithfulness (*xin*) in the Chinese context. *Xin*, according to Confucius, is better to be interpreted as *trust*. This type of trust is connected with the ultimate sense of life just like he says: “Death has always been with us since the beginning of time, but when there is no trust, the people will have nothing to stand on” (*Analects* 12:7).

Here the trust (*xin*) actually has two dimensions, one objective and the other subjective. In the first, it refers to the mutual commitment between the people and the government, without which the ruling will not be justified and the social order cannot be maintained. In the second, it refers to a personal or collective faith, which enables people to leave behind them a lasting influence and to endure in life the sufferings that cannot be normally endured.<sup>11</sup>

Evidently, such a faith is not pointing to God as the objective. Rather it is a humanistic concept engaged in the ordinary life. *Xin* is rather a life attitude which requires “committing oneself to the welfare of the family, community and society.”<sup>12</sup> When one continues to discipline himself according to moral and cultural norms, he has actually lived out faith in his life.

Obviously, *Xin* is not a spiritual and transcendental idea *per se* in the Chinese tradition. As a relational concept it clothes the people’s interactions and pursuits with a positive and confirmative sense. Faith in humanity, that is to trust in the guidance of man’s good nature (*ren xin ben shan*), is the fundamental point.

In Christian religion, Jesus behaves like a sage and a prophet who receives the commission from God. However, in the Chinese tradition the concept of a prophet is not really used or contemplated. Confucius behaves and speaks like a sage whose major concern is humanism. *Xin*, in Christianity, associates human’s correspondence with God’s calling and grace. But *Xin*, in Confucianism, directly refers to one’s social duties because of no distinction between faith and social duties.

Religious faith was composed, or consisted in, faith in humanity, and therefore one should first perform one’s human duties if one wanted to attain to transcendence. ‘If a person cannot yet serve humans, how can he serve the spirits?’ (*Analects*, XI, 12). It was through the first, service, through performing human duties, that one could learn the proper relationship between the human and the Transcendent, between this life and the life to come, and so make it possible to transcend the limitation of life and find the ultimate meaning of life.<sup>13</sup>

In fact, Confucius’ reference of transcendent beings to spirits (*shen ling*) or heaven (*Tian*) is ambiguous and lacks a careful explanation. Humanity behaves as the mediator to explain the

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<sup>11</sup> Xinzong Yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 284.

<sup>12</sup> Yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism*, 285.

<sup>13</sup> Xinzong Yao, *Confucianism and Christianity: A Comparative Study of Jen and Agape* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1996), 62.

transcendental idea—showing faith in Heaven (*Tian*). “To trust in *Tian* was to trust in humans.”<sup>14</sup>

Since there is no connection of *Yi* and *Xin* in the traditional Chinese thought, the protestant tenet—justification by faith—causes reinterpretation in this context. It falls in the humanistic category, which states that fulfilling one’s social and moral duties faithfully makes him conform to the way of heaven (*Tao*) to obtain his righteousness.

Therefore, the above study reveals that ethics and morality are perceived almost as religious concepts in China. Prioritizing ethics over religion is viewed as the primary feature of Confucianism. China is an ethic-centered society. Social and collective value is much more important than individual value.<sup>15</sup> Personal salvation has no position in this system. Instead, ethics through self-actualization plays a role equal to redemption. The people praise and even worship the ancient sages who demonstrated a perfect moral example. Since justification by faith rules out self-actualization in obtaining salvation, when it is introduced to China it will definitely encounter challenge and be compared to the personal behavioral and ethic performance.

## **WHAT CHINESE CHRISTIANS UNDERSTAND JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH**

This part will be divided into two sections. In the first section, I will give a brief review of the various interpretations from the representatives of the independent churches (later becoming the house churches) and the Three-Self patriotic churches (self-support, self-propaganda, self-autonomy). In the second section, I will bring forth my general survey of the urban Chinese Christian intellectuals in terms of their understandings of this doctrine.

### **REVIEW OF THE IDEAS BEFORE GREAT CULTURAL REVOLUTION**

Great Cultural Revolution (GCR) happened during 1966-1976 but pre-GCR political movements have started from 1952. To make GCR as a time marker is because it has caused the division of existential status of Chinese churches with the generation of the three-self patriotic churches against the underground churches. Three-self church union was produced from Three-self (self-support, self-autonomy, self-propaganda) patriotic movement in 1954. Those churches which rejected to join the three-self church union later became the underground or house churches under the severe political persecution.

In China, the Three-Self patriotic churches generally have a view in between Niebuhr’s second and the third option; that is, they consider Christianity as a useful external thought complementary to Chinese culture and tradition. For them Christianity is no more than a human product and westernized culture. The house churches normally hold a view in between Niebuhr’s first and the fourth option. They either insist that the secular culture is of anti-Christ, or contend that Christ and culture are irrelevant to each other and Christ’s

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<sup>14</sup> Yao, *Confucianism and Christianity: A Comparative Study of Jen and Agape*, 63.

<sup>15</sup> 梁漱溟, *中国文化要义* (上海: 人民出版社, 2007), 70, 94.

kingdom (the church) has nothing to do with the world.<sup>16</sup> For them Christianity is not a culture but the true revelation from God.

There are two streams in understanding this doctrine during the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first is from the independent and indigenous churches before 1949 which became the archetype of the house churches developing during the 1970s.

Watchman Nee (1903-1972) contends that a person can do nothing to be justified. One is justified because of “the fact that the Lord had done everything.” ‘Doing nothing’ is the motto of Nee in the handling of Christian life growth from justification to sanctification.<sup>17</sup> Nee stresses that a Christian needs to know justification as a revelation of the eternal fact completed by Christ. Doing nothing is the only correct correspondence to this fact.

Song Shangjie (1901-1944) mentions many times about faith and salvation in his diaries. Faith is the only way for him to secure God’s healing and empowerment. Thus, sinners need to believe in Christ and then they can be forgiven and justified by God.<sup>18</sup>

Wang Mingdao (1900-1990) considers his understanding of “justification by faith” the turning point of his Christian life. He presses that one really has nothing to do with salvation except to believe in Christ who had completed the work for the sinner. Righteousness is a free gift given by God through Jesus Christ to the world.<sup>19</sup>

The aforementioned three persons were very influential in the Chinese Christian churches before 1949. The house churches which developed around the 1970s persist in man’s inability of procuring God’s salvation except by faith in Christ.

Out of the three people, Nee’s idea has the most powerful influence. He develops a delicate theological view about sanctification (*cheng sheng lun*) which he considers the next step after justification. According to Nee, one’s fleshly character and personality (*lao xing qing*) can be totally transformed into a spiritual one by the Holy Spirit. This person will then become a spiritual man even though he has a fleshly form. This view imagines a flawless spiritual life on the earth. Nee’s view of total sanctification (*wan quan cheng sheng*) is based on his trichotomy of humanity (spirit, soul, and flesh), which opens a door for encouraging self-actualization.<sup>20</sup>

Why does it happen? It is because all these people perceive justification by faith as a moment rather than a progression, a discrete event rather than a continuous transformation, an instant fact rather than the sustaining grace. It shifts the emphasis from justification to

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<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Chao, *The Undying Fire of the Burning Branches* (ed. Susana Chen and Claudia Chang; Taipei: Chinese Ministry International, 2005), 21-22.

<sup>17</sup> Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 2008), 128.

<sup>18</sup> Song Shangjie, *灵里集光* (HongKong: 恩雨出版社, 1995), 1-340.

<sup>19</sup> Wang Mingdao, “五十年来。” *信仰见证*. [cited Mar 14 2009]. Online: <http://www.jmdjz.com/leadbbs/announce/announce.asp?BoardID=13&id=8801>.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Watchman Nee, *The Breaking of the Outer Man and the Release of the Spirit* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1997), 1-116.

post-justification radically with urging that a person should live in excellence *per se* once he gets righteousness by faith. However, this complete sanctification allows self-actualization on ethics to creep into one's post-justification life.

The second is from the liberal theologians who later attended the Three-Self patriotic movement after 1949, which fostered the formation of the Three-Self church.<sup>21</sup> Chinese liberal theologians like Zhao Zichen (1888-1979) and Wu Leichuan (1870-1944) attempt to interpret Christian theology from Confucius and the modern scientific worldview.<sup>22</sup> According to them, "Christianity is a kind of ideology, one that comes out of an affirmation of the existence of the individual and society, a kind of new life, that Christ is already a reality."<sup>23</sup> Influenced by German theologian A. Schweitzer's book "The Quest of the Historical Jesus" (1875-1965), Zhao Zichen contends that Jesus was a suffering hero and a moral example. Through following Christ one continues to develop his character until he "can bring peace and prosperity to country and cosmos." Wu Leichuan, Zhao's colleague, embraces the Confucian opinion that righteousness "could never be given but must be cultivated through self-effort."<sup>24</sup>

The founder of the Three-Self patriotic movement, Wu Yaozong (1893-1979) "abandoned individual salvation" procured from justification by faith and placed national salvation as the priority. Salvation is identified with the liberation and "the betterment of society and justice."<sup>25</sup> According to Jonathan Chao, this Three-Self theological substance is of communistic ideology.<sup>26</sup>

Around 1998, the leader of the Three-Self movement, Ding Guangxun (1915-2012), challenged justification by faith and provided his alternative: justification by love. He contends that righteousness by faith devalues ethics and excludes many good people without faith from heaven. Therefore, justification by faith is not an appropriate idea any more (*dan hua yin xin cheng yi*).<sup>27</sup> According to Ding, righteousness is an ethical concept. It only has a historical role rather than one which is eternal and unchanging. The Apostle Paul and Martin Luther used "Righteousness by Faith" to rebel against the rigid religiousness of Judaism and Catholicism.<sup>28</sup> "Echoing Zhao Zichen, Ding blames the tendency to see "faith" as an automatic trigger for "righteousness," as if it were an impersonal price paid in exchange for a

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<sup>21</sup> To understand the historical background of the Three-Self churches and the house churches, see Jonathan Chao, *A History of Christianity in Socialist China, 1949-1997* (Taipei: 中国福音会出版部, 1997), 1-730.

<sup>22</sup> Jingyi Ji, *Encounters between Chinese Culture and Christianity: A Hermeneutical Perspective* (London: Global, 2007), 212.

<sup>23</sup> Tang Tu, "Looking back, Looking ahead: Chinese Theology in the 20th Century." *Chinese Theological Review* 14. [cited March 14 2009]. Online: <http://www.amitynewsservice.org/page.php?page=1239>.

<sup>24</sup> Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, "Chinese Theology," *GDT*: 163.

<sup>25</sup> Kärkkäinen, "Chinese Theology,"

<sup>26</sup> Chao, *The Undying Fire of the Burning Branches*, 60.

<sup>27</sup> 邓福村, "中国基督教神学思想建设的现实意义." *State Administration for Religious Affairs of P. R. C.* [cited 16 March 2009]. Online: <http://www.sara.gov.cn/GB/xwzx/ztbd/zjyhxsh/623c049d-566f-11da-9bfd-93180af1bb1a.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. 丁光训, *丁光训文集* (南京: 译林出版社, 1998).

personal virtue. This misunderstanding is the reason for the churches' indifference towards ethics."<sup>29</sup>

These views from the Three-Self Churches' leaders are criticized as compromising with the Confucian ethic-centered ideology, which advocates "social and cosmic transformation through self-effort."<sup>30</sup> The Three-Self churches modify this Christian doctrine and make it subject to Chinese tradition and socialistic belief.

## REVIEW OF THE IDEAS AFTER THE GREAT CULTURAL REVOLUTION

My survey combines the research on a few recent Chinese theological journals, essays and the summary from my interaction with Christians in China. First, I will take a look at the articles of three contemporary Chinese religious scholars. They come from the Southwest Institute for Ethnic Groups, Department of Philosophy in Fudan University and the School of History and Culture in Sichuan University. In their articles, they attempt to present a comprehension of Martin Luther's justification by faith. They all agree that Luther's tenet is the best rebuttal against the authority of the Catholic Church. This dogma liberates the believers from the oppressive rule of the church and the passive religious spirit. It stimulates the believers to use their minds and provides them with a way of approaching God directly. Faith points to God as the objective. It is not about the faith of Christ as the archetype or the faith given by God, but the faith generated from the human's heart commits to God. According to them, Luther's justification by faith is a humanistic concept and has a heightened concern of humanity's subjective choice and commitment.<sup>31</sup>

Second, I will review three articles published in *Tianfeng* (an official Chinese Christian journal sponsored by the Three-Self patriotic organization). According to the authors, faith means "trusting in" or "believing in" God with one's heart rather than by what one can see with his eyes. Faith requires one to devote his or her life to God and live as an example deserving his or her righteous identity because faith separated from action is dead.<sup>32</sup>

Third, I will give a summary of the points from the students in a house church seminary on the south of China. These students are the house churches' leaders and own bachelor, master, or doctoral degrees. They wrote the papers on "Freedom and the Law" by studying relevant scripture from Galatians.

They understand justification as a forensic concept, that is, God does not reckon a person as a sinner because of Jesus. Justification endows a person with freedom and releases him from the condemnation of the law. Faith is opposite against the Law. The former will

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<sup>29</sup> Kärkkäinen, "Chinese Theology," 164; see also 李信源, "一个不信派的标本--《丁光训文集》评析." *Chinese Bible Study Class*. [cited 16 March 2009]. Online: <http://biblestudy.blogbus.com/logs/18417564.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Kärkkäinen, "Chinese Theology,"

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Deng Li, "Luther's Theory of Justification by Faith and its Humanistic Spirit," *JSU* 3 (2003): 113-18; Sun Shanling, "Justification by Faith in the Theology of Martin Luther," *JSIEG* 6 (1999): 143-47; Wu Shu-bo, "From Martin Luther to Descartes: The Relationship between "Justification by Faith" and the Uprising of Subjective Principle," *FJ* 4 (2005): 96-104.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. 杨友文, "信心是荣耀上帝," *TF* 1 (2006): 11-13; 单渭祥, "信心究竟是什么?," *TF* 10 (2005): 12-14; 郭文文, "信心的根基扎在磐石上," *TF* 7 (2006): 13.



give a person true freedom and identify him as the child of God, but the latter will steal his freedom and make him a slave. As far as faith is concerned, these students perceive faith as wholehearted acceptance of what Jesus Christ has done on the cross, the Gospel. Moreover, they also emphasize that preserving righteous status is not by keeping the law, but by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Fourth, when I visited the house churches in China from 1999-2004 (the travel covered *Henan, Anhui, Jiangsu, Shanxi, Shenzhen, Shanghai, Yunnan, Wenzhou, Jiangxi*), I observed four kinds of different explanations about justification by faith. The first kind inclines to see justification as a once-for-all moment. Once a person believes in Christ, he obtains justification, regardless of how bad and evil he might become later. This point leads to “once saved, always saved” which is prevalent in the churches in Wenzhou (a city on the east coast) and other urban churches. Some of the younger generation embrace it and claim that justification has freed them to do whatever they want to do. Thus, here justification by faith is identified with the full and never-lost salvation.

The second kind sees justification as the first blessing, and it insists that there will be a second blessing after justification, the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Thus, a true believer needs to seek the spiritual baptism and be filled by the Holy Spirit. Otherwise, though he is justified by faith, without being filled by the Spirit he will still fall out of salvation someday. “The True Jesus Church” in Shanxi (which I attended for several months) holds this point firmly and urges every believer to speak in tongues which is the sign of being filled by the Spirit. This point identifies justification by faith with the incomplete and unstable salvation.

The third kind understands justification as the first stage of Christian life. It is completed at the moment when one confesses his sins and accepts Jesus as his savior. However, a believer cannot remain at this stage and he must enter the second stage, sanctification. Justification already makes way for the Holy Spirit to enter one’s life and lead this person into a life-long transformation. The more important work will begin after justification, that is, he needs to carry the cross and battle against his old man (*lao rou ti*) everyday. This point identifies justification as guaranteed salvation but its focus falls on one’s effort on developing a morally well life through help from the Holy Spirit. This view is widely recognized by some house churches in *Henan* and *Shanghai*.

The fourth kind is similar to the third, but the nuance is its emphasis on total sanctification in one’s physical life. This point contends that a believer can live a blameless and spiritual life, once he masters the secret of breaking off his external man and releasing his inner spirit. This person will become a fully spiritual man, and without any of his own opinions he will live within the Holy Spirit. This point motivates a believer to attempt a life status without self except the Spirit. The Little Flock churches in *Yunnan* (*xiao qun jiao hui*) take this view as their teaching principle.

#### **“JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH” ITSELF VS. AFTER “JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH”**

Given the above study, we can conclude that Chinese believers usually understand justification as an instantaneous moment and individual event. What could happen after justification and how to maintain the faithful status are more important than justification by

faith itself to Chinese Christians. They perceive faith as one's subjective acceptance of, and commitment to Jesus Christ.

Lutheran's view of justification can be stated in three features. First, justification conveys an unequal situation between man and God. The human being has no ability to make himself justified before God. "The cause for justification is Christ and the way to receive it is faith."<sup>33</sup> Second, justification is a forensic concept. A person's sins are removed by God because of "God's reckoning of Christ's righteousness" on his behalf. Third, justification is a gift from God. Faith is the only acceptable response to such a divine promise and grace. The Lutheran view shows the focus on what conditions can cause justification by faith and what is justification itself, which has encountered the interpretative modification in the Chinese cultural context.

Doing to maintain "justification by faith" is more sensible to Chinese than being to maintain "justification by faith." Thus, the Chinese churches care about what they shall do after justification and develop many ways of "doing and bettering Christian life." Even Watchman Nee's "doing nothing" is still a concept of "doing" if one can read deeply into his view on sanctification (*cheng sheng guan*).

Being a Christian means to live one's life in a way deserving of his righteousness procured from God (cf. James 2:14-17). However, it is hard to deny that the ethic-centered culture forms a Chinese believer's presupposition of what justification is while wrestling between the two choices: What am I because justification by faith, or what shall I do to be after justification by faith? A Chinese Christian might easily choose the latter and attempt this likeness by doing something. I usually hear the older Christians humbly say: "I am not good enough, and I am still far from the standard of being a good Christian."

### **IGNORANCE OF COVENANTAL RELATIONSHIP**

Actually, the Mosaic law is never a forensic concept but rather a covenant concept in Judaism. In the Hebrew mindset, keeping the law is for the purpose of keeping the covenantal identity of being God's chosen (Exod 19:6; Heb 9:18-21). In a similar sense, faith in Christ for the early Jewish Christians also conveys a covenant relationship between believers and God (Luk 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25). This covenant relationship is not a moment but an already/not yet event, a dynamic and progressive process which integrates present and future.<sup>34</sup> Unfortunately, such a covenant concept is missing in Chinese culture. Since justification is perceived by the Chinese Christians as a moment, rather than a continuous relational bond, the stress on one's behavior and practice in post-justification time will not seem to be odd.

Nevertheless, justification by faith cannot be separated from a moral and righteous life. James, the brother of Jesus, understands that the law-covenant is transformed into the Christ-covenant in terms of love and judgment (cf. James 2:8-13). Therefore, he contends that faith shall be accompanied by good works. But this doing is different from that doing in

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<sup>33</sup> Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, "Justification," *GDT* : 448; the following quotation and remark are from *ibid*.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 156.

Chinese cultural context. James' doing is the compatible fruit made by the Holy Spirit in a believer's life defined within the covenant context rather than Chinese doing is to evaluate whether a believer deserves to be called a Christian out of the covenant context. Since Chinese culture appreciates the ethical correlation in natural and social processes, leading a morally well-being life (*de sheng sheng huo*) in post-justification time is certainly stressed by the Chinese Christians. Nevertheless, we need to tell the nuance by differentiate the performance as the life fruit within the covenant context from the performance as the worthiness within the humanistic ethic context. Otherwise, justification by faith in the Chinese performance-driven culture could easily be worn out by the legalistic stiffness and judgment.

### JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH: THE LIGHT FOR THE CULTURAL CHRISTIANIZATION

Consenting with Niebuhr that "there is no nature without culture,"<sup>35</sup> I will add that the incarnated Christ is the word of God taking the anthropomorphic form, living in culture and redeeming humanity's fallen nature so that culture will be revitalized and transformed by the new creation. No man lives without culture. However, the tension between culture and Christianity cannot be simplified with mere opposition or syncretism.

Culture reflects humanity's bearing of the *Imago Dei* (the image of God). Humans have the ability to create culture which exactly reflects "the communicative attributes of God."<sup>36</sup> Christ (the firstfruit of the new creation and the center of the ecclesiastic life) redefines culture in himself and the church (the chosen one in Christ), which sanctifies culture progressively towards consummation (the *Parousia*). Thus, culture is subject to God's plan (*oivkonomi*, *an qeou*/ cf. Eph 1:10; 3:2, 9; 1 Cor 9:17; Col 1:25; 1 Tim 1:4) and it certainly needs redemption and restoration to fit that plan. At this point, Jonathan Chao's reference to the Christianization of Chinese culture (*wen hua ji du hua*) soundly fits into the situation. In Chao's point, Christianity can transform Chinese culture with its views of transcendence (*chao yue*), original sin (*yuan zui*), redemption (*jiu shu*), forgiveness (*rao shu*), love fellowship (*ai de tuan qi*), hope for future life (*lai sheng de pan wang*).<sup>37</sup>

If one might agree that Christ is superior to human culture and he has established his church in the world to influence and transform culture, he will not feel awkward to see such a duty carried out by Christ's churches today. Chinese house churches care a lot about their identity in Christ, but their motivation, which targets giving "strong testimony to the watching world concerning the nature and importance of that eternal realm," still needs improvement.<sup>38</sup> Justification by faith does not demand the church to isolate herself from the world and focus only on her inner issues. Rather, such a faithful and justified community

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<sup>35</sup> Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 40-44.

<sup>36</sup> Chao, *The Undying Fire of the Burning Branches*, 19.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Chao, *The Undying Fire of the Burning Branches*, 17-40.

<sup>38</sup> T. M. Moore, *Culture Matters: A Call for Consensus on Christian Cultural Engagement* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007), 146; Jr. Daniel C. Arichea, "Reading Romans in Southeast Asia: Righteousness and its Implication for the Christian Community and Other Faith Communities," in *Navigating Romans through Cultures: Challenging Readings by Charting a New Course* (ed. Khiok-Khng Yeo; RGCS;; New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), 212.

needs to testify to the world about God's grace and faithfulness. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many Chinese churches have understood the mission of being light and salt by investing the volunteer service of the local communities. It at least denotes that Chinese Christians begin to not see the church in opposition to the world. After all, Christians will see that culture and the world are not at odds with God's sovereignty, just as Niebuhr notices that "the world of culture—man's achievement—exists within the world of grace—God's Kingdom."<sup>39</sup>

Finally, the life being justified is like a lampstand which cannot be hidden but lightens the whole room. Chinese culture can be transformed by the testimonial lives of Chinese Christians within the justification covenant of God. This covenant life is not maintained by the effort of humanistic ethics but by the transformative work of God's Holy Spirit in a believer's heart.

Can culture be Christianized? The answer is yes when the core value of the culture surrender to covenantal value of justification by faith. Then, the whole idealistic system encounters the shift and the transformative breakthrough pattern from the resurrection power of Jesus Christ is implanted in the cultural DNA. The Christianized cultural soil will become thicker and thicker so its fruit will produce more and more. Let your light shine, Chinese Christians, because Jesus is the light of the world (John 8:12).

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<sup>39</sup> Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 256.

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