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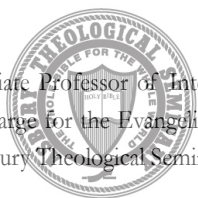
*Waltzing with Wesley: Wesleyan Theology as a Renewing Framework  
for Chinese Christian Spirituality and Global Identity*

**Abstract**

This paper argues that Wesleyan theology, understanding that God's prevenient grace is working toward the restoration of all Creation, serves as a means of grace for global Christians to incarnate Christianity with their indigenous cultural identity. Using the Chinese context, this paper explores how a Wesleyan perspective, being itself a pragmatic and integrative theology, provides a pathway for the Chinese church, suffering from a hobbled spirituality as consequence of an over-identification with Confucian philosophy, to achieve a synergistic spirituality that balances both biblical and Chinese cultural components. A brief review of Chinese spirituality is first provided.

**Keywords:** Wesleyan Theology, contextualization, Confucianism, Chinese church, cultural identity

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## Introduction

In January 2011, furor fulminated across Internet websites, forums, and blogs over Amy Chua's book entitled *The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. Much of the discussion centered around the question of whether or not Chinese parenting is superior to Western parenting. Much of the response was negative, highlighting the overemphasis in Chinese parenting on achievement and external success at the expense of a child's self-worth and self-identity. However, the discussion is actually part of a larger debate that is occurring as Eastern and Western cultures and values clash in our globalizing world. The Chinese church is not immune to such clashes, and is experiencing increased struggles and conflicts at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Although the Chinese church has grown rapidly in the past half century, cracks are appearing with increasing frequency in its glowing façade. In the two decades, many "model churches" have suffered serious setbacks as a consequence of leadership conflicts.

The majority of these conflicts are not a result of moral issues, but of the failure of Chinese leaders to exercise Christian charity, forbearance, and forgiveness over differences in a clash of cultures.<sup>1</sup> Chinese churches, outside of mainland China, are not homogeneous, but are a microcosm of many Chinese subcultures. Chinese from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, and now mainland China worship and serve together under one roof. Unfortunately, while they may love God in unity, loving one another leaves much to be desired. Differences in backgrounds, perspective, and approach have resulted in division and strife.

More often than not, church leaders are responding to conflict through *renqing*, the rigid, hierarchical Confucian social system that is stamped deeply into Chinese culture and shared among most Chinese subcultures on one level or another.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the "face" (i.e., social identity) of Confucian-based Chinese culture has eclipsed the face of Christ on many Chinese Christian leaders. Why is this happening? And what can be done to mitigate these conflicts?

This paper argues that conflicts in the Chinese church are a result of a hobbled understanding of spirituality as a consequence of an over-identification with Confucian philosophy and proposes that Wesleyan theology may serve to help Chinese Christians renew their understanding of a spirituality that is both biblical and consistent with their indigenous cultural context. The paper is divided into four sections. The first section will trace how Christianity came to be identified with Confucianism. The second section will discuss how this identification presents challenges for Chinese Christian spirituality. The third section will explore how Wesleyan theology can serve to restore Chinese Christian spirituality thereby enabling Chinese Christians to enjoy greater harmony individually and corporately.

The fourth section integrates the arguments and in closing, provides brief remarks as to the value of Wesleyan theology beyond the Chinese context in the formation of the global Christian identity.

### **Losing *Yin* to Christianity**

In attempting to bring the gospel to China, Matteo Ricci was one of the early pioneers in addressing the issues of contextualizing Christianity with an indigenous culture. According to Terry Muck and Frances Adeney, “Ricci saw the inherent difficulties in attempting to replace Asian Confucian culture with Western Christian culture. He struck on what was then the novel idea of not attempting to replace Asian culture with Western culture. Instead, he thought why not begin the process of developing an Asian Christianity, one that would be compatible with Asian culture?” (2009:140).

Of the three religions that make up Chinese religious practice – Confucianism, Taoism<sup>3</sup> and Buddhism – although Ricci initially explored Buddhism, he eventually chose to associate Christianity with Confucianism. Nora Buckley writes, “he saw how many ideas, particularly in the Confucian *Analects*, were in substantial agreement with Christian teaching and could provide ground for serious dialogue” (1977:580). Ricci also realized that Confucianism was easier to integrate because it was a more rational and centered in ethics rather than spirituality. As such, there were fewer issues to address theologically.

Unfortunately, in the process, Ricci “summarily dismissed Buddhism and Daoism as superstitious” (Liu 2008:470). He did not choose to integrate Christianity with all three religions as the Chinese had done before, but created a dichotomy that elevated Confucianism at the expense of Buddhism and Daoism. Further, with calculated intentionality, Ricci also minimized the transcendental and spiritual aspects of Christianity in order to strengthen his argument for compatibility.

It is commonly understood that “Every Chinese person is a Confucian, a Taoist, and a Buddhist. He is a Confucian when everything is going well; he is a Taoist when things are falling apart; and he is a Buddhist as he approaches death” (Robert Allinson, quoted in Fowler and Fowler 2008: 93). In other words, Chinese culture has been imprinted by the influence of all three religions. To remove any element is to tear the entire fabric of being “Chinese.” Hence, despite good intentions, Ricci did not fully understand the symbiotic nature of Chinese religion and unwittingly laid the groundwork for dualism in Chinese Christianity that continues to negatively impact Chinese and other Confucian-based Asian churches today. As a consequence, many Christians in Confucian-based cultures tend to be legalistic and understand faith as a form of works-righteousness. Jan Konior writes

that Confucian Christians “resemble the Pharisees, stigmatized by Jesus in the Gospel” (Konior 2010: 98). For example, in the more heavily Confucian-influenced Korean context, Young-Gwan Kim, citing Bong-rang Park, writes,

... the role of Confucianism is rather negative for the Christian community in Korea... hierarchy, legalism and mannerism in Confucianism are the main reasons for the division of the Korean Churches. Park goes on to argue that Confucianism, as a backward-looking ideology, sterile textual studies, and a social order interested only in the past and not in the future, is neither relevant nor influential in the growth of Korean Christianity. He boldly claims therefore that any theological attempt at syncretism with Korean Confucianism should be rejected. (2002:85)

The reasons behind the pejorative nature of Confucianism on Chinese Christianity rest not in Confucianism itself; rather, this paper argues that Ricci and others, by identifying solely with the moral components of Confucianism, unwittingly failed to integrate the spiritual and personal aspects that Daoism and Buddhism had provided for Chinese religion. Fenggang Yang writes, “... this lack of religious dimension is a fatal deficiency of Confucianism... Confucianism did not negate the existence of the spiritual world. Daoist and Buddhist superstitions filled the empty space left by Confucianism...” (1995:152). Hence, in identifying Christianity with Confucianism without including the aspects of spirituality Daoism and Buddhism provided, Ricci and others essentially hobbled faith for Chinese believers by emphasizing the more external, ritualistic, and legalist aspects of Christianity.

In reality, what Ricci did was to stamp the image of Western dualism into the face of Chinese Christian. For as Robert Schreiter writes,

“universal” theologies were in fact *universalizing* theologies; that is to say, they extended the results of their own reflections beyond their own contexts to other settings, usually without an awareness of the rootedness of their theologies within their own contexts. Subsequently... Christian Tradition itself might be seen as a series of local theologies. (1997:2)

In trying to make Christianity compatible with Chinese culture, Ricci made Chinese Christianity a reflection of Western Christianity by emphasizing Confucianism alone.

As a consequence, many Chinese Christians practice their faith out of step with their indigenous cultural spirituality. Andrew Walls argues that “...



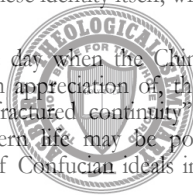
Christianity must always take seriously the preexisting culture, since Christianity of its nature does so; and the religious elements cannot be separated out from the rest of the cultural mix. Buddhist influences are always likely to shape the way that Christians from a Buddhist background embody Christianity” (Walls 2002: 17-18). The same can be said of Daoism.

The resulting loss can have devastating consequences for indigenous Christians. A. Mathias Mundadan writes of the Jesuits, that when indigenous religion is not acknowledged, it was “... tantamount to destroying the heart of their culture, because religion was the heart of their culture. And to destroy the heart of culture meant the cultural death of a people. All this was a consequence of the narrow Christian dogmatism of those days... The historical opportunity to create a Christianity culturally distinct from the Western form was lost” (as quoted in Shenk 2002: 32). As the Chinese church matured, many have come to recognize this deficiency. Consequently, many Chinese Christians call for a restoration of ancient Chinese culture prior to Confucius. They see that the pragmatic rationalism after Confucius blocked Chinese people from the transcendent or *Shangdi* (God), just like ancient Jews who sometimes betrayed Jehovah, God of their ancestors. Once we are reconnected with God as believed by our ancient ancestors, they say, we can expect the revival and revitalization of Chinese culture in the modern world (Yang 1995: 152).

In fact, some Chinese Christians actually believe that Christianity may be the means to preserve Confucianism in the modern world, for many Confucian scholars, such as Joseph Tamney and Linda Chiang, do not believe Confucianism on its own can survive in a global, modernizing society. They write, “A Confucianism pulled in different directions will be a weakened ideology. Accepting this state of affairs may be, for scholars, the hardest adjustment of all” (2002: 212). It is why many Chinese Christians believe that “Confucianism has to be complemented by Christianity in the modern world. These Chinese Christians believe that without believing in the living God many Confucian moral values would be devoid of meaning or impossible to practice” (Yang 1995: 153). Even Confucianism cannot stand on its own without its partners.

New Testament scholar K.K. Yeo would go even further to suggest Christianity may preserve Chinese identity itself, writing,

Might there be the day when the Chinese have no affinity for, not to mention appreciation of, the Confucianist ideals of virtue? That “fractured continuity” between Confucian tradition and modern life may be possible, but then the “museumization” of Confucian ideals in Chinese civilization



would make the culture no longer Chinese... The combined resources of Confucian ethics and Pauline theology provide the best way to view the hybridized identity of the Chinese Christian today. (2008:404)

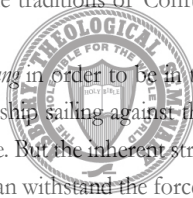
Hence, if Chinese Christians can re-integrate the religious aspects of Daoist spirituality with the already present Confucianist aspect, the faith of Chinese Christians will be more balanced and biblically holistic in nature. And in so doing, Christianity may well serve to preserve Chinese culture in an era of modernization and globalization (Yang 1995: 193).

### The *Yin-Yang* Dance of Confucianism and Daoism

This section explores further the essence of Chinese religious belief, specifically the dialectic relationship between Confucianism and Daoism. This paper will not discuss Buddhism because in the Chinese context, it is “but another sect of Taoism” (Fowler and Fowler 2008: 116). Jeaneane and Merv Fowler write, “Although Buddhism provided a spiritually impoverished people with an enormous potential for creative energy, paradoxically it also provided highly defined answers to questions that the Chinese had not raised: the problems for which Buddhism offered resolutions were not Chinese problems” (Fowler and Fowler 2008: 114). Consequently, Chinese scholars discarded many tenets of Indian Buddhism and pragmatically incorporated what they thought useful into Daoist beliefs. As Wilfred Corduan concludes, “Many Chinese people, if asked about their religion, will say that they are Buddhist, though what they mean by that term has relatively little to do with textbook descriptions of Buddhism” (1998: 296).

While Confucianism and Daoism share the same belief in *Dao*, the Way the world goes, and the complementary forces of *yin* and *yang* in Chinese religion, they approach it from differing perspectives. In fact, it has been said that Confucianism and Daoism are in themselves the *yang* and *yin* of Chinese religion respectively, enabling Chinese to find balance in *Dao*. This is perhaps why Ricci’s efforts have left a pejorative effect on Chinese Christians. In removing one pole, the Hegelian dialectic to find synthesis in Chinese religion left Confucianism with no partner. The religious understanding of Chinese Christians was consequently hampered as they inherited the traditions of Confucianism, but not the traditions of Daoism.

*Yin* must have its *yang* in order to be in the proper path of *Dao*. Robert Neville uses the analogy of a ship sailing against the wind. The force of the wind and water can easily snap a tree. But the inherent strength of the tree, made into the mast and planks of the ship, can withstand the force of the wind and water. In fact,



shaped and positioned properly, the tree can be used to work in tandem with the wind to move the ship through the water. Hence, the goal of Chinese religionists is to be subtle enough to spot the openings for spontaneous intervention, for changing directions by bringing the *Dao* of straight wood sliding through water to bear upon the *Dao* of the wind on the sails. The patterns of process give the *Dao* a kind of rhythm, a beat. If one knows the beat of the *Dao*, its repetitions of *yin-yang* harmony, one knows where the openings are to intervene. An adept of the *Dao* knows the subtle ways to adapt the *Dao* to his or her purposes (2008: 55).

Daoists and Confucianists seek the same goal, but Daoists focus on cooperating with the natural order while Confucianists look at the role and work of man within the natural order. Neville writes, “the Daoists look to the patterns and beat of nature, and the Confucians to the patterns and beat of institution and character building” (2008: 55). As such, Daoism and Confucianism complement each other in various aspects. Three of these contrasts, ecology and anthropology, action and inaction, and external and internal, are briefly discussed here as examples of the relationship.

The first difference between Daoism and Confucianism is that the former focuses on the ecological factors while the latter focuses on the anthropological factors. Daoists focus on the changes in nature and the subtle shifts in nature like changing breezes, the change of seasons, and the interplay between the elements such as water breaking down rocks. In contrast, Confucianists focus on human efforts to manipulate *Dao* through rituals. “No less than the Daoists, the Confucians look for openings in the *Dao*, but they are openings for criticism and practice of ritual behavior on which high civilization lies” (Neville 2008: 56 - 57).

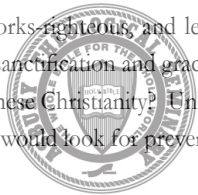
This leads to a second difference in which Daoists take a quietist approach to life whereas Confucianists take an active approach to life. In other words, Daoists seek to flow with the *Dao* while Confucianists seek to manipulate the *Dao*. Confucianists view one's actions as more critical in maintaining harmony in society and with the *Dao*. “Confucius believed in the right kind of actions and behavior between king and minister, the father and son, husband and wife, elder brother and younger brother, and between friend and friend— the so-called Five Relationships of Confucianism. Thus, Confucianism is associated with social stability and moral uprightness” (Fowler and Fowler 2008: 80). In contrast, Daoists strive for *wu-wei*, inaction. If one is in harmony with *Dao*, one need not do anything at all. Just as “when heavy snow covers the branches of trees, the branch that can bend, like the willow, does not break. Just so, the art of taking the natural and softest path through life, with the minimum of show, force, assertion or parading of oneself, is acting according to *wu-wei*” (Fowler and Fowler 2008:108).

Third, Confucianism emphasizes a rigid, external framework whereas Daoism emphasizes an internal flexibility. “Taken together, the two texts on ‘exterior’ and ‘interior practice,’ present a comprehensive description of the human path in Chinese religion...[For Confucianists, the key is to]... regulate human relationships and behavior, and the major salvific activity of the tradition consists in conscious and historical learning” (Kohn 2001: 33, 36). For Daoists, the key is harmonization with nature. As such, the key is purification such that the forces of *Dao* can flow freely through the individual such that “... the body has to be firm and quiet, and the senses have to be withdrawn completely. As the mind, too, is at rest and unified, the breath becomes so subtle it is hardly noticed anymore” (Kohn 2001: 34-35). The Fowlers thus conclude, “Returning to a *Tao*-oriented life ensures right action from inner naturalness, not from outward conformity” (2008: 93).

For Chinese, the goal is not to achieve one pole or another, not *yin* or *yang* and, consequently, not Confucianism or Daoism. The goal is to balance the interplay between not opposing, but complementary forces. In a Hegelian dialect, Confucianism and Daoism work to synthesize a map to guide Chinese along the path of *Dao*.

Rather than opposition between the two, there is polarity in unity, like two sides of one coin – harmonized unity of opposites... in the Chinese view of things, nothing can ever be wholly one polarity as opposed to its complementary opposite... Quite contrary to most western thought it is not the triumph of good over evil, of light over darkness, of the divine over the demonic that is the Chinese goal, but the perfect balance between yin and yang polarities that enables the self to transcend them in activity. Evil is but temporary disharmony just as night is the temporary suspension of day. (Fowler and Fowler 2008: 52)

With this understanding of the relationship between Confucianism with Daoism, it is easy to understand how Ricci unintentionally created a hobbled Christianity for the Chinese in choosing Confucianism over Daoism. From his dualistic, Western perspective, Ricci saw dichotomy, not dialectic. He thought he could decouple one from the other. Consequently, the identification of Christianity with Confucianism while castigating the contributions of Daoism has resulted for many Chinese Christians in a humanistic, works-righteous, and legalistic understanding of faith at the expense of spirituality, sanctification and grace. What can be done to restore wholeness and balance to Chinese Christianity? Unlike Ricci who would look for a rational solution, John Wesley would look for prevenient grace. And Wesley would find such grace.





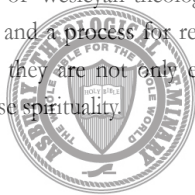
Fortuitously, the Chinese Bible has translated “the Word” in John 1:1 as *Dao*, providing a means for Chinese Christians to heal their myopic spirituality with a Christological lens. While caution must be taken to affirm the personality of Christ in contrast to the impersonal force of *Dao* and differentiate the nature of Christ as unique from Creation, if one can achieve this without syncretism, the re-interpretation of *Dao* as Christ provides a more holistic means of contextualizing Christianity for the Chinese. And the restored contextual understanding of Daoist spirituality would correct the material, humanistic image of Christianity that is viewed through a Confucianist lens. For many Chinese Christians, the restoration of the pre-Confucian image of Chinese religion through the face of the biblical “*Dao*” would restore wholeness to the Chinese Christian faith.

### **A Wesleyan Waltz for Chinese Christian Spirituality**

In this third section, this paper argues that by its nature, Wesleyan theology, compared with other Western theologies, is ideally suited for helping Chinese Christians re-vision their faith with their indigenous cultural spirituality. Neville writes,

Some parts of the Christian tradition, in accord with various forms of Western dualism, have stressed the justifying power of Christ in God’s action, whereas the process of sanctification or holy living is human action. Other forms of that tradition, however, for instance those following from John Wesley, have emphasized a mutual interpenetration of both divine grace and joint human responsibility, and that in continuity from the innermost parts of converting the heart to the most external of loving political actions. In one sense everything is simply the manifestation of divine creative and re-creative grace working from individual hearts to the perfection of society; in a completely compatible sense everything in that continuum is registered in terms of human response and action. (Neville 2008: 116)

Hence, in comparative religion, Wesley’s theology is in greater harmony with that of Chinese religion, but as well, in contextual theology, Wesleyan theology provides the means of grace by which Chinese can integrate their Christian faith with their Chinese culture. Four aspects of Wesleyan theology, prevenient grace, pragmatic approach, polar dialecticisms, and a process for renewal will be discussed. These aspects were chosen because they are not only essential elements of Wesleyan theology, but as well of Chinese spirituality.



*The Path of Prevenient Grace*

Wesley's foundational belief in prevenient grace provides both the door and the pathway for integrating Christianity with Chinese spirituality to restore a healthful balance for Chinese Christians. On the one hand, Wesley's understanding of prevenient grace allows for contextual integration of indigenous cultural values that complement Christianity. On the other hand, prevenient grace can be used to re-interpret the understanding of *Dao* itself.

As background, holistic contextualization is critical in preventing what missiologists term "split-level" Christianity. This occurs when indigenous Christians have a cognitive faith in Christ, but continue with their cultural practices that are in contradiction or in syncretistic relationship with Christianity. Confucian Christians may appear faithful by following rituals and carrying out good works, but may inwardly remain stagnant, not realizing the need for continued transformation and thus being unable to contextualize their faith in their environment. According to missiologist Paul Hiebert, split-level Christianity has "sapped the vitality of churches and limited Christianity to a segment of people's lives" (Hiebert, Shaw, and Tienou 1999: 15). As such,

When Christians from the West encounter people of other cultures, both Christians and non-Christians, contextual issues invariably surface. The central question asks how the holistic nature of the gospel can be relevant to particular cultural contexts without filtering it through Western or primal world views. To this end, contextualization attempts to tell the truth of the gospel by making it culturally relevant without having it become culturally relative. (Bradshaw 1993: 50)

Wesley's understanding of prevenient grace allows for a holistic contextualization of Christianity with indigenous Chinese culture. In fact, Wesley would have demanded it, having himself preached against split-level Christianity (Wesley, Sermon 1, "Salvation by Faith," *Works*: I. 4-5).

This is made possible because Wesleyan theology understands that God through prevenient grace is working through all cultures and as such indigenous culture holds a certain value and can be retained as long as it is consistent with scripture. Wesley, who was influenced by the Eastern Christian tradition, would see that there is "no absolute separation between general and Christian revelation," but would see "both as based on God's grace, with God's revelation in Christ establishing and completing divine revelation in creation." As a result, the grace of restoration takes place "in a continuum of progressively more definitive expressions, beginning with a basic knowledge that was universally available and

reaching definitive expression in Christ” (Maddox 1995: 28-29). Wesley himself concluded that, “... many of them, especially in the civilized nations, we have great reason to hope, although they lived among heathens, yet were quite of another spirit; being taught of God, by his inward voice, all the essentials of true religion” (Wesley, Sermon 106, “On Faith,” *Works*: I.4).

As such, Wesley would have seen the contextualization process as part of God’s enlightening revelation. He would understand that indigenous cultures, even indigenous religions, are part of the process of revelation. While they may not yet have the “light of revelation,” God’s prevenient grace is present and actively revealing itself until such time it finds its fullest expression in Christ. Additionally, the Wesleyan understanding of prevenient grace in itself serves not merely as the door for contextualization, but may very well serve as its pathway when contextualized in the concept of *Dao*. As *Dao* is the pathway for life, so too is God’s grace the pathway for living in relationship with God.

For Chinese Christians, understanding Christ as *Dao* holds special significance, strengthening one’s faith as well as Christology. For example, the complementary Daoist perspective helps Chinese Christians to recognize the sovereignty of Christ in the world. *Dao* is understood that “It contains all, performs all things, sustains all and permeates all, and nothing can be separate from it. It is the ‘is-ness’ of all things, all forces and all subtleties, the rhythms of existence, the patterns of nature, the order of the cosmos” (Fowler and Fowler 2008: 102). Such an understanding is very similar to the description of Christ in Colossians 1:15 – 18:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.<sup>16</sup> For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.<sup>17</sup> He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.<sup>18</sup> And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.” (NIV)

Again, it must be cautioned that the Personhood of Christ must be emphasized in contrast to the impersonal nature of *Dao*. But once clarified, *Dao* re-defined through a Christologic lens provides a powerful contextual means of grace for Chinese Christians.

Concomitantly, Wesleyan theology in emphasizing the overarching nature of prevenient grace in “Christ as the pardoning Initiative of God in salvation” (Maddox 1994: 118) is further strengthened in the Chinese context. *Dao* is understood as “the true nature of something, which is activated exteriorly”

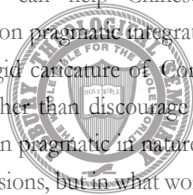


(Fowler and Fowler 2008: 106). *Dao* “makes possible the flight of self to unlimited freedom in the natural spontaneity of life lived within the reality that is *Tao*” (Fowler and Fowler 2008: 98). For Chinese, one strives to be aligned and within the *Dao* in order to experience the fullness and harmony of life. The Wesleyan understanding of prevenient grace well reflects this understanding of *Dao*. Unlike other Western theologians who understood grace as static and predominantly as pardon or unmerited forgiveness, following Eastern traditions, Wesley understood grace as dynamic and with the power to heal. Additionally, according to Randy Maddox, “Wesley’s conception of grace, like that of sin, is fundamentally relational in nature” (1994: 86)... “Prevenient Grace is not a new endowment given into human possession, it is an accompanying effect of God’s initial move towards mercifully-restored Presence in our lives” (Maddox 1994: 90). Hence, as *Dao* is the force that enables humans to live life to the fullest, the Wesleyan understanding of prevenient grace through the biblical *Dao* expands and brings balance to the spiritual understanding of Chinese beyond the static, humanistic nature of Confucian Christianity.

In summary, Wesley’s emphasis of prevenient grace is instrumental in allowing for the inclusion indigenous cultural beliefs because it understands these beliefs to be the means of grace for God’s revelation. Although Wesley would diligently cautious against syncretism, Wesley most likely would seek to find God’s prevenient grace in Chinese religion, understanding it to be part of the continuum of progressive revelation of God. But in the Chinese context, there is an added means of grace. In identifying prevenient grace in *Dao* further strengthens the understanding of Chinese Christians in God’s overarching omnipresent and omnipotent presence. Such an understanding may serve to help Chinese Christians understand that Christianity is not a “foreign religion” for God’s prevenient grace has been working through the *Dao* all along. Further, it helps Chinese accept that their “Chinese-ness” is part of God’s overarching plan of creation and salvation and that it does not need to be discarded when one becomes a Christian. It is merely part of a progressive revelation of identity.

### *Pragmatic Integration*

Wesleyan theology can help Chinese Christians avoid split-level Christianity with its emphasis on pragmatic integration. It can serve as a corrective to the more ritualized and rigid caricature of Confucian-formulated Christianity, which tends to encourage rather than discourage split-level Christianity. Chinese religious belief has always been pragmatic in nature (Fowler and Fowler 2008: 22). It rests not in creeds or confessions, but in what works. Religion must be something



that is “involved in the everyday life of the people, their ups and downs, their need to make sense of their environment, and their need to be assured that there was something they could *do* in order to make sense of life” (Fowler and Fowler 2008: 25). Consequently, Chinese religion relies heavily on divination and on the procuring of luck to enable success in life.

It is also the reason why Chinese religion is not distinct in nature, but an amalgamation of Chinese folk religion, Daoism, and Buddhism that is framed by Confucianism. Chinese “pick and choose” what is relevant and useful and stitch these beliefs together. Hence, one finds that Chinese popular religion is not a systematic, structured, and developed theology, but a “chop-suey” (a soup made up of left-overs) of beliefs and practices. It is how Chinese can be Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian all at the same time. None are true to form, but each are mongrels of interpenetrating beliefs and ideas.

The Wesleyan understanding of religion provides a suitable companion for Chinese spirituality. It too emphasizes the practical and the pragmatic - and as the next subsection discusses, is able to integrate polarized ideas into a single system. According to Sarah Lancaster, Wesley is “valued as a ‘practical theologian,’ that is, a theologian whose disciplined reflection addresses how faith is expressed in Christian life and worship... [Additionally,] Wesley’s theology is not only characterized by its practical nature, but also by the kind of synthesis it attempts” (2010: 303). It is why E.P. Thompson writes of Wesley’s impact on the miners and seafarers of Cornwall, “Wesleyan superstition matched the indigenous superstitions of tanners and fisherman who, for occupational reasons, were dependent upon chance and luck in their lives. The match was so perfect that it consolidated one of the strongest of Methodist congregations” (quoted in Hempton 2005:26).

Wesley would most likely have the same impact in the Chinese context. Wesley did not stick to one particular tradition, but drew on various traditions to formulate “what works.” As discussed earlier, Wesley’s understanding of prevenient grace provides the doorway and the path for integration of various traditions, including those from indigenous Chinese religion, as long as they were in line with scripture. As well, Wesley’s emphasis of daily practice through prayer, scripture, community life in the classes, bands, and societies, and through the means of grace (Wesley, Sermon 16 “The Means of Grace,” *Works*) provide an alternative religious life grounded in the daily experience of Chinese Christians, though as will be discussed not in a ritual manner, but from a more holistic perspective.



*A Play of Polarities and Parties*

In the same manner that Wesleyan theology's pragmatism is in line with that of Chinese religion, Wesley's ability to hold in tension two opposing views is well suited to the Chinese amalgamation of complementary forces and ideas. Wesleyan theology provides a Christian model for contextualizing a Chinese worldview. The Chinese world view seeks harmony, even with opposing forces. "The Chinese goal is harmony of the self with nature, and of Heaven with oneself. This is true whether from a Taoist, Confucian or Buddhist perspective" (Fowler and Fowler 2008: 36). The Chinese world view recognizes that all parties have their proper place. Additionally, there is an understanding that each party is interconnected with others and defined by others. For example, consider the critical forces of *yin* and *yang*. They appear to be opposing forces. But as discussed previously, they are not dichotomous nor in competition. Rather, they work together to balance and even define the other. The Fowlers write,

*Yin and yang are complementary essences or forces. Just as we cannot understand darkness without light or vice versa, and just as we need the variances of dark, light and shadow to see well, so yin and yang cannot exist without each other. So in being mutually dependent, yin and yang, like all opposites in Chinese thought, are complementary rather than oppositional. Further, yin and yang are alternating, even "pulsating" creative forces representing the interplay between physical and spiritual, emotion and intellect, passivity and activity, the yielding and the firm, resistance and generation. (2008:52)*

Wesleyan theology in many respects shares the same perspective and is dialectic in nature. Hempton writes, "Those with even a passing familiarity with Methodism as a religious movement know that it appeared to thrive on the energy unleashed by dialectical friction" (Hempton 2005: 7). Howard Snyder shares a similar understanding of Wesley's ability to embrace two seemingly opposite positions, noting, "Wesley represents an intriguing synthesis of old and new, conservative and radical, tradition and innovation..." (Snyder 1980: 3). Indeed, Wesley had the "ability to find a way to focus attention on Christian faith that not only brings clarity but also accounts for a range of concerns that have traditionally been set in opposition to one another" (Lancaster 2010: 304).

One example that Wesleyan theology aids Chinese Christians is in the understanding of evil. As discussed earlier, the Daoist understanding of evil is that it is a result of disharmony and defined by relationship. For Confucian-influenced Christians with a dualistic Western theology, this presents problems because such a world view is seen as a battle of two opposing forces with the eventual destruction

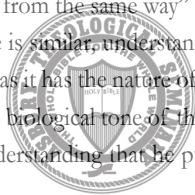
of one opponent. Opposing forces are not as seen as part of a whole. But Wesleyan theology, being more relational, offers an alternate view that is more in harmony with the Chinese world view. For Wesley, evil is not seen as an equal opponent, but still within the realm of God's sovereignty, under His authority and will. Chinese Christians would agree with Wesley when he says,

And it should be particularly observed the 'where sin abounded, grace does much more abound.' For 'not as the condemnation' so is the free gift'; but we may gain infinitely more than we have lost. We may now attain both higher degrees of holiness and higher degrees of glory than it would have been possible for us to attain if Adam had not sinned. For if Adam had not sinned, the Son of God had not died. Consequently that amazing instance of the love of God to man had never existed which has in all ages excited the highest joy, and love and gratitude from his children. We might have loved God the Creator, God the Preserver, God the Governor. But there would have been no place for love to God the Redeemer: this could have had no being. (Wesley, Sermon 57 "On the Fall of Man," *Works*)

For Wesley, evil is but a part of God's plan of salvation and defined relationally. Hence, more than integrating polarities, both Wesley and the Chinese worldview share a systemic understanding that all parties are interconnected and influence each other. Consider as well the example of the relationship between spiritual and physical health. Unlike theologies derived from Western dualism, both Wesley and the Chinese see them as part of the same system. When one aspect is sick, the entire being is sick. As such, it is important to maintain a healthful balance so that body and spirit are healthy.

Chinese place great emphasis in maintaining good health. Herbal remedies are available for any and every ailment. *Tai-chi* is practiced by millions every morning. And holistic treatments such as acupuncture serve to keep the forces in the body in proper balance so the spirit is unencumbered. Writes the Fowlers, "Stuart Olson makes the pertinent point that in the West we treat our bodies like a car, not bothering with it too much until it breaks down, and then we see a mechanic. We wait until we get ill before we help our bodies. The Chinese, he says, treat the body more like a garden, weeding it, nourishing it, caring for it, and strengthening it against illness from the same way" (2008: 260).

Wesley's perspective is similar, understanding that death has "debilitated and corrupted Adam's nature, as it has the nature of every person since, accounting for our sinful inclinations. The biological tone of this account is obvious" (Maddox 1994: 77). It was with this understanding that he published his *Primitive Physick*. In



the preface, Wesley as well “argued that the most effective prevention of the bodily disorders caused by distorted passions is the nurturing of a responsive love for God, for this keeps the passions in balance” (Maddox 1994: 147). For the Chinese Christians, this would be but a confirmation of their indigenous cultural world view.

In summary, Wesley’s systemic approach and his ability to integrate opposites are much more consistent with the Chinese worldview. Wesleyan theology provides Chinese Christians with a framework for holistic living that their indigenous cultural heritage necessitates, mitigating the dangers of dualism and split-level Christianity.

### *A Process for Renewal*

Unlike the more juridical Christian theologies and the conservative nature of Confucianism, both Daoist spirituality and Wesleyan theology share an emphasis in movement and progression. Both understand that life is not merely to maintain the *status quo*, but life is an ongoing process of growth and perfecting. Hence, a Wesleyan theology would enable Chinese Christians to move beyond their Confucian-dominated perspective to embrace a more fluid and flexible approach toward harmony in a changing global society. Unlike the more static understanding of Confucianism, Daoism understands that *Dao* intrinsically “represents the processes of change and transformation in all things,” and as well “as an entity of continuity” (Fowler and Fowler 2008: 107). “Taoism has always been a fluid phenomenon, evolving, diversifying, returning to past ideas, developing new ones and absorbing from its changing environments” (Fowler and Fowler 2008: 92).

Within *Dao*, human beings are to participate in its ebbs and flows. The human being is not estranged from nature or from a reality that is so ultimate that he or she is worthlessly lost. Reality is experienced in the patterns and harmonies of nature and life. Derek Bodde believed that it is ethics and not religion that inform the spiritual life of the Chinese... Fulfilling the best in one’s own nature and accepting the unique difference of oneself from another is what it means to be a relevant part of an interconnected and harmonized whole. (Fowler and Fowler 2008:35)

But unlike Confucianism, which relied on a hierarchical social structure and ritualized actions to define one’s place in the *Dao*, Daoists understood that right actions are to be natural. The Fowlers write, “The externalized values of conventional living by Confucian virtue and ethics are portrayed as degeneration from the experience of *Tao*... Returning to a *Tao*-oriented life ensures right action from inner naturalness, not from outward conformity. And the more Confucians



stressed the need for moral action, the more evidence that would be of its decline! (2008: 96).

In similar fashion, this was exactly what Wesley was trying to correct in the Anglican church. Wesley argued against a static, ritual-based, humanistic understanding of faith, but one of progressive sanctification in “justice, mercy, and truth” in full dependence on God. He preached,

We are inwardly renewed by the power of God. We feel the ‘love of God shed abroad in our heart by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us’,...We are enabled ‘by the Spirit’ to ‘mortify the deeds of the body’, of our evil nature. And as we are more and more dead to sin, we are more and more alive to God. We go on from grace to grace, while we are careful to ‘abstain from all appearance of evil’, and are ‘zealous of good works’, as we have opportunity, doing good to all men’ (Wesley, Sermon 43 “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” *Works*: I.4, 8)

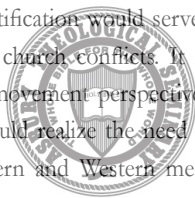
Thus, Maddox concludes,

Not only did Wesley view growth in the Christian life as a continual possibility, it was his normative expectation. On analogy with natural life, he diagnosed stalled spiritual growth as a sign of potentially fatal disease. His pastoral letters frequently admonish correspondents that they cannot stand still in their Christian walk, they must either press forward or they will regress. As this point reminds us, while Wesley understood growth in holiness to be gradual, it was not automatic – we must nurture a continuing responsiveness to God’s progressive empowering grace. (1994: 153)

As one compares the Daoist understanding with Wesley, one finds harmony.

Hence, in a Wesleyan theology, Chinese Christians would find a corrective to the Confucian influence by recognizing the connectedness of the inward with the outward and the need to transform the inward nature to transform the outward character. The Christian life would not be defined as juridical justification and its maintenance through external ritual and good works, but defined as a continuous transformation of the inner self that must be manifested in outward actions.

The revelation of the connection of the inward and outward self and the need for continuous sanctification would serve to help with the introductory examples of upbringing and church conflicts. It restores Chinese spirituality to a more holistic, progressive movement perspective. In the case of child rearing, Chinese Christian parents would realize the need for inner cultivation as well as outward development. Eastern and Western methods of parenting are not in



competition. Rather, they are complementary, emphasizing different aspects. Through Wesleyan theology, Chinese Christian parents would realize that the Lamb of God and the Tiger need to work together.

In the case of church conflicts among Chinese leaders, the primary challenge has been an unwillingness to repent and reconcile due to the cultural social issues of “face.” But in Wesleyan theology, Chinese Christians would be reminded that “heart”-work, not “face”-work, would be seen as primary and normative. Maddox writes,

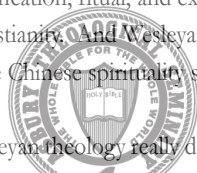
In Wesley’s terms this second aspect [of repentance, i.e., the broader biblical and liturgical sense of an entire change of heart and life] was essentially equivalent with the progressive transformation of life through the Christian journey. As he became increasingly aware, many in the Reformed tradition preferred to confine repentance (in its most proper sense) to the inception of the Christian life (1994:156)...[but] given Wesley his fundamental convictions, Wesley’s progressive acknowledgment of sin remaining in believer’s lives and cleaving to their actions after the New birth inclined him to place increasing emphasis on the proper, indeed, *essential*, place for repentance within the Christian life... repentance within the Christian life revitalizes our continuing *responsible* growth in holiness. (1994: 163)

As Wesley renewed the Anglican church, he may very well also help restore the balance of Chinese Christians by tuning into the spirituality of the lost Daoist dance partner, thereby correcting the humanist and work-hobbling of Confucianism with a more holistic and progressive instep.

### **Reel<sup>4</sup> Dancing in the Chinese and Global Contexts**

Through each of the previous sections, the literary dance has introduced you, the reader, to various parties in the missiological waltz of Christianity with Chinese culture. The paper has presented the understanding that Chinese spirituality is a dance of *yin* and *yang* following the steps of *Dao*. It has also argued that in identifying Christianity with Confucianism at the expense of Daoism, Chinese Christian spirituality was hobbled such that the Christian life centered on a static understanding of justification, ritual, and external works-righteousness that has resulted in split-level Christianity. And Wesleyan theology has been introduced as a means of grace to restore Chinese spirituality so that it may dance in balanced fashion.

But what does Wesleyan theology really do for Chinese Christianity? This section argues that Wesleyan theology is a mediating means of grace for the renewal



of the Chinese church and the means of grace in preserving one's particular identity in today's globalizing multicultural world community and consequently, reducing conflict. Finally, this section concludes, arguing that if Wesleyan theology can do this in the Chinese context, then Wesleyan theology may be equally useful in the wider global context.

*The Chinese dance ...*

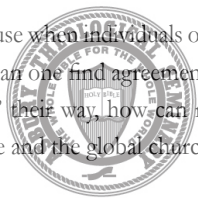
First, Wesleyan theology serves not only to restore a balanced and holistic perspective to Chinese Christian spirituality; it can also serve as a means of grace for renewal. Snyder argues in his model of renewal that two dialectic elements, the institutional and the charismatic, must be present. He writes renewal "... combines insights from the institutional and charismatic views. This would point toward a mediating model of the church which seeks not merely to steer the middle course between the two views but to incorporate the truth of both" (1980: 136). As argued earlier, the Chinese church was built primarily on the Confucian viewpoint, which is primarily the institutional viewpoint; but without the charismatic viewpoint that was inherent in Chinese culture through Daoism, so there were limited means by which renewal could occur. Hence, in the restoration of the charismatic viewpoint through Wesleyan theology, a means of grace for renewal could now be re-introduced to the Chinese church.

Second, as a result of this renewal, Wesleyan theology provides the means of grace in the formation of a balanced and holistic understanding of self-identity for Chinese Christians in a multicultural environment. Wesleyan theology, due to its holistic and practical nature, is more aligned with indigenous Chinese spirituality and may well serve to mitigate the influence of Western dualism and the potential for split-level Christianity. As such, Wesleyan theology serves as a well-suited pathway for the contextual integration of Christianity and indigenous culture.

*... moving into the Global Ballroom*

But if this is true of the Chinese church, then might this also not be true in a wider context? This paper closes by arguing that the challenge the Chinese church faces today is a challenge the global Church faces – how to bring unity in diversity.

Conflicts arise because when individuals of two different cultures, even if both are Chinese, clash, how can one find agreement if both feel their way is right? If both seek to "universalize" their way, how can resolution be achieved? This is the challenge both the Chinese and the global church face. William Shenk writes,



This conflict over conversion and identity centers on the relationship between the universal (that which is not conditioned by any culture) and the particular (that which is unique to a culture or religion). How does the gospel relate to each and every local religious and cultural manifestation without compromising the gospel's supracultural character? (2009:119)

Theologian Kevin Vanhoozer concurs, pointing to globalization's centrifugal and centripetal forces that place the world Christian community in constant tension (2006: 99). Indeed, Andrew Walls writes, "Church history has always been a battleground for [these] two opposing tendencies" (Walls 1996: 7).

As such, though Christianity may be found in every nation, because of the tensions of "unity in diversity," the ministry of reconciliation will always remain a critical aspect in the identity formation of the world Christian community. For with every age, Walls writes,

... God accepts us as we are... He does not take us as isolated, self-governing units, because we are not. We are conditioned by a particular time and place, by our family and group and society, by "culture" in fact... But if He takes us with our group relations, then surely it follows that He takes us with our "dis-relations" also; those predispositions, prejudices, suspicions, and hostilities, whether justified or not, which mark the group to which we belong. (1996: 7)

But as well, Walls continues, the Christian

... has also an entirely new set of relationships, with other members of the family of faith into which he has come, and whom he must accept, with all their group relations (and "dis-relations") on them, just as God has accepted him with his. Every Christian has dual nationality, and has loyalty to the faith family which links him to those in interest groups opposed to that which he belongs by nature. (1996: 9)

Wesleyan theology, with its pragmatic and holistic nature, offers a means of grace for bringing unity in diversity. Lancaster writes, "In the twentieth century, a new appreciation for Wesley's work in theology began to emerge. One reason for this renewed interest was the growing concern about the unity of the Church that had sparked the ecumenical movement" (Lancaster 2010: 302-303). Indeed, Timothy Tennent agrees, writing



With the dramatic rise of Christians from the Majority World church, many of whom do not trace their history to the Reformation, there is a need to discover a deeper ecumenism that can unite all true Christians. Wesley anticipated the future multicultural diversity of the church and the common experience of rebirth from above that unites all Christians of every age. (Tennent 2009: 110)

Unlike some other theological systems, a Wesleyan approach provides a means of grace by which to integrate the dialectic of the global and the local. By helping indigenous Christians accept their identity as both Christian and indigenous, conflict may be mitigated. In the Chinese context, Yang writes,

Chinese identity has been a *cultural* unity. Therefore, Chinese converts to Christianity could claim their Chinese identity by preserving their nonreligious Chinese cultural heritage, rejecting traditionally religious elements of the culture, and sometimes reinterpreting the meaning of certain cultural traditions. For these Chinese, Christian conversion becomes an integral part of the general identity reconstruction of Chinese-ness.” (1995: 199)

In the Japanese context, Uchimura Kanzo agrees, writing, “A Japanese by becoming a Christian does not cease to be Japanese. On the contrary, he becomes more Japanese by becoming a Christian” (Shenk 2009: 120). If so, then in today’s globalized, multicultural world, perhaps to be truly local, is to be Christian. And to be Christian is to retain portions of locality. Wesley would most likely understand this interpenetrating transformation to be a progressive outworking of God’s prevenient grace from the inner person outward through the local and into the world.

In conclusion, Wesleyan theology may be the most appropriate approach both to integrate Christianity with indigenous cultures, but as well to help Christians in different cultures develop their particular identities and roles in the broader global world. As such, Wesleyan theology, understanding that God’s prevenient grace that is working toward the restoration of all Creation, would truly be the means of grace for global Christianity.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Reported by Joshua Ting, General Secretary for the Chinese Coordination Council on World Evangelism, Singapore Bible College Faculty briefing, March 8, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> *Renqing* is true of many other Asian cultures, for example Korea; but for the purposes of this paper, we will focus on the Chinese context.

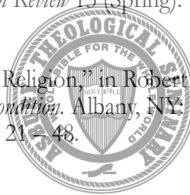


<sup>3</sup> *Tao* and *Dao* have the same meaning, but have different spellings due to two different Romanization systems (the older Wade-Giles (British) and newer PinYin (mainland Chinese)). They are used interchangeably throughout the paper though the preference will be *Dao*.

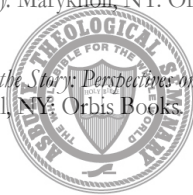
<sup>4</sup> An Irish dance that involves more than two partners.

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