

# **Theological Contributions of Sino-theology to The Global Christian**

## **Community (Part 1)**

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### **I. Introduction**

Historically speaking, China has contributed culturally to the global community by the introduction of the compass, gun powder, tea (from Swato "der"), porcelain (or "china"), silk, etc. Similarly, Sino-theology can also contribute theologically to the global community. The purpose of this article is to show that Chinese Christians by their efforts in formulating a Sino-theology (hereafter abbreviated as ST) can contribute theologically to the "global Christian community" (i.e. Christians worldwide).

As the focus of this article, "theological contribution" is defined as "giving in-put towards a positive result in the area of theology, including theoretical formulation and practical application." For the sake of brevity, only three areas are being covered: Part 1 - methodological (ways of studying or formulating), perspectival (ways of seeing or viewpoint), and Part 2 - practical (pertaining to actual application or action or usefulness).

### **II. Methodological Contributions**

Theologizing is a systematic study of God, and matters pertaining to God and its methodology is inevitably tied to the cognitive pattern and process of a people group. Due to the fact that theology has been well developed in the West, many Christians (including non-western Christians) tend to not only highly esteem the theological tradition of the West, but regard the Western methodology of theological formulation as the only and proper way of theologizing. As previously stated, competition, independence, individualism, dichotomy, dialectics, either-or, instrumentality, etc. are characteristics of the cognitive pattern and process of Western cultures. In contra-distinction, the concepts of co-operation, inter-dependence, group solidarity (e.g. family and clan), holistic, both-and, relational, etc. are very Chinese (Wan 1998:31-74). Therefore, Chinese Christians have to critically review the methodology of "traditional Western theology" (hereafter abbreviated as TWT) and creatively search for an alternative methodology that is appropriate to the Chinese cognitive pattern and process.

As analyzed previously, TWT has been heavily affected by the Aristotelian logic and troubled by the "either-or" paradox as shown in many cases of heresy and controversy in church history. A critique was offered previously on the "either-or" pattern of TWT, and the matter of practical contextualization for the Chinese was also presented. (cf. Nov 1999 issue of CATW)

The Sino-theological understanding of God and man in Table 1 is illustrative of the theological contribution of Chinese Christians to the global Christian community in terms of the methodology of "relational theologizing" and the "both-and" paradigm. "Tai-je 太極" is a Chinese ontology of the dynamic interplay between the two opposite elements ("ying 陰" and "yang 陽") where there is both "ying" in "yang" and vice versa. Equipped by this perspective, one can revisit the doctrine of the Trinity and discover that there is both unity and diversity in the Triune God with the dynamic interaction within the Trinity (i.e. "relational theologizing") shown in Table 2 and table 3 below.

**Table 1: God & man in Sino-theology (wan 1999: 218, tran. from Chinese)**

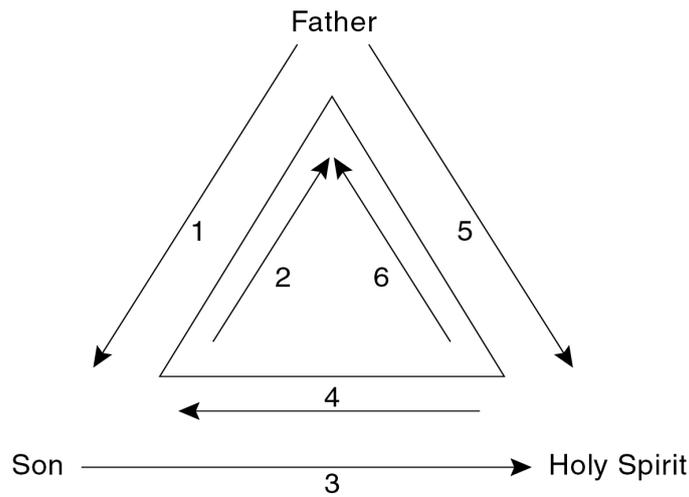
God /man	Item	Unity	Diversity	
<b>T R I U N I T Y</b>	Trinity	One God: Uniqueness & Transcendence	Three Persons: Difference & fullness	
	Essence & existence	Unity in essence	3 in existence, contrast without conflict	
	Will & operation	Unity in will	3 in operation, cooperation without competition	
	Sufficiency & dependence	Perfect union, Unity in self-sufficiency	Perfect fellowship, Interdependence	
	Authority & power	Unity in authority & power	Separate dominion without domination	
<b>M A N</b>	M I C R O	Origin	Both created by God & in His image	Difference between male and female; Different in order but not in equality
		Internal	Whole & integrated	3 modes: intelligence, affection & volition
		Essence	Holistic & healthy	3 dimensions: spirit, soul & body
		Operation	One & at equilibrium	3 manifestations: thought, feeling & action
	M A C R O	Origin	From one source: image of God	Created many nations (Acts 17:26)
		Tongue	From Adam → many nations	Tower of Babel: many tongues (Gen 12)
		Salvation	Jesus: The 2 <sup>nd</sup> Adam & 1st fruit (Rom 5:12-21; Rev 7:9-12)	Jews & Christian in Christ made into one with no enmity & dividing wall ( Eph 2)
		Covenant/ grace	Of Abraham & David (Gen 12; 2Chron 1) Messianic covenant (Heb 8:6)	From nations & tribes sharing inheritance  Recipients of God's manifold blessings
		God - The Father	-The sovereign King (Ps 5:2) -the fatherhood of God (Mt 6:9,26,32)	-Citizens of the heavenly kingdom, revere Him piously & serve Him faithfully (1Pet 2:9) -the brotherhood of Christians (Heb 2:11)
		God - The Son	-the better high priest (Heb 7) -the Groom (Eph 5:22-33)	-the priesthood of believers (1Pet 2:5) -the bride of Christ (Rev 21:9)
		God - the H.S.	-the temple of the Spirit (1Cor 3:16) -born/baptized of the Spirit (Jn 3:5)	-indwelled by the H.S. personally & corporately (1 Cor 3 & 6) -endowed by the Holy Spirit (1Cor 12)

		The Church	-The "household of God" (1 Tim 3:15) -With Christ as the head (Eph 1)	-Christians are members of "the family of God" (1Pet 4:17) -the Church as body with many parts (Eph 4)
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**Table 2 – THE INTIMATE INTERACTION BETWEEN THE FATHER, THE SON, & THE HOLY SPIRIT**

**NOTE:**

- 1, 3, 5 sending
- 2, 4, 6 submitting



(Wan 1996a:3)

**Table 3 - Internal inter-action within the Triune God**

GOD	THE FATHER	THE SON	HOLY SPIRIT
THE FATHER		Obeys the Father's will (perfect obedience) Mtt. 26:42, Jo, 4:34 Intercedes to the Father on behalf of believers Heb. 4:13-16; Mediates the Father's blessings Jo. 16:23 Mutual counsel Gen. 1:26	The Father's agent of creation Gen 1:2; Job 33:4; 34:14,15. Agent of Revelation Gen 41:38; Num. 24:2 Is the agent of God's wisdom, power and knowledge Isa. 11:2; 42:1; 61:1. Proceeds from the Father Jo. 15:26. Mutual counsel Gen. 1:26
THE SON	Sends the Son Jo. 5:24; 8:18,41; 11:42; 17:3,8,18, etc. Gives him Power Mtt. 9:6; 28:18; Lk. 6:19; Jo. 10:18; 2Cor. 12:9; Col. 1:11, Mutual love Mtt. 3:17 Jo 10:17 Mutual Glorification Jo. 17:1 Mutual counsel Gen. 1:26		Came upon Mary and Jesus was conceived (agent of virginal conception) Mtt. 1:18,20; Lk. 1:15,35 Filled the Son from his birth Mtt. 1:18,20; Lk. 1:15,35; and in baptismal and after baptism (authenticates Jesus' Messianship) Mtt. 3:16; 4:1, etc.

			Empowered Jess to serve Lk. 4:14 Mutual counsel Gen 1:26
HOLY SPIRIT	In OT, Holy Spirit sent to authenticate the anointing of the king 1Sam 16:13-14. The Father sends the Holy Spirit as a helper to Christ's disciples Jo. 15:26; to all believers in conversion Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2:17-21; Jo. 16:10	The Son sends the Holy Spirit Jo. 15:26; 16:7 Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit (agent of regeneration) Mtt. 3:11 Mutual counsel Gen. 126	

Conceptually, relational theologizing is not new in TWT for there has been the school of "covenant theology" for centuries (i.e. the systematic study of God, His attributes and actions in terms of a covenant, e.g. Abrahamic covenant, Davidic covenant, old covenant and new covenant, etc.). Doctrinally the "both-and" paradigm is neither new nor strange for it is clearly taught in the Scriptures as explained in the last article, "Practical Contextualization: A Case Study of Evangelizing Contemporary Chinese" (cf. March 2000 issue of CATW).

However, the method of theologizing (i.e. relational, both-and, etc.) exemplified in Table 1 is different from that of TWT (i.e. rational or instrumental, either-or, etc.). It is both scripturally sound and culturally relevant for the Chinese and it is one of the theological contributions that Sino-theology offers to the global Christian community.

At this point, it is appropriate to digress by differentiating two key concepts in any effort of contextualization. A person who is of the evangelical persuasion attempting to contextualize should **give priority to being "scripturally sound," not to being "biblically based" or "culturally relevant."** Being "scriptural" is a commitment to abide by that which is required and prescribed by the whole counsel of God in the Bible and being "scripturally sound" is to be of principal, prescriptive and trans-cultural (without being bound by time, place and situation) in contextualization (Wan 1994, 1996c). This is in contra-distinction to being "biblical" (precedent, descriptive and culture-specific) or merely "biblically based" or "context-specific" (i.e. recorded and reported in the Bible; of value only in terms of being a precedent, descriptive and situational to a specific time, place, circumstance and cultural context). For instance, the term "Trinity" is not biblical but the doctrine of the Trinity is scriptural. However, lying is "biblical" (in that it is characteristic of Satan and being practiced by many people as reported and recorded in the Bible); but it is not "scriptural" for it is forbidden by God. In this regard, **the method of "relational theologizing" and the use of the "both-and" approach are both "scripturally sound" and culturally relevant to the Chinese in formulating Sino-theology.**

In addition, mention must be made that due to the strong emphasis on "guang-xi 關係"

(relationship) in Chinese culture, a method of "relational theologizing" is proposed for Sino-theology. The discussion in previous articles on "fu-hu-shen-xue-lun 復和神學論" ("theology of reconciliation"), "yong-ru-shen-xue-lun 榮辱神學論" and "jia-ting-shenxue-lun 家庭神學論" ("theology of honor and shame," and "theology of the family"), are fruitful results of this relational approach. Relational theologizing is a methodology derived from a close analysis of the interaction of the Three Persons within the Trinity as illustrated in Tables 2 and 3. This methodology of relational theologizing is very adaptable to the agricultural and rural context, and is appreciated by people of non-industrial societies with a pre-modernist worldview and a strong emphasis on relationships. Though brief in this discussion, it nonetheless illustrates the theological contribution methodologically to the global Christian community as a viable alternative to that of TWT.

### III. Perspectival Contributions

In recent years, contemporary theologians recognized the importance of "perspective" in theologizing, e.g. Poythress' (1987) symphonic theology, the integrative theology of Lewis & Demorest (1987), etc. In this regard, theologies from the two-thirds world can enrich the theological understanding of the global Christian community with new insights and fresh perspectives into issues that are not addressed by TWT, e.g. liberation theology from South America (Gutierrez 1973), theology of the pain of God from Japan (Kitamori 1965), Ming-jung theology of Korea (Y.B. Kim 1981), "third-eye theology" of Taiwan (Song 1991), grassroot theology of the Philippines (Abesamis 1978), etc. However, from an evangelical stance, many of these "theologies" are culturally relevant within their respective socio-cultural contexts but not scripturally sound (i.e. principled, prescriptive, trans-cultural). On the other hand, **Sino-theology as presented in this study on "perspectival contributions" in terms of "the theology of the family," "the theology of honor and shame," "the theology of reconciliation," etc. are both scripturally sound and culturally relevant.**

Using "the theology of family" as an example, Sino-theology can enrich the global Christian community's theological understanding with new insights and fresh perspectives into issues not addressed by TWT. There are "five perspectival dimensions" and "four operational principles" in "the theology of family" (Wan 1999:165-176). Due to the limitation of space, the "four operational principles" will not be discussed here. Instead, the "five perspectival dimensions" of "the theology of family" will be briefly explained.

The first perspectival dimension is the "Fatherhood of God" in terms of the "Trinity" (close to

"theology proper" in TWT). It serves to correct the imperial and dynastic concepts of "t'ien-je 天子" (son of heaven) and "t'ien-ming 天命" (mandate of heaven)" in traditional China as the Chinese Emperor called himself the "son of heaven" and claimed to have received the "Mandate of Heaven." Yet with a tyrannical rule, it is not surprising that he would enslave his people and abuse his power. When tyrannical rule was common and imperial abuse of power happened too often, the phenomenon of the "dynastic cycle" was the result. On the contrary, the Bible teaches us "the fatherhood of God" in two ways: He is "the Father of all things" as the source of both life and general grace (Jas 1:17); He is "the Father of Christians" by salvation (Ro 8:15; 1 Ti 1:1), adoption (Gal 4: 6-7), and by His sovereign rule and reign (Ro 8: 14-15; Gal 1:3-5). In addition, the "Fatherhood of God" also provides the theological foundation of Christian stewardship globally, i.e. accountability to "the Heavenly Father" in terms of ecology, bio-ethics, etc. Bearing in mind that "this is my father's world," neither environmental abuse nor irresponsible genetic engineering can be condoned.

The Christian duty of faithful stewardship of eco-environmental accountability towards "the Heavenly Father" ("jia-ju 家主" \* "head of the household" and mankind being the "guan-jia 管家" \* "house-keeper or steward" entrusted with "jia-yie 家業" \* "family affairs") will replace the Western Christian's excessive emphasis on the "cultural mandate" in terms of "to rule and subdue." (Ge 1:28). The bend towards an antagonistic relationship between human and nature and their strong desire for "dominion over nature" led to their destructive exploitation of nature. Given this theological and cultural orientation, the abuse of technological power has caused drastic ecological disruption in the post-industrial context of the West. On the contrary, ecological disruption would not occur when nature is viewed in relational, accountable and harmonious terms ("this is my Father's world").

The second perspectival dimension is the "sonship of Christians" worldwide in "the theology of the family" (Chinese primordial concept of "t'ien-ren 天人" \* "heaven-man," close to "anthropology" in TWT). Christians, East and West, are all children of "the Heavenly Father" by regeneration of the Holy Spirit and adoption through Christ the Son. Recognizing the fallenness of mankind and acknowledging the importance of sonship by birth and adoption will be a strong corrective to the naive humanistic (positive) view of man (e.g. modernist humanism of the West or Confucious humanism of the East) or to the conflict (negative) theory of man (e.g. Marxist emphasis on class struggle, evolutionary perspective of "the survival of the fittest"). Here one finds the second perspectival dimension of "the theology of the family" contributing to the

global Christian community. Man is both created in the image of God (being good) and corrupted by sin after the fall (being evil). Both perspectives can be found in Chinese

religious-philosophical traditions: Man is innately good in Confucius/Mancius thought ( 孔孟之說 ) and inherently evil in the teachings of Suen-tze (荀子).

The third perspectival dimension is the "jia-yuen 家員" \* "membership of the family," (close to "soteriology" in TWT) in "the theology of the family." Membership in God's family is based on both the grace of the Triune God (i.e. the sovereign will of the Father, the submissive incarnation of the Son to the Father's will, the regeneration and indwelling of the Holy Spirit) and man's responsibility (i.e. voluntary submission of the members of "the family of God" to "the Heavenly Father" by faith appropriating the grace of salvation). Therefore, the salvation of Christians and inclusion into "the family of God" is neither a matter of merely Gods' sovereignty (as in "hyper Calvinism") nor pending on human free will alone (as in Arminianism); but both God's grace and man's will.

The fourth perspectival dimension is the "da-jia-tin 大家庭"\* "aggregate of family members" and the traditional Chinese ideal of "sei-hai-gi-nei-gea-shondi 四海之內皆兄弟" \* "the brotherhood of the four seas" (close to "ecclesiology" in TWT in terms of the brotherhood of all Christians). It is based neither on organizational nor political union but on true union of God's children. They all belong to the same "Heavenly Father," are members of "the household of God," abide by the same "household code of behavior," (Eph 5:21-6:9, Col 3:18-4:6, 1Ti 3:14-15, 1Pe 3:1-9, etc.) and long for the same "heavenly home" (Heb 1: 13-16). This is the theological foundation of the ecumenical spirit of the global Christian community and one of the theological contributions of Sino-theology to the global Christian community.

The fifth perspectival dimension is "jia-tin-t'uen-jue 家庭團聚" \* "the reunion of family members" (close to "eschatology" in TWT). The custom of Chinese extended family getting together during the festivals, especially "da-t'uen-yuen 大團員" \* "big reunion" during Chinese New Year, is akin to the eschatological hope of the "return of the Groom" (i.e. Christ' second coming) and "the feast of the Lamb" (i.e. the eternal bliss of Christian celebration). It is the Christian way of realizing the relational ideal of Confucianism and the Marxist utopia of "classless society." It is also the

Christian way to realize the Chinese ideal of the traditional family and to provide Christian hope for the current international problems due to racial prejudice, ethnic strife, etc. This is another theological contribution of Sino-theology to the global Christian community in terms of "the theology of the family."

#### **IV. Summary**

The method of theologizing (i.e. relational, both-and, etc.) exemplified in Table 1 is different from that of TWT (i.e. rational or instrumental, either-or, etc.). It is both scripturally sound and culturally relevant for the two-thirds world where relationship is emphasized and holistic thinking prevails. This is the methodological contribution of Sino-theology to the global Christian community.

The partial explanation of the "theology of the family" in Sino-theology and an understanding of the "five perspectival dimensions" in "the theology of the family" is provided in this article to illustrate the perspectival contribution of Sino-theology to the global Christian community. (For further discussion and additional illustrations, see Wan 1998, 1999).

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tional theologizing") shown in Table 2 and Table 3 below: