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**EXPLORING CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE IN CHINA:  
TODAY AND YESTERDAY**

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## Christian Theology in Chinese Idiom

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I titled my talk Christian Theology in Chinese Idiom. You might be thinking I will be using *chengyus* to express Christian theology, but I hope you are not disappointed. I will not refer to a single Chinese *chengyu* today. So, why does my title say “idiom”?

Lamin Sanneh (1942-2019), a Catholic historian of Islam and of World Christianity, and originally from Gambia, wrote this:

“Without a revealed language or even the language of its founder, Christianity staked itself on idioms and cultures that existed for purposes other than for Christianity, and to that extent Christianity came with a predisposition to embrace the marks of our primary identity. A mother-tongue response is in tune with the gospel. Accordingly, in its cultural aspects, the Christian movement provided the impetus for the flowering of a diverse and distinctive humanity by introducing the idea that no culture is inherently impermeable, nor is any one ultimately indispensable. To be grounded in your culture and to be a faithful Christian are complementary” (97).

The word “idiom” as Sanneh uses it here means a “characteristic mode of expression.” So, today I will be talking about Christian theology as expressed in ways that are characteristic of Chinese. I like to describe theology as an “idiomatic activity.” This is because theology is something we **DO**, not merely something we **KNOW**.

I like to use a definition of theology from the Scottish historian of Christianity, Andrew Walls, to help people see **how** theology is done, and **why** it is “idiomatic.” The quotation is long XXXXX, so I will break it into smaller pieces and explain each.

The purpose of theology is to make or clarify Christian decisions. Theology is about choices; it is the attempt to think in a Christian way.

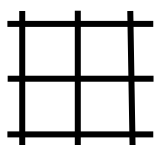
I love the phrase, “think in a Christian way.” We are to “think God’s thoughts after him.” We are to know and understand the world as God made it. And we are to understand how we are to live in the world he has made. That requires us to make choices. Can I drink alcohol or not? Is it ok to put flowers on my father’s grave? What about incense, can I put that on his grave? Can I play a tambourine to worship God? What is God like? Is he safe? Is he good? Is he male (or female)? Does God have a body? How does God communicate with humans?

You will notice that decisions are always preceded by a question, even if it is only implied. When you come to a fork in the road, you may not speak out loud, but your mind asks yourself, do I go left or do I go right? So, Walls continues...

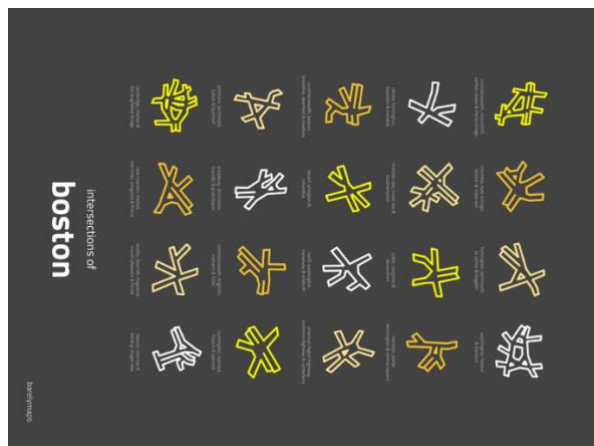
And the need for choice and decision arises from specific settings in life. In this sense, the theological agenda is culturally induced; and the cross-cultural diffusion of Christian faith invariably makes creative theological activity a necessity.

It is in the particularities of our life that the need for decision arises. Let me give you an example.

I am from Iowa. Most of Iowa is cultivated farm land, and you could almost map the entire state with a large grid like this:



The intersections are relatively simple. So, when my family moved to Boston for a semester during my PhD studies, I was totally unprepared for the intersections we found. Here’s a picture I found on Reddit, of some of the most famous intersections:



In my Iowa setting of life, you usually have three choices: right, left, or straight.

But in Boston, how do you even describe the choices before you!? Creative transportation activity is a necessity!

But let's get back to theology.

It might help us grasp this by asking a "simple" question. Who is Jesus Christ? For our first answer, we ask Peter the Apostle, and he answers in Matthew 16:16, "you are the messiah, the son of the living God." Peter had a choice. Some were saying Elijah, others John the Baptist. But Peter made his theological decision. Jesus is God's anointed one who will redeem Israel.

But what happens when you take that theological answer across cultural boundaries. Telling Gentiles that Jesus is the Messiah may not have very much meaning to them at all, particularly if they do not know anything about Judaism. But when you say, "Jesus is Lord!" they know immediately what you mean. But wait, isn't Caesar lord? Not anymore! Move over Nero!

The idea of Jesus being "lord" may even have been offensive to many Jews. How can you refer to Yahweh's Messiah with a filthy term for a political leader who thinks he is a god?! Before we are offended, we need to remember what it communicated to the Gentiles of the 1st century. This is creative theological activity.

Next, Walls explains what the materials are for doing theology, and what you do with those materials.

The materials for theology are equally culturally conditioned. They are inevitably the materials at hand in the situation where the occasion for decision has arisen, in interaction with the biblical material.

Walls gives us two things. The "materials at hand" and the Biblical material. The materials at hand are what the local Christian regards as normal. It is the water that the fish swims in. It is important to notice that although the cultural material is what gives rise to the occasion for decision, it must interact with the biblical material. This is what makes it specifically Christian thinking. But what do you do with the cultural material?

The materials at hand have to be "converted," turned towards Christ, in the process....Conversion, we must constantly remind ourselves, is about turning *what is already there*; it is more about direction than about content" (79).

Conversion of cultural materials means putting them into the service of worshiping and honoring God.

Some things cannot be converted. You cannot convert the idea of multiple gods, or millions of gods. There is only one God. But, there may be some surprising conversions. In my preparation for this talk, I almost suggested "child sacrifice" as something that cannot be converted. But, in fact, I think it can. If a Christian were to encounter a culture that practiced child sacrifice, we might point to Jesus as God's son who is the ultimate sacrifice. No more children should be sacrificed, because Jesus' sacrifice was the final sacrifice. It might sound offensive to our ears, but can you imagine the relief to all the mothers and fathers of that culture? Jesus really saves.

Before we look at a few examples of this cultural conversion, we should answer one more question. What are the materials at hand in Chinese culture?

This is a complex question, given the recent century of history in China. The fall of the Qing Empire and the dismantling of 2,000 years of dynastic rule, the May Fourth Movement, the Great Cultural Revolution, the Opening up and Reform Movement, the great Chinese diaspora, and even recent political events in China begs the question, what is China and what is Chinese?

K.K. Yeo, of Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, IL provides clear and helpful reasoning for taking a textual approach, particularly in a Chinese context:

“Every religion, in the East or West, has sacred scriptures that form the foundation of its cultural ideals. The orientation of these religions may be different, but each canonical, sacred text embodies the spirit of the people group. Scriptures are sacred texts that contain communal wisdom, have stood the test of time and continue to sustain the community” (*Global Theology*, 107).

The texts that have formed the bedrock of Chinese culture are those from Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism, and in Chinese they are often referred to as the “Three Teachings” *san jiao*.

This approach excludes other traditions such as folk religions, Chinese forms of Islam, and even Marxism or Maoism. I think an argument can be made that, even these facets of Chinese culture contain material that could be “converted” towards Christ. But we don’t have time to discuss everything today, so, in the interest of time, I have limited myself to the Three Teachings.

## **Buddhism**

It is difficult to overstate the differences between Christianity and Buddhism, particularly at their foundational, or metaphysical, level. Many comparisons have been done, and attempts to show their similarities and differences have been made.

I will mention one example from a Buddhist context for Christian theologizing, from Hong Kong. Some of you may be familiar with the Dao Feng Shan Christian Center 道风山 in Shatin. The Center was established in 1930 by Norwegian missionary Karl Ludvig Reichelt (1877-1952), who wanted to minister to Buddhists. He used the lotus and cross symbol as the Center’s logo. You may recognize it as the same image that appears at the top of the *jingjiaobei* or so-called Nestorian Stele from the late 8th century. The architecture of the Center’s compound is intentionally designed in the style of a Buddhist monastery, with Daoist accents, in order that Buddhists and Daoists might not be repelled by foreign looking architecture. Although this example focuses on imagery, it highlights non-verbal forms of communication that are integral to an idiomatic representation of Christianity and its “blessed sound” *fuyin* 福音.

Peter Feldmeier, a Catholic scholar of Christian spirituality at the University of Toledo, looks at Buddhist spiritual practices for potential material to be converted towards Christ. One practice that he finds potential in is 观 (*vipashyanā* in Sanskrit), found particularly in Tiantai 天台 and Chan 禅 Buddhism, which means something like “deep insight” or discernment of reality. That sounds to me, like something a Christian ought to be pursuing. Feldmeier emphasizes that, for a Christian, the pursuit is not unity with nothingness, which is the true nature of the universe for a Buddhist (again, a deep metaphysical difference), but a pursuit of unity with Christ.

## Daoism

When talking about Buddhism I referenced the Nestorian Stele, and the Buddhist imagery on it. However, Sung-Hae Kim, a Catholic nun since 1965, and a Korean scholar of Daoism, claims that the *jingjiaobei* (or Nestorian Stele) actually contains more Daoist influence than Buddhist or Confucian. One point of support she offers is the name of God that is used. The preferred translation of *Yahweh Elohim* in the stele is “Heavenly Worthy”, or *Tianzun* 天尊. The highest god in the Daoist pantheon at the time was called Heavenly Worthy of Primordial Beginning *Yuanshi tianzun* 元始天尊. You don’t have to be a scholar to see the connection!

Anyone familiar with Chinese translations of the Bible will also quickly recognize Daoist influence in first verses of the Gospel of John. Here, quoting from the *heheben* 和合本

太初有道，道与神同在，道就是神。这道太初与神同在。

In the Great Beginning there was the Dao, the Dao existed with God, the Dao—that is God. This Dao in the Great Beginning existed with God.

Now, *dao* 道 is not a term exclusive to Daoism. It is also particularly prevalent in the Confucian tradition throughout its long history. So, that sets us up nicely to transition there. But it is important to note that this is a very strong example of using the material at hand to communicate God’s revealed message of the gospel through Scripture translation. And by extension, our theologizing will be impacted by these choices.

## Confucianism

Confucianism is often regarded as the essence of Chinese culture. Some scholars would lead us to believe that a war is being waged, and either Western Christianity or Eastern Confucianism will prevail in Chinese contexts. Rather than seeing such a towering philosophical and religious tradition as an opponent to be battled with and defeated, I suggest that we see it as a field to be cultivated. Agronomists will tell you, the soil that a seed grows in makes a significant difference to the produce that is grown in that soil. Surely, there are rocks to be removed and weeds to be pulled. The soil never changes the essential nature of the seed, but it can impact whether you reap a harvest of 40, 60, or 100-fold. There is a richness in the soil of Confucianism and cultures formed by Confucianism that the seeds of the gospel can be planted, and flourish.

For Confucianism, I would like to use my own research as an example. Last year I submitted a paper to a conference on Chinese Christian families. It was primarily focused on historical, biographical and sociological explorations of Chinese Christian families. The call for papers seemed quite interesting, and they did ask for constructive theological papers, meaning, papers that explore Christian theology in a Chinese idiom. As I thought about the topic, a question came to my mind. What is a Chinese Christian family? (As I said earlier, theology comes out of specific settings in life.) So, what is a Chinese Christian family?

Immediately I thought of what seemed to me to be a very natural conclusion. The church is a Chinese Christian family. Everyone at a Chinese church is your brother and sister, and the older women who help you find your seat at a church service is your auntie or grandmother! And the

affection among Chinese believers is something that makes non-believers pause and think about how such love could even be possible. This can even run to excess, where Chinese Christian publications will urge believers to not neglect their biological families.

As I thought about this, I wondered what, in Chinese culture, would lead to this development? (Again, a question!)

We are all undoubtedly aware of the influence of Confucianism on the family. What does it have to say about family that would inform or direct our Christian thinking?

Here are just a couple of insights regarding sibling relationships:

There is a strong link between virtue and a person's conduct in sibling relationships. Confucius's disciple You says, "Filial piety and fraternal submission—are they not the root of all benevolent actions? (*Lunyu* 1.2). Jesus says, "whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Matthew 12:50). Something about a life well-lived builds family bonds.

But, we are probably all familiar with the saying, blood is thicker than water 血浓于水. Does the Confucian tradition support this? Can it be overcome?

In a conversation between two of Confucius' disciples, we discover a remarkable relational transformation that takes place.

Sze-ma Niu, full of anxiety, said, 'Other men all have their brothers, I only have not.'

Tsze-hsia said to him, 'There is the following saying which I have heard:--

Death and life have their determined appointment; riches and honors depend upon Heaven.

Let the superior man never fail reverentially to order his own conduct, and let him be respectful to others and observant of propriety:--then all within the four seas will be his brothers. What has the superior man to do with being distressed because he has no brothers?

This is quite a remarkable statement! It would appear that, under certain circumstances, non-blood related people can become family members. So, instead of blood being thicker than water, we might say 德浓于血, virtue is thicker than blood. A new community is formed through our following of The Way, and this community is not a social club. It is not a political party. It is a family.

### **Closing remarks**

I would like to close with a brief sketch of risks of the proposal I have given and might be on your mind, and a few points of the relevance of what I have shared.

### **Risks**

Andrew Walls anticipates two concerns or risks:

The first I would call “Our way or the highway.” This is “an instinctive desire to protect our own version of Christian faith, or even to seek to establish it as the standard, normative one.”

The second I call “Every way is ok!” Walls believes that this option is more attractive to Christians in Anglo-European settings: “to decide that each of the expressions and versions is equally valid and authentic, and that we are therefore at liberty to enjoy our own in isolation from all the others.”

Both of these dangers are visible in Christianity around the world. The former, “our way or the highway,” takes forms such as

- mass translation of numerous texts, sermons, and resources from one language into another, especially at a popular level
- large networks or mega-churches in one culture (American immediately comes to mind, but also Korean) hosting and training pastors and leaders in another culture, with the content of training largely or entirely unmodified (cookie-cutter approach)
- Again, it is not that cross-cultural fertilization cannot happen. But, what happens a majority of the time is, the culture with more power, globally, economically, politically, usually ends up dictating theology without much consideration for context, and the so-called “weaker” brothers and sisters simply receive. A far better, more costly, more time-consuming way is to walk alongside brothers and sisters in other cultures, weeping with them, praying with them, listening to them, and, when appropriate, sharing with them. But that is difficult to package, to market, to garner support for on a large scale.

The latter risk, “every way is ok!”, is equally destructive. It severs critical relationships that lead to growth, in both directions. It allows offensive and false teachings to grow and fester, and eventually do greater harm. It is also an offense to Scripture and Christian tradition that holds to a substantive idea of truth (as opposed to relative truth – true for you, but not for me).

Finally, there may be a question whether a cultural foreigner do creative theological activity in a Chinese idiom?

I wholeheartedly believe that it is possible. But it’s “success” will be largely determined by the people for whom that culture is the water they swim in. Cultural foreigners also must be aware of their outside status, and approach their giving of Christian answers (and asking questions) with an extra measure of humility. Otherwise, it may not hit the mark. And, it very well may come off as “imperialist” or “colonialist”.

## **Relevance**

Once again, I turn to Andrew Walls –

“Each Christian lifestyle, representing a culture converted to Christ, expressed something that the whole body needed” (78). “The Ephesian metaphors of the temple and of the body show each of the culture-specific segments as necessary to the body but as incomplete in itself. Only in Christ does completion, fullness, dwell. And Christ’s completion, as we have seen, comes from all humanity, from the translation of the life of Jesus into the lifeways of all the world’s cultures and

subcultures through history. None of us can reach Christ's completeness on our own. We need each other's vision to correct, enlarge, and focus our own; only together are we complete in Christ" (79).

I have given a few suggestions and examples for where Christian Theology in a Chinese Idiom has gone and could go. They are meant to be a catalyst, to get people thinking in a new direction, or, as the subtitle to my talk says, reframe the conversation.