



MONUMENTA SERICA MONOGRAPH SERIES

L/3b

The Chinese Face of Jesus Christ

Volume 3b

Edited by
ROMAN MALEK, S.V.D.

Jointly published by
Institut Monumenta Serica and China-Zentrum
Sankt Augustin

JESUS, THE CRUCIFIED AND RISEN SAGE CONSTRUCTING A CONTEMPORARY CONFUCIAN CHRISTOLOGY

JONATHAN TAN YUN-KA 陳運佳

Contents

I. From Classicist-Universalist European Christologies to Contextual Asian Christologies.....	1483
II. The Confucian World of East Asia.....	1492
III. The Sage (<i>sheng</i>) in the Confucian Tradition.....	1496
IV. Jesus, the Crucified and Risen Sage.....	1506
V. Conclusion.....	1513

This paper seeks to reflect on Jesus' profound question to his followers: "Who do you say I am?" (Mk 8:29, cf. Mt 16:15, Lk 9:20), as it is directed to the peoples from the Confucian world of East Asia, viz., China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. More precisely, it seeks to explore possibilities for articulating a Christology that will be meaningful to peoples from the Confucian tradition. Although J.V. Taylor, a missionary to Africa, made the following comment in the African context, it is just as pertinent, if not more, to the peoples of East Asia:

Christ has been presented as the answer to questions a white man would ask, the solution to the needs that Western man would feel, the Saviour of the world of the European world-view, the object of the adoration and prayer of historic Christendom. But if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking, what would he look like?¹

This essay is a slightly emended and updated version of the paper "Jesus, The Crucified and Risen Sage: Towards A Confucian Christology," which was originally presented at the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Office of Theological Concerns (FABC-OTC) Theological Colloquium, "Asian Faces of Christ," held from 11-15 May 2004 at Baan Phu Waan (Archdiocese Pastoral Center) in Samphran, Thailand, and published in *Asian Faces of Christ*, ed. by Vimal Tirimanna (Bangalore 2005), pp. 49-87.

Note on Transcription of Chinese terms: The *pinyin* transliteration system is used throughout this essay, except the names of Chinese authors who publish in Western languages and have chosen to transliterate their names in a specific way, and those Chinese terms that have been transliterated using the Wade-Giles system in quoted texts and titles of works.

¹ John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence Amid African Religion* (London 1963), p. 16.

Paraphrasing Taylor, one could also ask: if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that the Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese peoples have been asking, what would he look like? Clearly, Jesus is not so much interested in the abstract and impersonal "Who do people say I am," (or, to paraphrase the question in the East Asian context: "Who do Europeans say I am? Who do the Christians of European Late Antiquity say I am?"), as he is in the question, "who do you [viz., a Chinese, a Korean, a Japanese, or a Vietnamese] say I am?"

Hence, this paper seeks to investigate the prospects for articulating a distinctive Confucian Christology which would uncover the significance of Jesus for Confucian East Asians, as well as engage in a dialogue with their philosophical-religious traditions, socio-cultural institutions, existential concerns and life experiences, on the basis that

Christology is never final, but always in dialogue: with the early Church, with the religious and mythical presuppositions and commitments of the Jewish and Hellenistic world, and perhaps most important, with the world-views of our own age and time.²

First, it reviews the historical developments of Christology in the European world, exploring the transition from classicist-universalist European Christologies to contextual Asian Christologies, as well as the implications of this transition. Second, it surveys the context of the Confucian world of East Asia, presenting an overview of its historical developments, philosophical-religious worldview, and ethos. Third, it presents a critical evaluation of the possibilities of using the powerful and evocative image of the sage (*sheng*) as a Christological image for East Asian Christians, with an emphasis on articulating the foundational principles drawn from principal Confucian texts, e.g., the *Analects*, the *Book of Mencius*, etc., which would undergird this Confucian Christology, its principal elements, resources, and interpretive matrix.³ Finally, it concludes with an investigation of the possible implica-

² Robert Berkey and Sarah A. Edwards, *Christology in Dialogue* (Cleveland 1993) 24.

³ This paper seeks to complement earlier endeavors at exploring the possibilities for articulating a Confucian Christology. Two notable examples of these earlier endeavors include Kim Heup Young, "Jen and Agape: Towards a Confucian Christology," in: *Asia Journal of Theology* 8 (1994), pp. 335-364, which investigates the potential for constructing a Confucian Christology based on the Confucian virtue of "humanity" (*ren*); and Peter C. Phan, "The Christ of Asia (An essay on Jesus as the eldest son and ancestor)," in: *Studia Missionalia* 45 (1996), pp. 25-55, which seeks to construct a Confucian Christology by "situating Christ within the context of the Confucian teaching on family relationships, especially on the role of the eldest son, and the Asian practice of veneration of ancestors" (p. 27).

tions that the image of Jesus as the "crucified and risen sage" would have for East Asian Christians.

I.

From Classicist-Universalist European Christologies to Contextual Asian Christologies

If there is one thing which Christian theologians and believers of all stripes and colors could agree on, it would be the assertion that Jesus the Christ stands at the center of the Christian faith. Christology, or the "theological interpretation of Jesus Christ, clarifying systematically who and what he is in himself for those who believe in him,"⁴ is one perennial topic of theological inquiry that began when the crowds around Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth, wondered who he was, and which has continued unabated ever since. To the age-old question "Who do you say I am?" the answers in different historical epochs are diverse and varied, as Jaroslav Pelikan stresses in his landmark survey *Jesus Through the Centuries*.⁵

Christianity's chequered history offers us a good glimpse of the diversity of responses to the question of Christ's identity by different communities of followers. Clearly, Christians of all ages and places have been confronted with a diversity of images of Jesus in the New Testament, the writings of the Church Fathers, and the pronouncements of ecumenical councils. Indeed, there is no unanimity in the understanding of Jesus' identity even in the primitive Church. Generally speaking, the New Testament writers eschewed static, metaphysical concepts in favor of dynamic concepts to explain the significance of Jesus. For example, on the one hand, Paul rooted his Christological discussion in terms of the dynamic movement of the self-emptying (*kenosis*) of the pre-existent Logos, followed by its exaltation in the resurrection (e.g., in Phil 2:6-11). But on the other hand, Luke chose to begin with the human life of Jesus of Nazareth, his suffering and death, followed by his ascending to his glorification in his resurrection (e.g., Acts 2:22-36, 5:30-32, 10:36-38). Nonetheless, whatever the differences in the various New Testament writers' portrayals of Jesus' significance might be, what is clear and unequivocal is the fact that the various portraits of Jesus in the New Testament reveal an accurate depiction of the early Christians' under-

⁴ Gerald O'Collins, S.J. and Edward G. Farrugia, S.J., *A Concise Dictionary of Theology*, rev. and expanded ed. (New York - Mahwah, NJ 2000), p. 42.

⁵ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven 1985). Pelikan's underlying thesis is that Jesus cannot be understood outside of human cultures, and that it is human cultures that shape the diverse images and understandings of Jesus in human history.

standing of Jesus and his significance for their faith life. In addition, one also sees a diversity and plurality of images of Jesus, e.g., as "Son of Man," "Son of God," "Teacher," Messiah (*Christos*), Word (*Logos*), Lord (*Kyrios*), and Savior (*Soter*) in the New Testament. These images reveal what was the significance of Jesus for the apostolic Christians in messianic and soteriological terms.⁶ In this vein, J.B. Chethimattam suggests that "the missionary discourses of the Acts of the Apostles clearly show, the divinity of Christ was not the focus of the early Christian understanding of the salvation brought by Jesus," but rather, it "was principally the work of the Father, the one God of the Bible, who in fulfilment of his promise of salvation to humanity sent Jesus as a new Moses, a new David and a new Solomon to lead humanity in the faithful carrying out of the Covenant with Yahweh."⁷

The fourth and fifth century Christological debates on the relationship between the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ in the Hellenistic-Roman world of Late Antiquity introduced a paradigm shift from soteriology to ontology, viz., from his salvific significance for believers to abstract, philosophical musings on the nature and person of Christ in and of himself, as well as his position as the second person of the Trinity. Thus, Nicaea I proclaimed that Jesus the Christ is of one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father, and Chalcedon professed:

[the] one and the same Christ, Lord, Son, unique, acknowledged in two natures without confusion, without change, without division, without separation – the difference of the natures being by no means taken away because of the union, but rather the distinctive character of each nature being preserved, and [each] combining in one Person and *hypostasis* – not divided or separated into two Persons, but one and the same Son and only-begotten God, Word, Lord Jesus Christ ...⁸

One should remember that when the ecumenical councils of the fourth and fifth centuries fashioned these Christological formulations, they were motivated, not by questions of Jesus' significance for human salvation, but by

⁶ For a more in-depth analysis, see, e.g., James D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (Philadelphia 1980); Earl Richard, *Jesus, One and Many: The Christological Concept of New Testament Authors* (Wilmington 1988); John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (New York 1991); N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis 1996); and Ben Witherington, III, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis 1990).

⁷ J.B. Chethimattam, "Asian Jesus: The Relevance of Jesus Christ in the Asian World of Religious Pluralism," in: *Jeevadhara* 27 (1997), p. 300.

⁸ English translation taken from *The Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. by Edward R. Hardy (Philadelphia 1954), p. 373.

the highly polemical debates on this contentious issue between the Alexandrian and Antiochene theologians. Indeed, the council fathers pursued a defensive stance throughout, seeking to bolster doctrinal statements on the integrity of Jesus' divinity and his humanity against what were being perceived as heterodox statements.

Clearly, the classical Christological formulations of the fourth and fifth centuries of the Christian era focused exclusively on defining the person of Jesus Christ, the relation between his humanity and divinity, as well as his relationship to the Father, rather than his salvific work and significance for people, a fact which does not preclude new explorations of Jesus' salvific work and significance for people in later socio-cultural contexts. Hence, in the early Middle Ages of Europe, the old-Saxon epic *Heliand*⁹ and the Anglo-Saxon verse *The Dream of the Rood*¹⁰ presented Christ as an all-powerful Teutonic warrior-king within the context of a wider medieval germanization of Christianity. According to James Russell, this development arose because:

For Christianity to be accepted by the Germanic peoples, it was necessary that it be perceived as responsive to the heroic, religiopolitical, and magico-religious orientation of the Germanic world-view. A religion which did not appear to be concerned with fundamental military, agricultural, and personal matters could not hope to gain acceptance among the Germanic peoples, since the pre-Christian Germanic religiosity already provided adequate responses to these matters.¹¹

Although scholars critique the image of Christ the Teutonic warrior-king as a departure from the pacifist Jesus of Nazareth, it is undeniable that this image of Christ as a powerful, majestic, and triumphant king persisted through much of the Middle Ages into modernity. This triumphalistic image of Christ the King (*Christus Rex*) was brought by European missionaries to Asia, Africa, and the Americas, and used as justification for massacres, economic plunder, and socio-cultural destruction. As Michael Amaladoss points out,

the preferred image of Jesus in the West, at least as presented to the East, seems to have been that of Christ the King who seeks to extend his kingdom

⁹ For English translation and commentary, see *The Heliand: The Saxon Gospel: A Translation and Commentary*, transl. by G. Ronald Murphy (New York 1992). For a critical analysis, see G. Ronald Murphy, *The Saxon Savior: The Germanic Transformation of the Gospel in the Nine-Century Heliand* (New York 1989).

¹⁰ See Bruce Dickins and Alan S.C. Ross (eds.), *The Dream of the Rood* (New York 1966).

¹¹ James C. Russell, *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity: A Sociohistorical Approach to Religious Transformation* (New York 1994), p. 4.

all over the world, not hesitating to use merchants and armies in the process.¹²

More importantly, the classicist model of *missio ad gentes* is predicated upon a Christology of a triumphant "Christ the King" leading an army of missionaries to conquer pagan lands and rescue pagan souls from ignorance. Not surprisingly, such an assertive "Christ the King" is resented by many non-Christians.¹³ More significantly, while the image of "Christ the King" continues to resonate in the minds and hearts of many Christians in Europe and North America today, the very same Christians would have difficulty understanding the abstract classical Christological professions of Nicaea and Chalcedon, let alone explain in plain, coherent terms what these classical Christological professions really mean.

This brings us to the situation in Asia. Taking the Anselmian axiom *fides quaerens intellectum* as the starting point, then there will invariably be a continuous growth in an appreciation of Jesus Christ when he is understood and appropriated by people in new socio-cultural contexts. The Indian theologian Stanley J. Samartha explained it well when he pointed out that Christology was not about "a frantic search for an alternative 'substance,' whether home-made or imported from elsewhere, in order once again to understand Christ's nature," but an endeavor to answer the question, "what is the reality that we encounter in Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Lord?"¹⁴ On the question of Jesus' significance for others and his salvific work, the New Testament, the writings of the Church Fathers, and conciliar pronouncements are always the starting point and not the end, since these sources can never exhaust the range of people's experiences and questions in diverse *Sitz-im-Leben*. The preaching of Jesus Christ to every age and culture necessarily results in new understandings, responses, and experiences by people in new socio-cultural settings, all of which in turn lead to new insights about Jesus' meaning and significance for these people. One is reminded by Pope John XXIII, who noted in his opening *allocutio* to the Second Vatican Council, "[t]he substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another."¹⁵

¹² Michael Amaladoss, "Pluralism of Religions and the Proclamation of Jesus Christ in the Context of Asia," in: *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 56 (2001), p. 10.

¹³ See discussion in William Burrows, *Redemption and Dialogue: Reading Redemptoris Missio and Dialogue and Proclamation* (Maryknoll 1993), pp. 243-244.

¹⁴ S.J. Samartha, *The Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ* (Madras 1974), p. 41.

¹⁵ "Pope John's Opening Speech to the Council," in: *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. by Walter M. Abbott (New York 1966), p. 715.

A good starting point for studying the origins and developments of Asian Christologies is the pioneering book *Asian Faces of Jesus*, a collection of essays exploring the various images of Jesus for different Asian communities by Asian theologians and edited by R.S. Sugirtharajah. In the prologue to this work, Sugirtharajah points out the "misgivings and ambivalence Asian Christians feel about the images of Christ that were first introduced to them by foreign missionaries and still dominate their thinking," and highlights the "desire of Asian Christians to discover for themselves the evidence of his presence in the midst and his place among other savior figures of the region."¹⁶ Hence, Asian Christians have searched for ways to "re-Asianize and refashion Jesus on Asian terms to meet the contextual needs of Asian peoples":

They fiercely resist any attempts to apply well-established and timeless truth about Jesus. For them, all understandings of Jesus arise out of particular contextual needs. ... Asian Christians continue the hermeneutical tradition created by early Christian writers. ... they weave a wide variety of cultural symbols, philosophical insights and social concerns of Asia into their Christological articulations. ... The point of the Asian articulations of Jesus is that if the Christian Church in the fifth century was successful in delicately maintaining the enigma of Jesus in the language, mood and the spirit of the Hellenistic period, why should not Asians draw on their own hermeneutical reservoir to fashion Jesus for their own time and place?¹⁷

In other words, Asian Christians in general, and Asian theologians in particular, seek to explore how Jesus is relevant and meaningful to the Asian peoples and their existential realities and concerns. Their interests are primarily pastoral and pragmatic – they want to ascertain what Jesus means to the masses of Asian people struggling to cope with contemporary existential life issues, rather than abstract, theoretical, or metaphysical expositions about Jesus' pre-existence or his ontological relationship to the other two Persons of Trinity, or even speculative discussions of how the human and divine natures relate in his person, because such rational deliberations are often divorced from the Asian peoples' daily living experiences.¹⁸ Often,

¹⁶ "Prologue," in: R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Asian Faces of Jesus* (Maryknoll 1993), p. viii.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

¹⁸ M. Thomas Thangaraj is surely correct when he points out that "a Christology that uses the concept of Logos to explicate the significance of Jesus is relevant or meaningful only in the context of a conversation with those who know what Logos signifies." See M. Thomas Thangaraj, *The Crucified Guru: An Experiment in Cross-Cultural Christology* (Nashville 1994), p. 139. Thus, a Christology that speaks of essence and substance, nature and person, *homoousios*, and hypostatic union makes

Asian Christians do not begin their reflections on who Jesus is from the Nicene and Chalcedonian formulations. Rather, they are more interested in the Jesus of the New Testament, how he can bring them hope and new life, and how they can encounter his saving reality in their daily lives. Christological reflections cannot be done using an essentialist language and an abstract metaphysical thought-form which emerged as a response to specific Christological controversies that center on the difficulty of relating the human (profane) and divine (sacred) realities in Hellenistic mindsets, a non-issue as far as Asians, with their diverse relational and cosmological worldviews, are concerned.

Hence, an important characteristic of Asian Christologies is that they are by definition contextual theologies, that is to say,

[a] way of doing theology in which one takes into account: the spirit and message of the gospel; the tradition of the Christian people; the culture in which one is theologizing; and social change in that culture, whether brought about by Western technological process or the grass-roots struggle for equality, justice and liberation.¹⁹

On this same issue, the Taiwanese theologian Shoki Coe (a.k.a. Ng Chiong Hui) noted that the emergence and growth of contextual theologies in the Third World is the result of a growing concern of the need for the Christian Gospel to be made relevant to the needs and concerns of actual human living in the contemporary world, in reaction against the universalist-positivist approaches of traditional classicist theological methodologies.²⁰ Not surprisingly, the world has witnessed a spectacular growth in new contextual theologies in general, and contextual Christologies²¹ in particular.

sense only to those who have some understanding of the intricacies of classical Greek philosophical thought, something which most Asians have not.

¹⁹ This definition of contextual theology is taken from Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll 1992), p. 1. In contrast to classicist theologies which focus primarily on the two *loci theologici* of scripture and tradition, Bevans points out that contextual theology adds a third theological locus, viz., human experience. Accordingly, "theology that is contextual realizes that culture, history, contemporary thought forms, and so forth are to be considered, along with scripture and tradition, as valid sources for theological expression" (*ibid.*, p. 2).

²⁰ Shoki Coe, "Contextualization as the Way Toward Reform," in: Douglas J. Elwood (ed.), *Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Themes* (Philadelphia 1980), pp. 48-55.

²¹ Examples of Asian contextual Christologies include: *Asian Faces of Jesus*, ed. by R.S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll 1993); Stanley J. Samartha, *One Christ - Many Religions: Toward a Revised Christology* (Maryknoll 1991); M. Thomas Thangaraj, *The Crucified Guru: An Experiment in Cross-Cultural Christology* (Nashville 1994); A. Alangaram, *Christ of the Asian Peoples: Towards an Asian Contextual Christology Based on the Documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences* (Bangalore

In relation to Asian contextual Christologies, Asian theologians shy away from static, ontological, and metaphysical ruminations, beginning their theological reflections in dialogue with the Asian peoples and their diverse *Sitz-im-Leben*, seeking to discern what Jesus is doing within their lives, concerns, aspirations, and dreams, and ensuring that Jesus is not a stranger in Asia, and his clear and life-giving message of hope and love is not muddied by the speculative and metaphysical language of a by-gone era. On this basis, M. Thomas Thangaraj criticizes the "false sense of universalism" and "Christological positivism" of European theologians who "had assumed that their Christological articulations were context-free and thus applicable to global situations," insisting that "a Christology that does not realize its contextual character of its articulation promotes a false sense of universalism and thus assumes that it is applicable to all situations, times, and places" - a problem which runs deep throughout the Christologies which have been formulated in Europe.²² As he puts it, "in the New Testament, the collection of our most primitive documents concerning Jesus, [there is] not one standardized Christology but various and differing visions of Jesus' significance," and hence, "there is no perennial Christology that is applicable and relevant to all contexts and all ages."²³ While it is true that Thangaraj may be speaking from an Asian Protestant perspective, nevertheless, Asian Catholics would agree with his point of view. Thus, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India explains in its response to the *Lineamenta* of the 1998 Asian Synod:

*Christology is never a finished product but always in process, even while admitting the normative characteristics of the liturgical, biblical, patristic and conciliar Christologies. The lived experience of the Christian community, following the indispensable rules and diversities of time, space and cultural conditioning, has an important role in this process.*²⁴

Similarly, in its response to the *Lineamenta* of the 1998 Asian Synod, the Japanese Catholic Bishops' Conference also took a comparable stance:

We should try to discover what kind of Jesus will be a "light" to the peoples of Asia. In other words, as the Fathers of the early Church did with Graeco-Roman culture, we must make a more profound study of the fun-

1999); C.S. Song, *Jesus: The Crucified People* (Minneapolis 1990); Peter C. Phan, "The Christ of Asia: An Essay on Jesus as eldest son and ancestor," in: *Studia Missionalia* 45 (1996), pp. 25-55; Peter C. Phan, "Jesus the Christ with an Asian Face," in: *Theological Studies* 57 (1996), pp. 399-430; and *Asian Faces of Christ*, ed. by Vimal Tirimanna (Bangalore 2005).

²² Thangaraj, *The Crucified Guru*, p. 25.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

²⁴ *East Asian Pastoral Review* 35 (1998) 1, pp. 121-122 (art. 5.2). Emphasis added.

damentals of the religiosity of our peoples, and from this point of view try to discover how Jesus Christ is answering their needs. Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life, but in Asia, before stressing that Jesus Christ is the TRUTH, we must search much more deeply into how he is the WAY and the LIFE.²⁵

At the same time, in a continent where the percentage of Christians stands at about 4% of the total population, and where East Asian Christians live and interact very closely with their non-Christian family members, friends, and neighbors, there is a need to ensure that Asian Christologies in general, and Confucian Christologies in particular, are not parochial in orientation and limited merely to a specifically Christian audience. Taken as a whole, the diverse and pluralistic character of the East Asian region, the proximity of non-Christians to Christians, as well as their close interaction, all demand that the Christological task has to transcend confessional boundaries and enter into a dialogue with East Asian religious and cultural traditions within a wider context.²⁶ More importantly, this is more than mere pastoral pragmatism, because on a deeper and more profound level, the Asian Catholic Bishops have insisted in the Final Statement of the First Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) Plenary Assembly, that the great Asian religious traditions should be given reverence and honor, acknowledging that "God has drawn our peoples to Himself through them" (FABC I, 15).²⁷ In their words:

we accept them [i.e., the great religious traditions] as significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design of salvation. In them we recognize and respect profound spiritual and ethical meanings and values. Over many centuries they have been the treasuries of the religious experience of our ancestors, from which our contemporaries do not cease to draw light and strength. They have been (and continue to be) the authentic expression of the noblest longings of their hearts, and the home of their contemplation and prayer. They have helped to give shape to the histories and cultures of our nations (FABC I, art. 14).²⁸

²⁵ *East Asian Pastoral Review* 35 (1998) 1, p. 89.

²⁶ This insight is taken from Michael Amaladoss, who asserts that the desire of Asian Bishops to rediscover the Asian countenance of Jesus would not be fruitful unless it is carried out "in dialogue with Asian cultural and religious traditions." See Michael Amaladoss, "Pluralism of Religions and the Proclamation of Jesus Christ in the Context of Asia," p. 10.

²⁷ *For All The Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences Documents From 1970-1991*, ed. by Gaudencio B. Rosales and C.G. Arévalo (Maryknoll 1992), p. 14.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Elsewhere, the FABC's Bishops' Institute for Interreligious Affairs (BIRA) has affirmed that "it is an inescapable truth that God's Spirit is at work in all religious traditions" (BIRA IV/12, art. 7)²⁹ because

it has been recognized since the time of the apostolic Church, and stated clearly again by the Second Vatican Council, that the Spirit of Christ is active outside the bounds of the visible Church (BIRA II, art. 12).³⁰

In addition, the "great religions of Asia with their respective creeds, cults and codes reveal to us diverse ways of responding to God whose Spirit is active in all peoples and cultures" (BIRA IV/7, art. 12).³¹ For the FABC, it is

the same spirit, who has been active in the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus and in the Church, who was active among all peoples before the incarnation and is active among the nations, religions and peoples of Asia today (BIRA IV/3, art. 6).³²

In contrast, theologians in Europe and North America, where Christians form a significant majority at least nominally, have usually theologized within confessional boundaries without any interaction with non-Christian minorities. Nevertheless, in Thangaraj's words,

Christology is not simply the Christian community of believers having a dialogue within itself, but also the carrying on of a conversation with those who do not share their vision of the decisive significance of Jesus for one's view of and orientation to human life.³³

On a practical level, there is a need for these East Asian Christians to interpret the received Christian tradition in dialogue with the other religious traditions of their fellow neighbors, if the Gospel of Jesus Christ is to have any impact in the wider society. The alternative is for East Asian Christians to cultivate a fortress mentality and withdrawing into a self-imposed ghetto.

²⁹ *For All the Peoples of Asia*, p. 326. See also art. 8.5 of BIRA IV/2, which states that "the Holy Spirit is operative in other religions as well" (*ibid.*, p. 253); and *Theological Consultation*, art. 43, which states that the religious traditions of Asia "are expressions of the presence of God's Word and of the universal action of his Spirit in them" (*ibid.*, p. 344).

³⁰ *For All the Peoples of Asia*, p. 115.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 310.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 259.

³³ Thangaraj, *The Crucified Guru*, p. 139.

II.

The Confucian World of East Asia

The Chinese civilization, which is still very much alive and vibrant today, arose contemporaneously with the Egyptian, Babylonian, and Indus Valley civilizations, and before the birth of the Greek civilization, the cradle of European philosophy. For thousands of years, the Chinese civilization has prided itself as the "Middle Kingdom" (*Zhongguo*), the center of the inhabited world, "a civilised oasis surrounded by what was thought to be a cultural desert."³⁴ Undergirding the Chinese civilization and shaping the worldview of Chinese people for more than two millennia is the Confucian tradition.³⁵ The impact of the Confucian tradition has been felt far beyond the borders of China as it spread under the influence of the Chinese literate culture into the East Asian region as a whole, as well as East Asian *émigré* communities in Southeast Asia, Europe, Oceania, and the Americas.³⁶ More significantly, Tu Wei-ming highlights the fact that Confucianism has "exerted profound influence on East Asian political culture as well as on East Asian spiritual life," leaving "an indelible mark on the government, society, education, and family of East Asia," such that "the Sinic world (including industrial and socialist East Asia – Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, mainland China, North Korea, and Vietnam) has been characterized as 'Confucian'."³⁷ Thus, the Confucian tradition is still very much alive and influential in East Asia, intertwined within the socio-cultural and political lives of millions of East Asians, and nourishing their spiritual needs.

³⁴ Julia Ching, *Chinese Religions* (Maryknoll 1993), p. 1.

³⁵ Strictly speaking, there is no exact Chinese equivalent of the term "Confucianism," a term which was originally coined by 16th century Jesuits missionaries to China as a neologism for the venerable, all-encompassing tradition rooted in the Chinese *Weltanschauung* which in Chinese is variously referred to as *rujia* (School of the Literati), *rujiao* (Traditions of the Literati), *rujue* (Teachings of the Literati), or simply as *ru* (Literati). While the vision and ideas of Confucius (Kongzi, ca. 551–479 B.C.) and his later followers such as Mencius (Mengzi, ca. 371–289 B.C.) and others played a key role in animating and enriching the *ru* tradition, the *ru* tradition itself predated Confucius. The efforts of Matteo Ricci and his companions to canonize Confucius as the "founder" of Confucianism had more to do with missiological exigencies than being an accurate description of the *ru* tradition in its socio-historical setting. In the absence of other more appropriate terms, the terms "Confucian" and "Confucianism" will be used in this essay as convenient labels for the *ru* tradition accordingly.

³⁶ Julia Ching, *Chinese Religions*, p. 1.

³⁷ Tu Wei-ming, "Confucianism," in: *Our Religions*, ed. by Arvind Sharma (San Francisco 1993), p. 146.

Confucianism continues to be regarded as a manifestation of East Asian spirituality,³⁸ albeit diffused, that has shaped and continues to shape the life-orientation of the Sinic worldview. On the one hand, it is true that the institutional Confucianism which formed the 2000-year Chinese state orthodoxy from the Han Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty was accused by early 20th century Chinese reformers of the May Fourth New Culture Movement (1919), Chinese Marxists, and Western feminists for promoting patriarchy, misogyny, authoritarianism, formalism, and hindering socio-scientific progress. On the other hand, the late Julia Ching asserted that Confucianism continues to show much vitality in East Asia, "as a new generation of Asian Christians, whether Korean or Chinese, assert themselves as Christians of Confucian background and values."³⁹ She explained that Confucianism, like other religious-philosophical systems, has its strengths and weaknesses:

If we mean by Confucianism a backward-looking ideology, sterile textual studies, a society of hierarchical relationships excluding reciprocity, the permanent dominance of parents over children and of men over women, and a social order interested only in the past and not in the future, then Confucianism is not relevant and may as well be dead. But if we mean by it a dynamic discovery of the worth of the human person, of the possibilities of moral greatness and even sagehood, of one's fundamental relationship to others in a society based on ethical values, of an interpretation of reality and a metaphysics of the self that remain open to the transcendent – all this, of course, the basis for a true sense of human dignity, freedom, and equality – then Confucianism is very relevant and can remain so, both for China and for the world.⁴⁰

Before moving ahead with the task of constructing a Confucian Christology, one would do well to heed the caution of Benoît Vermander that theologizing in the Chinese context is fraught with pitfalls because the morphology of the Chinese language does not lend itself well to precise distinctions and well-defined grammatical categories, such that "basic Western concepts such as soul, substance, modality are often translated in a rather clumsy way, whereas finding equivalents for some basic Chinese categories is a painstaking

³⁸ For a thorough discussion of this point, see the excellent collection of essays in *Confucian Spirituality*. Volume One, ed. by Tu Weiming and Mary Evelyn Tucker (New York 2003).

³⁹ Hans Küng and Julia Ching, *Christianity and Chinese Religions* (New York 1989), p. 85.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

ing endeavour."⁴¹ As Cheng Chung-ying explains, the phonetic nature of the Greek language, which separates the sensible from the non-sensible, "tends to present a world of meanings in separation from a world of concrete things," thereby leading to conceptual metaphysical abstractions more readily than the visual nature of Chinese ideographs with its "cohesion of the sensible and non-sensible," and therefore, Chinese philosophy is "non-metaphysical in the sense in which Greek, and hence Western metaphysics, is metaphysical, since what is metaphysical in the Western sense is predicated upon the separation of the sensible from the non-sensible, the practical from the transcendental."⁴² Robert Allinson puts it succinctly when he asserts that the Western culture, being "a culture that could learn to function with an alphabet language would both be more theoretically inclined and *ex post facto* conditioned to think abstractly than a culture that was inclined to, and accustomed to, thinking in terms of concrete images," as is the case with the Chinese culture.⁴³

More specifically, while Vermander is thinking of the general task of theologizing, his caution hits home in the Christological task too, because there are no specific equivalents in the Chinese philosophical-religious tradition in general, and the Confucian tradition in particular for Greek metaphysical categories which are used in classical and scholastic Christological formulations, e.g., substance, essence, nature, and person. This dilemma arises because of the fundamental differences between Western and Chinese philosophies in general, and Greek and Confucian philosophies in particular. On the one hand, the central focus of Western philosophers is the quest for Truth with a capital "T," viz., the quest to discover the true reality, essence, and substance of things. Similarly, Western theologians have endeavored to discover the true reality, essence, and substance of Jesus Christ, the ontological integrity of his divine and human natures in the one person, etc. in the context of their Christological inquiry. On the other hand, in the Sinic world, the major existential, philosophical, and religious questions always center on discovering the ultimate values which shape human living: "What

⁴¹ Benoît Vermander, "Theologizing in the Chinese Context," in: *Studia Missionalia* 45 (1996), p. 120. [See also the contribution of B. Vermander in the present volume, pp. 1421-1430. (Ed.)]

⁴² Cheng Chung-ying, "Chinese Metaphysics as Non-metaphysics: Confucian and Taoist Insights into the Nature of Reality," in: *Understanding the Chinese Mind: The Philosophical Roots*, ed. by Robert E. Allinson (Hong Kong 1989), pp. 167-168. See also Chad Hansen, "Chinese Language, Chinese Philosophy, and 'Truth'," in: *JAS* XLIV (1985), pp. 491-520.

⁴³ R.E. Allinson, "An Overview of the Chinese Mind," in: *Understanding the Chinese Mind*, p. 8.

does it mean to be human as opposed to barbarians or animals?"; "What makes life worth living as humans?"; "What are the ideals and virtues that are needed to inspire everyone from ruler to ordinary citizen to participate in the creation and maintenance of a harmonious and civilized society?"; "Where are these ideals and virtues to be found?"; "What is the Way (*dao*) to these ideals and virtues?"; "How does one seek and attain the Way?"

In his characteristic blunt style, the late Angus C. Graham argued that the crucial question for the Chinese "is not the Western philosopher's 'What is the truth?' but 'Where is the Way?'"⁴⁴ David Hall and Roger Ames have coined the terms "Truth-seekers" and "Way-seekers" to describe the Western and Chinese philosophical worldviews respectively. According to them, Western Truth-seekers "want finally to get to the bottom line, to establish facts, principles, theories that characterize the way things are," while in contrast, Chinese Way-seekers "search out those forms of action that promote harmonious social existence," because "for the Way-seekers, truth is most importantly a quality of persons, not of propositions."⁴⁵ In particular, Confucius and his successors perceived human living as a constant striving for the Way (*dao*), calling for a dynamic and relational approach to "knowing" (*zhi*)⁴⁶ that is not concerned with discovering the Truth via abstract, essentialist, and metaphysical conceptualizations, but with knowing how to be adept in one's relations with others, how to make use of the possibilities arising from these relations, and how to trust in the validity of these relations as the cornerstone for familial and social harmony. Hall and Ames explain it succinctly when they point out that "in the West, truth is a knowledge of what is real and what represents that reality," while "for the Chinese, knowledge is not abstract, but concrete; it is not representational, but performative and participatory; it is not discursive, but is, as a knowledge of the way, a kind of know-how."⁴⁷

⁴⁴ A.C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (La Salle, Ill. 1989), p. 3.

⁴⁵ David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture* (Albany, NY 1998), p. 105.

⁴⁶ Interestingly, the ideograph 知 (*zhi*, "knowing") comprises the characters 矢 (*shi*, "arrow," which is derived from an arrow pointing upwards) and 口 (*kou*, "mouth"). In other words, *zhi* 知 ("knowing") means "speaking which hits the target," a metaphor pregnant with significant relational implications. In the Sinic mind, "knowing" is not a privatized, solitary, or even psychological act of apprehension in the abstract, but a relational act – one truly knows only when one is able to "speak" aptly or appropriately about the matter to the people around oneself.

⁴⁷ Hall and Ames, *Thinking from the Han*, p. 104.

Hence, in any quest to construct a Confucian Christology of Jesus as *sage (sheng)*, one would do well to eschew a Western-Greek "Truth-seeker" approach in favor of a Sinic-Confucian "Way-seeker" approach. This would mean that such a Confucian Christology might be less inclined, not only towards issues which classical and scholastic Christology deem important, e.g., essence, substance, nature, person, unicity, uniqueness, and pre-existence, but also towards overarching, universalist concepts such as the Cosmic Christ, the Pre-existent Logos, etc. Rather, it would be interested in discovering the "Way" (*dao*) of Jesus the sage (*sheng*), what this Way entails, as well as how one can participate in and attain this Way.

III.

The Sage (*sheng*) in the Confucian Tradition

Within the Confucian tradition, the figure of the sage (*sheng*) occupies a special place as an exemplar of the perfection of human nature and the mediator between Heaven and Earth.⁴⁸ In standard Chinese-English dictionaries, the term *sheng* is typically translated as holy, sacred, wise, sagacious, sage, or wise man. Etymologically, the Chinese ideograph for the word sage 聖 comprises the characters 耳 (*er*, "ear," viz., "to hear," "to listen," or "to discern") and 呈 (*cheng*, "to speak," "to manifest," "to disclose," "to present a message," or "to proclaim"), which – in turn – comprises the characters 口 (*kou*, "mouth") and 壬 (*ting*, an archaic ideograph depicting a person, 人, standing on the ground, 土, viz., a person standing in one's place of office). The late Zhou text *Erya* characterizes the term *sheng* as "to present, exhibit, show, to be prominent" (*xian*).⁴⁹ The Han text *Baihutong* (ca. A.D. 80) depicts the sage as "possessing a Way which penetrates everywhere, a

⁴⁸ Important English language studies on the sage in the Confucian tradition include Rodney L. Taylor "Scripture and the Sage: On the Question of a Confucian Scripture," in: *ibid.*, *The Religious Dimensions of Confucianism* (Albany, NY 1990), pp. 23-37; *ibid.*, "The Sage as Saint: A Study in Religious Categories," in: *ibid.*, *The Religious Dimensions of Confucianism*, pp. 39-52; *ibid.*, "Neo-Confucianism, Sagehood and the Religious Dimension," in: *JCP* 2 (1975) 4, pp. 389-415; *ibid.*, *The Cultivation of Sagehood as a Religious Goal in Neo-Confucianism: A Study of Selected Writings of Kao Pan-lung (1562-1626)* (Missoula, Mont. 1978); Tu Weiming, "The Confucian Sage: Exemplar of Personal Knowledge," in: *ibid.*, *Way, Learning, and Politics: Essays on the Confucian Intellectual* (Albany, NY 1993), pp. 29-44; Ning Chen, "The Etymology of *Sheng* (Sage) and its Confucian Conception in Early China," in: *JCP* 27 (2000) 4, pp. 409-427.

⁴⁹ Cited in David L. Halls and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius* (Albany, NY 1987), p. 258.

brilliance which radiates everywhere,"⁵⁰ and goes further to define the sage as follows:

Sheng (sage) means *t'ung* (to communicate, to connect, to penetrate through), *tao* (the process of becoming and the mode in which it unfolds, to speak), *sheng* (to sound, sound). There is nothing that is not in communication by virtue of his *tao*; there is nothing that is not elucidated by virtue of his understanding. Hearing the sound he knows a thing's nature and conditions. He is one in potency (*te*) with heaven and earth, one in brilliance with the sun and moon, one in order with the four seasons, and one in propitiousness with the gods and spirits (*Baihutong* 6/23/5b).⁵¹

Unlike dictionaries of European languages which define words by appealing to their "essential" meanings, in the *Shuowen jiezi*, the classical Chinese language lexicon compiled by the Eastern Han Dynasty scholar Xu Shen, the word *sheng* is defined rather by an appeal to its semantic and phonetic association to the word *tong* ("to communicate with," "to pass through," or "to penetrate"):

Sheng 聖 means *t'ung* 通: to communicate with, to commune with, to be conversant with, to penetrate, to connect. It derives semantically from *erh*, "ear," and takes its pronunciation from the *ch'eng* 呈 component.⁵²

The original meaning of the term *sheng* has been the subject of much debate. According to the *Shuowen* lexicon, this term is a *xinsheng* (logographic) character,⁵³ viz.,

deriving semantically from the ear graph *er* [耳] which has something to do with hearing, and phonetically from the *cheng* [呈] component, which often denotes the meaning of "to manifest" or "to reveal" in classical Chinese.⁵⁴

Using the insights gleaned from William G. Boltz's research on the Ma-wangdui *Laozi* manuscripts,⁵⁵ where the character 聖 is written as *sheng* 聲

⁵⁰ Cited in Julia Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity: A Comparative Study* (Tokyo 1977), p. 80.

⁵¹ English translation taken from Halls and Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, p. 258. See also Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity*, p. 80.

⁵² The English translation of the *Shuowen jiezi* is taken from Halls and Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, p. 257.

⁵³ Logographic characters are the most common Chinese characters, combining both semantic and phonetic components which suggest the meaning and the sound respectively.

⁵⁴ Ning Chen, "The Etymology of *Sheng* (Sage)," p. 409.

⁵⁵ See "The religious and philosophical significance of the *Hsiang erh Lao Tzu* in the light of Ma-wang-tui silk manuscripts," in: *BSOAS* 45 (1982), pp. 101-102.

("sound," "voice") in Mawangdui *Laozi* Text A, and as 耳口 in Mawangdui *Laozi* Text B, David Hall and Roger Ames have challenged the *Shuowen* lexicon's characterization of the term *sheng* as logographic, characterizing it instead as *huiyi* (ideographic),⁵⁶ where both elements of the character *sheng* 聖 - "listening" (耳), and "disclosing" or "expressing" (口 in Mawangdui *Laozi* Text A, and 呈 in the final form of the character), contribute to the meaning of the word.⁵⁷ On this basis, Hall and Ames conclude that the sage embodies both aurality and orality.

While the *Shuowen*'s definition of the term *sheng* emphasizes the "listening" aspect (viz., 耳 "ear"/"to listen" as semantic), Hall and Ames suggest that as the embodiment of aurality and orality, the sage is a "master communicator" who "first listens, then speaks."⁵⁸

Another scholar, Rodney L. Taylor, made a similar etymological study and agrees that the phonetic *cheng* 呈 also carries the meaning of "manifest," coming to the conclusion that the sage is one who thoroughly understands things in general, and the Heaven or the Way of Heaven in particular.⁵⁹ He further asserts that the sage is one "who hears the Way of Heaven and in addition manifests or reveals it to humankind."⁶⁰ While Taylor made this assertion of an intimate connection between the sage and Heaven based on the *Shuowen* lexicon and its commentarial tradition, the subsequent textual critical work that Ning Chen has carried out with regard to the much older Guodian Confucian texts confirms Taylor's assertion.⁶¹ In a similar

⁵⁶ An ideographic (*huiyi*) character derives its meaning from all its elements, e.g., the character "good" (*hao* 好) comprises the characters for "woman" (*nü* 女) and "child" (*zi* 子).

⁵⁷ Hall and Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, p. 258, and esp. pp. 362-363, n. 13.

⁵⁸ Hall and Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, pp. 259, 300.

⁵⁹ Rodney L. Taylor, "Scripture and the Sage: On the Question of a Confucian Scripture," p. 24.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ As Ning Chen explains, "the notion of *tian dao* ['Way of Heaven'] is brought to the culmination of all virtues and is at the same time described as the merit of transforming or moralizing many others, a merit exclusively associated with the sage. ... [T]he claim made in the *Wuxing* that 'the sage knows the Way of Heaven' (strip 26), which is found for the first time in reliable pre-Qin literature, should be taken to mean that the sage understands his mission decreed by Heaven. ... A sentence quoted by the author of the *Cheng zhi when zhi*, 'the sage is of heavenly virtues' (strip 37) is explained in similar tones. Hence, the sage is depicted as he who cultivates himself (*shen qiu zhi yu ji*) and follows the 'constant of Heaven,' *tianchang*, whereby to 'put human relations in order,' *li renlun* (strips 31, 37-38). In the words of the author of the *Tangyu zhi dao*, 'In serving Heaven above, the sage teaches the people to possess

the virtue of paying deference' (strip 4)." See Ning Chen, "The Etymology of *Sheng* (Sage)," pp. 416-417.

vein, in her study of the concept of the sage, Julia Ching was of the opinion that "[t]he sage was the person who heard the voice or the words of the spirits, or the deity, and then transmitted it to others with his own mouth."⁶² For Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., the "*shengren* (聖人) is a virtuoso of communication, 'listening (*er* 耳)' and 'presenting ideas (*cheng* 呈)' that not only come to define the human experience, but which further have cosmic implications."⁶³ Going further, David Hall and Roger Ames draw attention to the *Baihutong*, which identifies a spiritual dimension of the sage: "The reason why the sage alone is able to foresee the future is because he shares in the concentrated essence of the spirits [*shen* 神]."⁶⁴

An alternative understanding of the term *sheng* has been put forward by Ning Chen, who takes issue with the interpretation of the term *sheng* by David Hall and Roger Ames, Julia Ching and Rodney Taylor, because these scholars rely heavily on the *Shuowen* lexicon, and do not pay sufficient attention to the Shang oracle bone inscriptions and Zhou Dynasty epigraphic texts.⁶⁵ According to Chen, the *Shuowen* description of the graphical form of *sheng* as being composed of *er* 耳 and *cheng* 呈 is a late phenomenon that can only be traced back to the period of the Warring States (481-221 B.C.). His arguments may be summarized as follows: While it is true that the Shang oracle bone inscriptions reveal several variants of the character *sheng* 聖, nevertheless the *cheng* 呈 component was definitely not part of the original

the virtue of paying deference' (strip 4)." See Ning Chen, "The Etymology of *Sheng* (Sage)," pp. 416-417.

⁶² Julia Ching, "The Ancient Sages (*sheng*): Their Identity and their Place in Chinese Intellectual History," in: *Oriens Extremus* 30 (1983-1986), p. 14.

⁶³ *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, trans. by Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr. (New York 1998), pp. 62-63.

⁶⁴ *Baihutong*, 6/23/7b, cited in Hall and Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, p. 260. Hall and Ames further explain: "The etymology of this term, *shen*, is suggestive of the extending, integrating, and enriching that the sage brings to his relationships with other aggregate selves. The character is constituted of the radicals, *shih* 示, 'to display,' and *shen* 申, 'to stretch,' 'to extend,' interchangeable with its archaic homophone, *yin* 引, 'to draw out,' 'to stretch,' 'to guide.' If we understand the sage's extension and integration as being the source of meaning in the world, it is not difficult to explain the fact that *shen* means both human spirituality and divinity, and that it is frequently associated with the rhyming *t'ien* 天, commonly rendered 'Heaven.' That is, as a person exercises himself as a source of meaning, he moves toward divinity. Further, this extension and integration implicates the whole: as his particular focus (*te* 德) intensifies, man and heaven become one (*t'ien-jen ho-yi* 天人合一)" (*ibid.*).

⁶⁵ Ning Chen, "The Etymology of *Sheng* (Sage)," pp. 409-427. What follows in the next two paragraphs is a summary of Chen's principal arguments.

character *sheng* at all. Around the time of the Spring and Autumn Period (722–481 B.C.), the variants eventually coalesced into a form where the *ting* 壬 component is attached to the *er* 耳 graph. Only in the Warring States period did scribes consistently write the *ting* (壬) component under the *kou* 口, giving rise to the *cheng* 呈 component.

For Chen, the identification of the term *sheng* with “a religious person with the unusual and extraordinary capability of mediating between the supernatural world and human society” is anachronistic,⁶⁶ because the Shang oracle bone inscriptions had used this term in the sense of the verb “to hear,” and by extension, “to listen to state affairs,” and as a noun in the sense of “sound” or “news.”⁶⁷ It was only during the period of the Western Zhou dynasty that the meaning of the word shifted to being wise and sagacious.⁶⁸ Hence, because “the ‘root meaning’ of *sheng* is not that of ‘manifestation,’ however, the characteristic of the sage to follow and reveal heavenly messages or the Way of Heaven should be viewed as a late phenomenon.”⁶⁹ It was quite probable that the Han scholar Xu Shen, because he might not have had access to the Shang oracle texts and Zhou epigraphic sources, may have assumed that the new form of *sheng* was its original and perpetuated this mistake when he built his interpretation on this new form in the *Shuowen* lexicon. On this basis, Chen concludes that “any attempt to re-interpret the *sheng* character by stressing the role of the *cheng* component would be a further mistake,” and “the argument that *sheng* originally referred to a person with the ability of ‘manifesting’ (*cheng*) divine messages” was “a late phenomenon and was created by Confucians.”⁷⁰

On the one hand, Chen is correct in saying that historically, the original meaning of the word *sheng* as found in the Shang oracle bone inscriptions differs from that of the *Shuowen* lexicon. On the other hand, he acknowledges that since the Warring States period, the meaning of *sheng* had shifted to that which was stated in the *Shuowen* lexicon. Because language is not a static, fixed, and unchanging system, but rather, a dynamic system where the meaning of words changes over a period of time, one cannot look back merely to the original meaning of any term. Rather, one has to take into consideration the changes in its meaning over the passage of time. What is clear, therefore, is the fact that since the Warring States period, when the final form of the character *sheng* was fixed as 聖, the term has come to ex-

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 410.

⁶⁷ See discussion in *ibid.*, pp. 412–414.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 414.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 410.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

press a sage who listens to, as well as manifests or proclaims the Way of Heaven. It is this later meaning of sage that we consistently find in the Confucian tradition as well as in popular understanding, rather than the original meaning as found in the Shang oracle bone inscriptions. Hence, we will use this later meaning of *sheng* in the rest of our discussion here.

In the *Analects* (*Lunyu*), the sole extant source of Confucius’ teachings, the sage represents an ideal character at the highest pinnacle of human achievement. According to the eminent scholar D.C. Lau, this “ideal is so high that it is hardly ever realized.”⁷¹ Indeed, the *Analects* portray Confucius’ understanding of the sage as representing the fullness of human perfection which goes far beyond even that of “exemplary persons” (*junzi*), resulting in a perspective which elevates sagehood to the point where it is beyond the reach of most humans. Within the *Analects*, the term *sheng* occurs in the following verses: 6:30 (a sage is one who confers benefits on, and assists all peoples); 7:26 (Confucius laments that he has never, and probably never will, meet a sage); 7:34 (Confucius declines to consider himself a sage); 9:6 (Confucius chastises his disciple Zigong for equating him with a sage); 16:8 (the words of the sages are held in awe by “exemplary persons,” *junzi*); 19:12 (the sage alone walks on the path [*dao*] from the beginning to the end).

In his critical analysis of the passages dealing with the sage in the *Analects*, Rodney Taylor discovers that the sage in the *Analects* appears to be restricted to the ancient sage kings Yao, Shun, and Yü.⁷² Interestingly, it appears that Confucius never accorded the title of *sheng* to his heroes from the Zhou dynasty, namely, Wen, Wu, and the Duke of Zhou, although they were “paradigms of virtuous rule” for others to emulate.⁷³ On this basis, Taylor has identified four implications which necessarily flow from this observation: (i) sages are figures removed from ordinary time and space, and therefore different from ordinary people; (ii) there is no suggestion that one can attain the state of sagehood; (iii) as figures from antiquity, sages “were thought to have acted on the basis of their direct apprehension of the Way of Heaven”; and (iv) sages “remained as exemplary figures, a high ideal for humankind to emulate.”⁷⁴ Hence, Taylor takes the position that “[t]he sage for Confucius was, thus, of greatest significance, and the attempt to articulate the way of the sages to his own generation remained Confucius’ pri-

⁷¹ *Confucius: The Analects*, 2nd ed., trans. by D.C. Lau (Hong Kong 1992), p. xiii.

⁷² Taylor, “The Sage as Saint: A Study in Religious Categories,” p. 41.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

mary goal.”⁷⁵ The sage, as envisaged by Confucius, is “an example both of something, as an embodiment of the Way of Heaven, and an example to someone, as a model for emulation.”⁷⁶

At the same time, mention should be made of *Analects* 6:30, which suggests that a sage is one who is able to care for and assist all peoples without distinction or differentiation:

Zigong said: “What about the person who is broadly generous with the people and is able to help the multitude – is this what we could call authoritative conduct (*ren*)?” The Master replied, “Why stop at authoritative conduct? This is certainly a sage (*sheng*). Even a Yao or Shun would find such a task daunting.”⁷⁷

Commenting on this text, Li Chenyang suggests: “[a]pparently, only sages are able to practice universal love. It is noble and admirable but far beyond ordinary people’s moral horizon. For ordinary person, the highest moral ideal is *jen*, not sagehood.”⁷⁸

Elsewhere, David Hall and Roger Ames suggest that the sage who is presented in the *Analects* is “one who transforms the world by what he says,”⁷⁹ a point which is seen especially in *Analects* 16:8, which reads:

Confucius said: “Exemplary persons (*junzi*) hold three things in awe: the propensities of *tian* (*tianming*), persons in high station, and the words of sages (*shengren*). Petty persons, knowing nothing of the propensities of *tian*, do not hold it in awe; they are unduly familiar with persons in high station, and ridicule the words of the sages.”⁸⁰

More importantly, they conclude that “whether or not Confucius believed that he himself had achieved sagehood, there can be little doubt that the text seeks to portray him in that way.”⁸¹ Later tradition would elevate Confucius to sagehood, such that within the Confucian tradition, Confucius becomes the sage *par excellence* (see, e.g., *Mencius* 2A:2; 3B:9; 5B:1; 7B:38), culminating in the conferral of the title “Perfect Sage Ancient Master” (*zhisheng xianshi*) on Confucius by the Emperor Shizong on 4 December 1530.⁸²

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁷⁷ English translation from Ames and Rosemont, *The Analects of Confucius*, p. 110.

⁷⁸ Li Chenyang, “Confucian *Jen* and Feminist Care,” in: *The Tao Encounters the West. Explorations in Comparative Philosophy* (Albany, NY 1999), p. 105.

⁷⁹ David L. Halls and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, p. 259.

⁸⁰ English translation from Ames and Rosemont, *The Analects of Confucius*, p. 198.

⁸¹ Halls and Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*, p. 256.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 257.

Moving on to the *Book of Mencius* (*Mengzi*), we find that the term *sheng* occurs frequently in comparison with the *Analects*. According to Rodney Taylor, the term *sheng* appears 47 times in the Book of Mencius.⁸³ In contrast to Confucius, Mencius effected a paradigm shift in the understanding of sage from Confucius’ idealization of sages as ancient exemplars to the ultimate goal of self-cultivation that is within human reach in the present reality (see, e.g., *Mencius* 2A:2; 4A:2; 6B:2). For Mencius, “the sage, too, is the same in kind as other men. Though one of their kind, he stands far above the crowd” (*Mencius* 2A:2, cf. 6A:7).⁸⁴ In addition, Mencius suggests that “the sage is a teacher of a hundred generations” (*Mencius* 7B:15).⁸⁵ In 3B:9, Mencius appears to suggest that a sage is one who also combats false teachings. More importantly, a sage is someone who is “great and transformed by greatness,” and who when going beyond the understanding of others, becomes divine, suggesting that sageliness (*sheng*) and divinity or godliness (*shen*) are two end goals of personal self-cultivation (*Mencius* 7B:25):

The desirable is called “good” [*shan*]. To have it in oneself is called “true” [*xin*]. To possess it fully in oneself is called “beautiful” [*mei*], but to shine forth with this full possession is called “great” [*da*]. To be great and be transformed by this greatness is called “sage” [*sheng*]; to be sage and to transcend the understanding is called “divine” [*shen*].⁸⁶

Commenting on the foregoing, Rodney Taylor concludes that “Mencius, in suggesting that anyone could become a Yao or Shun, left open the possibility that through rigorous learning and self-cultivation one could, in fact, become a sage,” and therefore, “the ideal of the sage changed from a figure locked in antiquity to a potentially realizable goal for any person.”⁸⁷ Underlying this change was a new understanding of human nature which accepted that sages such as Yao and Shun were no different than other human beings because “all humanity possessed the same basic nature of goodness that was instilled in each by Heaven.”⁸⁸

Yao Xinzong agrees, suggesting that for Mencius sagehood “is the perfection of humanity, which comes as the result of self-cultivation. A sage is

⁸³ Taylor, “The Sage as Saint: A Study in Religious Categories,” p. 42.

⁸⁴ English translation from *Mencius*, trans. D.C. Lau (London 1970), p. 80.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

⁸⁷ Taylor, “The Sage as Saint: A Study in Religious Categories,” p. 43.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

essentially a perfect man who, by exerting his *jen*, penetrates and understands all things and makes the Way prevail in the world."⁸⁹

The *Doctrine of the Mean (Zhongyong)*, traditionally ascribed to Confucius' grandson Zisi, also presents an understanding of the sage which is similar to the *Book of Mencius*, as the following passages reveal:

Sincerity [*cheng*] is the Way of Heaven. To think how to be sincere is the way of man. He who is sincere is one who hits upon what is right without effort and apprehends without thinking. He is naturally and easily in harmony with the Way. Such a man is a sage. He who tries to be sincere is one who chooses the good and holds fast to it. (*Doctrine of the Mean*, 20)⁹⁰

Only those who are absolutely sincere can fully develop their nature. If they can fully develop their nature, they can then fully develop the nature of others. If they can fully develop the nature of others, they can then fully develop the nature of things. If they can fully develop the nature of things, they can then assist in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth. If they can assist in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth, they can thus form a trinity with Heaven and Earth. (*Doctrine of the Mean*, 22)⁹¹

Great is the Way of the sage! Overflowing, it produces and nourishes all things and rises up to the height of heaven. How exceedingly great! [It embraces] the three thousand rules of ceremonies and the three thousand rules of conduct. It waits for the proper man before it can be put into practice. Therefore, it is said, "Unless there is perfect virtue, the perfect Way cannot be materialized. (*Doctrine of the Mean*, 27)⁹²

The Neo-Confucian thinkers of the Song-Ming era also regarded sagehood as the epitome of human perfectibility, "an ideal that stood as the endpoint of the cultivation and learning process," "the full realization and development of the potential of human nature or mind," and "for many Neo-Confucians, the focus of their lives became this quest for sagehood."⁹³ For example, in his *Diagram of the Great Ultimate (Taijitu shuo)*, Zhou Dunyi (1017-1073) presents the sage as the "ultimate of humanity":

The sage settles these [affairs] with centrality, correctness, humaneness, and rightness (the Way of the Sage is simply humaneness, rightness, centrality,

⁸⁹ Yao Xinzong, *Confucianism and Christianity: A Comparative Study of Jen and Agape* (Brighton, England 1996), p. 134.

⁹⁰ English translation from *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, trans. by Chan Wing-tsit (Princeton, NJ 1963), p. 107.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 107-108.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁹³ Taylor, "The Sage as Saint: A Study in Religious Categories," p. 43.

and correctness) and emphasizes stillness. ... In doing so he establishes the ultimate of humanity. Thus the sage's "virtue equals that of Heaven and Earth; his clarity equals that of the sun and moon; his timeliness equals that of the four seasons; his good fortune and bad fortune equal those of ghosts and spirits. The superior person (*junzi*) cultivates these and has good fortune. The inferior person rejects these and has bad fortune."⁹⁴

That which is "completely silent and inactive" is authenticity. That which "penetrates when stimulated" is spirit (*shen*). That which is active but not yet formed, between existing and not existing, is incipient. Authenticity is of the essence (*jing*), and therefore clear. Spirit is responsive, and therefore mysterious. Incipience is subtle, and therefore obscure. One who is authentic, spiritual, and incipient is called a sage.⁹⁵

To summarize: while it is true that Confucius originally defined sages as the ancient sage kings of Chinese antiquity, from Mencius onwards to the Neo-Confucian thinkers, sagehood came to be understood as a goal which is universally attainable. Clearly, the foundation of the Neo-Confucian understanding of sagehood is the possibility of attaining human perfectibility, because all human beings share the same nature as the ancient sage-kings, and their incipient human nature can be perfected by moral self-cultivation after the example of Confucius and Mencius, sages *par excellence*. For Confucians of all stripes and persuasion, the figure of the perfect Sage brings the way of humans into accord with the Way of Heaven.⁹⁶ Hence, the Confucian sage is an exemplar of perfection who attains moral excellence without losing his humanity. As Mencius sees it, a sage is one who is able to transform himself into one who is good, true, beautiful, great, sagely, and divine (*Mencius* 7B:25).

Although sagehood is attainable, it is by no means an easy feat.⁹⁷ Even the great Neo-Confucian thinker of the Song Dynasty, Zhu Xi (1138-1200), conceded: "When I was in my early teens, I read how Mencius said sages are not different from us. I was happy beyond words, thinking that it is easy to become a sage. Only now have I realized how difficult this is."⁹⁸

⁹⁴ English translation from *Sources of Chinese Tradition*. Vol I: *From Earliest Times to 1600*, comp. by William Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom (New York 1999), p. 675.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 677-678.

⁹⁶ Yao, *Confucianism and Christianity*, p. 60.

⁹⁷ As Yao Xinzong (*ibid.*, p. 136) rightly points out: "In Confucianism, everybody is said to be perfectible. On the other hand, however, well one may do, one is very unlikely to be said to be perfect. In fact, very few are given the title of sage within the Confucian tradition."

⁹⁸ *Zhuzi yulei* 朱子語類 (Classified Conversations of Zhu Xi), 104:1a, quoted in Julia Ching, *The Religious Thought of Chu Hsi* (Oxford 2000), p. 93.

IV.

Jesus, the Crucified and Risen Sage

To the peoples of East Asia who are deeply steeped in the Confucian tradition, the image of Jesus as a sage or *sheng* is profoundly evocative and very meaningful. Beginning with the symbolic power of the ideograph *sheng* 聖, which those schooled in the Indo-European and Semitic languages often fail to appreciate, East Asians are invariably reminded that Jesus the sage is one who listens to or discerns (*er* 耳) the Wisdom of Heaven and then manifests and proclaims (*cheng* 呈) what he has heard to all humanity. Just as a *sheng* discerns the "Way of Heaven" (*tiandao*) and then manifests it to others, so too, Jesus *discerns* the Way of his Father, the Lord of Heaven (*tianzhudao*), which is described in the Gospels as the nearness of the Reign of God, proclaims it in his preaching and manifests it in his life to all peoples. This understanding is deeply rooted in the Christian scriptural tradition, which reminds us that the earliest followers of Jesus in the Acts of the Apostles were referred to as "followers of the Way" (see, e.g., Acts 9:2), before being subsequently called "Christians" (see Acts 11:26).

From Confucius, one gets an understanding of sages as exemplars of moral-ethical perfection to be *imitated by others*. For Confucius, sages were primarily the primeval sage-kings of Chinese antiquity who alone were able to fulfill their mission completely (viz., walk on the path [*dao*] from the beginning to the end, cf. *Analects* 19:12) by transforming the world with their proclamation (cf. *Analects* 16:8), as well as assisting and conferring benefits on all peoples without any distinction or differentiation (cf. *Analects* 6:30). Moral perfectibility is identified as striving for, embodying, and practising the "Way of the Sage" [*shengren zhi dao*] in one's life (cf. *Doctrine of the Mean*, 27).

Jesus, as a sage, also came to fulfill the mission for which he was sent by his Father in Heaven. This mission involved proclaiming the nearness of the Reign of God to his hearers, as well as assisting and conferring benefits on all peoples without any distinction or differentiation. More significantly, just as a sage in the Confucian tradition is an exemplar of moral-perfection to be imitated by others without any age, gender, or social restrictions, so too, all followers of Jesus – male and female, old and young, etc. – are called to fully imitate his life.⁹⁹ For example, Paul exhorted the Christians in

⁹⁹ In this respect, it is submitted that the image of Jesus as sage is preferable to the image of Jesus as "eldest son" and ancestor within the Confucian tradition because the image of eldest son performing his duty of filial piety by offering the ancestral sacrifice within the Confucian tradition stresses those aspects of the eldest son which are associated with his maleness and raises problematic issues about the position and roles of women, who were traditionally excluded in the patrilineal and patriarchal orien-

Corinth to "be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1, cf. 1 Cor 4:16, 1 Thess 1:6). As Julia Ching reminds us, Christians regard "Jesus Christ especially as a model, for personal imitation. Christian life has always referred to the following of Christ."¹⁰⁰ In Robert Cummings Neville's opinion:

imitating the character and work of Jesus, adapting that to your own situation ... requires taking on a character in action, loving enemies, glorifying God while enduring such sufferings and persecutions as crucifixion, and keeping focus, faith, and fervor for the mission of reconciliation and the ignition of love. The point is that, for Christians, Jesus had the fullness of divinity as fit for human beings, and by becoming more Christ-like you become more divine in that humanly fit sense. *The attainment of virtue by taking on Christ's virtue is not all that different in form from the Confucian project of filial piety as taking on the virtue of parents, ultimately of the sages.*¹⁰¹

Neville goes on to explain that this imitation of Christ is a quest for attaining holiness or sageliness, and its method is practice, i.e., "formation of habits that clear up your character so that the virtue of some previous concrete, particular person – your parents, the Great emperors Shun or Yu, or Jesus – becomes appropriately embodied in your own life."¹⁰²

There are two important insights that Mencius contributes to the Confucian understanding of sagehood. On the one hand, sages are more than just exemplars of moral perfection – they are human too, possessing the same nature (*renxing*) as ordinary human beings (see *Mencius* 2A:2, 6A:7). On the other hand, the sage in Mencian thought embodies *both* the qualities of sageliness (*sheng* 聖) and divinity or godliness (*shen* 神) (see *Mencius* 7B:25). The *Doctrine of the Mean* expresses the interrelationship between sageliness and divinity by saying that the sage forms a trinity (or triad) between heaven and earth (see *Doctrine of the Mean*, 22). In other words, in the person of the sage, both the human and heavenly are united. As a sage, Jesus, too, unites the human and divine within himself. While he is truly human, viz., as a sage his humanity is never in doubt or denied, he is also

tation of Confucian ancestor worship. The image of Jesus as sage circumvents these difficulties, because the sage in the Confucian tradition, by definition, is all-inclusive and gender-neutral, viz., everyone is called to sagehood and to cultivate sageliness within one's personal self-cultivation. See Peter C. Phan, "The Christ of Asia (An essay on Jesus as the eldest son and ancestor)," in: *Studia Missionalia* 45 (1996), pp. 25-55.

¹⁰⁰ Ching, *Confucianism and Christianity*, p. 79.

¹⁰¹ Robert Cummings Neville, *Boston Confucianism: Portable Tradition in the Late-Modern World* (Albany, NY 2000), p. 200. Emphasis added.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 201.

fully divine (*shen*), in that his divinity becomes a crucial, defining aspect of his sagehood. Moreover, as a sage, Jesus becomes the mediator between heaven and earth who embodies and exemplifies the "Way, the Truth and the Life" (Jn 14:6).

There are also biblical precedents for understanding Jesus as a sage. In 1994, the New Testament scholar Ben Witherington, III, came out with a groundbreaking monograph entitled *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom*,¹⁰³ where he argues the case for understanding Jesus as a sage within the sapiential tradition of Ben Sira, the Wisdom of Solomon, and Ecclesiastes (Qoheleth). What Witherington does is to uncover a portrait of Jesus as a Jewish prophetic sage who, after the style of Ben Sira, Qoheleth, and Pseudo-Solomon, drew upon and integrated the rich and multifaceted Jewish sapiential and prophetic traditions in his ministry and preaching.¹⁰⁴ According to him, "what makes sage the most appropriate and comprehensive term for describing Jesus, is that he either casts his teaching in a recognizably sapiential form (e.g., an aphorism, or beatitude, or riddle), or uses the prophetic adaptation of sapiential speech – the narrative *mashal*."¹⁰⁵

Taking the argument a step further, Witherington suggests that Jesus the sage went one step further and identified himself as the "embodiment of Wisdom in the flesh," believing that "he did not merely announce the in-breaking of God's dominion on earth, he believed that he brought it, and thus in some sense even embodied it."¹⁰⁶ As Witherington explains:

What is especially daring about the idea of Jesus taking the personification of Wisdom and suggesting that he was the living embodiment of it, is that while a prophet might be seen as a *mashal* or prophetic sign, no one, so far as one can tell, up to that point in early Judaism had dared to suggest that he was a human embodiment of an attribute of God – God's Wisdom. ... Some explanation for this remarkable and anomalous development must be given, and the best, though by no means the only, explanation of this fact is that Jesus presented himself as both sage and the message of the sage – God's Wisdom.¹⁰⁷

Commenting on Witherington's well-reasoned arguments, Roger Haight states:

The term "sage," then, is the most appropriate and comprehensive category for categorizing Jesus. Even though he used other traditions, prophetic, eschatological, and so on, Jesus cast the material in sapiential forms. For this

¹⁰³ Ben Witherington, III, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom* (Minneapolis 1994).

¹⁰⁴ Witherington's complete discussion of Jesus as sage is found in *ibid.*, pp. 117-208.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 204. For the complete discussion, see *ibid.*, pp. 202-208.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

reason "sage" is heuristically the most all-encompassing and satisfying genre of Jesus.¹⁰⁸

Although Haight's insights of Jesus as "sage" pertain to Jesus' sagehood within the Jewish sapiential tradition, his comments are just as significant and affirming for Confucian East Asians who endeavor to understand Jesus as sage (*sheng*) *par excellence* and who would agree with him that "sage" is heuristically the most all-encompassing and satisfying genre of Jesus."

Nonetheless, it is insufficient merely to call Jesus a sage, even a divine sage or perfect sage. As we have seen, it goes without saying that divinity and perfectibility are two defining characteristics of sagehood within the Confucian tradition. There is nothing uniquely Christian in saying that Jesus is a perfect and divine sage. Hence, it is submitted that for Confucian East Asian Christians, Jesus is best seen as the crucified and risen sage, an image that *juxtaposes* the paschal mystery (viz., the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus) within a Confucian-Christian understanding of Jesus as sage *par excellence*. When we say that Jesus is the crucified and risen sage, we attest to the fact that his death and resurrection represent the climax of his sagely mission to proclaim the Way of the Lord of Heaven, viz., the Reign of God to all peoples.

In particular, within the Confucian world, the image of Jesus as a crucified and risen sage is poignant and powerful for three reasons. First, historically many Confucian literati had great difficulty accepting the crucifixion of Christ, which for them was the biggest stumbling block to their embrace of Christianity, although they had no difficulty admiring his moral-ethical teachings.¹⁰⁹ In his work *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, Jonathan D. Spence paints a vivid picture of the Confucian literati's abhorrence of the crucifixion:

¹⁰⁸ Roger Haight, *Jesus, Symbol of God* (Maryknoll 1999), p. 70.

¹⁰⁹ For critical discussions on this point, see Erik Zürcher, "Guilio Aleni et ses relations dans le milieu des lettrés chinois au XVIIe siècle," in: *Venezia e l'Oriente*, ed. L. Lanciotti (Firenze 1987), pp. 107-135; *ibid.*, "A Complement to Confucianism: Christianity and Orthodoxy in Late Imperial China," in: *Norms and the State in China*, ed. by Chun-Chieh Huang and Erik Zürcher (Leiden 1993), pp. 71-92; *ibid.*, "Jesus Accommodation and the Chinese Cultural Imperative," in: *The Chinese Rites Controversy: Its History and Meaning*, ed. by David E. Mungello (Sankt Augustin – Nettetal 1994), pp. 31-64; *ibid.*, "The Two Faces of Late Ming Christianity in Confucian and Christian Religiosity in Late Ming China," in: *Catholic Historical Review* 83 (1997) 4, pp. 614-653; Paul A. Rule, "Does Heaven Speak? Revelation in the Confucian and Christian Traditions," in: *China and Christianity: Burdened Past, Hopeful Future*, ed. by Stephen Uhalley, Jr. and Xiaoxin Wu (Armonk, NY 2001), pp. 63-79.

One crucifix, which Ricci was carrying in his private baggage, must have been small yet vividly real in the style of the late sixteenth century, designed to give maximum immediacy to the man contemplating it ... The eunuch who found it, however – that same Ta Tang who had admired the Virgin's picture – suspected black magic and shouted aloud, "This is a wicked thing you have made, to kill our king, they cannot be good people who practice such arts." ... The main difficulty was, as Ricci noted with honesty, that the eunuch "truly thought it was something evil" and that in the face of the hostile crowd Ricci found it hard to marshal an adequate explanation of the significance of Christ crucified.¹¹⁰

Not surprisingly, Matteo Ricci carefully skirted the crucifixion in his *magnum opus*, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven (Tianzhu shiyi)*.¹¹¹ In the only discussion of the incarnation and ascension in this work, Ricci wrote (*Tianzhu shiyi*, no. 580):

[The Lord of Heaven] thereupon acted with great compassion, descended to this world Himself to save it, and experienced everything [experienced by man]. One thousand six hundred and three years ago, in the year Keng-shen, in the second year after Emperor Ai of the Han dynasty adopted the reign title Yüan-shou, on the third day following the winter solstice, He selected a chaste woman who had never experienced sexual intercourse to be His mother, became incarnate within her and was born. His name was Jesus, the meaning of which is "the one who saves the world." He established His own teachings and taught for thirty-three years in the West. He then reascended to Heaven. These were the concrete actions of the Lord of Heaven.¹¹²

Clearly, no mention is made here of Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection, only the fact that he descended, he taught, and he reascended to Heaven. In this regard, Erik Zürcher points to the existence of what he calls "Confucian monotheism," or "*Tianzhuism*," in which Christianity is virtually reduced to an overarching belief in the Lord of Heaven *sans* Jesus Christ and the paschal mystery, viz., Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection.¹¹³ Hence, the image of Jesus as a crucified and risen sage acts as a necessary corrective and an insistent emphasis on the paschal mystery as *de rigueur* of any Christological understanding of Jesus and his salvific mission.

¹¹⁰ Jonathan D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York 1984), p. 246.

¹¹¹ For a critical English-Chinese edition, see Matteo Ricci, *The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven (T'ien-chu Shih-i)*, trans. by Douglas Lancashire and Peter Hu Kuo-chen, ed. by Edward J. Malatesta (St. Louis 1985).

¹¹² English translation in *ibid.*, p. 449. For Chinese text, see *ibid.*, p. 448.

¹¹³ Zürcher, "Jesuit Accommodation and the Chinese Cultural Imperative," p. 50.

This leads us to our second reason, namely, the image of Jesus as a *crucified and risen sage* is a forceful testimony that Jesus' death is not a tragic end to his sagely mission, but rather, it is the highest embodiment of universal love and self-sacrifice which leads to the resurrection, a powerful symbol of victory over death. Certainly Stephen Bevans hits the nail squarely on its head when he insists on the centrality of the cross and the paschal mystery to the Christian life.¹¹⁴ The clear and lucid arguments of Thomas Thangaraj, although made within the context of his formulation of a guru Christology within a Saiva Siddhanta-Christian dialogue, also hold true for our discussion. Thangaraj argues that if the Jesus story had ended with his crucifixion, it would have remained but a tragic tale. However, it was because Jesus' crucifixion was followed by the resurrection, ascension, and Pentecost events that his life, ministry, and death was reinterpreted:

No longer was it the tragic and unfortunate death of a guru. The cross became the supreme and climatic point at which the guru was to be seen as being fully himself – the embodiment of what he taught and did. It became a symbol of the guru's victory of sin and death. By his powerlessness on the cross, the guru gives a fresh and novel understanding of wherein lay true power – the power of love and self-sacrifice.¹¹⁵

Consequently, Thangaraj asserts that Jesus' death was the embodiment of his life and mission as guru, a powerful symbol of victory over death, a power of love and self-sacrifice. For Thangaraj, the "resurrection of the guru was seen as the divine vindication of what Jesus stood for. This is why the early Christians referred to Jesus' resurrection not as Jesus himself rising from the dead, but rather as God raising Jesus from the dead and appointing him guru for all."¹¹⁶ In the words of Peter preaching to the crowd on the first Pentecost:

Jesus the Nazarene was a man commended to you by God with mighty deeds, wonders, and signs, which God worked through him in your midst, as you yourself know. This man, delivered up by the set plan and foreknowledge of God, you killed, using lawless men to crucify him. But God raised him up, releasing him from the throes of death, because it was impossible for him to be held by it (Acts 2:22-25, cf. 13:34, 1 Cor 15:4).

Thirdly, the cross and resurrection are inseparable from the Way which Jesus the sage discerned, embodied, and proclaimed to his hearers. Jesus'

¹¹⁴ Stephen Bevans, "Wisdom from the Margins: Systematic Theology and Missiological Imagination," in: *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 56 (2001), p. 38.

¹¹⁵ Thangaraj, *The Crucified Guru*, pp. 100 and 101.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

death and resurrection remain a powerful symbol of his protest against evil and injustice, viz., Jesus died because his preferential option for the poor and marginalized had threatened the interests of the powerful Jewish religious and political elite. Although the Confucian tradition does not speak explicitly of sages sacrificing their lives in protest against evil, oppression, and injustice, there are similar precedents in the Chinese moral imagination, e.g., the much beloved Qu Yuan (ca. 340-278 B.C.E.), and his righteous suicide in protest against a corrupt and unjust king of Chu and his court.

According to the biographical account of his life in Sima Qian's (ca. 145-86 B.C.E.) monumental work, *Historical Records (Shiji)*, Qu Yuan was an eminent poet and upright minister of the State of Chu during China's Warring States Period, until he was sidelined by the slanderous machinations of jealous rivals. Unable to stand aside and watch passively as his beloved state of Chu was hit by one calamity after the other as a result of the degeneration of the royal house of Chu into incompetence, petty rivalries, and corrupt decadence, he remonstrated with the king but to no avail. Instead, his loyal remonstrations stoked the king's wrath and resulted in his banishment from Chu. While on his way to exile, he drowned himself in the Miluo River, saying that he preferred an honorable death instead. Hearing of his righteous suicide in protest against injustice, people set out in boats to retrieve the corpse for a proper burial but to no avail. Subsequently, they set out again in their boats with rice dumplings (*zongzi*) to offer to his spirit. The anniversary of Qu Yuan's righteous suicide on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month of the Chinese calendar is commemorated annually by the Chinese as the Festival of the Patriotic Poet (*aiguo shirenjie*), and as part of this commemoration, rice dumplings (*zongzi*) are eaten and colorful dragon boat races, the popular Dragon Boat Festival (*duanwujié*), are organized throughout the length and breadth of the Chinese-speaking world.¹¹⁷

In the same vein, the death and resurrection of Jesus, the crucified and risen sage, like that of Qu Yuan the upright minister, serves to remind Confucian East Asians of Jesus' commitment to non-violent protest against oppression and injustice, even at the cost of his life. While the wisdom of dying for the cause of justice may appear to be folly to the mighty and powerful, it is a salvific wisdom which brings forth new life and hope, as well as transforming structures of oppression and challenging people to respond to evil with good, and hate with love.

¹¹⁷ For a fuller account on Qu Yuan, the Festival of the Patriotic Poet, and the Dragon Boat Festival, see Wong Choon San, *A Cycle of Chinese Festivities* (Singapore 1967), pp. 120-127, and the references cited therein.

V. Conclusion

To recapitulate, this paper explores the possibilities and implications for presenting the significance and meaning of Jesus as a sage (*sheng*) within the Confucian world of East Asia, analyzing its congruities with the existing 2,000-year old Christological tradition and the New Testament presentation of Jesus as, among other things, a sage in the Jewish sapiential and prophetic traditions, as well as exploring the challenges it generates. In particular, an argument is made that Jesus should be presented as a *crucified and risen sage*, not only because of the traditional misgivings of early Confucian literati with respect to Jesus' crucifixion, but more importantly, because his suffering, death, and resurrection (viz., the paschal mystery) mark the climactic culmination of his mission and ministry as sage to the world, a mission which had threatened powerful religious and political interests with its preferential option for the poor and marginalized. In articulating such a distinctive Confucian Christology, this paper also recognizes that classical Christological formulations are time-bound and can only be apprehended in the present as "tradition-as-reinterpreted-by-the-present," and therefore as a contemporary hermeneutical appropriation of the past.¹¹⁸

In the final analysis, how would the peoples of Confucian East Asia respond to the age-old Christological question, "who do you say I am?" Perhaps they might say in the following or similar words, "You are the sage, the son of the Lord of Heaven who embodies perfect humanity and divinity, discerning and proclaiming to us the nearness of the Way of the Lord of Heaven, showing us by your life, suffering, and death on the cross what this Way of the Lord of Heaven entails, and inviting us to imitate you and your preferential option for the poor and marginalized by joining you in embracing and walking along this Way from its beginning to its end."

¹¹⁸ See Felix Wilfred, "Inculturation as a Hermeneutical Question," in: *Vidyajyoti* 52 (1988), p. 434.