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JESUS, THE CRUCIFIED AND RISEN SAGE:
TOWARDS A CONFLUENT CHRISTOLOGY

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This paper seeks to reflect on Jesus' profound question to His followers: "Who do you say I am?" (Mt 16:15), 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 which 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


Abbreviations used:
FABC = Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences

Note on Transcription: The roman 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 these Chinese terms which have been italicized and rendered using the Wade-Giles system in quoted texts and titles of works.
foundational principles which would underpin this Confucian
christology, its principal elements, resources and interpretative matrix. 4
Finally, it concludes with an investigation of the possible implications
which 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 colours could agree on, it would be the assertion that Jesus
the Christ stands at the centre 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," is one
perennial topic of theological inquiry which 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

4 This paper seeks to complement earlier endeavors at exploring the possibilities for
systematizing a Confucian christology. Two notable examples of these earlier endeavors
include Kim Hap Young, "Yes and Agape: Towards a Confucian Christology," Asian
Journal of Theology 1 (1994): 335-364, which investigates the potential for constructing
a Confucian christology based on the Confucian virtue of "humanity" (ren); and Peter
C. Foss, "The Christ of Asia (An essay on Jesus as the eldest son and ancestor)," Studia
orientalica 45 (1998): 25-35, which seeks to construct a Confucian christology by
"reading Christ within the context of the Confucian teaching on family relationships,
especially on the role of the eldest son, and the Asian practice of generation of ancestors"
(p. 27).

5 Gerald O'Collins, S.J. and Edward G. Pannella, S.J. A Concise Dictionary of Theology,

6 Jaroslav Pelikan, Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture (New
Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). Pelikan's understanding here is that Jesus cannot be
understood outside of human culture, and that it is human cultures that shape the diverse
types and understandings of Jesus in human history.
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 (hypostasis) 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 God and only-begotten Son, Word, Lord Jesus Christ...  

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 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 *Hildisand* ¹⁰ and the Anglo-Saxon verse

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The Dream of the Road presented Christ as an all-powerful Teutonic warrior-king within the context of a wider medieval Germanisation 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 magic-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.

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 triumphant image of Christ the King (Christus Rex) was brought by European missionaries to Asia, Africa and the Americas, and was used as justification for massacres, economic plunder and socio-cultural destruction. As Michael Amalados 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 all over the world, not hesitating to use merchants and armies in the process."

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 ascetic "Christ the King" is celebrated by many non-Christians. 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 in understanding the abstract classical christological professions of Nicene 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 quærerit intellectum as the starting point, then there will invariably be a continuous growth in an appreciation of Jesus Christ when he is understood and appreciated by people in new socio-cultural contexts. The Indian theologian Stanley J. Samanta 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 endeavour to answer the question, "what is the reality that we encounter in Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Lord?" 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 contexts. 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 allocution to the Second Vatican Council, "The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another."

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11 See Bruce Dickson and Alan S. Cross, eds., The Dream of the Road, (New York: Appleton Century-Crofts, 1966).
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." Hence, Asian Christians have searched for ways to "re-Asianize and relashion 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 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 helenistic period, why should not Asians draw on their own hermeneutical reservoir to fashion Jesus for their own time and place? 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 peoples 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. 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 which centre on the difficulty of relating the human (profane) and divine (sacred) realities in helenistic mindssets, 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 theologising; and social change in that culture, whether brought about by western technological process or the grass-roots struggle for equality, justice and liberation." As early as 1974, Shoki Coe noted the emergence and growth of contextual theologies in the Third World.

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14 Ibid., ix.
19 M. Thomas Thangaraj is surely correct when he points out that "a christology that uses the concept of Logos to explain the significance of Jesus is irrelevant or meaningless 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: Abingdon, 1994) 139. Thus, a christology that speaks of essence and substance, nature and person, humanity and divinity should make sense only to those who have some understanding of the nuances of classical Greek philosophical thought, something which most Asian do not.
20 The definition of contextual theology is taken from Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992) 1. Thecontinent distinguishes theologies which focus primarily on the two basic theologies of scripture and tradition, Bevans points out that contextual theology adds a third theological locus, viz., human experience. Accordingly, "theology that is centred realities 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., 3).
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. Since that date, the world has witnessed a spectacular growth in new contextual theologies in general, and contextual christologies in particular.

In relation to Asian christologies, Asian theologians shy away from static, ontological and metaphysical ruminations, beginning their theological reflections in dialogue with the Asian peoples and their diverse Sitzen-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 mediated by the speculative and metaphysical language of a bygone 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. 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." Similarly, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India explains in their response to the Lineamenta of the 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 space, time and cultural conditioning, has an important role in this process (emphasis added)."

Similarly, in their 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 fundamentals 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."

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 neighbours, 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...

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23 Thangaraj, The Crucified One, 23.
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. 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 FABC Plenary Assembly, that the great Asian religious traditions should be given reverence and honour, acknowledging that “God has drawn our peoples to Himself through them” (FABC I, 15). In their words:

we accept them [=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 treasures 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).

Elsewhere, the FABC has affirmed that “it is an inescapable truth that God’s Spirit is at work in all religious traditions” (BIRA IV/12, art. 7) 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). 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/2, art. 12). 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). In contrast, theologians in Europe and North America, where Christians form a significant majority at least nominally, have usually theologised within confessional boundaries without any interaction with non-Christian minorities. Nevertheless, in Thangara’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.” 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 neighbours, if the Gospel of Jesus Christ is to have any impact in the wider society. The alternative is for the East Asian Christians to cultivate a fortress mentality and withdrawing into a self-imposed ghetto.

II. THE CONFUCIAN WORLD OF EAST ASIA

The Chinese civilization arose at a time when the Egyptian, Babylonian and Indus Valley civilizations were in full bloom, and before the birth of the Greek civilization, the cradle of European philosophy. In contrast to Egypt, Babylon, the Indus Valley, Greece and Rome, whose glorious past have long been consigned to the dustbin of history, the Chinese
Civilization is still very much alive and vibrant today. For thousands of years, the Chinese civilization has prided itself as the "Middle Kingdom" (中国, Zhongguo), the centre of the inhabited world, "a civilized oasis surrounded by what was thought to be a cultural desert."

Undergirding the Chinese civilization and shaping the worldview of Chinese people for more than two millennia is the Confucian tradition. 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 enclaves communities in Southeast Asia, Europe, Oceania and the Americas. More significantly, Tzu 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'." 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.

Without a doubt, Confucianism is rightfully regarded as a manifestation of East Asian spirituality, albeit diffused, that has shaped and continues to shape the life-orientation of the Sinic world. On the one hand, one has to acknowledge that the institutional Confucianism which was the 2000-year Chinese state orthodoxy from the Han to the Qing Dynasty stands accused by May Fourth-New Culture reformers, Chinese Marxists and Western feminists for promoting patriarchy, misogyny, authoritarianism, formalism, and hindering socio-scientific progress. On the other hand, Julia Chang points out that the 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." She explains that Confucianism, like any other religious-philosophical systems, has its strengths and weaknesses:

If we mean by Confucianism a backward-looking ideology, sterile verbal 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 sainthood, of one's fundamental relationship to others in society based on ethical values, of an interpretation of reality and a metaphysics of the self that remains 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.

Before moving ahead with the task of constructing a Confucian Christology, one would do well to heed the caution of Bennet Verbernek that theologising 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 endeavor." 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 "collection 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." 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 expect facts to conditoned 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.

More specifically, while Vermander is thinking of the general task of theologising, his caution lies here 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 endeavoured 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 centre on discovering the ultimate values which shape human living: "What does it mean to be human as opposed to barbarians or animals?" "What makes life worth living as humans?" "What are the ideas 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 ideas and virtues to be found?" "What is the Way [dao 道] to these ideals and virtues?" "How does one seek and attain the Way [dao 道]?" In his characteristic blunt style, A.C. Graham argued that the crucial question for the Chinese is, "is not the Western philosopher's "What is the truth?" but "Where is the Way?"" 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."

Clearly, Confucius and his successors perceived human living as a constant striving in the Way (dao 道), calling for a dynamic and relational approach to "knowing" (shì 知) which is not concerned

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44. A.C. Graham, Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argumentaion in Ancient China (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1985), p. 3.
46. Interestingly, the ideogram 聯 (shì, "knowing") comprises the characters 聯, 第, and 知.
with discovering the Truth via abstract, essentialist and metaphysical conceptualisations, but rather, with knowing how to adapt 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 discrete, but is, as a knowledge of the way, a kind of know-how.”

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 favour 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. In standard Chinese-English dictionaries, the term sheng is typically translated as holy, sacred, wise, sage, or wise man. Etymologically, the Chinese ideograph for sheng (聖), which is derived from the ideographs for “to bear a pointed spear” and “to bend,” means “intelligence” or “wisdom.” In other words, sheng (聖) means “speaking which, when used, rises to the upper region,” a metaphor expressed with significant religious implications. In the Sinic mind, “knowing” is not a predefined, objective, or even psychological act of apprehension; it is abstract, but a relative act—one that happens when one is able to “speak” truly or appropriately about the nature of things in the world around oneself.

47 Hall and Ames, Thinking from the Heart, 194.

48 Important English language studies of the sage in the Confucian tradition include N.J. Taylor, “Sculpture and the Sage: Eight Questions of a Confucian Sculpture” 1890, The...
Unlike dictionaries of European languages which define words by appealing to their “essential” meanings, the Shuowen jiesi 詒文解字, the classical Chinese language lexicon compiled by the Eastern Han Dynasty scholar Xu Shen 許慎, the word sheng 音 is defined rather by an appeal to its semantic and phonetic association to the word t'ung 通 (“to communicate with,” “to pass through” or “to penetrate”). “Sheng 音 means t'ung 通: to communicate with, to commune with, to be consonant with, to penetrate, to connect. It derives semantically from t'ung, 音 “ear,” and takes its pronunciation from the ch'eng 成 component.”

The original meaning of the term sheng 音 has been the subject of much debate. According to the Shuowen lexicon, this term is a xin-sheng 形聲 (logographic) character, i.e., “deriving semantically from the ear grapher 聽 which has something to do with hearing, and phonetically from the ch'eng 成 component, which often denotes the meaning of ‘to manifest’ or ‘to reveal’ in classical Chinese.”

Using the insights gleaned from William G. Boltz’s research on the Mawangdui Laozi manuscripts, where the character 音 is written as sheng 音 (“sound,” “voice”) in the Mawangdui Laozi Text A, and as 聽 in the Mawangdui Laozi Text B, David Hall and Roger Ames have challenged the Shuowen lexicon’s characterization of the term sheng 音 as a logographic character, characterizing it instead as hua-zi 豕字 (ideographic), where both elements of the character sheng 音 - “listening” (耳), and “disclosing” or “expressing” (口) in Mawangdui.

Laozi Text A, and 音 in the final form of the character) contribute to the meaning of the word. On this basis, Hall and Ames conclude that the sage embodies both ability and orality. While the Shuowen’s definition of the term sheng 音 emphasizes the “listening” aspect (viz., 聽 “ear,” “to listen” as semantic), Hall and Ames suggest that as the embodiment of ability and orality, the sage is a “master communicator” who “first listens, then speaks.”

Another scholar, Rodney L. Taylor made a similar etymological study and agrees that the phonetic ch'eng 成 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. He further asserts that the sage is one who “hears the Way of Heaven and in addition manifests it to humankind.”

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 Ming Chen has carried out with regard to the much older Guodian 郭店 memorials confirms Taylor’s assertion. In a similar vein, in her study of the concept of the sage, Julia Chang was of the opinion that “[t]he sage ... [is] the person who heard the voice or the words of the spirits, or the deity, and then transmitted it to others.

52 The English translation of the Shuowen jiesi is taken from Hall and Ames, Thinking Through Confucianism, 251.
53 Logographic characters (sheng 形聲) are the most common Chinese characters, combining both semantic and phonetic components which suggest the meaning and the sound respectively.
56 An ideograph 形声 (形 + 声) character derives its meaning from all its elements, e.g., the character “good” 須 (善) combines the character for “silk” (善) and “shiny” (耳)
with his own mouth. For Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., the "shengyi (聖義) is a virtuoso of communication, "listening (er 聽)" and "presenting ideas (cheng 成)" that not only come to define the human experience, but which further have cosmic implications."

Going further, sinologists David Hall and Roger Ames draw attention to the Risthun 魚身 which identifies a spiritual dimension to 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]."

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 Chang 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. According to Ning Chen, the Shuowen description of the graphical form of sheng as being composed of er 聽 and cheng 成 is a late phenomenon that can only be traced back to the period of the Warring States (481-221 BC). Ning Chen's arguments may be summarized as follows: While it is true that the Shang oracle bone inscriptions reveal several variants of the character sheng, nevertheless the cheng 成 component was definitely not part of the original character sheng at all. Around the time of the Spring and Autumn Period (722-481 BC), the variants eventually coalesced into a form where the sheng 成 component is attached to the er 聽 graph. Only in the Warring States period did scribes consistently write the sheng 成 component under the keu 篤, giving rise to the cheng 成 component.

For Ning Chen, the identification of the term sheng with "a religious person with the unusual and extraordinary capacity of mediating between the supernatural world and human society" is anachronistic, 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." It was only during the period of the Western Zhou dynasty that the meaning of the word shifted to being wise and sagacious. 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. It was quite probable that the Han scholar Xu Shen 嚇臣, 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, Ning Chen concludes that "any attempt to reinterpret 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."

On the one hand, Ning 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, Ning Chen acknowledges that since the Warring States...
period, the meaning of sheng had shifted to that which was stated in the Shuowen lexic. Because language is not a static, fixed and unchanging system, but rather, a dynamic system where the meaning of words change 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 頂, the term has come to express 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 論語), 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." Indeed, the Analects portrays Confucius' understanding of the sage as representing the fullness of human perfection which goes far beyond even that of "exemplary persons" (君子 君子), 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 旨 occurs in the following verses: 8:30 (a sage is one who operates on the people and assists all peoples); 7:28 (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 治公 for equating him with a sage); 10:8 (the words of the sages are held in awe by "exemplary persons" 君子); 19:12 (the sage alone walks on the path [道 道] 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 Yu. 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 "paragons of virtuous rule" for others to emulate. 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 of 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." Hence, Taylor takes the position that "[like the sage for Confucius was, thus, of] greatest significance, and the attempt to articulate the way of the sages to the current generation remains Confucius' primary goal." 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." 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 people without distinction or differentiation:

Zigong (子公) said: "What about the person who is broadly generous to the people and is able to help the multitude - is this what we could call authoritative conduct (尹 [尹])?"
The Master replied, "Why stop at authoritative conduct? This is certainly a sage (旨). Even a Yao or Shun would find such a task daunting." (Analects 6:30)

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73 ibid.
74 ibid.
75 ibid., 40.
76 ibid., 41.
Commenting on this text, Li Chongyang suggests: "[apparently, only sages are able to practice universal love. It is noble and admirable but far beyond ordinary people’s moral horizon. For the ordinary person, the highest moral ideal is jen (仁), not sagehood."

Elsewhere, David Hall and Roger Ames suggest that the sage which is present in the Analects is "one who transforms the world by what he says," a point which is seen especially in Analects 16:8. 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." Later tradition would elevate Confucius to sagehood, such that within the Confucian tradition, Confucius becomes the sage per excellence (see, e.g., Mencius 2A:2; 3B:8; SB:1, 7B:28), culminating in the conferral of the title "Perfect Sage Ancient Master" (zhishi liang xiexi 至聖先師) on Confucius by the Shi-huang Emperor on 4 December 1530.

Moving on to the Book of Mencius (Mengzi 孟子), we find that the term sheng occurs frequently in comparison with the Analects. In contrast to Confucius, Mencius effected a paradigm shift in the understanding of sage from Confucius’ idealisation of sages as ancient exemplars to the ultimate goal of self-cultivation which 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). In addition, Mencius suggests that "the sage is a teacher of a hundred generations" (Mencius 7B:15). 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, become divine, suggesting that sageliness (sheng 神) and divinity or godliness (shen 神) are two ends goals of personal self-cultivation:

The desirable is called "good" (shan 善). To have it in oneself is called "true" (xin 心). To possess it fully in oneself is called "beautiful" (mei 美), but to shine forth with this full possession is called great (da 大). To be great and be transformed by this greatness is called "sage" (sheng 神); to be sage and to transcend the understanding is called "divine" (shen 神) (Mencius 7B:25).

Commenting on the foregoing, Rodney Taylor concludes that "Mencius is suggesting that anyone could become a wise person, 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." 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." Yao Xinzhong agrees, suggesting that for Mencius, sagehood is "the perfection of humanity, which comes as the result of self-cultivation. A sage is essentially a perfect man who, by exercising his jen, penetrates and understands all things and makes the Way prevail in the world."
The Doctrine of the Mean (Zhongyong 仁義), traditionally ascribed to Confucius' grandson, Zisi (子思) also presents an understanding of the sage which is similar to the Book of Menius, as the following passages reveal:

Sincerity (zhong 仲) is the Way of Heaven. To think how to be sincere is the way of man. He who is sincere is one who acts upon what he 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).

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).

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)."

The Neo-Confucian thinkers of the Sung-Ming era also regarded the 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." For example, in his Diagram of the Great Ultimate (Taijitu shuo 太極圖說) Zhou Dunyi (周敦頤, 1017-1073) presents the sage as the "ultimate of humanity".

The sage settles things with centrality, correctness, uniqueness, and rightness (the Way of the Sage is simply humaneness, rightness, centrality, 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 (juzhi cultivates these and has good fortune. The inferior person rejects these and has bad fortune."

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.

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

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91 Ibid., 107-118.
92 Ibid., 110.
93 Taylor, "The Sage as Saint: A Study in Religious Categories," 44.
95 Ibid., 677-678.
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 Confucius, the sages are examples of perfection who attain moral excellence without losing their 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 sages are attainable, it is by no means an easy feat. Even the great Neo-Confucian thinker of the Song Dynasty, Zhu Xi (朱熹, 1130-1200) 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 do I realize how difficult this is.”

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 which those schooled in the Indo-European and Semitic languages often fail to appreciate, East Asians are inevitably reminded that Jesus the sages is one who listens to or discoursed (讲) the wisdom of Heaven and then manifests and proclaims (传) what he has heard to all humanity. Just as a sage discoursed the “Way of Heaven” (tiantao 天道) and then manifests it to others, so too, Jesus discoursed the Way of his Father, the Lord of Heaven (tiantao 天道), 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 shengren zidao 申命之道) 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 perfection is identified as striving for, embodying and practicing the “Way of the Sage” (shengren zidao 申命之道) in one’s life (cf. Doctrine of the Mean, 27).

Jesus, as a sages, 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 age, gender or social restrictions, so too, all of the followers of Jesus - male and female, old and young, etc. - are called to imitate his life fully. For example, Paul, among other things, exhorted the Christians in Corinth to “be imitators of me, as I am of

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69 In this respect, it is submitted that the image of Jesus as sages is preferable to the image of Jesus as “shengren” and associate within the Confucian tradition (see, e.g., Peter C. Pratt, “The Christ of Asia: An essay on Jesus as the East sea and ancestor” (Studia Historica 45 [1990]: 25-53)), because the image of elders and performing the duty of sages but optional to theChristian tradition encompasses those aspects of the sages which are associated with Jesus’ uniqueness and makes problematic issues about the position and role of women, who were traditionally excluded from the practical and spiritual orientation of Confucian religious worship. The image of Jesus as sages circumvents these difficulties, because the sages in the Confucian tradition, by definition, is inclusive and gender-neutral, viz., everyone is called to imitate and to cultivate wisdom within one’s personal self-cultivation.
Christ” (1 Cor 11:1, cf. 1 Cor 4:10, 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.” Commenting on this, Robert Cummings Neville writes:

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. (emphasis added)

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.”

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 人性) 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 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).

More importantly, 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 Jesu the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom, 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. According to him, “what makes Jesus 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 marshal.”

Taking the argument a step further, Witherington suggests that Jesus the sage went one step further and identified himself as the

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

104 In doing so, Witherington is critical of the treatments by scholars such as F.F. Bruce, James D.G. Dunn, and others. Witherington points out among other things, that a Cynic sage, concluding that "a careful study of Jesus' words and deeds, in particular his parables and sayings, reveals a family resemblance to other early Jewish literature but only minimal similarity to the Cynic corpus, much of which contradicts Jesus in any case" (WUS, 215). The full discussion on this issue is found in WUS, 217-263.

105 Witherington's complete discussion of Jesus as a sage is found in WUS, 117-208.

106 Ibid., 149.
“embodiment of Wisdom in the flesh,” believing that “He did not merely announce the in-breaking of God’s communion on earth, He believed that He brought it, and thus in some sense even embodied it.” 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 mediatory 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.\textsuperscript{107}

Commenting on Witherington’s well-reasoned argument, 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 reason “sage” is heuristically the most all-encompassing and satisfying genre of Jesus.\textsuperscript{109}

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) \textsuperscript{108}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

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 204. For the complete discussion, see ibid., 202-2.

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 204.

\textsuperscript{109} Roger Haight, Jesus, Symbol of God (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999) 70.

sage or perfect sage. As we have seen, it goes without saying that divinity and perfections 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 which 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 sage 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 in accepting the crucifixion of Christ, which was for them the biggest stumbling block to their embrace of Christianity, although they had no difficulty admiring his moral-ethical teachings.\textsuperscript{106} 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:

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 mammon who found it, however — that same Tu 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 people "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." 111

Not surprisingly, Matteo Ricci carefully skirted the crucifixion in his magnum opus, The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven (Tianzhu shiyi 天主實義). 112 In the only discussion of the incarnation and ascension in this work, Ricci wrote:

[The Lord of Heaven] thereupon acted with great compassion, descended to this world Himself to save it [tianzhu shiyi 天主實義], and experienced everything [experienced by man]. One thousand six hundred and three years ago, in the year King Shih [ ], in the second year after Emperor Ai of the Han dynasty adopted the reign title Yuan-shun, 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 ascended to Heaven. These were the concrete actions of the Lord of Heaven (Tianzhu shiyi, para. 580). 113

Clearly, no mention is made here of Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection, only the fact that He descended, taught, and then ascended 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. 114 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.

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 act in his salvific 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 Bevan hits the nail squarely on its head when he insists on the centrality of the cross and the paschal mystery to the Christian life. 115 The clear and lucid arguments of Thomas Thangaraj, although made within the context of his formulation of a guru christology within a Salivk Stchihana-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 parousia 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 climactic 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. 116

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113 English translation in ibid., 406. For Chinese text see ibid., 418.
114 Zürcher, "Jesus' Accommodation and the Chinese Cultural Impediments," 50. See also ibid., "The Two Faces of the Ming Christianization in Confucian and Christian Rhetorics in Late Ming China," and ibid., "Does Heaven Open? Reinterpretation in the Christian and Chinese Tradition."
Consequently, Thangaraj asserts that Jesus’ death was the embodiment of his life and mission as a 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.”

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 13:4).

Thirdly, the cross and resurrection are inseparable from the Way which Jesus, the sage discerned, embodied, and proclaimed to his hearers. Jesus’ 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 marginalised 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., Chu Yuan (circa third/fourth century BC), the upright and principled minister who drowned himself in protest against a corrupt and unjust king, and whose death is commemorated every year in the Dragon Boat Festival on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month of the Chinese calendar. In this vein, the death and resurrection of Jesus, the crucified and risen sage, like that of Chu 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.

CONCLUSION

To recapitulate, this paper explores the possibilities and implications of presenting the significance and meaning of Jesus as a sage (sheng) within the Confucian world of East Asia, analysing 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 apocryphal 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 marginalised. In articulating such a distinctive Confucian christology, this paper also recognises 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.  

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 marginalised by joining you in embracing and walking along this Way from its beginning to its end.”

117 Ibid., 100.