

China: Connected to the Highway of Salvation

Warren A. Shipton
Asia-Pacific International University, Thailand
wshipton@apiu.edu

ABSTRACT

God has not left people groups without witness to his presence and salvation. Knowledge of his ways can be traced in Chinese society to antiquity through analysis of ideographs, ceremonies, symbols, and stories contained in folk mythologies. The activities of sages operating around the time of Daniel the prophet and after contain information indicative of knowledge about the Divine. The ethical principles advocated by Confucius have a close resemblance to those outlined in the Old Testament as affirmed and expanded on by the teachings of Christ. There also are the intriguing prophecies of Mencius, which seem to point to a coming Deliverer. Indeed, his birth-star is noted in Chinese astronomical records. The activities of the Jews and the Church of the East, the latter whose witness essentially finished at the end of the fourteenth century, are but vaguely evident today in China. People with some Christian beliefs were found in the mountainous regions bordering China or elsewhere in Myanmar by 19th century missionaries. These and others who lived along protected sections of the ancient trade routes have provided a rich harvest of followers in more modern times. They with others could be regarded as members of the wilderness church. The echoes of Judeo-Christian thought contained in folk mythologies and dominant non-Christian religions present themselves as springboards to encourage devotees to experience eternal truths and acknowledge the creator God.

Keywords: Church of East, Jewish diaspora, Chinese sages, Confucius' *ren*

Introduction

The rebellion of a section of human race at the Tower of Babel was answered by the dispersion of the people defined by their ability to understand each other (Genesis 11:1–9). These groups increased not only through natural means, but no doubt also by persuasion or conquest and went out to colonize areas of the world. To varying degrees they carried a residual knowledge of God who also spoke to them through reason, conscience, and the works of creation (Romans 1:19, 20; 2:13–16). God apparently has not left any without some witness of his existence. The prophet Isaiah (c.720–680 BC) assures readers that the invitation to receive God's mercy is to peoples from all nations, near and far (Isaiah 49:7–12). When Isaiah prophesied there was no unified state in China. This occurred in 221 BC when the Qin state was formed.¹ However, his words ultimately included China and other developing nations. These peoples' consciences would be stimulated by their own philosophers, historical and natural events, and contact with Judeo-Christian ideas.

The Chinese were in contact with peoples in the West from at least as early as the second century before Christ and acquired ideas from the groups contacted. The explorer Chang K'ien went as far as Bactria (a region now in northern Afghanistan) and gathered extensive knowledge of surrounding nations over his thirteen year journey.² Ever since the conquests of Alexander the

Great (334–323 BC) new trade routes had been opened, which subsequently became very active from the first to third centuries of the present era. The Silk route(s) to China existed from the second century BC at least and land routes various sea routes to India, Sri Lanka and *Sinum Sinorum* (China) were known in early Roman times. Other land routes came to China from intermediate ports (e.g., Yangon).³

The trade routes brought merchandise, traders, and ideas and a variety of religious beliefs. One early point of contact was with India. Some consider Buddhist beliefs came via land and perhaps sea before AD 61, although the generally accepted idea they came sometime in the first century.⁴ The legendary account of a land expedition to India following the dream (AD 62) of a golden man by Ming-ti (Mingdi—AD 57–75) is held in Chinese records. One of Ming-ti's courtiers interpreted the dream of the golden man as meaning that Fou-t'u or Budh (Buddha) was represented. Thereupon an expedition was planned and it led to the arrival of scriptures and images.⁵ The main schools of Buddhism contributed to information arriving, but the Mahayana school made the greatest impact.⁶

Buddhism is associated with Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) who lived 623–543 BC (or other accounts 563–483 BC) and was born in Nepal in a region bordering India. He reformed Hinduism ridding it of the many gods and its caste system and proclaimed a religion of self-help, which would enable worshippers to attain nirvana. The bed-rock of the belief system is compassion.⁷ In China the religion took on a national flavour and a number of influential sects arose.⁸

About the same time that Daniel the prophet was operating in Babylon (7th–6th century BC), two indigenous religions/philosophies arose in China that were to have profound effects. Confucius (551–479 BC) generated a system of ethics and philosophy suitable for the guidance of official and religious practices. Confucianism can be considered a religion as it fosters the idea of the holy with Heaven being the ultimate authority. Confucius' writings were not concerned with salvation or damnation, but encouraged all to follow the way of Heaven so as to avoid moral evil. This involved the pursuit of well-appreciated virtues of which filial piety held some prominence. The central virtue was *ren* or benevolence/love to all.⁹ Confucianism for the most part has dominated in China, with periods of power experienced by the other religions.¹⁰

Lao-tzu (6th century) traditionally has been credited with developing the philosophy that later became Taoism as a religion in the second century AD. Alternatively, it may have come from the pen of others over the period 480–222 BC. However, without question the most influential document is *Tao Te Ching*. In it Lao-tzu expresses belief in the innate goodness of humans and in the value of peaceful resolution of conflict through allowing things to follow the natural force in the universe (Tao or Way). The principle virtues espoused are compassion (pity), simplicity (frugality) and humility (refusal to be foremost).¹¹ Taoism as a religion contains elements of mysticism, involving an emptying of the senses, ecstasy and shamanism. Associated with these later developments all sorts of rituals and practices were developed and alchemy and magic were encouraged.¹²

The basic attitude towards other philosophies spoken about in this essay is dictated by their relationship to Christian concepts in the areas of being, knowing and acting. Do they support or lead to the principles identified in the Bible? Daniel, the prophet, was critically interested in these concepts and spoke of powers that would undermine heaven's principles.¹³ Many philosophies contain elements of soundness allowing conversations and appreciative comments to be made. In the area of Christian education, these contact points may be addressed in sensitive ways so as to

challenge and at the same time not offend. Each culture/philosophy demands a different approach.¹⁴

Pathways pointing to the way of salvation

Weaving a coherent account of the origin of practices and beliefs held by people groups in China is impossible on account of lack of adequate historic records and the limited availability of the fragmentary records that remain for experts in the ancient Chinese language to examine. However, some suggestions are made here on evidence that I have been able to collect from limited English translations. The selection of appropriate headings for the placement of material has not always been simple and some may question the choices made. As I will later indicate, God is capable of reaching individuals in whatever philosophy they presently find themselves. In saying this I am in no way suggesting that there are many pathways to salvation, but I am suggesting rather that Romans 2 (vs. 14–16) is more than a theoretical idea. God has not left people without witness about salvation or the creator.

A. Jewish and Christian influence in China and their legacy

The history of both groups is fragmentary and very little lasting influence is apparent, although certain ideas appear to have been incorporated into Chinese thought, as I will mention later in reference to Confucius.

Jews. Well before Pentecost recorded in Acts, the Jews had begun to be dispersed. The first diaspora occurred in 721 BC (2 Kings 17:6). A large number later went to Egypt in 582 BC (Jeremiah 41:16–44:30). Jews also were taken to Babylon (597 & 586 BC). This meant that two major centres of Jewish life existed a century after the exile—namely, Egypt and Babylon,¹⁵ although the dispersal was as far as northern Afghanistan.¹⁶ It is said that in this area there were people with B'nei (Bani) Israel connections (deported in the first diaspora). Their religion had become corrupted with Brahman practices but they did hold onto important Hebrew beliefs. The stele at the Kaifeng synagogue (Henan province) in China indicates that the beliefs held there came from northern India and environs. Interestingly, Chinese records (*Wei Chi* or *Wei Records* from the Wei dynasty—AD 386–467) contain a tradition of communication about a divine man, Sha-lüh (2 BC). Since the message originated from the Bani Israel people's region some have wondered whether the name Shiloh (cf. Genesis 49:10; Isaiah 11:1) was meant and that they were telling of Christ's birth. This communication occurred during Emperor Ai's reign (or Emperor Aidi, reigned 7–1 BC). Unfortunately, the report was not acted on; possibly on account of the Western Han being in the tumultuous closing years of the dynasty (ended 8 AD).¹⁷

Not all the Jewish centres were established on account of political and religious oppression, but rather many migrated on account of trade and other advantages. There is evidence of a Jewish presence in India from 1000 BC.¹⁸ There is some evidence that Jews had reached China in the Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 221; some assert they reached there in the first century AD),¹⁹ which corresponds to the period encompassing the destruction of the temple in AD 70 and the presence of a vigorous silk trade.²⁰ An oral tradition exists that Jews were in China during the reign of Ming-ti (AD 57–75) and that a Cenobite mission, thought to be of converted Jews, went there in AD 96.²¹

At the end of the first century of the present era, Jews were found in most of the important commercial centres of the world.²² After the destruction of the temple in AD 70, Babylon became

the hub of Jewish thought and culture. Other important centres were found in Damascus, Alexandria, Antioch in Syria and Asia Minor.²³

It is not surprising, then, that at Pentecost Jews from these locations were in Jerusalem.²⁴ This included Parthia (Acts 2:9). The eastern limits of the Parthian empire extended beyond Iran reaching at times to modern day Afghanistan and extended into regions of Central Asia. Ruins of ancient trading cities are found in northern Afghanistan, close to the border with China. Carrying Christ's mandate to witness to the world, the apostles began to witness far and wide. In the region of interest, tradition has it that Matthew found his way to Parthia and Persia and Thomas evangelized in Edessa, Parthia, Persia and India (and possibly China). All this early activity meant that by the second and third centuries churches were found in the locations indicated.²⁵

The Jews, being small in number, exerted little lasting influence in China. The influence of important Jewish understandings of scripture came via the Assyrian Christians who followed the Jewish date for the observance of Easter (Passover), resisted the adoption of planetary names for the days of the week, and regarded the seventh-day Sabbath for longer than Christians in the West—about three hundred years. Even so, some could be found still observing it in the thirteenth century.²⁶

Christians. Four great language groups were utilized early by the apostles and believers to carry the gospel message to distant lands. The Syriac language enabled penetration into Syria, Assyria, Persia, India and China; the Celtic language gave access to Galatia, France, Ireland, Scotland and England. The Greek language was appreciated by the Greeks as was the Italian language by its people.²⁷

The believers established schools at Antioch and Edessa initially. These centres exerted great influence giving rise to early missionary endeavours. Edessa, to the north-east of Antioch, sent missionaries to India, Parthia, Persia and China.²⁸ From our viewpoint, the Council of Nicaea (AD 325) is significant. This was the first ecumenical council held by the Catholic Church. The Church of the East was not represented. This isolation widened and served to protect the church, which went on to endure great persecution in Persia.²⁹ In retrospect, persecution was a blessing in disguise for while the Christian church in the West was absorbing pagan ideas, principally of Mithraic origin, the Assyrian church was being persecuted by the Zoroastrians and thus kept free from related pagan doctrines. The Assyrian church, even in relatively recent times, is said to have resisted the doctrines of transubstantiation, purgatory, Mariolatry or image worship, and the use of icons in their churches. Men and women take the communion. All orders of clergy below the bishops are allowed to marry.³⁰

The church in Persia (Assyrian church) suffered in consequence of the effective Christianization of the Roman Empire under Constantine. Since at this time Persia and Rome were enemies and both were militant about their religions, all Christians in Persia potentially were considered to have divided loyalties and the priests of Zoroaster fanned this sentiment into persecution. Eventually, the feeling grew so strong that independence from Western Christianity was desirable. Indeed, a schism was approaching.³¹

The controversy over the nature of Christ eventually brought the schism (Council of Ephesus in AD 431 and of Chalcedon in AD 451). Nestorius of Antioch had objected to the use of the term "mother of God" for Mary. He did not wish to make Mary into a goddess. His intentions were blown out of focus and his doctrine misunderstood. The Assyrian church officially (AD 486) recognized the divinity and humanity of Christ in a single Lordship and object of worship. The emperor made laws

against the followers of Nestorius (AD 435) and this resulted in some movements of believers into Persia. The school of theology at Edessa was closed (AD 489) and was moved to Nisibis in Persia. The persecution continued under emperor Justinian I. Over the years there was a growing apart of the church in Persia and the Catholic Church. After AD 553, the Eastern Church essentially was separated from the church in Constantinople.³²

The Church of the East (Assyrian) had begun spreading its territories East, but especially to places in present day Iraq, India, and even China.³³ The condemnation of the Church was continued particularly by Justinian I (reigned 527–565) who distinguished himself by enacting severe laws against those not of the Catholic faith.³⁴ His repressive edict came into full effect in 538 in the Western Empire.³⁵ His decree was applicable throughout the empire and brought great suffering. It sought to establish unity of faith and it gave heretics three months to convert or be exiled.³⁶ The emigration of his most industrious and skilled subjects occurred. Many moved east.³⁷ These people could be considered along with the Albigenes, Waldenses and others part of the church in the wilderness on account of being more faithful to instructions contained in God's word in contrast to the developing universal church.³⁸

The Chinese made strenuous efforts to communicate with the West two centuries before the Christian era.³⁹ This would have brought them in contact with Judeo-Christian thought. These thoughts flowed east. For example, the Saint Thomas Christians considered that Thomas reached China about the same time he was in India.⁴⁰ Even apart from this tradition, the gospel possibly was carried to China (Seres) early in the Christian era.⁴¹ There is fragmentary evidence of Christian influence in China around the beginning of the third century.⁴² During the last half of the fourth century bishop Musèus from Ethiopia travelled extensively in China.⁴³ By AD 550/2 Christian monks brought silk worms from China to the West and they were considered to have been there many years previously.⁴⁴ There is indisputable evidence that Christianity was among the many religious movements present during the Tang dynasty (AD 618–907) and that the Syrians brought Christianity in a mission led by Alopen in AD 635 who also brought the sacred Scriptures.⁴⁵ Emperor Xuanzong (Hiuen Tsang) made it clear in an edict issued in AD 745 that Christianity was of ancient origin in China. He indicated that the Persian religion had been practiced there for a long time and had originated in the Roman Empire. The early flowering of Christianity in China continued until the mid-ninth century.⁴⁶

The presence of Christianity in China is frequently associated with the Church of the East through the famous stone monument unearthed at Xi'an (Chang'an) in 1625. It was erected in the nation's capital in 781.⁴⁷ This was a time of great Christian activity in China, not the beginning of the gospel witness. The gospel had been taken to other locations as well.⁴⁸ It has been estimated that at the turn of the first millennium, Asia held 17–20 million Christians in contrast to an estimated total of 25–30 million in Europe.⁴⁹

During the peak of the church's missionary endeavours (fourth–fifth centuries) monks were located in the East in Afghanistan, Burma (Pegu), China, Tibet, India, southern Vietnam (Cochin China) and northern Vietnam (Tonquin).⁵⁰ The church was widespread and some consider its missionary endeavours have never been eclipsed.⁵¹ We have highlighted its ministry east from its Persian base, but its mission was much broader.

The Church of the East had begun to decline gradually after the turn of the millennium. Defects began to emerge internally as materialism began to blunt the evangelistic fervor of its members and as different sects competed for favour.⁵² The coming of the Muslim conquerors to Persia discouraged the profession of Christianity owing to the repressive and cruel measures adopted.

Emigrations or conversions to Islam were common.⁵³ Other significant forces were pressures experienced through the evangelistic fervor of Buddhism, the grafting of Christian ideas into the doctrines of Buddhism in China, Japan and Tibet, and strenuous efforts by the Hindu leaders as they sought to recapture lost territory.⁵⁴ Despite these inroads, Christianity in Asia was still significant in 1200, but within two centuries that presence had all but disappeared.⁵⁵

Christians were not always allowed to live in peace; the first shock came to them with the reign of the Taoist emperor Wuzong of Tang (AD 840–846) who persecuted Christians, suppressed Buddhism and closed monasteries. Yet, the faith was to recover and became strong again under the Mongol rulers.⁵⁶ The Mongol invaders, under Genghis Khan (1206–1227) and his immediate successors occupied not only China, but also central Asia and progressed into Europe. The rulers did not oppose Christianity, but in their conquests they were responsible for appalling destruction and cruelty. Many ancient cities were devastated and never recovered. Irrespective of this slaughter in battle, they regarded both Christianity and Buddhism as accepted central Asian religions and some even married Christian wives.⁵⁷

The Mongols turn to be routed came quickly in China. The Chinese drove the Mongol overlords from the realm in 1368 to inaugurate the Ming dynasty. The first emperor, Tai Zu, controlled unorthodox religions, banned secret societies and even Lamaism. Some Buddhist sects and Taoism were tolerated. In his general administrative activities, he is considered the cruelest emperor throughout Chinese history.⁵⁸ Christians were forced to flee, give up the faith, or hide their identity.⁵⁹ The end result was that in China, Christianity had ceased effectively before the close of the fourteenth century.⁶⁰ About the same time, fierce Muslim conqueror Tamerlane or Timur (c. 1333–1405) destroyed the Church of the East across central, western and northern Asia; this meant that its base in Persia was no more. The Silk Road ceased to function. The violence he brought meant that Christianity effectively was destroyed. Elsewhere it struggled on, and remnants have persisted until the present time.⁶¹

The remnant groups left behind by this Church or which had some contact with Christian ideas responded to the gospel at a later time. They could be regarded as representatives of the wilderness church (cf. Revelation 12:14–16), a title usually reserved for others. The fascinating story of the hill tribes of eastern India, Burma, Laos and Thailand has been told by Don Richardson.⁶² I differ from him in that rather than tracing their Christian ideas primarily to general revelation, they more likely find their roots in contact with the Church of the East or other Christians. For example, it is reported that a Christian merchant was travelling from Bangladesh to Burma in 1506 and thence to other locations spoke of around a thousand Christians in the service of the king of Burma.⁶³ Particularly the Karen people (some of Chinese origin), who were located in the hills northeast to southeast of Yangon, believed in a monotheistic, eternal God, had knowledge of creation, the Fall, God's thoughts of mercy towards them, their responsibility to repent of their wrong actions, their need to show a love response to him and their neighbours. They passionately waited for his lost book of instructions to be given to them again by white skinned people from the west.⁶⁴ Of interest to this essay is the story of the Lisu from southern China (Yunnan & Sichuan provinces) who also believe they would have the book replaced they had lost (eaten by dogs through neglect), which contained the words of Mother-God. They too waited for a white man to bring them such a book and for a king to reign over them. This legend was fulfilled for them when James Fraser created a system of writing and translating the Bible or portions of it into Lisu. He gave the Scriptures to them and told them they now had a king called Jesu.⁶⁵

Contextualization practiced by early Christians. The Church of the East (often called Nestorian) was accepted initially in China as its representatives adapted their approach to incorporate Confucian virtues, such as loyalty and filial piety. Tang texts indicate that the Christianity practiced in China was not a weakened form, but corresponded basically to the Syriac understanding in the fifth and sixth centuries.⁶⁶

These Christians (Illustrious Religion) could be mistaken for a Buddhist sect on account of their withdrawal from the world in pursuit of salvation, their moral principles and monasticism. They had their own symbolism and liturgy, which apparently was influenced by Buddhist practices. But they had almost no lasting effect on Chinese Buddhism.⁶⁷ They attempted to adapt to the culture. To illustrate, the first four commandments were summarized in terms of honour and respecting for the “Heavenly Father” while the remaining six concentrated on filial piety in a play to Confucian thought. They placed statues of the Tang emperors in their worship places. Buddhist ideas were recognizable in calling worship places temples, the clergy monks (they could marry), and having kings of the Dharma (teaching/doctrine)—prophets, apostles, and saints. God could be referred to as Fo,⁶⁸ a classical term for Buddha (it meant “not man”).⁶⁹ A fragmentary text from Central Asia had Jesus going to nirvana after his crucifixion. However, the general opinion is that the Assyrian church generally maintained purity, but some adulteration occurred.⁷⁰ Evidence available indicates that the church affirmed many important doctrines that we would be comfortable with today. Significantly, they abstained from worshipping images.⁷¹ However, some Catholic ideas were accepted regarding the sacraments and these expanded with time.⁷²

Original sin was not acknowledged (human nature was not perpetually marred by sin after Adam’s disobedience), so that human nature was viewed as fundamentally good. They moved in proximity to the Taoist and Buddhist positions by saying that “To the first man he (God) granted perfect harmony with himself.” This could be interpreted as originally man had no desire and lived in harmony with the Tao. The Buddhists were appealed to in that the deceptions of Satan led to sin, which were represented as an error or an illusion on account of ignorance. The crucifixion apparently was not mentioned, but rather this event was represented in terms that Jesus overcame death and showed the way to achieve the original nature God purposed for humanity.⁷³ In Buddhism, suffering and a violent death are regarded as the results of unwholesome karma. This means the individual such as Jesus would not be regarded as wholesome and a worthy role model—hence the avoidance of great emphasis on the manner of Christ’s death.

At least one monastery built by Alopen was a seven storied, 31 metre pagoda (near Wuchun, Shaanxi Province). Being built on the orders of Emperor Taizong of Tang,⁷⁴ there perhaps was little choice to do otherwise. And then one may argue that this type of contextualization was entirely appropriate. One Adventist missionary undertook to implement a Buddhist-designed worship place in Thailand some years ago with reported missionary success. His efforts were not acceptance generally within the church.

B. God speaks through ceremonies, ideographs, prophets/sages and symbols/art objects

Remnants of biblical knowledge and/or the incorporation of elements of Judeo-Christian thought into cultural practices and some philosophies undoubtedly have occurred. Creating a coherent story often must be considered an imaginative construct rather than one supported by heavily documented information. This suggested phenomenon is evident in various Asian philosophies, ceremonies and symbolic representations. Yuan Zhi Ming recently has illustrated this in a video

where he attempts to show parallels between Chinese teachings/stories and the biblical account (seven day week, immortality connected with a tree of wisdom, and lastly divine judgment through a flood in the story of Gong Gong, the God of Water).⁷⁵ I have added a few more examples; all have been noted by others at some time.

The border ceremony. Well before the time of Confucius, the rulers of China had honoured God in the Border Sacrifice by offering an unblemished bullock to ShangTi, the Heavenly Ruler. This sacrifice ostensibly had been offered since before the first dynastic rule began in 2205 BC, for the Emperor Shun is said to have sacrificed to ShangTi. [The term ShangDi (Ti) or Heavenly Ruler is the earliest Chinese name for God and is similar to the Hebrew word for God, Shaddai (the Almighty).]⁷⁶The sacrifice location was moved to the outskirts of Beijing in the fifteenth century and housed in specially constructed edifices. In the Temple of Heaven no idol was found, but an inscription proclaimed “Heavenly Sovereign ShangTi.” At the winter solstice (about December 22) a magnificent ceremony took place (until 1911), with associated animal sacrifices. The true significance of the ceremony had been lost in its fullness even by the time of Confucius.⁷⁷ However, its continuance showed a basic reverence for maintaining harmony through acknowledging a superior spiritual force.⁷⁸ There is evidence that this impersonal view of God did not always exist. For example, in the Zhou dynasty (1111–256 BC; Western and Eastern) Heaven was thought of as the name for the revered ancestors, who influenced the fortunes of the living.⁷⁹

The record of the recitation of the singers at the Border Sacrifice (presumably of great antiquity) indicates the attitude of the worshippers towards ShangTi. “To Thee, O mysteriously-working Maker, I look up in thought. How imperial is the expansive arch (where Thou dwellest)... With the great ceremonies I reverently honour Thee. Thy servant, I am but a reed or willow; my heart is but as that of an ant; yet I received Thy favoured decree, appointing me to the government of the empire. ... Oh that Thou wouldest vouchsafe to accept our offerings, and regard us, while we worship Thee, whose goodness is inexhaustible!”⁸⁰ In speaking of Heaven and ShangTi in these terms, Confucius was not necessarily speaking of a personal God but rather of the source of life and moral order held in the universe.⁸¹

It is my assessment there are indicators in this ceremony of knowledge of covenants, creation, and sacrifice related to Jewish concepts.⁸² It has been noted that the ceremony reminds of sacrifices made at the entrance to the Garden of Eden by the first human family. Many years ago it seems that the ceremony was restricted to the emperor so that the common people were denied the privilege of worshipping God and other practices developed.⁸³ Despite this the *Chinese Classics* hold many useful ideas about a creator God, his good laws and how to live a virtuous life. Undeniably, much true knowledge about the God of Heaven had been lost by the time of Confucius and Mencius.⁸⁴

Ideographs. The connection between ideas expressed in ancient Chinese ideographs with the biblical record has been noted by scholars in considerable detail.⁸⁵ This should not be surprising since the world-wide flood was not more than an estimated several centuries before the beginning of Chinese history (2205 BC).

The ancient Chinese pictographs appear to carry their own significant account of a basal understanding that a personal God created mankind using his own hands and then spoke life into the clay model.⁸⁶ For example, the concept of a beginning is featured as two individuals in addition to the symbol for glorious; the ideograph for robe is made of two elements, clothes and God; greed

is illustrated by a woman standing under two trees; a big boat is featured as one with eight occupants; and justice has the individual connected with the symbol of a lamb.⁸⁷

Prophets/Sages. Since God seeks to reach all people groups, is it possible that he spoke to the Chinese through their own sages? Jesus' purpose in coming to the earth at his first advent was to offer salvation to all peoples, as indicated in his introductory sermon (Luke 4:18, 19). It has been suggested that when the sages prefaced their remarks by "Heaven [God] said" or "ShangDi said," this could be taken to indicate a prophetic message.⁸⁸ This is untested territory.

Some of these putative ancient Chinese messages from Heaven possibly would be preserved in the Chinese Classics. Some even have held that Confucius foresaw the coming of Christ in words he uttered to the effect that "in the west the most holy" was (?would) to be found. It is argued that this statement helped Emperor Ming-ti arrange an expedition to the West some six decades after the birth of Christ in search of the golden man seen in his dream.⁸⁹ The truth of this belief cannot be assessed realistically.

This speculation aside, Mencius is considered the greatest of the sages who studied under a disciple of Zi Si, Confucius' grandson. He spoke of the sacred doctrines handed down by previous sages. It is intensely interesting to follow his statements.

1. Mencius said, "From Yao to Shun [before c. 2205 B.C.] down to Tang [first emperor of the second dynasty—the Shang] were 500 years or more." Now Chinese history records that Tang was a righteous opponent of the last Xia king.
2. "From Tang [1766–1753 BC] to King Wen were 500 years and more. As to Yi Yin and Lai Zhu, they saw Tang and knew his doctrines, while King Wen heard them as transmitted, and so knew them." King Wen is known as King Chang, a ruler over the state of Zhou. The son of King Wen, Wu, established the Zhou dynasty in 1122 BC, ten years after King Wen's death.
3. "From King Wen to Confucius were 500 years and more. As to Tai-Gong Wang and San Yi-sheng, they saw Wen, and so knew his doctrines, while Confucius heard them as transmitted, and so knew them." We notice that from King Wen's death to Confucius was 581 years.
4. Mencius then confidently prophesied: "If that was the case of time then, it should be the same now. The King should arise in the course of five hundred years, and during that time there should be men illustrious in their generation."⁹⁰

Some believe that Mencius was saying that if the God of Heaven never failed in the past to raise up someone to transmit his Tao, he would surely send another King to teach his Way in the future after the passing of Confucius (479 BC). From Confucius to the coming of the King prophesied takes us to the date AD 22. At that time the last emperor of the Western Han dynasty was reigning and the dynasty was not great. This leads some to conclude that Mencius was perhaps unwittingly referring to the coming of another King, Christ the Saviour, as prophesied by the prophet Daniel who lived at the same time as Confucius.⁹¹ Indeed, the recognition that there were both unsolvable mysteries and corrupt practices in society perhaps led Mencius to say: "It is said in the Book of History [*Shu Jing*] 'We have waited for our Prince. When our Prince comes, we may escape from the punishments under which we suffer.'"⁹² This appears to echo Zechariah's words "Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation, lowly and riding on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Zechariah 9:9).

We well remember that the wise men (rich noblemen and philosophers) that came to honour the birth of Christ were from the east. One familiar writer has said that these wise men "had studied prophecy, and knew the time was at hand when Christ would come, and they were

anxiously watching for some sign of this great event, that they might be among the first to welcome the infant heavenly King, and worship Him. ... [To their amazement] a luminous star appeared, and lingered in the heavens. The unusual appearance of the large, bright star which they had never seen before, hanging as a sign in the heavens, attracted their attention, and the Spirit of God moved them out to seek this heavenly Visitor to a fallen world."⁹³ Now, "this luminous star appeared, and lingered in the sky. It was neither a fixed star nor a planet, and the phenomenon excited the keenest interest."⁹⁴ This phenomenon appears to have been recorded in the astronomical records of China where in 5 BC a comet was clearly visible for over 70 days and its appearance was associated with unusual alignments of other heavenly bodies. Tradition has it that the wise men visiting Jesus were Magi who came from northern Persia or other areas under Zoroastrian influence.⁹⁵ The news of their visit to Bethlehem could have gone to China bearing in mind the mutual strong interest in astronomy. Tradition has it that the apostle Thomas baptized the wise men and also introduced the gospel of the risen Lord to the Chinese.⁹⁶

Symbols/art objects. The miracle working Goddess of Mercy, Kwan Yin, was shown in one temple looking at Noah (historian's interpretation) in an ark contending with the raging waters surrounded by dolphins and a dove above the vessel.⁹⁷ The Chinese have been particularly adept at taking ideas and illustrations that please them and have grafted them into their own religious systems, particularly at the folk level.⁹⁸ The dove is associated particularly with the anointing of Christ by the Holy Spirit. There are no instructions to use the symbol, but at the same time its use should not be seen as idolatrous when used to illustrate a particular truth. And as pointed out by others the context in which the art object appeared changes its meaning.⁹⁹

The Assyrian church also adopted representations from other religions. They used the original bare cross but not use the crucifix. In China they embellished their cross with symbolic elements. Indeed, on the Nestorian monument the cross is supported by a lotus between clouds and two tree branches. The clouds are recognizable as Taoist in orientation and the lotus as Buddhist. To the Assyrians, the cross itself had a rather unique meaning. It was a "cosmic sign" that God used to indicate he is Lord of the four directions of the compass. This means it did not symbolize either the crucifixion or resurrection.¹⁰⁰ It is significant to note that they did not take on the use of the swastika (Buddhism), which represents the whirlwind or sun.¹⁰¹

C. Echoes of Judeo-Christian thought in folk mythologies

There are numerous examples where biblical ideas have been grafted into folk practices and mythologies so that on the surface it may seem that strong links exist between the belief systems. The masterful efforts of Alexander Hislop form a reasonable foundation for the proposition that movement of pagan ideas have flowed into the Christian church as a contaminating stream. The opposite trend is also a real possibility. Several examples may be offered; the list is not meant to be exhaustive. Even somewhat obscure similarities may be utilized.¹⁰² The existence of these ideas does not constitute evidence that salvation may come from these exercises, as asserted by some, but rather indicate that ideas exist that could form nodes for discussion and illumination of the authentic Way of salvation. In all discussions cultural sensitivity and a Christ-like approach will be productive of the most positive outcome.

Saviours—The way of salvation. Trade along the Silk Road and other highways facilitated the exchange of ideas, as did the exploits of Nebuchadnezzar and Alexander the Great. It was perhaps inevitable that following the dispersion of the Jews through the Babylonian exile and the

subsequent conquests of Alexander, whose empire extended into India, led to Zoroastrian and/or Jewish ideas being adopted by Indian philosophers. One can note the idea of a trinity in Hinduism and the concept of salvation by faith in the Mahayana branch of Buddhism.¹⁰³ Salvation as a voluntary act for the benefit of the world may have derived from Zoroastrianism. Such a sacrifice by Zoroaster (shedding of blood) assured those who undertook to remember his act that the empire of the Babylonians would remain. He was deified and a system of religion created around the fable in which a saviour (Saošyant) was born to a virgin by the seed of Zoroaster. However, the general concept of salvation was commonly held from Egypt to Greece and appears to represent a perversion of the prophecy given in Genesis 3, verse 15, which was subsequently illustrated through the sacrifice system adopted by the patriarchs and the nation of Israel.¹⁰⁴

In Mahayana Buddhism's Pure Land sect, popular in China, Korea and Japan, the transfer of merit was established by the late sixth century, perhaps following interactions with Christians. Merit could be transferred to the believer through faith in the name of Amitābha (Omitofo) or Lord of Boundless Light.¹⁰⁵ Enlightened beings or bodhisattvas delay their entry into nirvana in order to transfer merit to faithful followers. A popular bodhisattva in Asia is the Goddess of Mercy, Guan Yin (Kwan Yin), who was introduced into China in the first century of this era. She is often shown nursing a male child.¹⁰⁶ She may be associated with the goddess Sheng mu (Holy Mother—who gives children in answer to homage and offerings) and the goddess Matsu (protector of seafarers), and even in some Chinese communities she is regarded as the virgin Mary.¹⁰⁷ Merit can be transferred through a single act of faith, but many believers perform multiple acts in order to ensure it. The original idea of merit transfer has been attributed to the Buddha himself.¹⁰⁸ It is significant to note that merit here is gained as a result of faith in the efforts of other humans whereas grace (Christian context) is not earned. It is a gift bestowed on those who ask in faith and claim God's abundant gift of mercy offered to unworthy humanity.

Instead of blind faith, a faith built on the evidence from history of Christ's life and resurrection, when exercised, will give joy and release from the uncertainties found in other religious enterprises. The authentic Christian story of the virgin birth provides a powerful example of God's love for humanity, his faithfulness, and willingness to save all those who believe.

The Maitreya to come. The concept of Maitreya, the merciful one, arose in India where images appeared around BC 350.¹⁰⁹ The prophecy of his coming is contained in the Diamond sutra, which has been variously translated and interpreted.¹¹⁰ This Buddha will appear after an immense period of time. His actual appearance will coincide with the commencement of the era of the golden age of acceptance of Buddha's teachings. Hence, he is a symbol of hope. Those who hear him preach will be saved.¹¹¹

In China the Maitreya Buddha (Mi-li Fo or Mi-lo) is classically the Laughing Buddha who made his appearance around the end of the first millennium AD as this representation. He has experienced many incarnations in China, the most famous being during the Tang and Wu-Tai Dynasties (907–1060). Ideas of his imminent return inspired popular rebellions among the people. Most now hold he is in the Tusita Heaven, as he has not yet entered the final stage of his journey. But when he does he will save mankind and benefit all sentient beings. In seeking answers to prayers to him (he now acts as a bodhisattva), the expression of faith, purity and effort are significant.¹¹²

The teachings about Maitreya have been influenced by Taoist eschatology so that marvelous accounts about the end of the world has been invented involving scenes of apocalyptic battles, salvation of a minority, judgment and the establishment of an ideal dwelling place (parallels to

Christian thought). In medieval China the teachings took on the aspect of an imminent messiah in periods of temporal turmoil and decay and to serve political purposes.¹¹³ Today it is believed he willingly grants help to those who pray to him.¹¹⁴

The Buddhists were not the only group seeking salvation from the chaos being experienced. Taoists traditions about the coming of great harmony began in China in 3 BC with the worship of the Queen Mother of the West (Xiwang mu—Goddess of Immortality), although the date for the emergence of more serious messianic traditions often is placed much later (second century). The coming of a true king bringing harmony can be traced to Confucian thought, but it was taken on by popular movements within the Taoist tradition in times of political uncertainty and stress. The leaders of the movement in medieval times claimed guidance from a deified Lao-tzu (known as Li Hong/Laojun) in their quest for an emperor or leader capable of bringing temporal peace and harmony and thus fulfill their desire to claim the mandate of Heaven. Some dynasties sought to make their rule legitimate by adopting messianic beliefs.¹¹⁵

Christians can link into these ideas with their convincing and cohesive worldview about God's harmonious kingdom. The great controversy theme, with Christ at its centre, backed by the massed evidence of Bible prophecy, provides powerful evidence for belief in the Messiah who has come already. God is beyond the frailties of human nature and is the one who can be trusted to save and who is about to return to usher in his kingdom of harmony.

Festivals. The Chinese observe many festivals. Some of these, such as the Ghost Festival, contain linkages to Christian faith communities that believe that tradition has a significant part to play in informing doctrine and worship practices. For example, the Feast of the Assumption and the Ghost Festival are both held on August 15.¹¹⁶ The popular use of decorated eggs at festivals and times of rejoicing in China has its associates in some Christian circles where at Easter hot cross buns and eggs are popularized.¹¹⁷ Both these practices are of pagan origin¹¹⁸ and stand as stumbling blocks to lead listeners to the certainties of God's word.

However, all is not lost with some festivals. The Ghost Festival is distinct from other festivals where the living pay homage to the dead (Qingming—spring and Chung Yeung—autumn). These grave sweeping festivals can be used to reinforce belief in filial piety, which is so important in Chinese society and upheld fervently by Christians. A Singapore Adventist Christian believer expressed his enthusiasm for ensuring the survival of the Qingming (Ch'ing Ming) festival. When it is sensitively kept, it offers a pathway to witness positively to those steeped in ancestor worship without compromising biblical values concerning the state of the dead.¹¹⁹ It shows how filial piety can be strong, rooted in *agape*, without the interfering crutch of life after death.

There is no partiality with God (Romans 2:11)

God appeals to human minds using culturally appropriate methods. These may come through, promptings of conscience, reason, the principles evident in nature (Romans 2:14–16; 10:16–18), through allusions to a Supreme Being made in traditional religions (Acts 17:22, 23), or through the words of their great thinkers.¹²⁰ The latter may have unwittingly spoken words inspired by the source of wisdom (Proverbs 8:22–28, 1). I will develop this idea using Confucius as an example using the fundamental principle on which he constructed his philosophy—*ren* or loving others (Table 1).¹²¹

The wise behavior approved by Confucius was found in the sage kings (Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties and particularly the latter) and is described principally by the concept of *li* (proper,

acceptable, and prescriptive behavior according to a standard). This feature is derived from Heaven, which Confucius spoke of as representing a Being capable of meaningful interaction with humans. Obedience to the mandate of heaven meant that one followed the Way. The most significant function of *li* is to achieve harmony (internal and external). As a consequence joy, peace and comfort could be experienced within and without. The observance of *li* essentially comes from the convinced mind because the individual has internalized the values it represents. This means that joy arises spontaneously from observing its ways.¹²²

Table 1: Comparison of characteristics and attitudes displayed by those with *ren* and *agape*.*

Characteristics and close associates of <i>ren</i>	Characteristics of <i>agape</i>
Essential quality: “loving others”	Essential qualities: “loving God and others”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect others and count as important—means show empathy, sincerity, reverence, dutifulness • Live according to the roles and responsibilities assigned to you • Deferential • Desires to benefit others • Helps others to reach their goals • Slow to speak • Courage, strength, decisiveness, simplicity and deliberateness in speech • Not selfish • Tolerance, trustworthiness, diligence, generosity • Contented in all circumstances • Generous • Practices reciprocity—Golden Rule • Show deliberateness in speech • Is not associated with a ‘glib tongue’ and ‘ingratiating appearance’ • Not anxious or afraid • Shows filial piety, reverence, trustworthiness • Promotes the right (the Way) • Helps others to become good and not evil • Do not compromise beliefs and principles to achieve harmony 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kind, gentle. Emotions under control of reason • Not dishonourable in behavior, courteous • Not jealous/envious • Empathetic and seeks to promote happiness in others • Not boastful • Not proud or conceited • Not selfish • Longsuffering/patient • Not irritable or given to anger • Puts best construction on acts and statements of others • Puts others first • Gentle and calm • Do not expose weaknesses of others • Defends others • Pleasure in others virtues • No pleasure found in unrighteous attitudes/acts, but pleasure found in goodness

* Analysis based on Tan (2013)¹²³ and Nichol, Cottrell, Neufeld *et al.* (1957) on 1 Corinthians 13.¹²⁴

The observance of *li* means that one already possesses *ren* or desirable attitudes and behaviours. And it follows that if one has *ren* then *li* will be demonstrated in action. This is because actions arise from the attitudes and values espoused (character traits). *Ren* motivates and directs an individual to think and feel the right thing whereas *li* guides and regulates one to think and feel the right in the correct way. Even sacrificing life to achieve *ren* is commendable. Confucius considered filial piety was a foundational expression of *ren*. All the values, attitudes and behaviours of *ren* are harmonized in *li*, which is at the centre of realizing proper relationships with the family, community and the world.¹²⁵

The instruction given by the apostle Paul to be conscious of and responsive to one another's problems represents a compassionate attitude and actions coming from an empathetic base. Those travelling this pathway are fulfilling the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2), because they are being led by the Spirit. Confucius appears to have been travelling along the pathway lighted by Christ, which has been commented on by others.¹²⁶ He reflected a "shadowy" monotheism and his teachings contain all the great ethical teachings found in the words of Christ.¹²⁷ This idea is illustrated by observing the parallels between the concept of *ren* and *agape* (Table 1).

The concept of *agape* is foundational to Christian thought. It is an unselfish love that originates from God.¹²⁸ *Agape* represents a divine quality (1 John 4:7, 16), which we experience as a consequence of Christ's sacrifice. We then act as channels to transmit this understanding to others.¹²⁹ Confucian *ren* has some connection to Heaven, but essentially comes from within the human sphere. It is connected with the development and expression of other virtues. This love is channelled to others too.¹³⁰ Hence, it is similar to but not identical to *agape*.

Previously, we have indicated that Confucius' made great statements about beneficence, mercy, magnanimity, justice, good faith, and veracity and love. It is significant to note that all these are illustrated in the Old Testament scriptures,¹³¹ which were written prior to his life activities.

Other philosophers have reflected honourable moral principles (e.g., Buddha), which mirror elements of the Ten Commandments.¹³² Those who are honest seekers for truth can be led to greater light and eventually acknowledge Christ, as has been observed by this author in South-east Asia. This is in accord, I believe, with the comment by Ellen White¹³³ "That was the true light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.' The world has had its great teachers, men of giant intellect and wonderful research, men whose utterances have stimulated thought, and opened to view vast fields of knowledge; and these men have been honored as guides and benefactors of their race. ... as far as their teaching is true, do the world's great thinkers reflect the rays of the Sun of Righteousness. Every gem of thought, every flash of the intellect, is from the Light of the world."

Concluding remarks

It is clear that pathways pointing to the God of salvation have existed from ancient times in China. The clarity of the messages given appears to have varied greatly through the ages, being perhaps the clearest during the time of the ancient sages and when the Church of the East had reached the high point of its activity before it was decimated (end of the fourteenth century). God calls all people through conscience, reason, the witness of nature, and special appeals can be made through their own philosophers and prophets/sages who may be unwitting ambassadors for him. Mankind is answerable only to the light received or is capable of receiving.¹³⁴ In this context, there perhaps never has been a time when the true Light, Jesus, has not been shining in China. Finding effective ways to utilize traditional stories and historical details to lead modern hearers to the God

of all knowledge is the real challenge. It is an endeavour that will deliver positive results, as the apostle Paul demonstrated at Mars' Hill (Acts 17:16–34). On seeing the unknown god's altar, he referred his audience to the legendary story of Epimenides of Crete who supposedly rid Athens of a plague by offering sacrifices of all the sheep (in a selected flock) that lay down in a meadow. An altar was erected to commemorate the deliverance by a god not named. Paul then preached to them about the true God and finished by quoting from the poet Aratus ("For we are also His offspring"—v. 28). The pagan poet was speaking about Zeus or Jupiter but Paul interpreted his saying to mean that the quote was properly attributed to the true God.¹³⁵ There are many sayings and springboards in Chinese culture/philosophy that could be used to serve a similar purpose.

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