

Prolegomenon to Interreligious Dialogue in China: Daoism, the Trinitarian Relationship, and Christian Inculturation

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Abstract: *While Matteo Ricci inaugurated a fruitful dialogue between Christianity and Confucianism, today this dialogue must account for all of Chinese culture, including Daoism. Church Fathers, such as St. Augustine of Hippo, made great contributions to theology out of their profound experience of God and the encounter between Christianity and Latin culture that has its roots in Greek philosophy. In this article, the author attempts to read the mystery of the Trinity using categories of Chinese thought. He finds helpful for understanding the Trinitarian*

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relationship the Daoist concepts of the dialectic of harmony containing many elements: the abiding relationship of qi between the yin and the yang, the relationship between being and non-being, Dao and De, the imprints of one and three in all things, and the concept of self-emptying aiming at wu-wei (non-doing) as an ultimate goal of a human being in harmony with the Dao. He also finds that Chinese culture's values of harmony, humility, and intuitiveness and its emphasis on relationship befit a good disposition for approaching the mystery of the Trinity, which is essential to Christianity. The proposal of this prolegomenon is that an in-depth analysis of Daoism and the Christian Trinitarian theology can contribute to the inculturation of the Christian faith in the Chinese context in ways that can contribute to the positive development of Chinese culture in today's world.

China has gone through tremendous changes since the initiation of its Open Door Policy in 1979. The paramount leader of this change, Deng Xiaoping, coined the phrase “building socialism with Chinese characteristics.” By putting this proposal into practice, an enormous potential has been unleashed, and China has achieved unparalleled development. Recently, President Xi Jinping expounded new policies concerning religions in China today.¹ What consequences will these policies bring about? This question is of particular interest to the Catholic Church in

1. President Xi Jinping addressed a conference on religions, which was held in Beijing from April 22 to 23, 2016. Xi said that religious affairs carry “special importance” in the work of the Communist Party of China and the central government, and he promised to fully implement the Party’s policy on religious freedom and help religions adapt to the socialist society. See *Global Times*, April 25, 2016.

China, especially in terms of the inculturation of the Christian faith in the Chinese context.

A recent article on the editorial page of the *Global Times*, a major newspaper of the Chinese government, mentioned that there is a simple way to describe China's recent historical development.² While the founding of the New China relied on Marxism, the economic success of China depended to some extent on implementing a reform that opened China to the global economy. In this implementation, China accepted some modern Western ideologies for the sake of the nation, its people, and the revival of Chinese culture. However, new ideas must be verified through praxis. China is now defining core values of the Chinese dream that the article suggests must be maintained while accepting modern Western influence. The West and its positive values, in my view, are deeply rooted in Christianity. As such, the future of China's integration of Western and Chinese culture will entail the integration of Christianity.

The Jubilee Year of 2000 was celebrated worldwide, and Beijing's Millennium Tower was built for the occasion. In the center of this millennium monument, there is a circular mural decorated with multicolored stone carvings and a huge relief featuring five thousand years of Chinese cultural history. Among many great figures in Chinese history, Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), who introduced the West and Christianity to China and promoted cultural exchange, is recognized for his unique contribution to China. In 2010, the Catholic Diocese of Shanghai also initiated the cause

of beatification for Xu Guangqi (1552–1633), the great Catholic scientist and chancellor of China. The beatification of Xu together with Ricci would be a gratifying event in China and very significant for the church, considering how their lives have been intertwined.

Ricci had great respect for Chinese culture. He valued friendship and he made friends with scholar-officials such as Xu Guangqi, Li Zhicao, and Yang Tingyun.³ Today, he occupies an important place in Chinese history and is appreciated by the Chinese people. Although for some time the church did not adopt his method of approaching China, in recent decades it has once again put him in the limelight. Pope Francis and recent pontiffs affirmed and praised the missionary work of Ricci in China. Saint John Paul II pointed out that Ricci knew how to seek consensus with Chinese intellectuals of his time. Ricci based his vision of inculturating the Christian faith in China on how the Fathers of the Church had done centuries before in the encounter between the Gospel of Jesus Christ and Greco-Roman culture.⁴

As an outstanding representative of the Western culture of his times, Ricci inaugurated a fruitful dialogue between Christianity and Confucianism. While the church today affirms the correctness of Ricci's attitude and approach to China, these were limited to Confucianism. The dialogue today must also account for Chinese culture's other great school of thought, namely, Daoism. It is precisely to this task that I attempt to contribute in this paper.

3. They are known as the "Three Great Pillars of Chinese Catholicism." See Jean-Pierre Charbonnier, *Christians in China, AD 600–2000* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 161.

4. John Paul II, Message to Participants of the International Conference Commemorating the Fourth Centenary of the Arrival in Beijing of Father Matteo Ricci, no. 3.

2. Chen Ming (陈明), "The return of Confucianism in modern practice edification" (儒家回归还需在现代实践中重构) Editorial, *Global Times* (Chinese edition), March 21, 2016.

Daoism in Chinese Culture

A prominent theme of Chinese culture is the desire for social harmony and cosmic unity. For Daoism, this is achieved through the interplay between yin and yang,⁵ the two vital forces of the universe stemming from the Dao. A similar view is found in Neo-Confucianism.⁶ In fact, Daoism and Confucianism, along with Buddhism, enriched one another throughout Chinese history and cultural tradition. For most Chinese persons, these three traditions are complementary and contribute to the happiness and the harmony of daily life. The question today concerns how Christianity can contribute to a Chinese culture of happiness and harmony.

Turning to Daoism, the opening chapter of the *Dao De Jing* (the Book of Dao and De) states: “The Dao that can be defined is not the constant Dao (道); the name that can be named is not the constant name.”⁷ In this chapter, two other terms, *miao* (妙) and *xuan* (玄), translated as “subtle” and “profound,” respectively, were employed to express the mysterious nature of the Dao.⁸ In another chapter, the author, Laozi according to tradition, gives three attributes of the Dao: the “invisible,” the “inaudible,” and

the “formless.”⁹ As suggested in the opening remark of *Dao De Jing*, the Dao can neither be described nor given a name (非常道, 非常名). One may start with the observation without giving it a name to avoid limiting the description of the phenomenon and of any corresponding guiding principles. The Chinese culture often uses the term *laisheng* (来生), meaning “next life,” to refer to ultimate reality. Whatever it is, it is a mystery to those living in this world.

Philosophy in the West, on the other hand, focuses more on ontology, the study of “being,” to grasp reality and give it a name. Christian theology has used this Western philosophical approach to discuss the nature and action of God. Reason is a handmaiden to faith. However, Daoism and Confucianism have focused on humanity and the world around it. It is on this more humble, intuitive, and practical this-worldly basis that Chinese culture has developed.

The Chinese Values of Harmony, Humility, and Intuitiveness

Confucius was once asked what he thought about life after death, and his reply was explicit: “We do not know the mysteries even of this life; how can we know about the future life?”¹⁰ A quote from Laozi in the *Dao De Jing* goes like this: “He who knows does

5. Note that we will put in italics Chinese words that are less familiar to non-Chinese readers. But “Dao,” “De,” “yin-yang,” and “wu-wei” will not be italicized.

6. Zhang Zai (1020–1077), in his work *Western Inscription* (西铭), stressed the unity of heaven (天), earth (地), and all beings. Heaven and humanity are one. All people are brothers and sisters because everyone is birthed by heaven.

7. The translations of the *Dao De Jing* in this paper are mine, based on several recent translations including: Joseph H. Wong, “Logos and Tao: Johannine Christology and a Taoist perspective,” *Path, Pontificia Academia Theologica* 2, 2003; Chan Wing-Tsit, ed., *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 136–76. In the translation of the first two verses of *Dao De Jing* here, Wong used the phrase “the constant Dao,” while Chen used “the eternal Dao.”

8. Chan indicated that the translation of *maio* could be “mystery” (139), but Wang Bi preferred “subtlety.”

9. *Dao De Jing*, chapter 14: We look at it and so not see it; Its name is The Invisible. We listen to it and do not hear it; Its name is The Inaudible. We touch it and do not find it; Its name is The Subtle (formless). These three cannot be further inquired into (unfathomable), And hence merge into one. See Chan.

10. Ji Lu asked about serving the gods and spirits. Confucius replied: “You are not able to serve man well. How can you talk about serving gods and spirits?” Ji Lu asked again: “May I ask about death?” Confucius replied: “You do not understand even life. How can you understand death?” See James J. Legge, trans., *The Analects by Confucius*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1893, Book 11.

not speak; he who speaks does not know.”¹¹ The knowledge here refers to knowledge of the transcendent that is indescribable and ineffable.

When a person says, “I see,” in English, he or she means, “I understand.” In Chinese, the expression is “*Wo ming bai*.” The term “*ming*” (明) means to be illuminated, to be given the light to understand. As Carmine di Sante writes, while in Greek culture the emphasis is on actively “seeing,” in contrast with the Jewish Christian tradition of “listening” (to the words of God),¹² it is interesting to note that for the Chinese people, to understand one must first have the light to see. This shows a basic attitude of humility in the understanding of reality. One cannot “see” only by using our senses or “understand” only by using our reason. One must be illuminated.

In terms of Daoism, the following sentence appears twice in the *Dao De Jing*: “To know the constant (*chang* 常) [Dao] is called enlightenment (*ming* 明).” This means that the source of true enlightenment is the eternal Dao. In the humility of knowing nothing through one’s own efforts there can arise an intuition of the Dao. In chapter six, Laozi makes use of metaphors to indicate the features of an intuition of the Dao: “It is called the root of heaven and earth” (是谓天地之根). One can gain an intuition of the Dao by silently observing all things in their rising from and returning to their root. From this humble intuition, the Dao is understood as the ultimate principle of the universe, the source and destination of everything: “It is continuous, and seems to always exist.

Use it and you will never wear it out” (绵绵呵！其若存！用之不离).¹³ As far as time is concerned, one understands that the Dao is eternal. From the perspective of space, the Dao is everywhere and its effects are endless.

Looking deeper into this continuity, chapter 16 says: “Expand to extreme vacuity” (致虚极) and “Contract to utmost quietude” (守静笃). There is a continuous dynamic, from vacuity (*xu* 虚) through extreme expansion while quietude (*jing* 静) contracts to the utmost, which presents a dialectic way of understanding. Chapter two begins with these verses:

When people of the world all know beauty as beauty, there arises the recognition of ugliness (天下皆知美之为美，恶已). When they all know the good as good, there arises the recognition of evil (皆知善，斯不善矣). Therefore, you (有) and wu (无) “give relational existence” (有无之相生也). Difficult (*nan*) and easy (*yi*) complete each other; long (*chang*) and short (*duan*) contrast each other; high (*gao*) and low (*di*) distinguish each other; voice (*sheng*) and tone (*yin*) harmonize with each other; front (*qian*) and back (*hou*) follow each other.

In all these verses, pairs of opposites, such as *nan-yi*, *chang-duan*, *gao-di*, *sheng-yin*, *qian-hou*, arise in a dialectic of harmony. This is the method of yin and yang.

In this way, Laozi described the relationship of interdependence (connection and functioning) of all things in the world, affirming the harmonizing, eternal, and universal principle. As

11. *Dao De Jing*, chapter 56.

12. Carmine di Sante, *Responsabilità, L'io-per-l'altro* (Roma: Edizioni Lavoro-Esperienze, Fossano 1996), 11–44.

13. *Dao De Jing*, chapter 6.

Chan Wing-Tsit has pointed out, with a humble intuition of this interrelated process of the changing cosmos, Laozi explicated the superiority of non-action (*wu-wei*) over action and the idea of teaching without words.¹⁴ This does not mean being passive but being an active subject without forcing nature. Ren Jiyu writes that, like exemplary persons, it means to make a change without forcing the situation. One is always in harmony while contributing to that harmony. This dialectical principle guides people in their social life.¹⁵

The dialectical principle of Laozi is distinctively different from the dialectical method of Hegel. Western logic, codified in the rigid laws of scholastic argumentation, is based on the principle of contradiction and operates by means of subtle distinctions aimed at proving the invalidity of adverse positions. The Chinese tradition instead aims not to refute but to reconcile contradictions. Opposites are the two extremes of the one truth. Different points of view are not mutually exclusive. Reasoning above and beyond concrete realities is considered futile argumentation based on abstract concepts.

Hegel gave this example: “The bud disappears as the blossom bursts forth, and one could say that the former is refuted by the latter. In the same way, the fruit declares the blossom to be a false existence of the plant. These forms do not only differ, they also displace each other because they are incompatible.”¹⁶ He saw

the progressive development of an organic whole by way of the dialectical method. A thesis gives rise to its reaction, an antithesis, which contradicts or negates the thesis, and the tension between the two is resolved by means of a synthesis. While the Hegelian method is based on rejection and displacement, Laozi’s method is based on a dialectical principle of change that blends the contrasts such that they achieve a state of balance in a harmonious way. One refutes contradictions, while the other reconciles contradictions. According to Laozi, the created universe carries the pervading principles of the yin and the yang; through their union it reaches harmony. (This passage of *Dao De Jing*, chapter 42, will be further explained and elaborated later.) There are many examples in the Chinese classics of this dialectical method,¹⁷ which may be called the “dialectic of harmony.”

The Imprint of “One” and “Three” in All Things

How might one interpret the following Daoist passage? “All things under heaven come (生) from *you* (有); you (有) comes from *wu*

17. Another example of the dialectic of harmony and simplicity appears in the following passage in the *Book of Changes* (See “Appended remarks,” Bk. II, Ch.5 in Chen, 268): “After the Sun goes, the moon comes. After the moon goes, the sun comes. The sun and the moon push each other in their course and thus light appears. After the winter goes, the summer comes. After the summer goes, the winter comes. The winter and the summer push each other and thus the year is completed. To go means to contract and to come means to expand. Contraction and expansion act on each other and thus advantages are produced. The looper caterpillar coils itself up in order to stretch. Dragons and snakes hibernate (contract) in order to stretch out (expand). Investigate the principles of things and refinement until we enter into their spirit, for then their application can be extended, and utilize that application and secure personal peace, for then our virtue will be exalted. What goes beyond this is something we can hardly know. To investigate spirit to the utmost and to understand transformation is the height of virtue.”

14. Chan indicated that in this passage of *Dao De Jing*, Laozi anticipated the Buddhist tradition of the silent transmission of the mystic doctrine, especially in the Zen School. See Chan, 140.

15. Ren Jiyu, “The dialectic of simplicity” (老子的朴素辩证法思想), *Teaching and Research* (教学与研究) 2 (1962): 17–18.

16. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit: Volume 1*, trans. J. B. Baillie (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2005), 68.

(无)”¹⁸ First of all, the concept of *you* and *wu* is to be understood in terms of the *you-wu* dialectic co-relation. In fact, they have been translated as “being” and “non-being,” “presence” and “absence,” “with” and “without,” as in the case of *you-ming* (with name) and *wu-ming* (without name).

For example, there have been various interpretations of the following verse in the beginning chapter of the *Dao De Jing*. For Wang Bi (226–249),¹⁹ *Wu-ming* and *you-ming* mean “without name” and “with name,” respectively. Therefore, the verse goes: “The nameless is the origin of heaven and earth; the named is the mother of ten thousand things (无名天地之始; 有名万物之母).” For Wang Anshi (1021–1086),²⁰ *ming* is used as a verb “to name,” and *wu* and *you* are nouns that mean “non-being” and “being.” Therefore, the verse would go like this: “Non-being names the origin of heaven and earth; being names the mother of ten thousand things.”²¹

Contemporary scholars such as Feng Youlan²² have the following explanation of the terms *you* and *wu*: The *you* in the verse “all things under heaven come from *you*” (天下万物生于有) refers to something material and to physical things: “the materiality of being.” The *wu* in the verse “*you* comes from *wu*” (有生于无)

refers to something immaterial and metaphysical, “nothingness,” which is close to if not identical to “pure act without form and matter.” The *you* and *wu* referred to here, in chapter 40, have the same meaning as those of chapter 1, where *you-ming* (with-name) is the mother of all things, and *wu-ming* (nameless) is the origin of Heaven and Earth. However, the *you-wu* in chapter 1 and chapter 40 is different from that of chapter 2, where it states: “*you* and *wu* (being and non-being) therefore give relational existence” (有无之相生也). This passage expresses the mutual relation of *you-wu* as the twofold aspect of Dao. The co-relation of this *you-wu* is like that of yin-yang. This *you-wu* refers to the transcendent and metaphysical Dao.

However, the *Dao De Jing* does not stop with this duality. Rather, Laozi discusses a third dimension that surpasses simple duality. This third dimension is *sheng* (生). According to Chinese tradition, the term *sheng* has the following meanings: to generate or to arise (生长), to form (生来, 形成), to transform (生化, 化生), or to manifest (显生, 展示). Given this third element, one might analyze chapter 42 of the *Dao De Jing* verse by verse in the following way:

Dao manifests itself as One (道生一): Dao is being One, absoluteness, and unity.

One becomes two (一生二): one composed of two, non-uniformity within unity. Dao by itself contains the yin and yang, therefore two.

Two becomes three (二生三): the third is the relation between the two. The third is the *qi*, the flow and the vital force, and there are the vital forces of yin and of yang.

18. *Dao De Jing*, chapter 40.

19. Wang Bi (王弼) is regarded as one of the most important interpreters of the *Dao De Jing*. His commentary that appeared with the text was widely considered the best copy of the text until the discovery of the Mawangdui manuscript near Changsha, Hunan province, in 1973. See *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2013.

20. Wang Anshi (王安石) was a Song dynasty (960–1279) scholar and politician who made interpretations of the philosophical Laozi commentaries.

21. Cf.: Chen Guying (陈鼓应), *The translation and Review of Laozi* (老子注译及评) Chunghwa Book (中华书局), 2012, 90.

22. Feng Youlan (冯友兰), Chinese Edition, *Collection of Discussions on the Philosophy of Laozi* (老子哲学讨论集), 41.

Three generates the ten thousand things (三生万物): relation within and without. These three factors interact to reach an appropriate state, and all things are generated in this state.

The ten thousand things carry the yin and embrace the yang (万物负阴而抱阳): all things carry the imprint of yin and yang.

Blending of their *qi* achieves *he* (冲气以为和): *qi* is the vital force, and *he* means harmony as well as totality.

Laozi used “one” as a numerical representation of the Dao as the absolute. “Two” refers to yin and yang, the two that the Dao contains. The *qi* of the yin and of the yang is contained in the one Dao, and *qi* is the relationship between the two in the one, making *qi* the third. The final verse of the paragraph says: “The ten thousand things carry the yin and embrace the yang, the blending of their *qi* achieves harmony” (万物负阴而抱阳，冲气以为和). Therefore, we can say that *qi* is the vital force of the two: yin and yang. The equilibrium of the two achieves harmony. Yin-yang is also a process of harmonization that ensures a constant, dynamic balance of all things.²³ The interaction of the *qi* of yin and yang establishes *he* (harmony), so it gives birth to all things in the cosmos. Harmony is the relationship of “mutually transforming” (相互相生) yin and yang in the one Dao. It generates new and harmonious life that includes all things. All things have the imprint of “one” and “three.”

23. Robin R. Wang, *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2006.

Here, Daoism provides a context for comparison, and we find seeds for dialogue with Christians concerning the Trinity. For example, in his encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* Pope Francis writes about the “divine principle” of the Trinity and the relationship between creatures: “For Christians, believing in one God who is Trinitarian communion suggests that the Trinity has left its mark on all creation.” Humans going out from themselves enter into relationships, “to live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures. In this way, they make their own the Trinitarian dynamism that God imprinted in them when they were created. Everything is interconnected, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of a global solidarity that flows from the mystery of the Trinity.”²⁴

The Trinity and Chinese Culture

Before attempting to read the mystery of Trinitarian relationships through categories of Chinese thought and, in particular, in light of the Daoist vision outlined above, one must first examine some verses from the Prologue of the Gospel of John, written originally in Greek:

- 1:1 In the beginning was the Word (λόγος): the Word was with (προς) God and the Word was God.
1:2–3 Through him all things came into being (γίγνομαι), not one thing came into being (γίγνομαι) except through (δια) him.

24. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, encyclical letter on care for our common home, Vatican, May 24, 2015, 238–40.

- 1:14 And (καί) the Word became flesh (σὰρξ ἐγένετο), he lived among us, and we saw his glory, the glory that he has from the Father as only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth.
- 1:18 No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

In these verses, the term λόγος (Logos)²⁵ in Greek and *Dabar* in Hebrew is translated as “the Word” and has the meaning of “words” and “expressions.” The term προς (*pros*) is translated as “with” or “toward,” as in the phrase “was toward God” (*pros ton theon*). It indicates dynamism imprinted in the verb “to be.” Therefore, it means that the Word is always directed toward someone, living and creating relationship; the Being of the Word is movement, so to speak. The Word is not only God but also with God and always dynamically toward God. The terms γίγνομαι (*gignomai*), translated “came into being,” and δια (*dia*), translated as “through,” as in the verse “all things came into being through him,” shows that the Word was not only God and with and toward God but also played a creative and ordering role in forming the creation of all things. The phrase “in the beginning” means that the Word was with God since eternity in the perspective of time. As the renowned exegete Rudolf Schnackenburg has pointed out, the term

25. Although the Gospel of John has been transmitted to us in Greek, John the Evangelist, being a Jew, was also thinking of the Hebrew term *Dabar* when he used the Greek term Logos. (Note: Since Logos is familiar in Christian theology, we will not italicize it.) Anna Pelli affirmed that the philosophical *logos* in the Greek tradition was insufficient to express the reality of the universal Logos of God become man in history. A richer meaning was then embraced by Christianity. See Anna Pelli, *dispensa Verità e dialogo: la dinamica relazionale del conoscere*, Sophia University Institute manuscript 2013–2014, 18–19; Giustino, *Apology*, 2, 13, 4.

καί (*kai*) indicates a moment when and where the Word “became flesh” (ἐγένετο *egeneto*), which the Word until then had not been.²⁶ The phrase “he lived among us” indicates that the Word entered in time and space into human history through Jesus Christ.

The opening verses of the Prologue powerfully express the eternal relationship between God and the Word, the reality of the Word in the heart of God. They also present the Word as the focus, the converging point, through which God created the cosmos and where God made the transcendence of God come to be present in the world. One can see here a certain compatibility with the concept presented in the passage from chapter 42 of the *Dao De Jing*, which states that Ultimate Reality, the Dao or the One, contains two: yin and yang. For the Christian, the One also contains the Word making Two. But the Two are fully One because by an inner *kenosis* (self-emptying) they fully empty themselves into each other and totally give one to the other so that there are not two gods, but One God. They are so by the self-emptying love, the kenotic love, that pours each fully into the other, making them eternally One. This pouring forth of Love is the “with” or “the dynamic movement towards” that is the Holy Spirit that defines their Oneness as Eternal Love.

Later in the Gospel of John, it is written that Jesus as the Word made flesh appeared after his death to his disciples. Jesus passes on the Holy Spirit to them: “And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’” (Jn 21:22). At the end of his Gospel, just before the epilogue, John completes the Trinitarian picture with the Holy Spirit being given to persons.

26. Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistle: A Commentary* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 267; Cf.: Thomas L. Brodie, *The Gospel according to John* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1993), 142.

Verses 14 and 18 point out that the Word made flesh showed us God. The Word glorified God and vice versa. Here there is One and Two bound eternally in unity by Three, the Holy Spirit that is shared with the cosmos and humankind. It brings unity to the cosmos and harmony to humankind. Here we find more ground for dialogue between Christianity and Daoism, with its view of Ultimate Reality and its humility, which is so important in Chinese culture. It is as the light of the God, the Word, and the Holy Spirit that the Trinity is manifested to human intuitiveness, bringing both personal transformation and social harmony.

I do not mean to say that certain ideas found in the *Dao De Jing* express Christian concepts of the Trinity, but it is necessary to express Christian thoughts from a Chinese perspective just as the early Church Fathers did in the Greek and Roman cultural context. Inculturation is a process that requires time and patience. However, Vatican II affirms that culture is a human creation and needs to be “cleansed, raised up and perfected.”²⁷ If only more Chinese Christians would put into practice the gospel message, their expressions of faith could be genuine and authentically Chinese. In the process, these expressions would gradually be accepted.

This calls to mind an episode of the Old Testament. “I Am that I Am” was the response God used when Moses asked for his name (Ex 3:14).²⁸ It is very difficult to translate this verse of the

27. Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium*, Vatican 1964, 17.

28. See Exodus 3:14: “Moses said to God, ‘Who am I to go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?’ ‘I shall be with you,’ God said, ‘and this is the sign by which you will know that I was the one who sent you. After you have led the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.’ Moses then said to God, ‘Look, if I go to the Israelites and say to them, “The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,” and they say to me, “What is his name?” what am I to tell them?’ God said to Moses,

Bible. It is the revelation of the ineffable name of God. That God alone IS. God’s self-revelation has been promised from above as people strive to know God. According to the theologian Piero Coda, through this giving of “I Am,” of the IS, God enters time and space and creates a relation: “‘I Am’ is the name of God which can be translated as ‘I am always *with* you.’”²⁹ In the Prologue, God’s Word is not just spoken as it was to Moses, but in Jesus it entered into human history to be with us concretely, forever. And at the end of John’s Gospel, the Holy Spirit is given to bind all to God and together in harmony. The One gives Two, and Two gives Three—the very Three that binds in love One and Two.

In his autobiography, *The Confessions*, Augustine described his encounter with God: “When I first knew thee, thou didst lift me up (*et vestrum sollevasti*). And thou didst cry to me from afar, ‘I am that I am (*Ego sum qui sum*).’ And I heard this, as things are heard in the heart, and there was no room for doubt.”³⁰ Piero Coda affirms that, for Augustine, therefore, it is not just with human effort that one can grasp and understand who God is; rather it is God who lowered himself to elevate people to a “being with” God.³¹ The first move to tell the Being of God is not from bottom up, for this attempt is always out of reach, but from top down.

‘I am he who is.’ And he said, “This is what you are to say to the Israelites, “I am has sent me to you.””

29. Piero Coda, *La trinita quando il racconto di Dio diventa il racconto dell'uomo* Rome: Marcianum Press, 2015), 16–21.

30. Augustine, *Confessions*, VII, 10:16.

31. Piero Coda observes that the expression “when I first knew thee” indicates a precise event and a living experience for St. Augustine, wherein he emphasized that God “elevated him” to see who God IS—precisely that Being that Augustine could well see in a strong ontological sense. See Piero Coda, *Sul luogo della Trinità: Rileggendo il De Trinitate di Agostino* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2008), 30–31.

St. Thérèse of Lisieux, too, found the “elevator” for which she was searching: “It is your arms, Jesus, which are the lift to carry me to heaven, and so there is no need for me to grow up. In fact, just the opposite: I must stay little and become less and less.”³² The “little way” of St. Thérèse is centered on the infinite mercy of God and recognizes that everything is a grace and that Providence is in control from moment to moment when one embraces the will of God. She observed, “Jesus is doing all in me, and I am doing nothing.” Since everything is a grace, she came to realize that God has no need of one’s works. However, the “little way” is not an invitation to do nothing. One must prove one’s love by works, but works without love count for nothing.

This is very much in tune with Laozi’s concept of *wu-wei* (non-doing). It refers to the cultivation of the highest state of being in non-doing. It is a kind of paradoxical “action of non-action,” a kind of “going with the flow” characterized by living in harmony with the ultimate nature (*ziran*) in response to the world around us. A practical example is what athletes experience when they do something so often that its movements are natural and no thought is needed to act correctly in the right time and place. It is simply done, effortlessly, cleanly, and in harmony with everything around it. However, it requires endless practice beforehand. In comparison to the concept of *wu-wei*, there are religious traditions wherein one experiences union with God (mysticism) after a long period of mortification (asceticism). In Christian terms, one could call such union a state of grace, wherein one is in full disposition to the gifts of God and partakes in the divine nature of God.

32. Thérèse of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 113.

Jesus Christ and the Trinitarian Relationship

As mentioned above, the Word is the converging focus in the creation of all things. The Word is also said to be “life” and “light” and is incarnated as Jesus. As narrated later in the Gospel of John, when the hour had come before leaving this world, Jesus prayed to the Father: “I have given them the glory you gave to me, that they may be one as we are one” (Jn 17:22). One might interpret this priestly prayer of Jesus on three levels.

First, there is the level of the relationship of love between Jesus and the Father: “All I have is yours and all you have is mine” (Jn 17:10). It is this relationship of total giving that makes God Father and Jesus Son. Jesus doing the will of God becomes truly the Son, and God letting the Son fulfill his plan becomes truly the Father. Second, there is the level of Jesus’s prayer to the Father: “Keep those you have given me true to your name, so that they may be one like us” (Jn 17:11). This prayer refers to the relationship among Christians of total giving that is one of unity and love. Third, there is the level of Jesus’s prayer for his disciples: “May they all be one, just as, Father, you are in me and I am in you, so that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe it was you who sent me” (Jn 17:21). Here we find a mutual indwelling that echoes Chinese Huayan Buddhism. And only by witnessing this relationship of unity and communion among Christians can others believe in the message of love brought by Jesus.

During the Last Supper, Jesus gave the disciples a new commandment: “Love one another, as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn 15:12–13). In the Gospel of Matthew, at the climax of his passion, echoing Psalm 22, Jesus cried out: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (27:46). And he passed away. The veil of the

temple is said to have split in two from top to bottom. This action is reminiscent of the scene of Jesus's baptism when the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended as a dove upon Jesus.³³ Indeed, Scripture states that in seeing this total self-emptying lived by Jesus on the cross, a centurion standing in front of him came to believe in the message of love of Jesus's death and said, "Indeed this man was the son of God" (Mk 15:34–39).

How can this life of self-emptying and self-giving love be lived by people? The relationship of "love" necessitates at least two parties. Piero Coda provides an insightful definition of the Trinitarian relationship: "I am if you are; I am so that you would be."³⁴ That is, I am my true self only in relation to you, and you are your true self if I am who I am. My fulfillment is the condition for your fulfillment, and vice versa. I find the reason of my existence in relation to the other, and in relation to me the other finds the reason of his or her existence. Again, as in the relationship between the Father and the Son, a father is a father because he has a son. The son is a son because of the father. The identity of the two arises in a mutually dependent relationship. It is not a dialectical relationship of negating or denying the other but of fulfilling each other in this relationship.

The relationship between Jesus and God the Father is such: The Son felt abandoned by the Father and died on the cross. At that moment he fully identified with all humankind in their suffering existence; thus he accomplished the will of the Father. At the same time, the Father glorified the Son. Between the Father and the Son is the relationship of "love," the Holy Spirit. The

forsaken Jesus completely emptied himself (*kenosis*) to be one with humankind through kenotic love that is the Holy Spirit. When he totally denied himself in a loving relation with humankind, he fulfilled his identity as the Son of God. This brought about a universal Trinitarian relation with all humankind, namely, the Word of God that created the world re-creates humanity and the cosmos in the Son.

Given this vision, how should Christians look at and relate to the world and society? Paul said: "Who has ever known the mind of the Lord? But we are those who have the mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:16). The "mind of Christ" present in the Christian sees and knows the world through its essence: Love and Unity. It is as if the pupil of the eye of a Christian allows the Light and Love from the mind of Christ to enter within, enabling him or her to be a source of "intuitiveness" and "harmony." While Christians see the negative things around themselves, they are moved from within to seek unity and harmony through the love also found within. This is the source of the "humility" of Christianity and its service to humanity, society, and the cosmos. This attitude brings about positive energy in the world.

The Second Axial Age and Inculturation

In *The Origin and Goal of History* Karl Jaspers pioneered the idea of the Axial Age (800 to 200 BCE).³⁵ According to him human history has gone through four ages: the Neolithic age, the age of the earliest civilizations, the axial age, and the modern age. The so-called axial age is "pivotal" characterizing the period in which

33. See Gospel of Mark 1:10.

34. Piero Coda, "Trinitarian Ontology" (lecture, Sophia University Institute, Figline and Incisa Valdarno, Italy, March 11, 2014).

35. Karl Jaspers, *Origin and Goal of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 1–27.

new ways of thinking appear. Many of the great philosophers and religious leaders flourished at roughly the same time, as if something parallel was happening in the world. People, though, were unaware that similar or complimentary ideas were being developed simultaneously. In Greece there were Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle; in China, Confucius, Laozi, and Mozi; in India, the Upanishads and the Buddha; and Palestine witnessed several of the greatest prophets. People became conscious of themselves, of their limitations and their potential. Their view of the world and their position in the world changed. They sought the supremely and eternally “real” that lay beyond the world of the senses, and in so doing they created what Jasper called “fundamental ideas” that have defined the modern age through the centuries. Since the 1900s, scholars such as Ewert Cousins and Karen Armstrong say that the gaze of human beings has shifted in such a way that one might call this the Second Axial Period, which could likewise shape the horizon of consciousness for future centuries.³⁶ This consciousness is global, collective, interreligious, dialogical, experiential, and ecological.

Globalization has become a reality for the first time in history, and awareness of climate change has birthed the ecological movement, which continues to grow. In the Catholic Church, Pope Francis has written the encyclical *Laudato Si'*. Because of Vatican II and the work of Saint Pope John Paul II, the Catholic Church, with its universal apostolic nature, has been engaging in the process of interreligious dialogue and inculturation. Vatican II has also called for all people in the church to experience “sanctity.” The

36. Ewert Cousins, *Christ of the 21st Century* (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1998), 7–10.

lay movements in the church today are taking spirituality and the experiential dimension of religion beyond the walls of convents and monasteries to the people. This change is not just individual but collective, since the church sees its role today as caring for all humanity, bringing harmony among the rich diversity of humankind with its many cultures and religions.

Just as the Church Fathers expressed the content of the Jewish Christian religion in the Greek and Roman cultural context, in the past century, people have tried to present the message of the Gospels from the milieu and perspective of Chinese culture. The well-known jurist and philosopher John Wu Ching-hsiung (吴经熊) attempted to translate the Prologue of the Gospel of John using the term Dao. The Shanghai diocese made similar efforts through their translations. They translated the original term “Logos” as Dao. Therefore, in the Prologue we read: “In the beginning was the Dao: the Dao was with God and the Dao was God” (太初有道，道在天主，道就是天主) and “The Dao became flesh, he lived among us” (道成人身，寓居我们中间). More classical Chinese expressions were also employed in the translation. Today, the expression about incarnation, “The Dao became flesh” (道成肉身), is often employed in translations by Protestant Christian churches. However, in the Catholic translation of the text, the expression “the Word” (圣言) is considered more prudent, and until we fully understand the connotation of the word Dao in Chinese culture, is more commonly used.

Since people today live in a cross-cultural environment, when carrying out the project of inculturation it is important to understand different articulations and categories of thinking in the East and the West. What method should Asian scholars use to approach Christian studies given our present age? First, as the

philosopher Jacques Maritain said, one should begin with an “existential epistemology.”³⁷ That is, one needs to start with the actual religious experience that Jesus Christ made. Second, one should use “phenomenology” to comprehend the profound nature of the experience of Jesus Christ. These two steps are important to both the West and the East in considering the words of an important religious text.

Third, relationality is critical for both the Christian Trinitarian viewpoint and the Chinese cultural viewpoint, but with different emphases. In the West, for example, relationship with others is emphasized as I-thou. The approach is to define who I am and my relationship with others ontologically. In the East, the emphasis is on my relationship with the totality. The relationship between the self and another person is seen in the larger context of the True Self and Totality. Fourth, for the West, careful analysis is important in defining the realities discussed in a text as a basis for living. In the East, it is more important to intuit the realities presented in the text as a basis for living. By drawing on both similarities and differences and by combining the strengths of East and West, one might discover a new hermeneutics in textual interpretation.³⁸

37. Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2015).

38. This project is larger than what I am attempting here. However, in searching for a new hermeneutics, I would refer to the Italian theologian Piero Coda, who writes about “teor-etica.” See Piero Coda, *Il logos e il nulla: Trinità religioni mistica* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2003), 28–29; 109–12; 133–36. In Italian “teor-etica” means theory and ethics; there is a continuous circle through intelligence to experience, and vice versa. Ontology, as Coda sees it, is never an abstract intelligence but is always at the same time practical, because moving knowledge moved freedom, and moving freedom moved knowledge.

Understanding Trinitarian Relationships from the Perspective of Chinese Culture

In Chinese culture, the concepts of Dao, de and *qi*, and *he* (harmony) have rich connotations. To interpret and understand the Trinitarian relationship from the perspective of a “dialectic of harmony,” we might raise the following points:

1. An attempt could be made to interpret the relationship between the Word and God using the principle of the dialectic of harmony. That is, the relationship could be expressed in these phrases of *Dao De Jing*: “Being and non-being co-arise” (有无相生)³⁹ and they are in a “reciprocally transforming” (相互相生) relationship. God exists in eternity. God is the Trinity, three united as one. In Daoist cosmology, “Dao generates one” (道生一) means Dao is being one, the absolute.
2. Two of the Persons in the Trinity are God the Father and Christ the Son. In an expression of the *Dao De Jing*, two comes from one or “one generates two” (一生二),⁴⁰ in which the two are yin and yang or *wu* and *you*. God eternally generates the Son in total giving, making God Father. The Son completely empties himself (*kenosis*), making him the eternal manifestation (*epiphaneia*) of the Father.
3. The third Person of the Trinity is the relationship of love, the Holy Spirit (*pneuma*). It could be expressed by the Chinese term “*qi*” insofar as “the blending of the *qi* of yin and the *qi* of yang achieves the *qi* of harmony” (冲气以为和). *Qi* is the

39. *Dao De Jing*, 2.

40. Ibid.

The Contribution of Chinese Culture to Doing Trinitarian Theology

To “do” theology in the context of Chinese culture,⁴¹ it could be helpful, as we have seen, to translate the term “Logos” as “Dao” and to use the expression “the Dao became flesh” (道成肉身). However, Logos simply translated as “Dao” might not be enough. The relationship between Dao and De should also be explored, since in Chinese culture the two are linked, both in the texts of Daoism and in the Chinese way of thought. What does this connection between Dao and De contribute to our understanding of the relationship between God and the Word?

Contemporary scholars such as Philip Ivanhoe and Roger Ames point out that the Daoist concept of de has been “severely undervalued,” both in later commentary and in present understandings of Daoism.⁴² An understanding of de is indispensable to a full appreciation of the philosophy presented in the text.⁴³ The word De itself can be translated as either “Virtue” or “Power.” In the text of the *Dao De Jing*, there is a distinction between the expressions of upper De and lower De. According to Laozi, upper

41. Theological studies are not limited to gaining knowledge and of understanding with the head; they require living practices and understanding with the heart. See Yong Lina, “Research on theological education in the Church of China” (扎根中国文化放眼全球—探索中国教会的神学教育) 社会变迁中的宗教研究与宗教教育 Conference Paper, November 18–19, 2014, 25.

42. Roger T. Ames, “Putting the *Te* Back into Taoism,” in *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought*, edited by J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 123. Wade-Giles Romanization of Chinese terms (“te”; “tao”) in the article have been altered to pinyin (“de”; “dao”) for consistency.

43. Philip J. Ivanhoe, “The Concept of *de* (“Virtue”) in the *Laozi*,” in *Religious and Philosophical Aspects of the Laozi*, edited by Mark Csikszentmihalyi and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 239.

flow and the relationship of love, of harmony, and of mutual giving. Mutual giving of the “two becomes three” (二生三).

4. This relationship of love is imprinted in all things, as shown in the statement “The three generates the ten thousand things. The ten thousand things carry the yin and embrace the yang, and through the blending of their *qi* they achieve harmony” (三生万物，负阴而抱阳，冲气以为和). In Chinese culture, the generating principle of all things is based on the two elements of yin and yang, and the third element is symbolized by *qi*. All things generated are the result of the blending of *qi* to achieve harmony within the Totality.

In the final analysis, the early Church Fathers did use Greek language and philosophy to express Christian thought. To describe the relationship within the “Trinity,” they use the term *perichoresis*. It means “dancing around,” (flowing) freely, obeying the movement of one another. In Trinitarian language it refers to the dynamic mutual indwelling among the three Persons. I think the concepts of “yin-yang harmonizing” and “mutual transforming” (相互相生) might as well be used to interpret the Trinitarian relationship. From the early Church Fathers to recent times, *perichoresis* has been applied in three contexts: the relationship between the divine nature and the human nature of Jesus Christ, the relationship among the three Persons of the Trinity, and other interpersonal relationships and God’s presence in human affairs. In this last meaning, we see a link to the human relations and society that is so important in Chinese culture, wherein all things and actions are generated by the flowing and harmonizing of the vital energy (*qi*) of yin and yang.

De is a power and virtue fully in accordance with the spirit of the Dao. Laozi also uses the expressions Supreme De (玄德), Great De (孔德), and Constant De (常德) to express the infinite nature of the Upper De. The Upper De has a metaphysical meaning that is foundational for the refined ethical meaning in the sense that for Laozi the upper De emphasizes the ideas of “return to the nature” and wu-wei (无为, non-action). The lower De, on the other hand, has a purely ethical meaning that is close to the moral teachings of Confucianism, even paying attention to the concept of propriety (li 礼).

Catholic scholar Bernard Li Chien-Chiu writes that while in Confucianism Dao signifies the way of heaven or humans, in Daoism it acquires a metaphysical meaning. Dao is the ultimate reality as well as the first principle underlying form, substance, being, and change.⁴⁴ Therefore the connotation of Dao in Daoism is different from its connotation in Confucianism. It is the same with De, whose connotation in Daoism is different from its connotation in Confucianism. So, how should the relationship between Dao and upper De be understood in Daoism?

Laozi said: “The all-embracing quality of the Great De is alone derived from the Dao” (孔德之容，惟道是从). The Great De comes from the Dao. It is the power and virtue of the Dao, and follows only the Dao in all its actions.⁴⁵ This means that the Great De is the embodiment of the spirit of the Dao and the concretization of the Dao itself. That is, Dao in itself is invisible, and De manifests its power and the nature of its action. With the term

De, Laozi expresses how the Dao takes up power and virtue in creative action and how it returns to the original natural state.

The term De as expressed in the *Dao De Jing* connotes the manifestation of the Dao, whereby it takes up human factors such as virtue and yet returns to the original natural state. “In this natural state,” Ding Yuanzhi writes, “you and wu, with and without, being and non-being, Dao and De are interrelated.”⁴⁶ Here we see that the ontological natures of the Dao and of the upper De are defined in relational terms, rather than in singular terms, as entities in themselves. They have to be analyzed as relational structures, as expressed in the *I Jing (Book of Changes)*: “What is called the Dao is in the metaphysical realm while the actualization is in the physical realm” (形而上者谓之道，形而下者谓之器).⁴⁷ Also, Daoist scholar Chen Kuying writes that when Dao is in the state of potentiality and not actuality, it is not perceivable by the senses. When the metaphysical Dao concretizes itself at the human level, it is called the De. Laozi made use of the development of the body and its functions to explain the relationship between Dao and De. Dao in its original state is formless and its manifestation is the De.⁴⁸

With reference to using the term Dao for Logos, I would suggest that the term De could be used in place of Logos. De can be used to translate Logos and Dao to translate “God.” From the perspective of Trinitarian relationship, one might make use of the

46. Ding Yuanzhi (丁原植), *Guodianzhujian interpretation and research on Laozi* (郭店竹简老子释析与研究) (Taipei: Wanjuanlou Publishing (万卷楼图书有限公司), 1999), 144.

47. See *I Jing* 《易经·系辞》

48. Chen Guying (陈鼓应), *The interpretation and translation Laozi today* (老子今注今译), (Beijing: Commercial Press (北京商务印书馆), 2006.

44. Bernard Chien-Chiu Li, “Dao-Logos: Lao Zi and Philo,” *Euntes Docente*, 1/ Anno LXII, Urbaniana University Press, 1. 2009, 143.

45. *Dao De Jing*, 21.

relationship between Dao and De to interpret the relationship between God and the Word. I would argue that this would be more comprehensive and appropriate. For example, the inner Trinitarian relationship should be understood as an eternal relationship of love and communion that in some regard reflects the Chinese relationship of the dialectic for harmony. As noted above, it is the relationship of mutual transforming, the relationship between Dao and De, the relationship of non-action and dynamic change. The ultimate purpose of the relationship is eternal harmony or unity. The relationship of giving relational existence to one another between Dao and De makes these states eternally united and yet distinct. Finally, it is through this upper De that people can gain the power of the Dao and live its higher virtue in harmony with others and the cosmos. I would add here that in Christian terms, the Holy Spirit is the love or the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. Likewise, the *qi* is the correlation between yin and yang, *wu* and *you*, Dao and De. Obviously, one may make a comparison between *qi* and the Spirit.

Also, the incarnate Trinitarian relationship is in the Word made flesh, in Jesus Christ. The upper De manifests the power and virtue of the Dao while maintaining the oneness of Dao and De. So too the Word made flesh in this world manifests the power and virtue of God and maintains the oneness with God, as in Jesus's last prayer, "May they all be one as we are one." The oneness with God and the life of virtue and unity lived by Jesus is possible through the power of the Word made flesh, the power of God made weakness, to the point of dying on the cross. Therefore, I suggest that Asian scholars in China take into consideration the relationship between Dao and De to inculturate more fully the inner Trinitarian relationality, and the relation between God and

the Word in Jesus Christ in Chinese culture. I am not challenging the validity of certain translations previously made of Logos as Dao. My prolegomenon is an invitation to scholars in this field to ponder the translations more from the point of view of Trinitarian relationality. In this regard, it seems that the Chinese dialectical relationship of harmony might make valuable contributions to Christian theology as it develops in China. The benefit would not only be theological but would also have ethical and social benefits for the development of Chinese culture today.

I find the following passage from Chiara Lubich about the Trinitarian relationship very inspiring in relation to the above:

Three form the Trinity, yet they are one because love is and is not at the same time. Even when love is not, it is, because it is love. In fact, if I renounce a particular possession of mine and give it away (I deprive myself of it—it is not) out of love, I have love—therefore it is.⁴⁹

Lubich emphasizes that it is more important "to be love" than to be "doing things for love." One may think, for example, of someone believing to be doing a great service to a sick friend while the friend finds the service annoying. It calls to mind the dialectic of harmony in Daoism. One of the most important concepts in Daoism, *wu-wei*, emphasizes the importance of being rather than doing. In other words, being is in non-doing.

In conclusion, the concept of non-action in Daoism is understood in Chinese culture in relation to the concept of "making a

49. Judith M. Povilus, *United in His Name. Jesus in our Midst in the experience and thought of Chiara Lubich* (New York: New City Press 1992), 66.

difference” in Confucianism. As a matter of fact, Confucius says: “Now the man of perfect virtue, wishing to be established himself, seeks also to establish others; wishing to be enlarged himself, he seeks also to enlarge others.”⁵⁰ Confucianism and Daoism are complementary and in constant interaction in a dialectic of harmony. I propose that the cultures of East and West can also have a dialectical relationship that is not conflicting. By the inculturation of Christianity in China, and understanding Trinitarian theology in light of Chinese categories of thought, this relationship can be transformed into a dialectic of harmony for the benefit and enrichment of both East and West.

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50. Ibid., 30