

Poetry, Music, and Rituality: A Contextual Comparison

K. James Wu

This paper explores insights of Confucius and John Wesley by means of comparative study in the context of Christian-Confucian dialogue, detecting the intricate relationship between rituality, music, and poetry in both traditions and what they mean to the people when engaged. Having noted that, in a Confucian context, Confucian rites pose a dilemma for the Christian minority population: either to be religiously idolatrous by observing the rites or to be culturally estranged by rejecting the rites, it uses a comparative theological approach to offer a fresh understanding that can resolve this dilemma.

Keywords: Confucius, Wesley, rituality, music, dialogue, comparative, Christian, Confucian

Confucian rites have been a theologically perplexing issue for the Christian minority who reside in a predominantly Confucian society. They are confusing to the Christian—especially the Protestant Christian—because Confucian rites in general, ancestral rites in particular, are both religious and cultural in essence. Thus, they pose a dilemma for the Christian: either to be religiously idolatrous by observing the rites or to be culturally estranged by rejecting the rites.

Faced with this dilemma, the Christian may wonder if there are other dimensions of the rites worthy of investigation. To address this question, this paper explores insights of Confucius (551 BCE–479 BCE) and John Wesley (1703 CE–1791 CE) into rituality by means of a comparative study in the context of Christian-Confucian dialogue, detecting the intricate relationship among poetry, music, and rituality in both traditions and what rituality means to the people when engaged. It argues that the moral dimension of Confucian rites is worthy of investigation because of its significance to the social ethos in such a given context and to Christian ethics in the context of Christian-Confucian dialogue. To validate this argument, this paper takes the Confucian idea of *li* (rituality) to examine the moral dimension of Confucian rites and to seek a contextual interpretation of *li* in relation to Christian ethics as the main counterpart of theological comparison.¹

This paper, thus, begins with a methodical justification of the Christian study of Confucian categories in such a given social context, arguing for the necessity of conceptual engagement through a careful study of Confucian classics in which Confucian ideas have been deeply rooted. After all, Confucian ideas are fundamental to the life of the people, and rendering a Christian study of the idea of *li* in this case explains why the Confucian category is valuable to shape the Christian understanding of Christian ethics in such a given social context.

This paper, then, examines Confucius's accounts of rituality by drawing sources mainly from *lunyu* (the *Analects*), elaborating on why poetry and music are an integral part of rituality and how they conjointly shape personal and social morality in Confucius's understanding. For the

¹ There are different English translations of the classical Chinese word *li*, such as rite, ritual, rituality, ritual practice, ritual propriety, decorum, manners, social etiquettes, and the like. Readers may comprehend its meaning only by giving a contextual analysis of the word employed by the text. Here I use rituality in a general sense for *li* to accent its conceptual quality rather than physical references.

counterpart of comparison, this paper also examines John Wesley's account of hymn singing based on his central work *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*, elaborating on why hymn singing is critical for Wesleyan piety and how it shapes the Christian ethics from a Wesleyan perspective. After delving into Confucius' and John Wesley's ideas, this paper brings these two accounts into a theological conversation that illuminates the significance of categorical engagement in the process of theological comparison and contextualization.

At the end, this paper concludes that comparative theology should be contextual, reconstructed in a given social context that frames theological issues intrinsically relevant to one's own and the encountered religious tradition—Christianity and Confucianism in this case. On the one hand, it takes Confucian categories into conversation and comparison with Christian ones as a categorical driven enterprise. On the other hand, it responds to the need of rendering a Christian contextual theology in such a given social context as a method for theological contextualization. In other words, comparative theology portrays itself as an epistemological search for new insight on the one hand and, on the other, an ontological quest of existential concerns in such a given social context.

A Christian Engagement of Confucian Categories in the Confucian Context

In a social context deeply embedded with Confucian values, it is inevitable for Christians to engage with Confucian conceptual categories to deepen their understanding of Confucian values and its overall theological implications to Christian theology. Especially in the case of interreligious study on Confucian rites, Christians must take into account the Confucian category of rituality (*li*) to examine its significance to the Confucian rites and its theological implications to Christian ethics. Without considering this conceptual category, Christians may impose Christian concepts to the rites and misconstrue—as well as misunderstand—the Confucian idea of rituality. If so, Christians will be culturally estranged in this given social context.

Rituality, as a conceptual category, has profoundly shaped the Confucian way of moral life.² Its significance to Confucian morality has underscored the historical development of Confucian tradition since Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.), the founding master of Confucian tradition, began to teach philosophy. This conceptual category, therefore, may be traced back to the era of classical Confucianism, or even beyond.³ Nevertheless, for the classical Confucian, ritual practice (*li*) often conveys something beyond ritual practice per se, pointing to something in which *li* as ritual practice has participated.

According to the classical Confucian thought, *li* as ritual practice exhibits a sensible gesture of rituality (*li*) that is proper to oneself, the world, and the cosmos. First, as proper to the cosmos, *li* originates from the Grand Unity (*da yi*) which generates all spiritual forces and physical things. Second, as proper to the world, *li* harmonizes all changing things between Heaven and

² For an explanation of “rituality” as a theological category for comparative theology in the Confucian context, please see my essay, “A Contextual Comparison of Conceptual Categories: A Christian-Confucian Test Case in Taiwan from a Ritual Perspective,” in *A Companion to Comparative Theology*, ed. Pim Valkenberg (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 446–66.

³ This period of Confucian tradition runs from Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.) to Xunzi (c.310–221? B.C.E.). As to the division of the tradition, see John H. and Evelyn Nagai Berthrong, *Confucianism: A Short Introduction* (Boston: Oneworld Publication, 2000), 9–22.

Earth. Third, as proper to oneself, *li* cultivates a person's humanity through various ritual practices.⁴ These three aspects of ritual propriety (*li*) also illustrate that the category of rituality contains both transcendent and immanent elements in its own categorical structure. It reveals its transcendent element by pointing back to its origin (the Grand Unity) and immanent by referring to humanity cultivation for harmony with all things between Heaven and Earth. These two elements are inextricable, jointly structured in this conceptual category to elaborate on why rituality reveals the transcendent and immanent dimension of humanity.

Seen in this light, *li* is religious and moral and thus a symbol representing the Confucian way of religiosity and morality. In other words, as *li* is practiced and embodied, a person is considered religious and moral. Yet, Confucians are pragmatic, understanding that morality should be the first layer (immanent dimension) of *li* through which religiosity—the second layer (transcendent dimension) of *li*—is to be probed; and thus believing that *li* should be applicable to practical domains of human life through which its moral and religious connotations are to be detected. This Confucian epistemology is evident in one of the Confucian classics—the *Records of Rites*.

According to the *Records of Rites*, *li* is applicable to four domains of human life, namely, *de* (virtue), *zheng* (politics), *yu* (education), and *ji* (sacrifice). In the domain of virtue, *li* actualizes morality, love, and righteousness;⁵ of politics, *li* achieves proper social order and authority;⁶ of education, *li* teaches a person to discern between humanity and other species;⁷ and of sacrifice, *li* cultivates humanness through religious observance in general, offering sacrifices in particular.⁸ In any case, *li* yields its corresponding moral characters such as love, righteousness, peace, discernment, and humaneness in its corresponding social contexts. This is the first layer of *li* portraying Confucian morality in these practical domains of human life, which in turn alludes to the second layer of *li*: Confucian religiosity.

For the classical Confucian, religiosity exhibits itself through the working phenomenon of Harmony (*he*) and the Grand Unity. In other words, Confucian morality bears its religious weight because it participates in Harmony (*he*) and the Grand Unity. A moral person is also a religious person because the person with those moral characters also harmonizes all things and unites them with the Grand Unity. In this, the religious person knows how to act properly through *li* in a given social context, knowing *li* is “to differentiate and restrain human feelings and emotions” in a given social context.⁹ The moral person who knows how to act properly through self-discernment and self-control is the religious person who brings harmony and unity to all things

⁴ The *Records of Rites* (禮記 禮運) 9.6. “是故夫禮·必本於大一·分而為天地...協於分藝·其居人也曰養...”。 See *Xin Yi Li Ji Du Ben* (新譯禮記讀本), trans. and comp. by Jiang Yi Hua (Taipei: San Min Press, 2000), 339.

⁵ The *Records of Rites* (禮記 曲禮上) 1.9. “道德仁義·非禮不成。” See *Xin Yi Li Ji Du Ben*, 5.

⁶ The *Records of Rites* (禮記 禮運) 9.4. “是故禮者...治政安君也。” See *Xin Yi Li Ji Du Ben*, 332.

⁷ The *Records of Rites* (禮記 曲禮上) 1.10. “為禮以教人...知自別於禽獸。” See *Xin Yi Li Ji Du Ben*, 6.

⁸ The *Records of Rites* (禮記 祭統) 25.1. “凡治人之道·莫急於禮；禮有五經·莫重於祭。” See *Xin Yi Li Ji Du Ben*, 669.

⁹ The *Records of Rites* (禮記 檀弓下) 4.29. “品節斯·斯之謂禮。” See *Xin Yi Li Ji Du Ben*, 152.

between Heaven and Earth in a given social context. Seen in this light, Confucian morality and religiosity are two sides of one coin—*li*.

While calling people to act properly, *li* can be understood as a set of fixed ethical codes that regulates people's actions from without. For the classical Confucian, framing *li* into external ethic codes does not serve its ultimate purpose. Rather, *li* should be pursued by people with self-motivation, something driven from within a person.

As the author of the *Records of Music* indicates, while *li* regulates the action of a person from without, *yue* (music) inspires a person from within to pursue *li*.¹⁰ While *yue* harmonizes all things, *li* differentiates all things.¹¹ Both *li* and *yue* work together to cultivate a person from within and without to bring all things into unity and harmony.¹² As such, *li* achieves its artistic embodiment through *yue* and *yue* achieves its ritualistic aesthetics through *li*. Thus, *li* requires *yue* to inspire people from within to learn the knowledge of *li* and to act properly in a given social context. Both *li* and *yue* illustrate a process of humanity cultivation leading to realize Confucian morality and religiosity.

To Christians who live in a Confucian society, engaging with Confucian categories is a given. After all, Christians are not able to evade axiological confrontation in their religious and cultural life. While facing the question of Confucian rites, Christians should take into account the Confucian category of *li* to examine its moral and religious significance to the rites. Though not exhausting the philosophical attributes of classical Confucian morality and religiosity, *li* may serve as the contact point where these two traditions converge and through which Christians may venture into the question of Confucian morality and religiosity.

Confucius's Ideas of *Shi* (Poetry) and *Yue* (Music) in *Li* (Rituality)

Confucius values *li* highly in his teachings of moral cultivation. To understand Confucius' ideas of *li*, the *Analects* is indubitably the major source available for researchers. Though being a collected work compiled by later followers of Confucius, the *Analects* clearly represents Confucius' viewpoints on morality. It contains twenty chapters of selected conversations transpired between Confucius and his disciples.¹³ Among these conversations, the doctrine of *li* is prominent in Confucius' philosophical teachings.

According to the *Analects*, *li* is a conceptual category pointing to something beyond its physical references. This means that *li* portrays a ritual quality characterized by the ritual practice that serves its functional purpose to realize its ultimate end. In Confucius' teachings, *li* ultimately aims at a state of harmony in which a person's proper discretion of a given situation is

¹⁰ The *Records of Rites* (禮記 樂記) 19.6. “樂由中出，禮自外作。” See *Xin Yi Li Ji Du Ben*, 519.

¹¹ The *Records of Rites* (禮記 樂記) 19.5. “樂者為同，禮者為異。” See *Xin Yi Li Ji Du Ben*, 519.

¹² The *Records of Rites* (禮記 樂記) 19.10. “禮樂明備，天地官矣。” See *Xin Yi Li Ji Du Ben*, 523.

¹³ Irene Bloom, “Confucius and the Analects,” in *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 2nd ed., vol.1, comp. by Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 42.

sought and proper relationship among all things is retained by means of ritual practice.¹⁴ Attaining harmony through *li*, therefore, demonstrates that *li* bears its personal and social functions. In light of personal function, *li* exhibits a state of ritual propriety that develops the righteousness of a profound person (*jun zi*) and keeps the profound person away from shame.¹⁵ As Confucius points out, using the power of law and punishment to govern people may prevent crimes but yields no shame in the hearts of the people. Yet, applying *li* to regulate people's behaviors as a way of moral cultivation makes shame known to people.¹⁶

Seen in this light, *li* arouses a person's consciousness to know shame and thus know how to act properly in a given social context; which in turn shapes a person's interpersonal relationship and attains social harmony. In this, the person who keeps himself or herself away from shame in the society is considered righteous. Hence, knowing shame through *li* is critical for the person to vindicate his or her social status. As Confucius argues, no one can vindicate oneself in society without learning *li*.¹⁷ Such a vindication evinces the social function of *li*.

Yet, *li* does not function alone in Confucius' idea of moral cultivation. In addition to *li*, Confucius considers *yue* (music) an inextricable component of moral cultivation. Confucius believes that *yue* is an art work refining the state of rituality and thus it should function along with ritual practice. So, *yue* is not the ordinary music commonly understood but the ritual music collaborating with ritual practice, which refers to an artistic work comprising a tone movement that begins from one unified tone to many tones, remains open and harmonized, and recurs frequently until the completion of the work.¹⁸ Such a movement, furthermore, imitates the natural movement of the universe, moving from one to many while remaining open, harmonized, and recurring frequently until its completion. In this, Confucius seems to argue ritual music shapes the process of moral cultivation in a way similar to the natural movement of the universe that nurtures human beings.

However, not all genres of music are necessarily beneficial for moral cultivation. There are three genres of ritual music identified by Confucius:

- 1) the music of *shao* (*shao yue*), which is beautiful and good;¹⁹
- 2) the music of *wu* (*wu yue*), which is beautiful but not necessarily good;²⁰ and

¹⁴ *Lunyu* (論語 學而第一) 1.12. “禮之用，和為貴。”; *Lunyu* (論語 八佾第三) 3.4. “禮，與其奢也，寧儉。” *Si Shu Du Ben* (四書讀本), trans. and comp. by Wang Tian Hen (Tainan: Wen Guo Press, 2002), 11, 38.

¹⁵ *Lunyu* (論語 衛靈公第十五) 15.17. “君子以義為質，禮以行之。”; *Lunyu* (論語 學而第一) 1.13. “恭近於禮，遠恥辱也。” *Si Shu Du Ben* (四書讀本), 12, 336.

¹⁶ *Lunyu* (論語 為政第二) 2.3. “道之以德，齊之以禮，有恥且格。” *Si Shu Du Ben* (四書讀本), 17.

¹⁷ *Lunyu* (論語 季氏第十六) 16.13. “不學禮，無以立。” *Si Shu Du Ben* (四書讀本), 366.

¹⁸ *Lunyu* (論語 八佾第三) 3.23. “始作，翕如也；從之，純如也，皦如也，繹如也，以成。” *Si Shu Du Ben* (四書讀本), 53.

¹⁹ *Lunyu* (論語 八佾第三) 3.25. “韶盡美矣，又盡善也。” *Si Shu Du Ben* (四書讀本), 55.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, “武盡美矣，未盡善也。”

3) the music of *zheng* (*zheng sheng*), which is evil.²¹

Among them, the music of *shao* should be advocated because its beauty and goodness are so fascinating that it may make one forget the taste of meat for three months.²² Thus, by working with ritual practice, the music benefits humanity. On the contrary, the music of *zheng* should be condemned because its lustful sound is so evil. If collaborated with ritual practice, the music corrupts humanity.²³ Thus, for Confucius, ritual music as an artwork exhibits not only its beauty but also its goodness that ultimately directs people toward good.

In Confucius's eyes, though not identical, *li* and *yue* are inextricable in the process of moral cultivation. They do not simply refer to superficial gift exchange and sound making.²⁴ Rather, they suggest something deeper, demanding a philosophical framework to elaborate on something beyond their physical references. As conceptualized by Confucius, they function together to transform a person into a mature person from within²⁵ and a society from without according to the Way as decreed by the Son of Heaven.²⁶ Hence, without *li* and *yue*, personal dignity and social righteousness are not to be vindicated in the society.²⁷ *Li* and *yue*, for Confucius, shapes both personal morality and social formation.

In addition to *li* and *yue*, Confucius also argues that poetry (*shi*) is another inextricable component of moral cultivation. Poetry inspires people, contains insights, unites the community, and vents complaint.²⁸ In a word, poetry expresses pure thoughts.²⁹ For Confucius, learning poetry is required for moral cultivation because it shapes a person's interpersonal relationship in the society. While *li* (rituality) establishes moral cultivation and *yue* (ritual music) achieves the goal of moral cultivation, poetry (*shi*) arouses a person's feelings to learn moral teachings³⁰ and teaches a person to know how to speak with people properly.³¹ In this sense, speaking properly with people maintains proper relationship with others. Learning poetry, therefore, is the starting point for becoming a profound person.

Joining with *li* and *yue*, *shi* shapes personal morality, interpersonal relationship, and social formation. While *li* regulates people from without and *yue* motivates people from within, *shi* inspires people to learn *li* through *yue*. In other words, *li*, *yue*, and *shi* change a society by changing

²¹ *Lunyu* (論語 陽貨第十七) 17.18. “惡鄭聲之亂雅樂。” *Si Shu Du Ben* (四書讀本), 385.

²² *Lunyu* (論語 述而第七) 7.13. “子在齊聞韶，三月不知肉味。” *Si Shu Du Ben* (四書讀本), 135.

²³ *Lunyu* (論語 衛靈公第十五) 15.10. “鄭聲淫，佞人殆。” *Si Shu Du Ben* (四書讀本), 332.

²⁴ *Lunyu* (論語 陽貨第十七) 17.11. “禮云禮云，玉帛乎哉？樂云樂云，鍾鼓云乎哉！” *Si Shu Du Ben* (四書讀本), trans. and comp. by Wang Tian Hen (Tainan: Wen Guo Press, 2002), 380.

²⁵ *Lunyu* (論語 憲問第十四) 14.13. “文之以禮樂，亦可以為成人矣。” *Si Shu Du Ben* (四書讀本), 294.

²⁶ *Lunyu* (論語 季氏第十六) 16.2. “天下有道，則禮樂征伐，自天子出。” *Si Shu Du Ben* (四書讀本), 356.

²⁷ *Lunyu* (論語 子路第十三) 13.3. “禮樂不興，則刑罰不中。” *Si Shu Du Ben* (四書讀本), 262.

²⁸ *Lunyu* (論語 陽貨第十七) 17.9. “詩，可以興，可以觀，可以群，可以怨。” *Si Shu Du Ben* (四書讀本), 379.

²⁹ *Lunyu* (論語 為政第二) 2.2. “詩三百，一言以蔽之，曰『思無邪』。” *Si Shu Du Ben* (四書讀本), 17.

³⁰ *Lunyu* (論語 泰伯第八) 8.8. “興於詩，立於禮，成於樂。” *Si Shu Du Ben* (四書讀本), 160.

³¹ *Lunyu* (論語 季氏第十六) 16.13. “不學詩，無以言。” *Si Shu Du Ben* (四書讀本), 366.

a person first. They conjointly cultivate a profound person who will be vindicated in the society with benevolence (*ren*), a cardinal virtue founding the true meanings of *li* and *yue*³² and thus representing the reputation of a profound person.³³ As Confucius argues, restraining oneself and returning to rituality is benevolence. If a person realizes benevolence through rituality one day, all people will join the person to realize benevolence in the world.³⁴ Once a person is benevolent, the world will be benevolent, too. For Confucius, benevolence is the Confucian cardinal virtue to which *li*, *yue*, and *shi* conjointly direct.

John Wesley's Ideas of Hymn Singing in Christian Piety

The motto “Methodism was born in song” has characterized the congregational life of Methodists since the beginning of the Methodist movement in the eighteenth century.³⁵ John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, definitely deserves such a credit because he values congregational singing highly in the formation of Christian piety. As he saw it, congregational singing had been a means of grace that had shaped Christian piety since the time of early churches. Hence, to develop a spiritual revival movement under his leadership, he and his brother, Charles Wesley (1707–1788), published numerous hymnals for Methodist gatherings at various occasions.³⁶ Among those hymnals, *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists*, published in 1780 (henceforth, the *1780 Collection*), was well received.

The *1780 Collection* clearly reflected the Wesley brothers' theological thoughts, and thus it was considered a practical guidebook to the Methodists for doctrinal teachings, spiritual formation, piety engagement, and public worship. Charles Wesley had reportedly written more than 6,500 hymns during his lifetime, though few hymns have survived today.³⁷ The hymns compiled in the *1780 Collection* were poetic in origin, but they in fact unveiled a spirit of piety beyond the spirit of poetry. As John Wesley illustrated, “When poetry thus keeps its place, as the handmaid of piety, it shall attain, not a poor perishable wreath, but a crown that fadeth not away.”³⁸

The *1780 Collection* contains 525 hymns. Scholars often refer to it as the “Large Hymn Book” among those published hymnals.³⁹ As John Wesley saw it, however, the hymnal was neither too large nor too small to contain sufficient teachings for various occasions.⁴⁰ The hymns were organized according to a principle based on John Wesley's experience of salvation, testifying a spiritual biography of a true believer called a real Christian.⁴¹ For John Wesley, they

³² *Lunyu* (論語 八佾第三) 3.3. “人而不仁 · 如禮何! 人而不仁 · 如樂何!” *Si Shu Du Ben* (四書讀本), 37.

³³ *Lunyu* (論語 里仁第四) 4.5. “君子去仁 · 惡乎成名?” *Si Shu Du Ben* (四書讀本), 59.

³⁴ *Lunyu* (論語 顏淵第十二) 12.1. “克己復禮為仁 · 一日克己復禮 · 天下歸仁焉。” *Si Shu Du Ben* (四書讀本), 237.

³⁵ *The Methodist Hymn-Book* (London: Methodist Conference Office, 1933), Preface.

³⁶ For the whole list of the published hymnal, see Richard P. Heitzenrater and Frank Baker, eds., *The Works of John Wesley*, the bicentennial ed., vol.7, *A Collection of Hymns for the use of the People called Methodists*, eds. Franz Hildebrandt, Oliver A. Beckerlegge, and James Dale (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1983), 727-9; 788-91.

³⁷ Andrew Wilson-Dickson, *The Story of Christian Music* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 116.

³⁸ Heitzenrater and Baker, eds., *The Works*, vol.7, *A Collection of Hymns*, 75.

³⁹ Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, *American Methodist Worship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 157.

⁴⁰ Heitzenrater and Baker, eds., *The Works*, vol.7, *A Collection of Hymns*, 73.

⁴¹ Bernard Lord Manning, *The Hymns of Wesley and Watts* (London: Epworth Press, 1943), 11-2.

are “not carelessly jumbled together, but carefully ranged under proper heads, according to the experience of real Christians.”⁴²

In *The 1780 Collection*, hymns are grouped as five parts. Part I presents an introduction composed of three subsections: section 1 describes religious conversion as a way of returning to God; section 2 portrays the reality of God and God’s power; and section 3 appeals for a blessing through prayer. Part II illustrates the nature of religion, making a distinction between formal religion and inward religion—outward piety and inner religiousness. Though distinct, they are intrinsically interwoven in the life of a Christian. Part III recounts a personal experience of salvation by calling of repentance through confession of sin in which justification and sanctification kicks off the process of salvation. Part IV appeals to believers and their various experiences of faith journey. Though challenging, the faith journey will eventually reach its full redemption in Christ. The last part, Part V, focuses on the communal life of Methodist society, highlighting the unique character of the believers called Methodist.⁴³

Beginning with an invitation to return to God and concluding with a calling to integrating personal religious life into the community of faith, *The 1780 Collection* narrates a spiritual journey that John Wesley undoubtedly wants to share with his fellow Methodists. Hence, *The 1780 Collection* functioned exactly the way that John Wesley expected to direct the Methodist to assure their calling, election, perfection, and holiness in the fear of God. It was in effect “a little body of experimental and practical divinity,” which nurtures a faithful and holy life of a Christian.⁴⁴ Though personal experience makes its way into these hymns, the hymnal does not simply tell the story of John Wesley’s experience of salvation. It contains doctrinal, spiritual, and devotional teachings derived from the Bible. After all, for John Wesley, such an experience is “sufficient to confirm a doctrine which is grounded on Scripture.”⁴⁵

For instance, the renowned Wesleyan hymn, “Wrestling Jacob” (Hymn #136 of the *1780 Collection*, known today as “Come, O Thou Traveler Unknown”) conveys the Wesleyan doctrine of grace to the Methodist. Jesus reveals God’s love for humanity as a friend of feeble sinners. Christ’s love is the form of God’s grace and God’s grace is the substance of Christ’s love. Only can sinners receive such love to see God face to face through faith.⁴⁶ The theology of grace taught here is Christological in essence, defining Christ as the mediator through whom God’s love comes to sinners.⁴⁷ Also, in Hymn #341 of *The 1780 Collection*, the Wesleyan doctrine of Christian perfection—though controversial—also teaches that Christian perfection is a process of spiritual formation leading to holiness through God’s grace.⁴⁸ The holy living of a real Christian is a symbol of Christian perfection, testifying that God is working in the life of the Christian who always seeks ultimate union with the Holy God through Christ. Christian perfection, as a way of

⁴² Heitzenrater and Baker, eds., *The Works*, vol.7, *A Collection of Hymns*, 74.

⁴³ For the full table of contents, Heitzenrater and Baker, eds., *The Works*, vol.7, *A Collection of Hymns*, 77–78.

⁴⁴ Heitzenrater and Baker, eds., *The Works*, vol.7, *A Collection of Hymns*, 74.

⁴⁵ John Wesley, “The Witness of Spirit, II” in *John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology*, eds. Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 402.

⁴⁶ Heitzenrater and Baker, eds., *The Works*, vol.7, *A Collection of Hymns*, 250.

⁴⁷ Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 26.

⁴⁸ Heitzenrater and Baker, eds., *The Works*, vol.7, *A Collection of Hymns*, 502.

spiritual formation, portrays a process of sanctification through which a believer's faith grows to holiness in God's grace.⁴⁹

The Wesleyan doctrines of Christ's grace and Christian perfection exemplified here are in fact biblically grounded, for grace and perfection are rather the biblical categories derived from the Bible than the conceptual categories created by the Wesley brothers. As each hymn shows, scriptural references are marked beside almost every line of these hymns to safeguard their biblical truth.⁵⁰ Evidently, John and Charles Wesley did not reconstruct these teachings solely based on their theological preferences or religious experiences. They wanted *The 1780 Collection* to be "large enough to contain all the important truths of our most holy religion . . . to prove them both by Scripture and reason."⁵¹ For the Wesley brothers, the truth of Christianity must be grounded by the Scripture, approved by reason, and confirmed by experience. Thus, *The 1780 Collection* was meant to be biblical, reasonable, and experiential to shape Wesleyan theology, spirituality, and piety.

In addition to the hymn text, John Wesley also published three hymn tune books to meet the music literacy of the congregation.⁵² John Wesley was indeed rigorous in hymn tunes, expecting the congregation to sing the hymn tunes accordingly. Yet, hymn tunes should not be complex but singable and accessible to all.⁵³ They should be simple and memorable to anticipate the full participation of the congregation in worship.⁵⁴ They should be so teachable that the congregation is able to learn Christian theology through music.⁵⁵ Thus, hymn tunes should be so accessible, singable, simple, memorable, and teachable that the congregation is able to learn Wesleyan doctrines, spirituality, and piety through singing.

Though the hymns of *The 1780 Collection* are rich in the variety of poetic meters, music and text are carefully coincided with these meters.⁵⁶ The Wesley brothers and the employed composers had competently put together poetry and music into hymns. They fashioned Christian theology with artistry, which brought religion from the intellectuality down to the heart of a real Christian.

As S. T. Kimbrough, Jr. points out, Wesleyan hymns are *de facto* a lyrical theology—a "sung" theology that helps faithful believers hold the paradoxes of life in balance without subjecting it to theological logic and translating theological affirmations purely into canons of belief.⁵⁷ As theology and music work together, theology may prevent music from becoming an end in itself by pointing humanity to its origins while music prevents theology from becoming a

⁴⁹ Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater, ed., *John Wesley's Sermons* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 69.

⁵⁰ In fact, all sacred poems collected in the *collection* contain scriptural references; for some documented samples, see Heitzenrater and Baker, eds., *The Works*, vol.7, *A Collection of Hymns*, 730–35.

⁵¹ Heitzenrater and Baker, eds., *The Works*, vol.7, *A Collection of Hymns*, 73–74.

⁵² Carlton R. Young, *Music of the Heart* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing Company, 1995), 54–80.

⁵³ Wilson-Dickson, *The Story of Christian Music*, 117.

⁵⁴ Carlton R. Young, "John Wesley and the Music of Hymns" in *Companion to the United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 11–14.

⁵⁵ Erik Routley, *Hymns and Human Life* (London: John Murray, 1952), 71–72.

⁵⁶ Harry Eskew and Hugh T. McElrath, *Sing with Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Hymnology*, sec., rev., and exp. ed. (Nashville: Church Street, 1995), 137–7–8.

⁵⁷ S. T. Kimbrough, Jr., "Lyrical Theology" *Theology Today* 63, no.1 (April 2006): 22–37.

purely intellectual matter by moving human heart to consider its ultimate purpose.⁵⁸ Wesleyan hymns, after all, teach doctrines, shape spirituality, and cultivate piety to integrate a Christian's mind and heart into a holistic life of a Christian.

A Theological Conversation through Categorical Engagement in Context

Based on the foregoing analysis of Confucius' and John Wesley's teachings, the conceptual categories such as poetry, music, rituality, piety, benevolence, and holiness are prominent in reference to the theological conversation between Confucian moral philosophy and Wesleyan Christian theology. These categories are accountable for conceptual engagement owing to their respective cultural/religious references to Confucian rituality and Wesleyan piety. Thus, to uncover the theological connotation of these references, rendering a categorical engagement through theological conversation is essential. Such a conversation must address three questions. First, what do Confucian rituality and Wesleyan piety signify? Second, do they involve something transcendent? Third, are they moral or religious?

First, either Confucian rituality or Wesleyan piety signifies something beyond its physical references (ritual practice or practicing piety). Though being separated by considerable distance in time and space, both Confucius and John Wesley agree that poetry and music shape a person's rituality or piety that ultimately leads the person to embody a state of humanity beyond its status quo. In other words, they both believe humanity is so adaptable that it may transcend its status quo through a process of rituality or piety cultivation. Hence, in light of Confucian rituality, *ren* (benevolence) should be the state of humanity embodied by a profound person through a form of rituality shaped by poetry and music. In contrast to Confucian rituality, Wesleyan piety highlights that holiness should be the state of humanity embodied by a true Christian through a form of piety shaped by singing hymns.

While portraying a state of humanity transcending its status quo, both *ren* and holiness also evince a dynamic of humanity that transforms itself in a life-long process of humanity cultivation. They both are the catalyst and the goal of the process, motivating a person to cultivate on the one hand and anticipating a person to attain on the other. In this sense, *ren* anchors the process of becoming a profound person (*jun zi*) as Confucius indicates⁵⁹ while holiness directs the process of sanctification in this world as John Wesley argues.⁶⁰ Thus, *ren* and holiness signify a state of humanity at which Confucian rituality and Wesleyan piety respectively aim, which in turn transcend either ritual practice or practicing piety per se.

Second, though both Confucian rituality and Wesleyan piety symbolize a process of humanity cultivation, human effort alone does not secure the state of *ren* or holiness attainable during the process. In other words, something transcendent is involved in the process, bringing forth a form of synergism between humanity and the transcendence in the process to attain the

⁵⁸ Robin Leaver and James A. Litton, eds., *Duty and Delight* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing, 1985), 49.

⁵⁹ *Lunyu* (論語 里仁第四) 4.5. “君子無終食之間違仁·造次必於是·顛沛必於是” *Si Shu Du Ben* (四書讀本), 59.

⁶⁰ In his sermon, John Wesley contends that the circumcision of the heart marks a true follower of Christ with a right state of soul termed holiness wherein Christians are called to be perfect in this world. John Wesley, “The Circumcision of the Heart,” in *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology*, ed. Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Jeitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 24–32.

state of *ren* or holiness. This notion is clear in the Wesleyan hymns exemplified above. Those hymn texts explain that Jesus Christ is the mediator through whom God's gracious love comes to sinners. Through Christ's love, God works in the life of a real Christian who always participates in Christ's love to grow to holiness and seek ultimate union with God in Christ. As such, God has never been absent from the life of a real Christian. This is so central to John Wesley's idea of Christian perfection that ultimately leads to salvation.⁶¹

In contrast to John Wesley's teachings, Confucius' teachings recorded in the *Analects* are less explicit with respect to the synergistic effect in the process of humanity cultivation. Yet, this does not suggest that Confucius has no idea of the transcendence involved in his moral philosophy. For instance, Confucius once said, "it would be useless to say prayers if Heaven were offended."⁶² In this, the notion of Heaven (*Tien*) could be Confucius's idea of the transcendence, but it was not explicitly correlated with his ideas of rituality (*li*) and benevolence (*ren*), as documented in the *Analects*. Later Confucian philosophers after Confucius, however, have developed the synergistic effect of the process between humanity and the transcendence (or the Ultimacy) in general, benevolence (*ren*) and Heaven (*tien*) in particular, by following Confucius's cardinal idea of *ren*.⁶³ This development explains why the notion of *ren* has been so central to Confucius' moral thought and its synergistic effect has been so valuable to subsequent Confucian moral philosophy. Hence, Confucian rituality and Wesleyan piety, while symbolizing a process of humanity cultivation, evince a way of life in which humanity and the transcendent work together to transcend its status quo.

Third, while demanding such a synergistic effect in the process of humanity cultivation, Confucian rituality and Wesleyan piety are both moral and religious by nature. In other words, practicing Confucian rituality or Wesleyan piety to embody the state of *ren* or holiness is simultaneously moral and religious. For Confucians, practicing Confucian rituality through singing poems is moral because it yields a Confucian cardinal virtue—*ren*—that exemplifies a virtuous Confucian who is benevolent, as well as beneficent, to others.⁶⁴ In the meantime, it is also religious because it typifies a heavenly endowed humanity—*ren*—that exemplifies a religious Confucian who cultivates centrality (*zhong*) and harmony (*he*) by receiving the mandate of Heaven or the Way (*dao*) to bring all things between Heaven and Earth to proper place, nourishment, and flourishing.⁶⁵ Hence, Confucian rituality is moral and religious, shaping not only personal

⁶¹ For John Wesley, sanctification is God's work "in" us while justification is God's work "for" us. Both constitute God's work of salvation to us. See John Wesley, "Justification by Faith," in *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology*, ed. Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Jeitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 112–21.

⁶² *Lunyu* (論語 八佾第三) 3.13. "不然，獲罪於天吾所禱也。" *Si Shu Du Ben* (四書讀本), 45.

⁶³ A brief account of the development, see Xinzhong Yao, *Confucianism and Christianity* (Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2017), 68–81.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 140–51.

⁶⁵ *Zhong Yong* (中庸) 20. "修身以道，修道以仁。仁者人也，... 故君子不可以不修身；... 思知人，不可以不知天。" *Si Shu Du Ben* (四書讀本), 38；*Zhong Yong* (中庸) 1. "天命之謂性，率性之謂道，修道之謂教。... 致中和，天地位焉，萬物育焉。" Contemporary Confucian scholar Wei Ming Tu argues that Confucian religiousness reveals itself through the way of equilibrium (中庸之道) that portrays a process of learning to be fully human. Wei Ming Tu, *Centrality and Commonality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 94. As to the religiousness of *ren*, see Yao, *Confucianism and Christianity*, 140–51.

humanity but also personal relationship with others, the community, and Heaven the transcendent / the Ultimacy.

For Wesleyans, practicing Wesleyan piety through hymn singing is religious for sure because God is involved in such a practice to typify a divinely transformed humanity—holiness—that exemplifies a real Christian sanctified by God’s grace. In the meantime, it is moral because it brings forth a Christian cardinal virtue—Christ’s love—from the state of holiness that exemplifies a virtuous Christian who love others in a way as an extension of God’s holy love to humanity.⁶⁶ Hence, Wesleyan piety is religious and moral (as Confucian rituality is), shaping not only personal spirituality but also personal relationship with others, the community, and God.

As such, it seems that Confucian *ren* and Wesleyan holiness are two distinct conceptual categories pointing to a commonly shared category—the category of love in general. Confucian *ren* as benevolence is in fact a way of life characterized by love, considered universal for all human beings starting from loving self, others, the community, to loving the mandate of Heaven—the transcendence.⁶⁷ Likewise, Wesleyan holiness as Christian perfection is in fact a way of life characterized by God’s perfect love, universally offered to all through Christ as God’s grace to perfecting humanity by loving God and our neighbors as ourselves.⁶⁸ In this, love is the common conceptual category exemplifying Confucian *ren* and Wesleyan holiness in which its moral and religious attributes are unified in a transformable way of human life. As Xinzhong Yao argues, when love and religion are unified in one reality, “religion and ethics are unified into one: faith is ethically love, while love is religiously faith.”⁶⁹

In summary, the theological conversation reconstructed here takes categorical engagement into account through asking questions and giving answers.⁷⁰ By practicing Confucian rituality or Wesleyan piety with poetry and music, either Confucians or Christians are to embody a state of humanity—*ren* or holiness—that transcends ritual practice or practicing piety per se. Practicing as such denotes a process of humanity cultivation in which the transcendence—either Heaven or God—is deeply involved. As commonly defined by the category of love, either *ren* or holiness shapes not only personal growth, but also personal relationship with others, the community, and the transcendence / Ultimacy. Hence, either *ren* or holiness shaped by Confucian rituality or Wesleyan piety is simultaneously moral and religious.

From Comparison to Conversation, Contextualization to Confession

All in all, the foregoing theological conversation has demonstrated that both Confucian rituality and Wesleyan piety signify a process of by which humanity is deeply shaped by a form of ritual practice in which poetry and music are inextricably involved. This process ultimately leads to a transformable state of humanity (*ren* for Confucians; holiness for Wesleyans) under a working synergistic effect between humanity and the transcendent (Heaven for Confucians; God for Christians). Despite the differences between the Confucian and Wesleyan knowledge of and

⁶⁶ Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 13.

⁶⁷ Yao, *Confucianism and Christianity*, 176–89.

⁶⁸ Runyon, *The New Creation*, 222–33.

⁶⁹ Yao, *Confucianism and Christianity*, 201.

⁷⁰ For the argument of reconstructing a theological conversation by asking questions and giving answers, see David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987), 20.

approach to the transcendent, practicing either Confucian rituality or Wesleyan piety is simultaneously moral and religious. In this sense, both *ren* and holiness refer to a moral/religious state of humanity, translatable to the category of love that portrays a form of love to oneself, others, and the transcendence. In other words, love portrays a way of life concerning not only personal growth but also personal relationship with others, the community, and the transcendence. Hence, love is the moral/religious attribute of Confucian rituality, corresponding to that of the Wesleyan piety in which Christ's love revealed through God's grace to humanity.

This is a Christian understanding of Confucian rituality entailed from a categorical engagement in the given Confucian social context. In view of this understanding, Protestant Christians who reside in a predominantly Confucian society may re-frame their thinking mode by taking into account the notion of love while encountering the Confucian rites. If following Confucian ritual practices raises serious cognitive and ethical concerns, they may create a Protestant Christian ancestral rite, for instance, that demonstrates Christian love to their beloved ancestors, families, community, and God. In so doing, they are considered moral and religious by the people who also reside in a predominantly Confucian society and thus do not have to choose between religious idolatry and cultural estrangement when encountering the ritual issues.

While exploring the moral dimension of Confucian rites from a Protestant Christian perspective, this paper has argued that rendering a categorical engagement through a study of religious classics in a mode of theological comparison and conversation is necessary for Protestant Christians to acquire a Christian understanding of the Confucian ritual issues in a social context deeply influenced by Confucian ethos. This approach definitely marks a type of Christian theology that is comparative on the one hand, demanding a categorical engagement in the framework of theological conversation; and contextual on the other, demanding a reflection of Christian faith in reference to its social context.

In light of comparative theology, this Christian understanding of Confucian rituality is vulnerable for correction. As Robert Neville and Wesley J. Wildman jointly argue, in the making of comparison, comparative categories are vague in general but specified in a certain respect to allow commensurate comparison, which in turn enriches the compared categories though vulnerable for correction.⁷¹ In light of contextual theology, this Christian understanding of Confucian rituality is open to a theological reflection of Christian faith in the given social context. It manifests itself as a "confessional comparative theology" reconstructed in the given context.⁷² As Catherine Cornille argues, comparative theology seeks to "deepen and advance theological truth."⁷³ While engaging in constructive theological reflection with other traditions from one's home tradition perspective, comparative theology could be understood as a confessional theology with theological reflections on one's own faith.⁷⁴

In other words, this type of Christian theology demands a scholarly endeavor that is rooted in one's own home tradition to learn novel religious insights by venturing into theological comparison and conversation with the encountered tradition in the given context. In this

⁷¹ Robert C. Neville, ed., *Ultimate Realities: A Volume in the Comparative Religious Ideas Project* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), 187–208.

⁷² Catherine Cornille, *Meaning and Method in Comparative Theology* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2020), 9–34.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

Christian-Confucian dialogical context, it compares conceptual categories through a theological conversation and aims to reflect on one's own faith by learning from others in the given context. Hence, by means of comparison through categorical engagement and conversation from a Christian perspective, it yields this Christian understanding of Confucian rituality as a way of theological contextualization through reflection on Christian faith.

While making a clear distinction between home tradition and other traditions, Cornille's analysis of comparative theology remains true only in a western framework of epistemological search. Yet, to the Protestant Christian minority born in the predominantly Confucian society, both Christianity and Confucianism are in fact home tradition. In this given social context, no distinction between these two traditions is necessary for theological/philosophical reflections. For these Christians, the epistemological search for objective truth should be added by an ontological quest of existential truth to satisfy their theological curiosity. They ought to work together to break through its own particularity and attain a form of spiritual freedom that grasps the ultimate meaning of human existence. As Paul Tillich convincingly argues,

In the depth of every living religion there is a point at which the religion itself loses its importance, and that to which it points breaks through its particularity, elevating it to spiritual freedom and with it to a vision of the spiritual presence in other expressions of the ultimate meaning of man's existence.⁷⁵

It is my hope that this subject matter may demonstrate a Christian/Confucian theology reconstructed in the given social context, which solicits a religious breakthrough in its own particularity, attains a form of spiritual freedom that grasps the ultimate meaning of human existence, and brings out a self-judgment of Christianity in the face of the world religions.



K. James Wu, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Theology at Chang Jung Christian University in Tainan, Taiwan.

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⁷⁵ Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 62.