Confessions of a Confucianist: Implications for Missions

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Introduction

I have been a Christian for more than fifty years and a missionary with Wycliffe Bible Translators for forty years, but it has only been in the last ten years that I have realized how much my Christianity has been influenced by my Confucian heritage as a Japanese American. Reflecting back on my missionary experience, I have discovered a number of ways in which Confucianism contributed to the ongoing cultural stress that I experienced.

One of the main ways was reluctance to speak to authority figures when I disagreed with them. Even though I felt they were wrong or did not understand the whole story, I did not feel it was appropriate for me, as a woman, to speak to them about the issue or to suggest that they might not have understood the situation correctly. Instead, I would get knots in my stomach and suppress my negative feelings. Rather than addressing my concerns with authority figures, I would take my complaints to others. Over a period of time, these negative feelings built up, and I would release them in some harmful way. I would become angry at my husband, my children, and just about everyone else. I would complain about the situation to others, but not to the appropriate people. Although I knew that the Bible allowed me to be angry but not to sin, I did not know how to stop being angry. Since I thought I was following the biblical commands to submit to authority figures, I did not understand why my emotions and behavior were so unbiblical.

This article reviews how I, as a Japanese American woman missionary, recognized and addressed my Confucianist practices and the implications for missions. First, I discovered Confucianism and then realized how much my own life was impacted by Confucian values. Then, I looked more deeply into Scripture and began to understand how I had replaced biblical values with cultural values. Finally, I discuss the missions implications of understanding Confucianism and the impact it had on my perception of myself as a woman.

Discovering Confucianism

In my research, I discovered that Confucius was an actual person named K'ung-fu-tzu, who lived from 551–479 B.C. He was a scholar and a teacher concerned about the social ills that characterized China at that time. His teachings sought to educate people to become the best human beings they could be by developing their inner selves. His teachings were aimed at leaders, as he felt they were responsible for the social turmoil of the country. Confucius felt that, if the leaders acted appropriately, they could improve the social condition of society as a whole.

Confucius’s thinking, as well as his actions and dialogues with his disciples, were recorded in a book entitled Analects. Confucius taught a code of ethics for self-realization through interactions with others. This code of ethics is based on appropriate behavior in five major relationships through which individuals can cultivate their true inner selves in order for the family, state, and world to function appropriately. Each of these relationships enabled the development of a particular virtue. If these virtues were practiced, he believed they would reduce the rampant social ills.

The five relationships are defined hierarchical relationships between ruler and subject, husband and wife, parent and child, older and younger, and friend to friend. The lower person is always to be subject to the higher person. Within each relationship, a specific virtue is developed: “love between father and son, duty between ruler and subject, distinction between husband and wife, and precedent of the old over the young, and faith between friends.” Confucius believed that developing these virtues through these relationships would produce an ideal society.

The main virtue upon which these relationships were established and modeled is the child’s love for the parent, or filial piety. This has also been described as mutual indebtedness—the parents’ care for their children indebts the children for the rest of their lives. If this value is learned well within the home, a person is prepared to serve society as well. To demonstrate filial piety, a person treats his or her parents with the proper actions, or li. This refers not only to the outward behavior, but also to the inward disposition of mind and heart. It is also based on reciprocity for what the parents have done in bringing up, training, and providing for them. With filial piety, children repay their parents for their kindnesses. Filial piety is demonstrated through respect or love to parents. This takes various forms and should also be extended to anyone who is older or higher in status. This love/respect is seen in every aspect of life in the home as well as in public. Children are to provide care and services by serving favorite foods, giving gifts, and speaking with respectful language, as well as submitting to their parents’ desires. Children are also to respect/show love to their parents by being courteous, giving them special seats or places, celebrating their birthdays, and remembering them after they have died. Such activities parallel the care that the parents had for their children in rearing them. These activities continue on even when children become adults and leave their childhood homes, and even after their parents have died.

The daily practice of such respectful behaviors forms a pattern in which a son learns to “suppress his own desires, anticipates the wishes of his father, and takes his father’s commands as sacred edicts.” This was not the original intention of the Confucian scholars who taught that if parents were wrong, they were to be gently corrected.
[F]ilial piety consists, during the lifetime of our parents, in conforming ourselves to their wishes, and giving them not only physical care and nourishment, but nourishing their wills; while should they fall into error, it consists in reproving them and leading them back to what is right.\(^\text{12}\)

On the other hand, the Asian cultural practice of saving or protecting the face of the family or group has reinforced the suppression of individual desires and disagreements with parents or with those in higher positions of authority. The concept of face includes everything regarding one's birth, degree of education, sophistication, and fate.\(^\text{13}\) Children are socialized from an early age to act in ways that preserve the dignity of the family name. Disagreeing with an elder or confronting that person in public causes an elder to lose face. In fact, face has been described as a mechanism for Asian conflict management—that is, in order to preserve face, conflict is avoided.\(^\text{14}\) Face is saved to preserve social harmony, and children are trained at a young age to have smooth relationships by not being aggressive. They do this by learning to suppress their own desires by giving in to others, particularly to those who are older.\(^\text{15}\) A strong sense of community loyalty automatically suppresses bad feelings among extended family groups, not just the individuals involved. These bad feelings are often passed on from one generation to the next.\(^\text{16}\)

Women have a very low position in Confucianism. In fact, submission characterizes a woman her whole life. First, as a child, she is to submit to her father, then as a wife to her husband, and, finally, as a widow, to her oldest son. Women have a very low position in Confucianism. In fact, submission characterizes a woman her whole life. First, as a child, she is to submit to her father, then as a wife to her husband, and, finally, as a widow, to her oldest son.

How Confucianism impacted me

Before I studied Confucianism, as a third-generation Japanese American, I thought I was thoroughly American and not affected by my Asian heritage. However, my grandparents lived with us when I was growing up, since my father was the oldest and only son. Both my grandmother and mother were very submissive to their husbands (the husband and wife relationship). I never heard a disagreement between them. Additionally, my mother never thought her mother-in-law liked her.

I was also taught not to talk back to my parents or to question what they did. I was to obey because they were my parents and I was their child (the parent and child relationship). My older brother and I were given responsibility for our two younger brothers, and we made sure they followed our orders as well (the older and younger relationship). Since they were eight and twelve years younger, they were too young to contradict our authority.\(^\text{19}\)

I also remember my parents telling me not to express myself by being overly noisy or by drawing attention to myself. I was also to control my emotions and conceal them.\(^\text{20}\) At the time, I thought that was just the proper way of acting and wondered why my Caucasian friends were trained so differently. Their parents allowed them to express their emotions, talk loud, and draw attention to themselves. I would feel uncomfortable when they were emotional, talked loud, disagreed in public, or spoke disrespectfully about their parents. When I read the Japanese proverb that says, “the nail that stands out gets pounded down,” I realized my parents were following Japanese culture in teaching me not to make myself stand out from the group by making a lot of noise or drawing attention to myself. The Japanese proverb stands in contrast to the American proverb that says, “the squeaky wheel gets the grease.”\(^\text{21}\) I began to understand why I was different from my friends and why some of their behaviors made me uncomfortable.

When I went to college and took a required class on public speaking, I had a very difficult time speaking up. For one assignment, the class went outside, and we took turns standing on a small hill above others, shouting out our speeches while the other students criticized loudly. This was very difficult for me to do. First, I was not used to raising my voice, and, second, I was not used to people criticizing me in front of others. This incident created a painful memory that I still have. For many years, public speaking was very difficult for me. My knees would knock, I would get butterflies in my stomach, and my voice would quaver.

Shortly after college, I felt God’s call to join a mission organization (Wycliffe Bible Translators). During my forty years with the organization, I have had difficulty with various supervisors. Although I was trained as a Bible translator and had been in translation work as a single person, one supervisor treated me differently than he treated my husband, who also worked there.
He only talked to my husband and expected my husband to pass the information along to me. Although I might have expected this in an Asian situation, I was disappointed to find it in a non-Asian Christian context. However, I could not bring myself to confront the supervisor or tell him how I felt. Instead, I suppressed the negative feelings inside me. Another time, when I wanted to obtain official permission from my supervisor to do graduate studies, my supervisor told me it was not necessary because my husband had a graduate degree. I was very disturbed again, but could not bring myself to talk to my supervisor. My husband spoke to him on my behalf, but I was still angry with him and suppressed my negative feelings.

In response to Confucian hierarchy, I responded in three different ways. One was to consider myself unequal or not as good as men in God’s eyes, second was to do a lot of work in order to please God, and third was to try to control others. These responses were all unconscious. My Confucian background had made me believe unconsciously that men were better than women—that is, God preferred men over women. This was also reinforced in my own family life. I was the only daughter with three brothers and had two sons and no daughters. I felt that my duty was to take care of the men in my life and make sure they succeeded. Anything I wanted for myself should be denied for the sake of the males.

In order to compensate for this feeling of inadequacy, I developed a drive to accomplish much to please God. I did not realize that this response was similar to the Confucian value of duty as well as the Buddhist value of good works. In my determination to do many things, I also did not know how to say “no” and would get myself in a bind by taking on more things than I was actually able to do.

I also tried to control others by suggesting different things they could do, especially different jobs women could do on the mission field. I know I offended a number of people, as one woman told me her husband did not want her to talk to me anymore. I made her feel guilty about not doing more. I also tried to control my daughters-in-law, but to no avail, as they are not Asian. I made her feel guilty about not doing more. I also tried to control my daughters-in-law, but to no avail, as they are not Asian. I made her feel guilty about not doing more. I also tried to control my daughters-in-law, but to no avail, as they are not Asian. I made her feel guilty about not doing more. I also tried to control my daughters-in-law, but to no avail, as they are not Asian.

After many years of suppressing my emotions, I was diagnosed with breast cancer and later with uterine cancer. In fact, my whole family has had some form of cancer. Both my grandmothers died of cancer—breast cancer and ovarian cancer. My father died of prostate cancer that went to his brain, and my older brother of prostate cancer that went to his bones. My mother has had breast cancer twice, but is still alive. I tested positive for a cancer gene and realize that years of suppression from Confucian values may have affected my family’s immune system and health and played a role in making us susceptible to cancer. It was actually after I was diagnosed with cancer that God began to help me understand how much Confucianism has impacted my life and how I needed to turn to him and his word to receive the help I needed. I began to realize that I had believed the lies of the Confucian system—that I was not as good as men, and I needed to resort to good works to fill the void rather than valuing who I really was in Christ.

Confucianism and Scripture

Prior to studying Confucianism, I had interpreted my Confucianist behaviors as Christian. I thought I had obeyed the verses that spoke of submission to rulers (Rom. 13:1, Titus 3:1, 1 Pet. 2:13), especially when I kept silence when I disagreed with them. I did not want to rebel against God by disagreeing with authority figures (Rom. 13:2). In the same way, I was submissive to my husband and did not contradict him or question his authority (Eph. 5:24, Col. 3:18, 1 Pet. 3:1), but would suppress negative feelings when I felt he was wrong. I was outwardly obedient to my parents as a child (Eph. 6:1, Col. 3:20) and kept my disagreements inside. However, I did not understand where my feelings of inadequacy came from. I felt that God was not pleased with me as a woman and, in particular, as an Asian woman. It just seemed to me that he was more pleased with men, and white men in particular.

The particular passage of Scripture that was a breakthrough for me was Genesis 1:27: “So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (NIV). As various seminary professors used this passage in their classes, I began to consider what it meant to be made in God’s image. God began to reveal that his love to me was just the same as to men—Asian or white. He had created both male and female to reflect his image, not just one to the exclusion of the other. Men and women were to reflect God’s image together through godly relationships and acceptance of one another. This was a wonderful new thought for me. I began to see how cultural values distorted God’s image and made Asian women feel inadequate in relation to men. I was able to look back on my life and see how God’s truth had been distorted.

As I reflected more on what it meant to be made in God’s image, I began to understand that Christ completed the work on the cross for my sin once and for all (1 Pet. 3:18). It was through his work of grace that Christ provided redemption for me. I could in no way earn my salvation (Eph. 2:8–9). I did not need to continue doing lots of things to earn God’s pleasure. He was pleased with me through Christ’s work on the cross (Col. 1:19–20). In fact, I was denying the power of Christ’s work on the cross rather than valuing who I really was in Christ.
in prioritizing work over people, and that I needed to do less “work” and spend more time with people, and more time with God. This was so contrary to the past years of my life. As I moved more toward this new lifestyle, my heart was lifted and the burden of work reduced. I was no longer responsible for having to say “no.” I began to experience joy (John 16:24) and peace (John 14:27) rather than worry whether I was doing enough to please God (1 Thess. 4:1). I began to enjoy doing things for God. It was like a conversion experience for me, even though I had made a profession of faith at five years old.

As I looked again at the verses on submission, I began to notice it was not just the submission that was important, but the attitude behind the submission. I was to submit as to God—not just because it was my duty to submit, but because of who he is. I also noted that rulers were supposed to look out for the good of the ones under them to govern diligently, cheerfully showing mercy (Rom. 12:8) and becoming like one who serves (Matt. 22:26). The Scriptures did not say that rulers are always right or never do any wrong. Rulers are human and affected by the same sin nature as the rest of us. My submission had unconsciously been affected by the desire not to disturb the outward harmony.

When I realized that I had believed the lie that God did not love me as much as he loved men, I could replace the lie with the truth that God loved me equally with men. He loved me so much that he made me in his image. I began to thank God for his love for me, and he began to give me love for those around me—both authority figures and others.

The beginning of change came with a conflict I had with a supervisor. I had been shamed in public and was very angry. I complained about the situation to others for several years. I had previously felt there was nothing I could do about it except complain. Armed with the truth about myself, I prayed about this conflict and God gave me the thought to take my husband to speak with this supervisor. God knew that I needed that support. The result was that the misunderstanding was cleared up immediately. I could not believe that was possible. I had spent several years brooding over the situation, and to have it cleared up in a moment was unbelievable. I was so thankful to God and began looking for other ways that God would help me rectify past injustices.

As my journey continued, I wondered if difficulties with supervisors might haunt me the rest of my life. Several years ago, I was in a situation where I needed to find a new position within Wycliffe. When one supervisor invited me to discuss this with him, I decided it was time to be honest and tell him my history with supervisors. I did not give him all the details, but, as we talked, he felt comfortable becoming my supervisor. The situation has been the best ever. Although I wanted to hide my past difficulties, God convicted me that I needed to be honest and tell him. Through this new position, God has done amazing things that have never happened to me before.

Another way in which God had to deal with me by addressing the downside of the Confucian hierarchy was in healing the depression and bitterness that came with always being at the bottom. I seemed to have a sixth sense that noticed when men were favored over women. I would become upset easily at this injustice and brood over the injustices to myself as well as to other women. My inability to question these things grew and festered over the years. I knew things were not right, but thought it was wrong to question them. The bitterness made me feel bad about myself. The only way I could respond was to allow the resentment to grow.

Because I thought my actions were Christian and not Confucianist, I denied this bitterness. I thought God wanted me to submit unquestioningly to authority figures, but I could not understand the growing bitterness. I would complain about supervisors to everyone who would listen. Some were very kind and let me go on and on while others disagreed with me. Others were also dissatisfied with the supervisors, so we spent time complaining together, but we were unable to resolve our bitterness.

I was very stressed because I thought I was acting in a Christian way, so I did not understand where the negative feelings were coming from or how to address them. This stress affected my health. I was unable to sleep well at night and woke up early in the morning rehearsing how to address the situations. I had no peace and was very miserable. I also made other people miserable with my continuing complaints.

I had to face the fact that I had bitterness, that it was evil (Rom. 3:14), and that I needed to get rid of it (Eph. 4:31). I knew that my complaints were affecting others and causing them to become bitter as well (Heb. 12:15). Knowing what generated my bitterness helped me to address it. I first needed to change my thinking. Unquestioning submission to authorities was not what God wanted; he wanted to change my attitude and my heart. He wanted me to submit to earthly authority figures because of my love for him and not because I was following some rules for behavior. God also gave me his Spirit to help me desire his will, convict me of my sin (John 16:8), and guide me into his truth (John 16:13).

Confucianism focuses on proper conduct in an attempt to create an orderly, harmonious, and peaceful society. Christianity focuses on relationship with God and how Christ enables us to become a reflection of himself. The ability to become a better person within Confucianism lies with the individual alone, while the ability to become a better person within Christianity lies in the individual’s relationship with God based on God’s truth and guided by his Spirit. Confucianism focuses only on human relationships while Christianity focuses on a relationship with God first. Confucianism presents the five relationships for a person to follow while Christianity presents a relationship with God that enables them to submit mutually to others. One is done out of duty and the other out of love for what Christ has done for us.

**Implications for missions**

At the turn of the twenty-first century, one of the biggest changes has been the rise of Christianity outside of the North and West. Phillip Jenkins says that “the center of gravity in the Christian world has shifted inexorably southward to Africa, Asia and Latin America.” The number of Western Christians has been surpassed by the number of African, Asian, and Latin American Christians. In 1960, 30 percent of the non-Western world was Christian, but
is predicted to be 78 percent by 2000. The increase in the Asian world has been significant—35 percent Korea, 14 percent Hong Kong, 13 percent Indonesia, 12 percent Singapore, 9 percent Vietnam, 7 percent India and Malaysia, and 5 percent the People’s Republic of China. This global church will have a different look than the Western church. Samuel Escobar describes this church as grassroots Christianity characterized by “a culture of poverty, oral liturgy, narrative preaching, uninhibited emotionalism, maximum participation in prayer, worship, dreams and visions, faith healing, intensive search for community with belonging.”

This shift from a Western church to a global church has many implications for what Christianity might look like in the future. In order to address this shift adequately, missiologists need to grapple with the challenge of how to present the gospel in a way that fosters rather than inhibits this growth. One of the main challenges is to equip missionaries to present the gospel without cultural trappings both of the West and the East. The American way of life has shaped Christianity into a product to be distributed to the consumer through the tool of technology. The Asian way of life, influenced by Confucianist and Buddhist values, has shaped Christianity into a duty to be performed as a social role characterized by good works. A major challenge will be to counter the cultural preferences that missionaries with such values consider to be Christian. In fact, Christians are so influenced by their environments that the historian Andrew Walls says Christians from different parts of the globe might not be recognizable to one another. Samuel Escobar exhorts mission-sending churches to be very careful that they are not exporting cultural distortions to emerging churches.

Along with this shift has come a rise in the non-Western missionary movement, particularly from Asia. Asians from Bangladesh, India, Burma, Japan, and Korea have been sending out missionaries for more than one hundred years. In the 1970s, Asian churches were sending out their own missionaries, and, by 1973, the Asia Missions Association was formed in order to coordinate mission efforts throughout Asia. The Asian Missiological Society held its first conference in Bangkok, Thailand, October 30 to November 1, 2007, to forward the work of missions in Asian churches through research and academic discussions as well as networking. One goal of the Asian Missiological Society is to recognize and avoid the pitfalls that has hindered Western missions, particularly in Asia.

In our globalized world, there is an increasing need to understand our coworkers as well as those we are trying to reach with our mission efforts. The Joshua Project listing unreached people groups places three large groupings out of sixteen in Asia (East Asians, Southeast Asians, and South Asian peoples). The need for mission work in Asian countries and the increase in the number of missionaries from Asian countries necessitates greater understanding of Asian peoples by themselves as well as others. We need to help Asian and Asian American Christian women recognize the impact of Confucianism in their lives and support them in breaking out of these Confucianist bonds. Their experience of true acceptance and freedom in Christ will draw many to Christ.

The influence of culture on Christianity has been discussed for a number of years, going back as far as 1951 when H. Richard Niebuhr presented various ways of looking at Christ and culture. He presented “Christ against Culture,” “Christ of Culture,” “Christ Above Culture,” “Christ and Culture in Paradox,” and “Christ the Transformer of Culture.” The Lausanne II conference addressed the model of “Christ in Creative Tension with Religions” as an important theme for present-day missions. Understanding ethnicity and religious background is crucial to mission work. For example, Malaysia’s mixture of three main religions—Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism—has to be understood, as well as the influence of local folk religions. These religions fulfill everyday needs of family, finances, and business. Therefore, in order to present the gospel appropriately in Malaysia, it is necessary to consider Christ’s encounter with these religions. Western evangelicals might also learn from other religions.

Another reason for understanding culture and other religions is the need to work with people from other cultures. A recent comprehensive study of mission attrition revealed that one of the main reasons for attrition is the inability to get along with coworkers. In a period of rising interest on the part of Asians in joining the missions movement, it is imperative that Asians themselves, as well as others, understand their own cultural heritages. Well-known missiologist Samuel Escobar says,

One of the evangelical missiological trends after Lausanne 1974 posed forcefully the need for evangelists and missionaries to become aware of how their culture shaped not only their missionary methodologies, but also their versions of the gospel, in ways that were in open contrast with biblical teaching and theological conviction.

Missiologists, mission organizations, mission trainers, and missionaries themselves need to consider the extent to which cultural and religious backgrounds impact and influence not only Christianity, but the gospel message they take to other places. Cultural discovery training was not a part of my pre-field orientation forty years ago. However, missiologists have identified this as a needed area for research and training. Much more reflection needs to be done in considering the extent to which one’s own cultural and religious background distorts the gospel message. This is true not only for Asians and Asian Americans, but for all missionaries.

Although outside the scope of this article, other theological issues that Asians need to grapple with in light of their cultural heritage are the biblical concept of grace versus good works, identifying and dealing with sin, and good works versus sanctification—that is, obeying as unto the Lord, rather than out of social duty.
Conclusion

As the global church and mission force from Confucian countries is growing in number, it is critical for Christian leaders both male and female to understand how cultural heritages can distort the true message of the gospel. Samuel Escobar and others have stated that past missionary efforts have not adequately differentiated culture from the gospel message—so much so that cultural interpretations of the gospel have resulted in “flagrant contradictions between their theology and their practice.”

If you work or socialize with Asian women who do not have a good self-image or are very submissive and shy with guarded bitterness, you might encourage them to read this article. You can dialogue with them to help them look at the five Confucian relationships and any resulting bitterness in their own experiences. In the process, be willing to share how your own culture has distorted your view of Christianity.

In all of my forty-plus years as a missionary, I have not encountered any training that enables people to differentiate their cultural background from biblical truths. This lack reinforces the belief that one’s own cultural perspective of Christianity is the right perspective. This area of cultural self-discovery has been greatly overlooked, and its importance has been greatly discounted. If Asian and Asian American women are to find freedom and acceptance in Christ, we need to learn how we are impacted by Confucianism and how that conflicts with biblical values.

Asian and non-Asian Christian leaders, male and female, need not only to discover how their culture influences their form of Christianity, but also to examine their words and actions in order to recognize whether they reinforce Confucian duty or godly obedience in their interactions with Asian and Asian American women. Asian and Asian American women need to hear and understand how they can be released from the bondage of the Confucian hierarchy and how a relationship with Christ gives them a freedom and acceptance they did not have within Confucianism.

Notes

25. “The Japanese word haji means “anything but shame.” A person experiences this when they have been criticized in public. This justifies revenge. See Holding, “Returning Japanese.”
47. Escobar, preface to One World or Many? The Impact of Globalisation on Mission, 5.