

Read this book for the sake of sharing the Good News with Cultural Chinese! I'Ching Thomas, has aptly pointed out that the reception of the Christian religion by Cultural Chinese has never been an easy path ever since Christianity reached the shores of China more than ten centuries ago. With exceptional clarity, I'Ching identifies the core belief of the Cultural Chinese as the belief in human flourishing based on Confucianism. Without undermining the contribution of Confucius to humanity, I'Ching presents the biblical belief of human flourishing as the state of *shalom*, in which God restores humanity from its fallen predicament through the redemptive work of His only begotten Son Jesus Christ.

*Rev Dr Clement Mook-Soo Chia  
Principal  
Singapore Bible College*

*Jesus: The Path to Human Flourishing* does us an enormous service. China is expanding its vision as a global citizen and its people are increasingly settling throughout the world. Those of us who love the gospel of Christ and love all things Chinese — and I am certainly one — have been desperate for a single volume that can expertly guide us through the rich moral and spiritual history of Chinese thought, and then show us how the story of Scripture, from Creation, to Fall, to the ultimate harmony of God's kingdom, both challenges and fulfils the longings of the Chinese heart. As someone serving in a city, and a local church, blessed with a growing Chinese population, I am very grateful to I'Ching Thomas for the years of work evident in this book.

*Rev Dr John Dickson (Ph.D.)  
Author, historian, Founding Director of the Centre for Public Christianity,  
and Rector of St Andrew's Roseville (Sydney)*

In an era when China's political leaders and intellectual elites are doubling down on their criticism of Christianity as a "foreign" religion, I'Ching Thomas's book provides a timely response to the age-old question of how the gospel relates to Chinese culture. Bringing together the Hebrew concept of *shalom* and the Chinese notion of the *junzi*, or Noble Man, she makes a strong argument for human flourishing as the common aspiration bridging the two traditions. Building on this common ground, she constructs an apologetic that speaks to the relational nature of Chinese culture, allowing for a meaningful dialog that engages the heart as well as the mind. For Chinese Christians struggling to share their faith with non-believing relatives, as well as for non-Chinese who seek to relate the truth of the Gospel within the Chinese worldview, this book provides a positive way forward.

*Dr Brent Fulton*  
*President and Founder*  
*ChinaSource*

This is a must-read book for anyone serious about building better evangelistic models for reaching more Cultural Chinese today. With great insight and clarity in so many areas, I'Ching Thomas tells us the history that led to why Chinese people actually think the way they do. More importantly, she provides new insights on how we can use that understanding to build better bridges with Cultural Chinese today. In writing this book, she provides a great service to the body of Christ in helping us better understand what may be missing in our approach to reaching more Chinese today. Most importantly, she shows us how God's work in human history actually provides the ideal blue print to fulfill the deep longings of the Chinese heart!

*Dr David Geisler*  
*President, Norm Geisler International Ministries*  
*Adjunct Prof, Southern Evangelical Seminary*

I'Ching Thomas has written something very important for those who wish to build bridges and not walls between world cultures. She has provided us a brilliant road map that has the real potential to heal an ages-old rift between traditional Chinese culture and the Christian West. Her project highlights the noble goals of Confucian thought for the betterment of humankind, but adds something that other writers and thinkers tend to leave out: a real source of power that can bring these traditional aspirations to a point of full flourishing. She offers a solution that is not imported from overseas, but one that comes from above, with power to achieve true peace for individuals and society, and to achieve the most noble ends.

*Craig J. Hazen, Ph.D.*  
*Director of Graduate Studies*  
*Biola University*

Eastern religions in China have often been described and discussed, but the transformative impact of the gospel in Chinese culture has received scant recognition. I'Ching Thomas's remarkable work reveals how one can meaningfully connect with the Cultural Chinese through our Christian faith without rejecting their history and culture. *Jesus: The Path to Human Flourishing* provides a clear and fascinating insight to engaging the Cultural Chinese with Scripture. This book is about building bridges, and embracing the world's largest and, perhaps, most energetic population.

*Lawrence Tong*  
*International Director*  
*Operation Mobilisation*

We cannot contextualize biblical truth without first understanding context. I'Ching Thomas helpfully identifies key points of intersection between Chinese culture and the gospel. Contextualization requires humility and earnest reflection. Thomas demonstrates both when discerning biblical concerns found in various Eastern traditions. While readers won't agree with her on every page, her book will certainly catalyze productive conversation.

*Jackson Wu*  
*Professor of Theology & Missiology*  
*Themelios, M&C Book Reviews Editor*  
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*Jesus:  
The Path to  
Human  
Flourishing*

THE GOSPEL FOR  
THE CULTURAL CHINESE

by I'Ching Thomas

*And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.”*

— MATTHEW 4:19

*Jesus: The Path to Human Flourishing*

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*For my family,  
that spans two great cultures.*





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# Foreword

Christianity has a message for all people. Unfortunately, in many cultures, particularly ones with other dominant religions, the people cannot see how the religion of the Bible would add anything to their lives. This barrier is particularly significant if their introduction to Christianity occurred via European imperialism and its concomitant exploitations. China is a good case in point, as I'Ching Thomas explains in her book.

My observation is that around the globe there are frequently two undesirable reactions when Christianity is presented to people without concern for their indigenous culture. One is that the people consider Christianity to be an alien, Western religion and restrict its practice, maybe even prohibit it. The other surprisingly common reaction has been that the newly reached cultures find some way of “colonizing” Christianity. By that I mean that the people of those cultures not only accept Christianity, but syncretize it with their already existent beliefs to the point that they claim a privileged standing before God, ahead of any other nations and cultures, an attitude that is surely incompatible with biblical teaching. Again, we can see both of these extreme perspectives coming out of various pockets of Chinese culture today.

Without creating forced connections, I'Ching Thomas shows us that, despite the obstacles, Christianity is clearly appropriate for the Chinese people as much as for anyone else. Ancient Chinese philosophies and religions (specifically, Confucianism, Daoism, and Chinese Buddhism) hold up high ideals. They provide concepts and practices that should be of great benefit to their adherents in this life and for eternity. Even when we realize that the traditions per

se cannot fulfill their promises, the ideals are not lessened; they just appear unattainable.

However, writing from her own experience and an impressive amount of scholarship, Thomas shows that Jesus, in his person and through his work, when rightly understood, directly addresses and fulfills the goals that have evaded the ancient sages.

This book exudes fairness on the intellectual level and usefulness on the practical side. It is very readable and makes a valuable contribution for anyone engaged in presenting the Christian gospel in the context of Chinese culture.

*Winfried Corduan, PhD*  
*Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and Religion*  
*Taylor University*

*Author of Neighboring Faiths and In the Beginning God: A  
Fresh Look at the Case for Original Monotheism*

*Introduction:  
Why You're  
Talking  
But We're Not  
Hearing*

*The people may be made to follow a  
path of action, but they may not  
be made to understand it.*

Kongzi



I have a confession — I can't swim. When I was merely five my mother decided to place me under the auspices of the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy, *Guanyin*. Apparently when I was dedicated to the Goddess over fire, a medium at the temple warned my mother that I should be kept away from large bodies of water as I was prone to death by drowning. Consequently, when I was at the prime age for swimming lessons, I was denied the opportunity and have never since had the chance to pick up the skill. Fortunately should a day come when I'm drowning, my son, who started learning swimming when he was four, promised that he would save me!

The driving force behind such superstitious beliefs in my family was my late maternal grandmother. My grandmother, before she passed on, was the empress of our family. *PohPoh's* petite and almost frail physique was most unfitting for her undeterred and strong will. Her domineering grip on her family was expected as she was a typical Hakka woman who survived the Japanese invasion in the 1940s as well as her husband's abandonment of her and their four young children when she was barely 30 years old. Her unsparing life had left her soul scarred, hardened, but no less determined to change her destiny.

At the same time, the tragic events of her life also led her to believe that all of life is fated — since her cards had been dealt, she would work with them and try to appease (and perhaps even manipulate) the heavens for a change in her luck. Hence, she was extremely superstitious — firmly committed to her religious beliefs, she was dutiful in her allegiance to the variety of gods at her favorite temple. However, during the last years of her life, she decided to start attending a church as she was distressedly concerned that her only son, who had become a Christian decades before, would not give her a proper send-off when her time on earth was up. She reckoned that if she became a Christian he would not hesitate to participate in her funeral rites as any filial son would and should.<sup>1</sup>

Uncle Alfred (*PohPoh's* only son) became a follower of Jesus when he was a teenager. His conversion was nothing less than a miracle considering the circumstances around it — single-mother family living in a Chinese new village of a small town in Malaysia. These “new villages” were really suburbs created by the British colonialists in the 1950s to prevent the Communist resurgence from spreading among ethnic Chinese in Malaya. As such these New Villages were mostly populated by ethnic

Chinese and hence very Chinese socially and culturally. Nonetheless, despite living in such a decidedly Chinese environment, Uncle Alfred became a Christian and started attending a Cantonese Baptist church in the village. His conversion marked the beginning of the Lord's work in my maternal family as, along with him, his youngest sister started attending church.

I was the third on my mother's side of the family to have become a follower of Jesus. Growing up in the seventies' multi-ethnic and multi-religious Malaysia, we simply assumed that all religions are the same — they all teach us to be good or moral, they bring peace and order into one's life, etc. While we express our reverence in different ways, we are all ultimately relating to the same God or a God. My Muslim best friend may appear very pious as she prays five times a day, but I am equally religious as I offer joss stick incense three times a day to the idols on our household altar. My mother, though a regular visitor to the Daoist temple, did not hesitate to ask my uncle to bring me to Sunday School on occasion as she believed that they teach children good things in church.

However, when I was 15, overwhelmed by teenage angst, the daunting questions of life haunted me: Who am I? Where did I come from? Why am I here? Where is my life heading? I was seeking and longing for meaning and purpose. I wanted answers. This existential ache further intensified with the sudden and tragic death of my eight-year-old cousin. I was demoralized and felt that there really was no point in my living if there was no purpose for my existence! Then, as I was clearing up after doing my school homework, a tract I randomly picked up from the occasional Sunday School class I attended fell out from one of the books. It was based on Psalm 34:8: *"Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!"*

Three years after that evening, when I made the commitment to follow Jesus, I prayed for boldness as I approached my mother to ask for her permission to be baptized in water. Her first question was, "Will you still be able to eat with us when we serve foods that have been offered to idols on the table?" After I assured her I would still be able to do so, she granted her consent. Twenty years later, I would have the privilege and joy to witness her baptism and, subsequently, her sister's after being born again by the grace of Jesus Christ.



If you are a Cultural Chinese<sup>2</sup> and a first-generation follower of Christ in your family, chances are you will have many stories that are very similar to mine. In fact, I can bet that my mother's foremost concern for my new-found faith — whether I would be able to eat with the family post-baptism — is not at all peculiar in view of the significance of communal meals in a Cultural Chinese household. In addition, you would also be able to identify with my family's value of maintaining the harmony of relationships, and life's ultimate goal of prosperity. Navigating what onlookers might call passive-aggression that characterizes the behavior of so many Cultural Chinese is merely a way of life for us.

A common question I encounter in my interaction with Cultural Chinese believers when I speak at churches (no matter in Singapore or in Berkeley, California) is how they can relevantly share with their loved ones that this man, who is from a foreign land and from a culture that is equally distant, is the Savior their heart is meant for. How is accepting the lordship of a foreign man who was shamefully executed as a criminal in a time past be good news to the Cultural Chinese who take pride in being one of the most self-sufficient people that ever lived. Think of our celebrated inventions: paper, printing, compass, gunpowder, and the ancient wisdom of Confucius and Laozi.

If you are not a Cultural Chinese, you may find the Cultural Chinese's social and cultural values rather alien and even odd. Think of the many times you have wondered why rituals and formalities are so crucial that they can make or break relationships. Or the frustration you experienced when you can almost never get a straight *No* from a Cultural Chinese.

A few years ago I found myself among a privileged few invited to train over 200 house church pastors from mainland China in apologetics. After I finished my presentation, a question was handed to me: "Why must we preach the message of a foreign Jesus when the ancient wisdom of Kongzi and Laozi has already revealed to us the Way (the Dao<sup>3</sup>) even long before Jesus was born?" While these were already believers in Jesus (and were serving as pastors!), they also genuinely had an issue with God revealing his salvific truth in a supposed Western setting.

Anyone who has ever interacted with Cultural Chinese on spiritual or religious matters, would have come across the objection that Christianity is a Western religion and hence unsuited for Asians. "Christianity is a

religion for Westerners. We Asians have our own religions,” they would insist. Unfortunately, access to the worldwide web and the economic success of China in the last decade have not changed this misperception — in Qufu, Shandong, the Christian church is still not allowed to build her own building and believers can only meet to worship in a temporary make-do shelter because of opposition from local Confucianists. Some Chinese even insist that they will not celebrate Christmas because they are Chinese.<sup>4</sup>

### **Christianity: A Western Cultural Invasion?**

Since Christianity (or at least some form of it<sup>5</sup>) arrived on the shores of China in AD 635, it has been perceived as a foreign religion and hence irrelevant for the Cultural Chinese.<sup>6</sup> The *One more Christian, one fewer Chinese* chant on May 4, 1919, in China further reinforced and perpetuated the misconception that when one chooses to follow Jesus, one has denounced one’s Chinese identity to go after a foreign or Western god and ideology. A Chinese commits a great offense against his ancestor and nation when he pledges allegiance to Jesus.

According to historian Wu Xiaoxin, the propaganda that impacted the Chinese the most is the claim that “*Religion is the opium of the people.*”<sup>7</sup> One of the main contributing factors to the hostile reaction to Christianity is nationalism. Anyone familiar with the events in this part of the world during the mid-1800s would realize the baggage this statement bears. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity has been associated with Western imperialism in the minds of Chinese people — both Catholics and Protestants came to China together with Western Imperialists.

In fact, many of the Western missionaries of that generation rode on the coattails of the European opium traders to bring the gospel to the Chinese.<sup>8</sup> For example, Karl Gutzlaff, an early Protestant missionary to China, joined the Jardine Matheson opium fleet as the interpreter in order to reach more Chinese with the gospel.<sup>9</sup>

Former Peking University president, Jiang Menglin, aptly described this historical baggage when he compared the arrival of Buddhism and Christianity in China: “Buddha rode into China on a white elephant, while Jesus rode in on a cannonball.”<sup>10</sup> The anti-missionary feeling was understandable in view of the circumstances under which the modern missionary movement in China began: the same door that was forced open by military and naval power to expand trade was the door through

which missionaries entered China. This compromised the gospel in Chinese eyes for the next century.

Although Christianity is not identical with Western Imperialism, they were both synonymous in the perception and memories of the Chinese. As a result, the encounter between Christianity and Chinese culture in the modern missionary era came with struggle between nationalism (and patriotism) and imperialism.<sup>11</sup> Even though personal relationships extended to deep friendships between Chinese and missionaries, in the background there always lingered the fact of missionaries being representatives of the foreign powers whose assault on China was all too obvious.<sup>12</sup>

As the Chinese saw their land endure one humiliation after another at the hands of foreigners in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they came to regard Christianity as the representative of Western cultural imperialism. In addition, the gospel along with the beliefs it represents is entirely foreign to the Cultural Chinese worldview thus far and consequently some have considered the spread of Christianity as a kind of cultural invasion.

While it is undeniable that at some point in Chinese history Westerners who called themselves Christians were involved in oppressing and exploiting the Chinese, we need to differentiate Western imperialism and colonialism from Christianity. These Westerners did much harm to the Chinese but it must be recognized that many Western Christian missionaries also contributed greatly to the community where they worked in. Many sacrificed their lives to serve the Chinese people and built various institutions like schools, hospitals, orphanages and so on. For example, it must be remembered that during the tumultuous years of the second world war many Western missionaries and doctors stayed behind risking their lives to tend to and help the injured and dying.<sup>13</sup> And prior to the war, many Christian missionaries were instrumental in setting up schools and universities throughout Asia in the 1800's. Ubiquitous schools like the Anglo Chinese schools and Methodist colleges were all established by missionaries in the likes of James Legge, Robert Morrison and others.

Tu Weiming, the renowned modern-day Confucianist and a Sinologist, rightly applauds Christianity's contribution to China's intellectual landscape<sup>14</sup>:

*While national universities, notably Peking, Nankai, Fudan, and Central, may have produced more political leaders, graduates from the Christian universities provided important human resources for virtually all professions. Furthermore, by emphasizing a liberal arts education, Christian universities trained several generations of modern scholars in the humanities and social sciences. Although all Christian universities were outlawed with the founding of the People's Republic, their alumni, numbering in the thousands, continued to play a vital role in many fields, including economics, diplomacy, education and journalism. Despite Zhou Enlai's critique of American cultural imperialism, the legacy of the Christian influence on Chinese higher education is indelible. ... After all, ever since the mid-nineteenth century, Christians have been champions of woman's liberation, medical care for the poor, human rights, and philanthropy.*

The belief that Christianity is a Western or Westerners' religion is also far from being true as Christianity is a divine plan of salvation for all mankind regardless of heritage or ethnicity. In fact, to be historically accurate, the Christian faith had its early setting in the East rather than the West! Neither Jesus nor the Apostles were Westerners. Though as a result of historical development, Christianity did come to us from the West, it is a known fact that the Christian faith actually originated in Asia.

### **Being a Paul to the Cultural Chinese**

Chinese Christian scholar, Xie Fuya, who spent most of his life analyzing the relationship between Christianity and Chinese culture believes the reason for the many misunderstandings and conflicts between the two is because Christianity has not yet comprehended Chinese culture. Consequently, Chinese culture does not fully fathom the essence of the faith while Christianity has not been able to impress and influence the Chinese culture.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps this is oversimplifying an issue that is much more complex, but I think in doing so Xie has actually stumbled upon something that is unique about the Christian faith.

Unlike the other foreign religion in China — Buddhism — Christianity is a canonical and exclusive religion. It makes exclusive truth claims about God and reality. However Buddhism is much more inclusive doctrinally. (This will be discussed at length later.) As such, it was able to assimilate congenially into the Cultural Chinese spirituality — accommodating and conforming to local philosophies which resulted in

various indigenous permutations of the religion — affording it a home-grown status.

For our interest, how would the perception of Christianity as a foreign approach to spirituality advance or hinder our mission of making Cultural Chinese disciples of Christ? Has this negative reputation of the Christian faith changed today among Mainland Chinese? While the church in China has grown exponentially in the last few decades, I have found that the question still remains — can we find common grounds between the Christian faith and the Chinese culture? What about Diaspora Chinese globally? Is it truly the case that Jesus and his teachings are alien to the Cultural Chinese mind?

It is with all these questions and challenges in mind that the idea of this book came into being. While I am aware there exist many similar resources that deal with this theme, I am hoping that this book would present another angle to bridge the values of Cultural Chinese with the message of the gospel. However this is not an apologetics resource in the conventional sense. When one is engaging a Cultural Chinese, apologetics in the traditional sense may not get you very far as, often for them, truth and falsehood are subjective matters. Not that the question of truth is unimportant or irrelevant. Rather, a Cultural Chinese expresses a theory of truth that is appropriate to his culture.

Expert in world religions, Winfried Corduan, once quipped about the sense of truth among Cultural Chinese: “A correspondence theory of truth — namely that truth corresponds to your heart.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, if you believe it in your heart, then it is truth. From a purely apologetics perspective, this can be most frustrating.

The Cultural Chinese’s emphasis on maintaining peace in their relationships also further obscures the objectivity of truth. As the telling of truth may involve the unpleasantness of upsetting the other person, a genuine discussion of truth is hard to achieve. It is more virtuous to impress and remain pleasant than to discuss truthful matters and offend.<sup>17</sup> Hence there is a general reluctance to deal with the truth of matters directly and openly for fear of offending the other party.

What then is the most effective apologetics strategy that we should employ with a Cultural Chinese? Perhaps there is no need for one. After all, the Great Commission is not about finding an apologetic against

all non-Christian worldviews but to witness about Jesus Christ to the world and make disciples in his name. Apologetics is just an approach where there is a need for us to clear away intellectual or cultural obstacles that may stand in the way of someone's understanding and acceptance of the gospel.<sup>18</sup>

The historical book of Acts records Paul's famous sermon in Athens. However, what preceded this event in Acts 17 was the accusation that Paul was preaching a foreign god to the Athenians:

*Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said, "What does this babbler wish to say?" Others said, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities" — because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean." (Acts 17:16–20)*

The Athenians called Paul a blabber who was presenting some weird ideas and they wanted to learn more about these ideas. Of course our audience may not be as interested in our message as the Athenians for, after all, the pragmatism of the Cultural Chinese would have no time for such endeavors! Instead, like Paul, we need to figure out if there is a way to locate some of their values within the Christian worldview.

If we are to relevantly share the Christian faith with the over 1.3 billion Cultural Chinese in the world, we need to understand their worldview. The onus is on us to learn and study about the Cultural Chinese worldview and their cultural expressions. We need to consider how to ask probing questions tactfully and learn to listen attentively as we seek the help of the Holy Spirit to discern the core issues at hand. We must learn how to articulate the gospel in terms that are attractive and significant to this quarter of the world's population.

This aptly describes the goal of this book. However there is no shortcut to our goal. In order for us to understand the Cultural Chinese worldview,

we must take the winding path that leads us past the bamboo forest of ideas and philosophies that have so entrenched and formed the soul of the Cultural Chinese. Or, as in the words of my former boss, Dr. Ravi Zacharias, “In India there is a saying that you can touch your nose directly or you can touch your nose the long way around. And for some people, you need to go the long way around to reach them. It’s a long road, but it’s often the only road.” Hence this book is the long way, but I believe it is also the road that is lined with fewer obstacles than you would encounter on many other shortcuts.

We will begin our journey on this winding path with the persuasion that we need to rethink our message and faith — that we need to start perceiving our faith as well as the gospel as a worldview or a metanarrative. Next we will go on a fast rollercoaster ride into the past to survey the key historical figures and events (Laozi, Kongzi and the advent of Buddhism) to decipher how they have contributed to the formation of the Cultural Chinese worldview. We will then take a closer look at Confucius’s ideals — where we will begin to recognize how familiar they are to many of us. In the final chapter of this book, we will discuss the facets of Confucius’s ideals that are parallel to what God had intended for his creation and how Confucius had fallen short of proposing the right path towards that end.

Blessed with the privilege of retrospection, we now know that there is only one way: *“Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.’”* (John 14:6–7)