

The Great/Higher Learning of and in the Spirit:

A West-(South)East Asian Conversation After Pentecost

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How might a global pentecostal conversation on theological education emanating from the southeast Asian cultural milieu of Singapore unfold?¹ Perhaps through a comparative theological dialogue between apostolic teaching as recorded by St Luke and *The Great Learning*, a Neo-Confucian classic. Here West Asian first century ecclesial educational endeavors from Jerusalem through Antioch and Ephesus (part I) are brought into cursory consideration with East Asian thinking (part II) about the shaping of citizens developed over the last two millennia from the Northern and Southern Song periods through the tip of the contemporary Malaysian peninsula in order to ask what theological formation in the Spirit of Pentecost might look for the twenty-first century global context (part III). The discussion initiated by these questions involves also the following pneumatological inquiries: What might the Spirit be saying to the churches of (southeast) Asia that might resound for the theological and formational endeavors of the church catholic in our time, and can (southeast Asian) Christians not only hear the call of the Spirit but also rise to the occasion of participating in the Spirit's many tongues for the purposes of theological education today?²

One caveat before proceeding. Luke's Day of Pentecost narrative (Acts 2) was not written to address theological or higher educational issues. However, theologians—pentecostal and otherwise—might well read this passage, or any other part of scripture, and ask if and what implications there are for any topic, including the educational task of the church.³ Pentecostal

¹ This paper gives me the opportunity to extend my prior proposal for theological education—Yong, *Renewing the Church by the Spirit: Theological Education after Pentecost*, Theological Education Between the Times series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020)—in a specifically East Asian direction.

² The goal here, as in my work on pentecostal theology as a whole, is to follow the Spirit who blows from and to where we cannot discern, which is why I have for over 25 years now called this a pneumatology of quest; see Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s): A Pentecostal-Charismatic Contribution to Christian Theology of Religions*, Journal of Pentecostal Theology Supplement Series 20 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 30.

³ These are fundamental postulates for my theological method and hermeneutics; see, e.g., Yong, *Spirit-Word-Community: Theological Hermeneutics in Trinitarian Perspective*, New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology and Biblical Studies Series (Burlington, Vt., and Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2002; reprint: Eugene: Wipf &

spirituality, in particular, given its deep rootedness in the Day of Pentecost narrative about the infilling and empowering of Jesus followers by his Spirit (starting in Acts 2:1-4), provides further motivation for such a focused inquiry.⁴ In the spirit of the Lukan account, then, the three questions posed therein frame the three movements (and parts) of our consideration.⁵

“Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” (Acts 2:7b): The Higher Learnings of the Spirit

The Pentecost narrative, especially its registering of many languages heard “from every people [*ethnous*] under heaven” (Acts 2:5), invites a global theological imagination and in that respect, a multiethnic, transnational, and ecumenical formational and educational vision.⁶ Yet too quickly talking about the “global” character of the church and the manyness of its witness elides the particularities through which these are lived out and the otherness—e.g., they spoke “in *other* languages [*heterais glōssais*]” (Acts 2:4, emphasis added)—through which they are given. That there are three questions posed at the center of the Day of Pentecost account indeed invites us to privilege inquiry over proclamation in any Spirited-theological endeavor. More importantly, it is not just raising questions for their own sake, but the specificity of the posed probes, I suggest, have theological implications for our purposes.

Stock, 2006), and *The Hermeneutical Spirit: Theological Interpretation and the Scriptural Imagination for the 21st Century* (Eugene: Cascade, 2017).

⁴ While I have worked as a pentecostal theologian for three decades, in the last half of this time, I have invited others to consider their theologizing to proceed not only after Easter but also after Pentecost, so also continue in this vein here; among my various books elaborating on this invitation, see *Mission after Pentecost: The Witness of the Spirit from Genesis to Revelation*, Mission in Global Community (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), and *The Dialogical Spirit II: Contextual God, Pluralistic Selves, and Dialectical Imagination after Pentecost*, ed. Spencer Moffatt (Eugene: Cascade, 2024).

⁵ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition.

⁶ E.g., Yong, “Many Tongues, Many Formational Practices: Christian Spirituality/Formation across Global Christian Contexts,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 22:1 (2022): 59-70.

The first question we hear is—indeed, all of the questions in this narrative are—not that of the apostolic evangelists but of the listening crowd: “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” they asked. The “world,” onlookers and those listening in, inadvertently or otherwise, on the messianic community, it is “they” who hear not generic languages, not *lingua franca*, whether that be English or Chinese, etc. Rather what is heard is specific local languages, in fact, spoken in distinct dialects and with particular accents, in this case the Galilean type in the Judean region. To be sure, as the messianic community launched, apostolic instruction (Acts 2:42) may have unfolded in both the local (Hebraic) and “global” or imperial (Greek) languages (6:1), indeed this first seminary being linguistically “glocal,” even if such a contemporary colloquialism is anachronously applied to this fledgling undertaking. Notable, however, is that this initial (in)formational and educational effort happens linguistically, not in any abstract sense but in and through the specificity of local discursive performances albeit interfacing with outside currents, perhaps Singlish in the cosmopolitan Singaporean Chinese-English context!

Further, the questions coming from the crowd are in response to something they are hearing from the ecclesial and theological community. In that respect, the Galilean dialect is being interpreted and translated across various ethnic, cultural, and linguistic registers, Luke (Acts 2:9-11) naming sixteen different ones across and representative of the known (Mediterranean) world. For our (Singaporean) purposes, note that Galilean tongues bear witness to testimonies heard also in Asian languages, given that some of those in attendance heralded from that region of the Mediterranean world (Acts 2:9b).

In the first century, Asia was within what is western Anatolia (today Turkey). In the rest of the book of Acts, five chapters (13-14, 16, 19-20)—or almost twenty percent of St Luke’s second volume—are focused on endeavors across this Asian landscape. In fact, the beginnings of

the mission to Asia also feature its next apostolic centers of theological education: Antioch in Syria (Acts 13:1-3), where we find, again, multiple ethnicities—e.g., Barnabus from Cyprus (11:36), and North Africans like Lucius (from Cyrene) and perhaps Simeon called Niger, besides Judeans and Paul himself from the Asian/Anatolian city of Tarsus (9:11)—and, by extension we can presume, many languages present and operative.⁷ Then, later, there is a Lecture Hall of Tyrannus in the far western Asian city of Ephesus which Paul secures to engage in a sustained program of intercultural dialogue and instruction with Asian students and interlocutors (Acts 19:9-10). Noteworthy here is that whereas the Jerusalem “seminary” was at least bilingual (as indicated above), the Antiochene school of ministry was perhaps multilingual and the Ephesian school of theology could be understood as having operating primarily (but not necessarily only) in the *lingua franca* (Greek) of the Roman world since there, “all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord” (19:10b), through Paul.⁸ Yet more to the current point, over one third of the apostolic writings originate from, are influenced by, or written to churches at least in part in this Asian region—the Gospel of John, Ephesians, Colossians, the three pastoral letters, Philemon, James, 1 Peter, the three Johannine letters, and the Apocalypse—and their total text is right under thirty percent of the entire New Testament. In other words, a not insignificant portion of the first century apostolic legacy unfolded in or was concerned about Asian Christianity, and thereby engaged with its diverse cultures and languages.

⁷ For more on the Antiochene mission vis-a-vis (western) theological education today, see my article, “‘Not Many of You Should Become Teachers ...’: Whose (Established) Professoriate? Which (Diasporic) Faculty?” in Neal D. Presa and Anne E. Zaki, eds., *Now to God Who Is Able – Vocation, Justice, and Ministry: Essays in Honor of Mark Labberton* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2023), 139-54; note also for our Singaporean purposes, Kong Hee, “Singapore: The Antioch of Asia?” in Kong Hee, Byron D. Klaus, and Douglas Petersen, eds., *Voices Loud & Clear* (Oxford: Regnum, 2024), 181-203.

⁸ For more on Pauline theological dialogue at Ephesus, see my essay, “Where Did the Holy Spirit Go? Ephesian Pneumatologies from the Third Apostolic Missionary Journey for a Post-Secular Age,” in Yong, *The Hermeneutical Spirit II: Migrations, Diasporas, and Cultures after Pentecost*, ed. Rudolfo Galvan Estrada III (Eugene: Cascade, 2026), ch. 5.

From this perspective, what can today's Asian Christians, including those here in the southeast section of the continent, who are considering next steps in theological education for our time glean from the efforts of their ancestors in the far West Asian context two millennia ago? Our question extends the initial pentecostal one, with a twist: "Are not all these who are speaking Singaporeans?" and in what dialects are these Singlish witnesses in dialogue with, whether from Malaysia through UPGs across the Indonesian archipelago, to south and far east Asian nations, and beyond? Put otherwise, how should we undertake our theological education in this specific social-linguistic context, albeit one situated in a glocalizing world whose pace of transnational connectivity and interaction is much more intense than in the first century?

Here I want to press into the specificity of the Singaporean site. In the Pentecost narrative, the speakers were not generic believers but Galileans. Galileans come from a particular place, with its culture, plants, animals, climate, and environment. Place matters, shaping not just linguistic but also discursive-performative development: languages help us to do things and emerge from living with others in a given natural and socially constructed world. Nevertheless these Galilean speakers were heard, and in that respect spoke in ways that could somehow be grasped, by those from around the known world, "from every people under heaven" there in Jerusalem (Acts 2:5), even. Singaporeans exist on an island close to the equator: our Singlish is inflected with our dialectical concerns shaped by our form of terrestriality and aquatic surroundings. We are a small island-nation but yet strategically located at a south-east-Asian-and-global crossroads/ currents. Theological education in a Singlish accent does not need to apologize for its distinctive witness, but, following the apostolic promise, might be able to declare the wondrous works of God to the world precisely in and through its particular testimonies!

God has intended that place matters in relations to language from the very beginning.⁹ The primordial invitation to *ha adam* was to “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Gen 1:28a), and in the re-creation after the flood, our Noahic ancestors began to live into this summons, spreading out across the world “in their lands, with their own language, by their families, in their nations” (Gen 10:5b, 20b, 31b). From this perspective, the Tower of Babel episode was actually a divine intervention intended to empower continued migration, not only to counter the fears of dispersion (11:4b) but also to undermine the movement toward what we know as a *lingua franca* (11:1). If the Babelites, anticipating Assyrian and Babylonian—as well as Greco-Roman later and perhaps also modern capitalist imperialism today! —wanted to hunker down and not have to work through translation, God’s intention was to have human creatures live with all “the fish of the sea and ... the birds of the air and ... every living thing that moves upon the earth” (1:28b), across diverse ecological environments. Theological education and formation in this creational and pentecostal context, then, generates linguistic, cultural, and environmental signification and translation,¹⁰ so that we can respond appropriately to and with the earth and its creatures in declaring the wondrous works of God. Our invitation is a specifically Singlish-ean rendition of Spirit-empowered witness in a time of geopolitical turmoil, later modern consumeristic capitalism, environmental degradation, among many other challenges.

“Are not all these who are speaking Singaporeans?” thus potently elevates every one of the six million plus Singaporean voices. This is why every one can give a testimony from out of

⁹ The following summarizes my essay, “Many Tongues, Many Biocultural Niches: A Pentecostal Missiological Response to Language Endangerment and Environmental Degradation,” in Eugene Baron and Amos Yong, eds., *Wonders Above, Signs Below: Pentecostal Missiology and Environmental Degradation* (Carlisle, UK: Langham Global Library, 2025), 81-105, open access at langhamliterature.org/books/wonders-above-signs-below.

¹⁰ See my *Earth: Translating Worlds*, Spirituality for the World series (Eugene: Cascade, 2027).

their life's journey in and through this specific (Singaporean) space, and therefore also, everyone can and perhaps ought to embark on a journey of theological education regardless of their background. Yet, it is not just what is in the past that matters—and that past matters, linguistically, culturally, experientially and otherwise, as already intimated¹¹—but the future that God is calling us to also matters. More precisely, God is calling each of us forward as Singaporeans, formed/shaped and testifying in and through our terrestrial-geographic and cultural-linguistic sojourns.

The Book of Revelation that provides the most encompassing horizon for the eschatological future we are called to confirms that we bear witness out of the specificity of our locations: “every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev 5:9b). We are both invited and drawn “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages,” to the throne of God and the Lamb, where we will herald in and through all of our dialectical accents, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb!” (Rev 7:9).¹² Yet this is not merely a populist cacophony of sons and daughters, young and old, the socioeconomically privileged or not (see Acts 2:17-18), even as it does not matter that those who bear witness out of their life experiences trekking through the habitation given to us by God do so not because we are educated or cultured but simply because we have been given the divine breath to testify. In addition, however, the multitude from across the regions and places of the earth will continue their procession into the New Jerusalem, and there, common voices will intermingle and resonate with the cultivated and the accomplished: “The nations [*ethnē*] will walk by its light, and the

¹¹ See my prior Asian Summit essay, “Many Tongues, Many Professions: Towards a Pentecost Theology of Vocation,” in Kong Hee, Byron D. Klaus, and Douglas Petersen, eds., *Asian Voices Amplified* (Oxford: Regnum, 2026), forthcoming.

¹² For more discussion of the repeated but not always in the same order, see my *Revelation, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* series (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2021), 137-38.

kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.... People will bring into it the glory and the honor [*timēn*] of the nations [*ethnōn*]" (Rev 21:24, 26).

I see and hear the many ethnicities, tribes, peoples, and the cultured leaders of the East Asian Middle Kingdom—the standard Chinese term for China is *Zhōngguó*, first attested during Zhu's eleventh century, and means "Central States" or "Middle States"—past, present, and future in all their tributaries, bringing their gifts into the New Jerusalem, to testify to the gloriousness of the one on the throne and the Lamb. That which is honorable, *timēn*, is what the Seer of Patmos sees as related to the Lamb (Rev 4:11, 5:13, 7:12), so we (Singaporean and other) East Asians will bring our language, learning, and culture stretching back through time—for instance, for us, back through the Neo-Confucian revival, through the eras of Master Kong and his disciples and of the mysterious Laozi and Zhuangzi to the primordial Duke of Zhou who was legendarily carrying out the Mandate of Heaven¹³—that are precious, valued, and esteemed in the highest degree to return these to the one who gives gifts by his seven spirits "sent out into all the earth" (Rev 5:6). If this is the case, how might the witnesses from the Middle Kingdom reverberate in and through the Singlish curriculum for our efforts in theological education in the present era?

¹³ If second century Christian apologists like Justin Martyr urged that the ancient Greek philosophers like Socrates and Plato were (even soteriologically) beneficiaries of the Logos, the "true light, which enlightens everyone" (John 1:9), is it possible for us to reconsider our East Asian ancestors, not to mention those of other (non-Western) cultural-linguistic and wisdom traditions around the world, in a similar vein? I make this argument pneumatologically also in my *Beyond the Impasse: Toward a Pneumatological Theology of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003; reprint, Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2014). For discussion of Justin, see Sébastien Morlet, "The Agreement of Christianity and Platonic Philosophy from Justin Martyr to Eusebius," in Panagiotis G. Pavlos, et al., eds., *Platonism and Christian Thought in Late Antiquity*, Studies in Philosophy and Theology in Late Antiquity (New York: Routledge, 2019), 17-32.

“...how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?” (Acts 2:8): *The Great Learnings* of and from the Middle Kingdom

When thinking about the Singlish witness to contemporary education and formation, then, among the many notes, I suggest that echoes of the *Daxue* (大學) or *The Great Learning* might resonate. That today *daxue* colloquially refers to “university” is due in part to its illustrious two-thousand-plus-year history. While attributed to Master Kong (Kǒngfūzǐ or Confucius) and his disciples by Zhu Xi (1130–1200), it appeared formally in its initial format during the Qin Dynasty era in the 3rd century BCE when added as a (42nd) chapter to the *Liji* (禮記) or the *Book of Rites*,¹⁴ itself part of the so-called Five Classics at the fount of the Confucian tradition.¹⁵ Over a millennium later, partly because of redactions of and attention to the *Liji* and its parts over time and then newly motivated in combatting the encroachments of Buddhist teachings into the Middle Kingdom, the Northern Song (960–1127) masters and founders of the Neo-Confucian movement elevated discussion of and thereby registered the import of this chapter.¹⁶ These accomplishments inspired Zhu and his (Southern) Song (1127–1279) compatriots to locate the *Daxue* as the lead work in his *Sishū* (四書) or Four Books, the other three being the *Analects* (of Master Kong), the *Mencius*, and the *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhong Yong*).¹⁷ In the early

¹⁴ The *Liji* version of *The Great Learning* can be found in the appendix to Robert Eno, *The Great Learning 大學 and The Doctrine of the Mean 中庸: Translation, Commentary, and Notes* (2016), 25-31, available at <http://hdl.handle.net/2022/23424>.

¹⁵ The other four being the books of Songs/Poetry, of Documents/History, of Changes, and the Spring and Autumn Annals. The fullest English translation of the *Liji* still remains, however dated, by James Legge, *The Sacred Books of the East: The Texts of Confucianism*, parts III-IV (Oxford: Clarendon, 1885), with the *Tá Hsio* or *Great Learning* being ch. 39 in Legge’s vol. 4.

¹⁶ For more on the fortunes of and debates about the *Daxue* bequeathed by the Northern Song masters, see Kai-wing Chow, “Between Canonicity and Heterodoxy: Hermeneutical Moments of the *Great Learning* (*Ta-hsueh*),” in Kai-wing Chow, On-cho Ng, and John B. Henderson, eds., *Imagining Boundaries: Changing Confucian Doctrines, Texts, and Hermeneutics*, SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 147-63.

¹⁷ The last named, *Zhong Yong*, was also a chapter in the *Liji*, with a similarly obscure textual and reception history; for a succinct discussion of the Four Books, see Wm. Theodore de Bary, “Zhu Xi and the Four Books,” in

fourteenth century, the *Sìshū* was established as core to the curriculum preparing and the examinations testing candidates for civil service, which, because persisting for almost 700 years until the latter was abolished amid the early twentieth century push for modernization (indeed: westernization), became the “political Bible for the Chinese.”¹⁸

The Great Learning as studied (for up to forty years), and then edited, commented on, and handed down by Zhu consists of a short “Text,” attributed to Master Kong, and, about four times longer, chapters of “Commentary” ascribed to Kong’s later disciples.¹⁹ Elsewhere in his writings, Zhu clarified that the preparatory education—the so-called “lesser learning” at the elementary levels—was focused on facts about the things of the world and the affairs (histories) of human efforts, whereas the *Daxue* would open up for adults the underlying natural causes, including the metaphysical principles of the cosmos, and the full scope of human endeavors, including their underlying moral imperatives.²⁰ The main “Text” sketches three “guidelines” and eight “stages” for this greater educational endeavor. Do not be fooled by the brevity of this main “Text” (which at slightly over 300 words is as long as is the Pentecost narrative, without the

Wm. Theodore de Bary, ed., *Finding Wisdom in East Asian Classics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 187-98.

¹⁸ This is from Wing-tsit Chan, in his “Introduction” to Zhu Xi’s collection of Northern Song writings; see Chu Hsi and Lü Tsu-Ch’ien, *Reflections on Things at Hand: The Neo-Confucian Anthology*, trans. Wing-tsit Chan, Records of Civilization Sources and Studies 75 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), xxxix.

¹⁹ The standard English translation for the last two generations is chapter 4 of Wing-tsit Chan, *A Sourcebook of Chinese Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 84-94; the original Chinese texts of the *Liji* and Zhu’s versions are available, with English translations, by Ian Johnston and Wang Ping, *Daxue and Zongyong: Bilingual Edition* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2012).

²⁰ Zhu Xi, *Basic Teachings*, trans. Daniel K. Gardner (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 66. And yet, the lower or lesser level learning is also essential, undergirding the greater or higher level: both are needed, for Zhu, and together, provide a more robust educational model than the Buddhist teachings. As indicated in the *Yulei*, a collection of his sayings later collected by his students: “The Buddhists speak only of penetration on the higher level; they pay no attention to learning on the lower level. But, if they pay no attention to learning on the lower level, how can they expect there to be penetration on the higher level?” Note here that Zhu’s Buddhist antagonists saw what he called higher level learning in terms of awakened consciousness, that is part of the problem for our southern Song master: that this was a privatized enlightenment, without either sociopolitical value or application, or understanding of the natural world which is the environment of human habitation under Heaven. For the *Yulei* quotation, see Daniel K. Gardner, *Chu Hsi and the Ta-hsueh: Neo-Confucian Reflection on the Confucian Canon*, Harvard East Asian Monographs 118 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 74n45.

apostolic explication): the Analects that follow provide exemplifications of and (historical and legendary) case studies for these guidelines and stages. In part because ours is no more than an initial engagement with Confucian educational philosophy, and given our limited space and time, we will focus on the main “Text” of the *Daxue* (reproduced in the appendix below).²¹

The three guidelines—“making bright virtue brilliant; ... making the people new; ... coming to rest at the limit of the good”—at least as interpreted by Zhu, suggest movement from inner personal moral character through social application directed toward, or drawn forward by, the wider common good. While such a triadic sequence is undeniable, their interrelatedness is also clear from the text, with the next paragraph connecting the initial and the last guidelines via the middle one: “those who wished to make bright virtue brilliant in the world first ordered their states.” Meanwhile, the five “only after” serially progressive clauses accentuate the classical Confucian correlative thinking, which the back-and-forth elaboration of the eight stages next indicates is also reiterative: only-after developments continue as if looped together.²² This is seen also in the transition from the guidelines to the stages: “Affairs have their roots and branches, situations have their ends and beginning.” “Roots and branches” are concerned with origins and unfoldings, and yet can also be understood vis-a-vis how (teleological) purposes at least influence our perception of inceptions, derivations, and commencements. Nevertheless, “To know what comes first and what comes after is to be near the Dao,” is necessarily appropriate for a “greater learning” that forms children and teenagers—all growing persons—for adulthood, social responsibility, and political citizenship.

²¹ Because of its accessibility, I rely on and quote from Robert Eno’s *The Great Learning and The Doctrine of the Mean: An Online Teaching Translation* (2016), 11-12 (available at <http://hdl.handle.net/2022/23422>).

²² See Eno’s notes in his *The Great Learning* 大學 and *The Doctrine of the Mean* 中庸, 11-12.

These introductory guidelines set up the eight steps that are at the heart of the path to great or higher learning: aligning affairs, extending understanding, making intentions genuine, balancing the mind, refining the person, aligning the household, ordering the state, and setting the world at peace. We might say that the first four stages look inward, the fifth turns to the person as a whole that pivots between the former set and the last three which extend outward to the household, the state, and the peace of the entire Middle Kingdom. What are the stages or progressive steps to renewing society and bringing peace to the world?²³

The first two stages are that of aligning affairs (格物 *gé wù*) and extending understanding (致知 *zhì zhī*). As there is no consensus in the perennial debate about which stage precedes the other, they are beneficially considered as a mutually informing pair, combining both cognitive and practical dimensions. For our purposes, *aligning* can mean both comprehending or rectifying, which involves both investigating and bringing about, while *affairs* can refer to situations or circumstances, including objects (cultural or natural). Then, *extending understanding* would be elaborative: deeper analyses and broader rectifications, arguably, an “extension of one’s applied knowledge,” as Charlene Tan puts it.²⁴ Understood reiteratively, intellectual knowledge is a second order reflection on practical know-how, which both aligns the mind with its objects of consideration on the one hand and enables our behaving—conducting and disciplining ourselves—ever-more appropriately in response to and interaction with the world and its many things and living creatures on the other hand.

²³ An excellent contemporary commentary is Barry C. Keenan, *Neo-Confucian Self-Cultivation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2011), chs. 3-4.

²⁴ Charlene Tan, *Confucian Philosophy for Contemporary Education*, Routledge International Studies in the Philosophy of Education (New York: Routledge, 2021), 8.

The making of genuine intentions (誠意 *chéng yì*) and balancing the mind (正心 *zhèng xīn*) focuses on the moral and affective dimensions of this internalization process of aligning understanding with the world. If the first two stages involve both the reflecting deeply on and abiding with knowledge in navigating affairs (natural and historical), the third attends to the inclinations, postures, and predilections of this endeavor, so that the would-be sage or ruler manifests that this commitment is held with integrity and “without self-deceit.”²⁵ This gets at the level of intentions and motivations, indicative of a deep authenticity. Stage four’s *balancing* is parallel to *aligning* or *rectifying* and *mind* is perhaps more technically *mind-heart*, with the goal of correlating the affective level with what is going on in the moral and intellectual domains. The sincerity of intentions is thereby “wholehearted,”²⁶ so that the will is rerooted deep in the soul, including balancing the depths of human emotions like anger, fear, fondness, worry, etc.²⁷

Working on the mind, will, and heart/soul shapes, indeed, refines the person, which is the fifth stage. Thus, at least since the Neo-Confucian retrieval, *The Great Learning* has been understood as a manual for self-cultivation, itself central to the Confucian tradition’s understanding of true humaneness.²⁸ Those who are truly human, or via the steps of the *Daxue* being educated into their humanity, are able to align their households or regulate their families and order the state. These latter two realms are extensions of the Five Relationships, originating in the *Liji* and systematized ethically by Zhu: between father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger brothers, friends, and rulers and subjects. Put otherwise, those whose cognitive, moral, and affective understandings align with especially the affairs of the world will be able to

²⁵ Eno, *The Great Learning 大學 and The Doctrine of the Mean 中庸*, 18.

²⁶ Tan, *Confucian Philosophy for Contemporary Education*, 7.

²⁷ Keenan, *Neo-Confucian Self-Cultivation*, 47, discusses these emotions.

²⁸ As attested across the broad arc and scope of Confucianism, including the neo-Confucian contributions; see Tu Wei-ming, *Humanity and Self-Cultivation: Essays in Confucian Thought* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities, 1978).

appropriately interact with others personally, socially, and politically: “From the Son of Heaven to the common person, for all alike, refining the person is the root.” The result is peace in and for the entirety of the civilized sphere that is all under the Son of Heaven, the ruler of the Middle Kingdom who operates under the Mandate of Heaven to order Humanity, the Earth, and the world.²⁹ The *da* 大 of *Daxue* is thus understandable as “expansive,” which not only captures “the centered and radial nature of personal growth,”³⁰ but is also further extendable outward from humanity precisely in our interconnectedness with non-human creatures and interdependence amid what the broader Confucian-Daoist-Buddhist synthesis calls the myriad world of ten-thousand things.

We now have a glimpse into the staying-power of *The Great Learning* over centuries of adult education from the Yuan through the Ming and Qing Dynasties. Even currently, there are various reappropriations and rereadings of the *Daxue* for purposes of rethinking higher education in global contexts.³¹ On the one hand, the manual is sensitive to the developmental stages of learning, not least in its insistence on linearity even amid fluidity: “That roots should be disordered yet branches ordered is not possible.” And yet, on the other hand, there is a universality and dynamic spaciousness to the endeavor, always seeking to align affairs and extend understanding, thereby advancing, for tertiary education, the modern disciplines of

²⁹ Heaven in ancient Chinese thought being a vague but all-inclusive canopy holding Earth and Humanity within a transcendent frame; see John Berthrong, who right before I matriculated to my PhD program of study had published *All Under Heaven: Transforming Paradigms in Confucian-Christian Dialogue* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 112. It is worth noting here that Berthrong taught at Boston University, a city that has come to be known as a hub of Confucianism in the West, e.g., Robert Cummings Neville, *Boston Confucianism: Portable Tradition in the Late Modern World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000). I first learned about the Confucian tradition there, matriculating not long after Berthrong’s book appeared; see also my *The Future of Evangelical Theology: Soundings from the Asian American Diaspora* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014), ch. 3, for initial reflections on being shaped and formed as a Boston Confucian.

³⁰ See Roger T. Ames, ed., *A Sourcebook in Classical Confucian Philosophy*, SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2023), 122; notes that Ames translates here the *Liji* version of “The Text” (124-28).

³¹ Besides Tan’s book, already cited, see Vincent Shen, “*Daxue*: The Great Learning for Universities Today,” *Dao* 17:1 (2018): 13-27.

knowledge. All the while the formation of the person is irreducible to the Cartesian *cogito* but includes the mind-heart with its practical efforts and socio-systemic structures and relationships: the subjective is woven with the objective, inner connected to outer, and the self related to others.

To be sure, the preceding is not only brief in the extreme but also is offered very preliminarily and tentatively as my own informal Asian American consideration.³² There is certainly a long history of critical reaction to the hierarchicalism, authoritarianism, and patriarchalism of Confucian culture that ought not to be overlooked in any Christian dialogue with the heritage of East Asia, although these matters are also equally relevant to readings and applications of the biblical traditions for any later time and place, including our own.³³ Keeping these caveats in mind, then, we should still ask what is it that we hear, each of us, in and from our own (Singlish) perspective after Pentecost?

At this juncture, a few comparative notes are summarily suggestive. First, if the greater learning of the Son of Heaven catches up all persons under the general Mandate of Heaven, the Pentecost perspective highlights that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit comes upon and more personally interfaces with “all flesh,” male and female, young and old, well-to-do and not-so-much (Acts 2:17-18); thus both agree that none are exempt from the call to and journey of higher learning.³⁴ Second, however, the *Daxue*’s educational focus makes explicit what is at best

³² Although without formal Sinological training, I have still dabbled in reclamations of especially the Confucian tradition for Christian higher education; see, e.g., Yong, “Evangelical *Paideia* Overlooking the Pacific Rim: On the Opportunities and Challenges of Globalization for Christian Higher Education,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 42:4 (2013): 393-409; and Dale M. Coulter and Amos Yong, *The Holy Spirit and Higher Education: Renewing the Christian University* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2023), §8.2.

³³ One place I attempt to address some of these issues is “Yin-Yang and the Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: An Evangelical Egalitarian East-West Dialogue on Gender and Race,” *ChristianityNext* (winter 2020): 61-77.

³⁴ Indeed, students of the *Daxue* have observed: “In Chu Hsi’s hands ... a sort of ‘democratization’ of the work had taken place. A guidebook for the political elite had now become a guidebook for anyone and everyone hoping to become part of the moral elite” (Gardner, *Chu Hsi and the Ta-hsueh*, 58).

implicit in the Pentecost account devoted to other purposes: that the greater learning shapes adults integrally as fully embodied persons for taking socio-political responsibility and citizenship; the Pentecost narrative is not devoid of observing the carnal/kinesthetic (Acts 2:2-4) and socio-economic expressions (2:42-47) of the arriving Spirit but does not directly foreground these as educationally relevant. Yet last for our purposes but not least, if the Son of Heaven implements the Mandate of Heaven across the fullness of the Middle Kingdom, so also is the Pentecost gift similarly expansive in scope and direction, starting “in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth,” and perhaps even no less cosmically extensive in activating “portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below,” as St Luke tells us (Acts 1:8, 2:19). Might the Pentecost-goal that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” be heard, through our (Singlish) reception of the *Daxue*, as inviting consideration of the path of higher and greater learning to be oriented toward the vision and horizon that “the world be set at peace”?³⁵

“What does this mean?” (Acts 2:12b): A (Singaporean) Pentecostal Intervention on Theological Education in the Late 2020s?

We now step back from the closer (although still no more than a sketch) engagement with *The Great Learning* to consider the broader implications for contemporary theological education as prompted by the third question of the Pentecost narrative: what might all of this mean? Most immediately, addressing here pentecostal communities in southeast Asia, including all that are part of the wider east Asian diaspora, we have barely begun to scratch the surface for a deeper dialogue with the *Daxue*. Remember: we have focused only on the “Text,” and have not even

³⁵ Others have sought a political theology of Shalom in dialogue with the Four Books; see the New Testament scholar, Te-Li Lau, *The Politics of Peace: Ephesians, Dio Chrysostom, and the Confucian Four Books*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum 133 (Leiden; Brill, 2010), ch. 5, esp. 258-64, for consideration of the *Daxue*.

begun interacting with the “Commentary,” so Zhu might think our efforts half-hearted at best (not to mention that awaiting us is his canon of Four Books, and behind that the earlier Five Classics, and then also the wider Confucian tradition, including as such has been interwoven with the *Sanjiao* or “three teachings” that is the Confucian-Daoist-Buddhist synthesis,³⁶ and all of the ways in which this variegated tradition has engaged with the *Daxue*³⁷). In our particular Singaporean context, the invitation would be to recognize that we have been formed and shaped by these commitments, and to begin to ask specifically theological questions from this situatedness, one already directed (by the *Daxue*) toward higher learning. Not doing so would be to continue like fish in water, enlivened in their aquatic environment but not able to reflect consciously on its life-giving (not to mention higher educational) implications (for us, of our east Asianness, but perhaps also as what we might offer to other non-Asians).

First, to recapitulate, the *Daxue* can urge a Singlish after-Pentecost vision for theological education to be multidimensional in its scope. The cultivation of the self, commended by the Neo-Confucian masters is not incompatible with the focus on the pentecostal desire to be filled with the Holy Spirit and to be reformed and renewed in the innermost spiritual, moral, and intellectual domains of our beings. Then, the preceding inward register opens up outwardly: the *Daxue*’s goal of self-cultivation being the regulation of the family, the ordering of the Middle Kingdom, and peace under Heaven is not inconsistent with the pentecostal evangelistic movement from out of one’s hometown—e.g., Jerusalem—to share the good news of the coming divine reign with others in order to anticipate the new creation itself. Last but not least, the

³⁶ My focus has been on dialogue with Buddhist traditions; e.g., Yong, *Pneumatology and the Christian-Buddhist Dialogue: Does the Spirit Blow through the Middle Way?* Studies in Systematic Theology 11 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), and *The Cosmic Breath: Spirit and Nature in the Christianity-Buddhism-Science Trialogue*, Philosophical Studies in Science & Religion 4 (Leiden: Brill, 2012). Initial forays into Daoist thought are in my *Trauma: Repairing Worlds*, Spirituality for the World series (Eugene: Cascade, 2027), part II.

³⁷ A brief listing of the reception of the *Daxue* from its *Liji* version to the present, can be found in Johnston and Wang, *Daxue and Zhongyong*, appendix 2 (499-520).

horizontal sphere does not neglect a vertical orientation: that the greater learning of the *Daxue* brings the self, family, polis, and all things under alignment with the Mandate of Heaven is not out of sync with the pentecostal missional commitment to reconcile by the Spirit all things to God in Christ.³⁸ In short, if the *Daxue* provides a template for educating human creatures toward their greater ends, then a Singlish witness enabled by *The Great Learning* could be multidimensionally paradigmatic for forming Jesus-disciples at the higher educational levels for personal, political, and theological purposes.

More specifically, then, what a *Daxue*-Pentecost dialogue means for us southeast Asian pentecostal educators embarking on the greater and higher learning endeavor can and should be pressed hermeneutically and methodologically.³⁹ How might we do our theological work interdisciplinarily, multi-culturally/religiously, and also transgenerationally, for instance? If the Son of Heaven has in mind the common good of all under Heaven, then the sphere of greater learning, as we have seen, is all encompassing;⁴⁰ translated theologically, the higher education is necessarily interdisciplinary, involving extension of understanding and knowledge to include the world and all things under God as Creator, for which the human, social, and natural sciences are designed to explore and comprehend.⁴¹ Further, if the Son of Heaven is formed to embody the Mandate of Heaven, then this involves not only the extensive moral compass of the greater

³⁸ These various dimensions being part of what is cartographed in my *Jesus: Mapping Worlds*, Spirituality for the World (Eugene: Cascade, 2026).

³⁹ A previous iteration of my exploring these matters is in Yong, “Concluding Malaysian Diasporic Reflections from the Ends of the Earth: Contextuality and Marginality in Hermeneutical and Theological Method for the Third Millennium,” in Elaine Wei-Fun Goh, Kah-Jin Jeffrey Kuan, Jonathan Yun-Ka Tan, and Amos Wai-Ming Yong eds., *From Malaysia to the Ends of the Earth: Southeast Asian and Diasporic Contributions to Biblical and Theological Studies* (Claremont: Claremont, 2021), 275-86, available via open access at https://www.jstor.org/content/oa_book_edited/j.ctv2b07vst.

⁴⁰ Note here that for Zhu and his Song colleagues, the Neo-Confucian synthesis engaged the natural world but not at the expense of the personal and social, which was their critique (whether fair or not is disputed of course) of the Daoist tradition’s primary thrust.

⁴¹ I have proposed an interdisciplinary approach to theology of creation after Pentecost in my *The Spirit of Creation: Modern Science and Divine Action in the Pentecostal-Charismatic Imagination*, Pentecostal Manifestos 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

learning but also its underlying spiritual or religious dimension;⁴² translated theologically, higher education is necessarily intercultural and interreligious, here needing to carefully explore what it means for inculturation and contextualization in dialogue with Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist ways of life under Heaven.⁴³ Then also, along this front, if the work of the Son of Heaven (all of us, for the *Daxue*) is to extend peace to the world, then the greater educational endeavor not only has synchronic implications of all citizens across the entire Middle Kingdom (the world from a Chinese perspective), but also diachronic applications for all our children and succeeding generations; translated theologically and even pentecostally, then, the higher learning is relevant not only for us as adults wherever we may be but is what we invite our children into, indeed, is for our children's children and for all succeeding generations "who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him" (Acts 2:39b).⁴⁴ When we consider the expansiveness of such a *Daxue*-inspired vision for education after Pentecost, we realize that any theological endeavor that hopes to form followers of Jesus for the long haul of history until the Parousia, whenever that may be, has to be ecologically conscious, shaping terrestrial citizens toward the arriving divine reign in, amid, and for a world threatened by climate change and environmental degradation.⁴⁵

Last but not least, how then might southeast Asian pentecostals generally, and Singaporeans in the mix more specifically, be exemplary for the global pentecostal theological

⁴² E.g., Rodney L. Taylor, *The Religious Dimensions of Confucianism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

⁴³ Here we are reminded of, and pay tribute to, the legacy of Singaporean pentecostal theologian, Tan-Chow May Ling, *Pentecostal Theology for the Twenty-First Century: Engaging with Multi-Faith Singapore*, Ashgate New Critical Thinking in Religion, Theology, and Biblical Studies (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007).

⁴⁴ See also my "Children and the Spirit in Luke and Acts," in Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *Child Theology: Diverse Methods and Global Perspectives* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2021), 108-28; reprinted in my *The Hermeneutical Spirit: Theological Interpretation and the Scriptural Imagination for the 21st Century* (Eugene: Cascade, 2017), ch. 6.

⁴⁵ Besides the previously referred to Baron and Yong (note 9 above) and *Earth* (note 10 above) volumes, see also my "Many (Other) Tongues, Many Translations: Ecossemiotics and the Gift of Interpretation of Tongues in the Age of the Anthropocene," in Yong, *The Heteroglossic Spirit: Unruly Tongues and Translations after Pentecost*, ed. Ekaputra Tupamahu (Eugene: Cascade, 2026), ch. 12.

conversation? Perhaps our theologizing out of the resources of our Singlish experience and perspective can be catalytic for others to do so around the world, each of us in and from our own native language, as that happened at the first Pentecost.⁴⁶ What if our UPG brothers and sisters began to emulate the growing numbers of Aboriginal and Maori pentecostal believers in rethinking their theology and practice in light of inherited cultural traditions?⁴⁷ How might African pentecostal theologizing, for instance, be more intentionally sub-Saharan as we proceed?⁴⁸ What might pentecostal theologizing sound like if we resonated First Nations, native, and indigenous wisdom from across the Americas?⁴⁹ Many of these communities are formed by a deeper awareness of our environmental rootedness than those of us operating mostly, or even only, in urban metroplexes. Yet, even here on an island at the tip of a peninsula, we are well aware of our aquatic surroundings, and thus might be more primed than many others to consider God as Creator of a world of and sustained by water.⁵⁰ In short, perhaps Singaporean and southeast Asian pentecostal churches and communities can lead the way for a twenty-first century orchestration of theological education that emerges from out of the many tongues and languages underneath the pentecostal ferment across the majority world.

⁴⁶ Beyond the groundbreaking work of Tan-Chow (note 40), see also Dennis Lum Li Ming, *The Practice of Prophecy: An Empirical-Theological Study of Pentecostals in Singapore* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2018).

⁴⁷ See Tanya Riches, *Worship and Social Engagement in Urban Aboriginal-led Australian Pentecostal Congregations: (Re)imagining Identity in the Spirit*, Global Pentecostal & Charismatic Movements 32 (Leiden: Brill, 2019), and Michael Frost, *The Spirit, Indigenous Peoples and Social Change: Māori and a Pentecostal Theology of Social Engagement*, Global Pentecostal & Charismatic Movements 30 (Leiden: Brill, 2018), for initial articulations.

⁴⁸ Leading the way are West African pentecostal theorists like Nimi Wariboko, *The Breath that Remains: A Philosophical Ode to Matter* (Eugene: Cascade, 2026), and southern African pentecostal theologians like Chammah Kaunda, *The Paradox of Becoming: Pentecostality, Planetarity, and Africanity*, Religion and Society in Africa 7 (New York: Peter Lang, 2023), and Mookgo Solomon Kgatle, *African Pentecostals in the Diaspora: The Pneumatological Missional Imagination* (New York: Peter Lang, 2026) among a growing number.

⁴⁹ E.g., Angela Tarango, *Choosing the Jesus Way: American Indian Pentecostals and the Fight for the Indigenous* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), and Marcelo A. Vargas, *Faith that Indigenizes: Neo-Pentecostal Aimara Identity* (Oxford: Langham Global, 2022).

⁵⁰ E.g., Jione Havea, ed., *Theologies of the Pacific*, Postcolonialism and Religions (Cham: Springer, 2021).

So, if what this means invites closer attentiveness to the diversity, multiplicity, and plurality of pentecostal voices and experiences globally, it also welcomes the ecumenical (universal) theological educational endeavor to register the specificity of each distinct witness, à la the apostolic generation's observational inquiry: "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" Around the world, then, we anticipate the day when theological students will be asking: are not all these who are speaking, lecturing, and writing Singaporeans, and if so, then isn't it marvelous that we are receiving their witness and instruction, each of us, in our own native language, albeit here through Singlish accents and intonations? In short, could it be soon when, like when the Antiochene theological curricular offerings spread across the ends of the earth across the second half of the first century, Singaporean and southeast Asian voices will similarly resound through the global theological academy to declare the wondrous works of God in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit for the edification of the church ecumenical and the galvanizing of its witness in many languages, starting from the late 2020s and beyond?

Concluding and Transitional Thoughts

The preceding represents a very preliminary pentecostal engagement with the classical Chinese canonical tradition, specifically the *Daxue*, and that in comparative theological perspective.⁵¹ Being limited, personally, to English-language sources, means that Singlish listeners and readers of this text who are Mandarin literate will need to lead the way in serious consideration of primary and secondary Chinese sources. A next generation will then need to arise, able to bridge multilingually so that they can translate Chinese and English discussions

⁵¹ One of the few other pentecostal theologians to have begun comparative theological readings of classical Chinese texts is Joel D. Daniels, *China's Indwelling Spirit: Pentecostal Roots in Republican China, 1907-1949*, CHARIS: Christianity and Renewal – Interdisciplinary Studies (Cham: Springer/Palgrave, 2026).

into other languages as Singlish pentecostal believers seek to bear witness to those from many other tribes, nations, peoples, and languages to and from the ends of the Earth. From a theological educational perspective, the Singlish pentecostal reception of the *Daxue* and the classical Chinese traditions will then benefit from inter-, multi-, and trans-disciplinary approaches, in these various languages. In short, if the harvest is plentiful, the laborers are few, then many are being called, and hopefully more than a few will respond to the immensity of the task before us.

Thus, my hope is that in this short conversation between the heart of the Day of Pentecost narrative and the main “Text” of *The Great Learning* is just the beginning of a pneumatological and Pentecost-imagination for an East-West theological dialogue and formational education. If present indicators hold true, the next century (and beyond) will see a resurgence of the Middle Kingdom as *the* global force, and the world of theological education and its many intersecting arenas will need Singlish (and other) translators and interpreters of its historic, cultural, and wisdom resources both to comprehend and also critically and constructively engage that imperial regime. You, my southeast Asian and Singaporean brothers and sisters, are in a unique position to mediate, deepen, and extend the foregoing dialogue for the sake of theological formation in the late 2020s and beyond around the world. May our journey here and along the many routes of the southeast Asian diaspora be emboldened as the Spirit leads ... come, Holy Spirit!⁵²

⁵² Thanks to Robert Eno for helping me be consistent with the pinyin transliteration; I appreciate, again, Wonsuk Ma for his comments encouraging our trek.

Appendix: *The Great Learning: Text*⁵³

The Dao of Great Learning lies in making bright virtue brilliant; in making the people new; in coming to rest at the limit of the good. Only after wisdom comes to rest does one possess certainty; only after one possesses certainty can one become tranquil; only after one becomes tranquil can one become secure; only after one becomes secure can one contemplate alternatives; only after one can contemplate alternatives can one comprehend. Affairs have their roots and branches, situations have their ends and beginnings. To know what comes first and what comes after is to be near the Dao.

In ancient times, those who wished to make bright virtue brilliant in the world first ordered their states; those who wished to order their states first aligned their households; those who wished to align their households first refined their persons; those who wished to refine their persons first balanced their minds; those who wished to balance their minds first perfected the genuineness of their intentions; those who wished to perfect the genuineness of their intentions first extended their understanding; extending one's understanding lies in aligning affairs. Only after affairs have been aligned may one's understanding be fully extended. Only after one's understanding is fully extended may one's intentions be perfectly genuine. Only after one's intentions are perfectly genuine may one's mind be balanced. Only after one's mind is balanced may one's person be refined. Only after one's person is refined may one's household be aligned. Only after one's household is aligned may one's state be ordered. Only after one's state is ordered may the world be set at peace. From the Son of Heaven to the common person, for all alike, refining the person is the root. That roots should be disordered yet branches ordered is not

⁵³ Reproduced here with permission from Robert Eno.

possible. That what should be thickened is thin yet what is thin becomes thick has never yet been
so.

DRAFT

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