

## “THEOLOGY OF HOME”: A CHRISTIAN IDENTITY FROM HEAVEN TO EARTH COMBINED WITH THE GREAT LEARNING PHILOSOPHY

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### *Introduction*

In the past few years, observable phenomena have revealed a recurring issue in China. For example, the divorce rate increased between 2010 to 2019, reaching 50.7% nation-wide, and as high as 70% in some cities like Tianjin.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the digitalized life has increased indifference, and the function of the community has become weaker than before. Interactions among individuals also have become increasingly marginalized, separating them from the communal experience.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the war between Russia and Ukraine demonstrates that the conflicts between the countries seem never-ending.<sup>3</sup> The lack of the concept of home in this world is a major concern for individuals, society, culture, and the nation. In such a global atmosphere, a theological response to home becomes necessary. The theology of home can give individuals a concept of home to expand the theory from individuals' inner discipline to the external reality. It has become the mission for Christian scholars to protect the “home” in the era of globalization.

Great Learning is a Chinese Confucian classic teaching, which is one of the most important philosophical and educational materials in China. The essence of Great Learning is to live out the illuminating morality, bringing people closer to the Chinese understanding of virtue and resting in the highest good. It also contains eight stages, including investigating things, extending their knowledge, making the will sincere, rectifying the mind, cultivating the self, regulating the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world.<sup>4</sup>

The Bible and the Great Learning contain the concept of home but carry different theological and moral tensions. The “home” in the biblical concept is the starting point of the spiritual order and manifestation of the kingdom's culture (Gen. 1:27-28, Eph. 5:22-33, 6:1-4). From the Great Learning, “home” is the place of becoming a family member and a vessel of bringing peace to the world through practical life.<sup>5</sup> The Biblical home emphasizes the relationship between God and family members through education. The home in Great Learning is the starting point of practice of the heavenly mandate and divine order. Heaven's mandate

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<sup>1</sup> Haoguang Guan, “The Number of Divorces Has Soared 75% in 10 Years. What Is Killing Marriages?,” *CEIBS*. Last modified October 27, 2021, <https://cn.ceibs.edu/new-papers-columns/20081>.

<sup>2</sup> Biao Fang, “Digital Public Realm as ‘Nearby’ and Reconstruction,” *China Social Sciences Network*, Last modified August 30, 2024, [https://www.cssn.cn/skgz/bwyc/202408/t20240830\\_5774630.shtml](https://www.cssn.cn/skgz/bwyc/202408/t20240830_5774630.shtml).

<sup>3</sup> “Ukraine: War Disproportionately Affects Women, Minorities, and Children,” *United Nations*, Last modified May 4, 2022, <https://news.un.org/zh/story/2022/05/1102612>.

<sup>4</sup> James Legge, *The Chinese Classics* HongKong: HongKong University Press, 1986, 356 -357. The original Chinese text is “大学之道，在明明德，在亲民，在止于至善。”，“古之欲明明德于天下者，先治其国，欲治其国者，先齐其家，欲齐其家者，先修其身，欲修其身者，先正其心，欲正其心者，先诚其意，欲诚其意者，先致其知，致知在格物。”

<sup>5</sup> Youlan Feng and Derk Bodde, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*. New York, NY: Free Press, 1997, 314.

means a person who has the responsibility to teach illuminating morality to the one who does not know the divine order. This person fully follows the teaching of divine order. Divine order is the moral and cosmic structure created by Tian(天/heaven), which is the ultimate order like providential power that governs the world. In Great Learning, the highest good rests in the one who ultimately follows the divine order.<sup>6</sup> By integrating these two concepts of home, the theology of the home can be developed through combining biblical home and home in Great Learning.

In this article, the writer will bring the developmental sequence from Heaven to the earth in combination with the Great Learning in the middle. This structure reflects the heavenly mission as a spiritual family member and absorbs the progression from “Making will sincere” to “Bringing peace to the world” in the Great Learning Philosophy. Through “your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,” this article intends to build on the inspirational and culturally adopted “Theology of Home” to allow faith to be witnessed and renewed in the family, community, and the world from a new identity from the Chinese context.

### *Home as Spiritual Governance in the Bible*

In Genesis, home is not only the starting point of human society, but it is also the manifestation of the order of God. Genesis 1:27-28 provides the original mission for marriage and the home; Genesis 2:24 describes the spiritual relationship between the husband and wife. However, due to the corruption of human beings, the order of the home was broken because of sin. Sin caused the separation between God and human beings and the beginning of suffering. Females must endure labor pain, and males will struggle in their work. From that point on, home is not only a place for starting a mission but at the same time a place of consequence of sin. This spiritual disconnection made human beings lose the harmony and mission of God. In Genesis chs.12-50, home becomes the foundation of the promise of God. Brueggemann stated that the stories of home are the seedbed of Israel’s promissory faith.<sup>7</sup> God promised Israel the land to call home; the Israelites’ response became a witness to their belief. Home is not only the narrative in the background but the structure of the theology, carrying the promise, response, and inheritance. Home in the Bible is the starting point of the order of God that manifests in history.

The Abrahamic home is also the origin of the community and the Israelite nations. In Genesis, the story provides a complex and complicated practice of faith in Abraham’s journey. He gradually gets closer to God in faith. Abraham is the role model of justification by faith. Jana M. Bennett pointed out that his journey of the faith becomes the example for personal, familial, communal, and organizational faith.<sup>8</sup> Abraham’s home contains God’s promise, and the faith will coalesce through Abraham’s blood and their response to God. Also, it is a faith about

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<sup>6</sup> Xi Zhu, *Annotated Commentaries on the Four Books* Zhonghua Book Company, 1983, 1,3. The original texts are like this “一有聪明睿智能尽其性者出于其闲，则天必命之以为亿兆之君师，使之治而教之，以复其性。”“明德者，人之所得乎天，而虚灵不昧，以具众理而应万事者也。”“盖必其有以尽夫天理之极，而无一毫人欲之私也。”

<sup>7</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*. Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 2000, 167.

<sup>8</sup> Jana Bennett, “On Pilgrimage With Abraham: How a Patriarch Leads Us in Formation in Faith,” *Journal of Moral Theology*, 2021, 20–39, 38.

relationships, which is not the concept of isolation. The journey of faith is not unpredictable and inexplicable to others because home is a place where people can witness the journey of growth. In the modern era, some people doubt organizational faith. Indeed, it is obscure, but the point the writer mentions here about the organization is that faith is not the concept of only one person but relational. The formation and inheritance of faith comes through relationship. From this example, Abraham's story introduces a threshold that allows people to discover the value of communal faith in building a community.

Moses established the management structure in Exodus and the wilderness, as well as established national politics and the expansion of God's reign. The politics included the system of twelve tribes, with God residing in a tabernacle in the middle of the community, making the home the starting point for faith practice. He made a covenant with Israel to become his people. Deuteronomy emphasizes that parents should teach their children about God's law, in which the reign of God starts from the family and expands to the community and all Israel (Deut. 6:6-7). Daniel Block pointed out that God, as the only God of the world, did not put his covenant into the other houses but into the ark and sanctuary.<sup>9</sup> This position speaks about God's responsibility and ensures he will never forget His covenant. It requires a reciprocal relationship from home to Israel and to the world. In response to the problems in the disconnection between God and family, community, and world, the theology of home provides micro and macro level relationships in a concrete and collective way.

In the New Testament, the concept of home was described as the expansion of the home. It is spiritually connected to the community and the world. Paul pointed out "you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household" (Eph. 2:19). It emphasizes that the church is formed by a group of believers and a spiritually connected family. Hebrews 3:6 says Christ is faithful as the Son over God's house. Believers are that house, if they hold on to hope and confidence. The confidence from God lies in hope. The hope is in the faith of eternal life in Jesus Christ. Therefore, the church is the home of God that is connected by the believers who have faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>10</sup> The church also shows the best way of politics, just like Scot McKnight mentioned that the church "Ekklesia," a gathering for politics, emphasizes the renewed spiritual politics. It provides a way of life, a life of accepting and serving each other. This spiritual home overcomes ethnicity, gender, and hierarchies. This faith is not just for personal redemption, but for the witness of the kingdom in a practical way.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, the one bringing the concept of heaven to the earth in the perspective of the Bible is that one who reconciles with God through belief in Jesus Christ, learning to love the members of home in their family, community and the world.

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<sup>9</sup> Daniel I. Block, *Covenant: The Framework of God's Grand Plan of Redemption*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2021, 251.

<sup>10</sup> David A. Ackerman, *Hebrews & James: Devotional Thoughts and Commentary for Life*. Boston, MA: AdmitHub acquires Reference Service Press, 2021, 26.

<sup>11</sup> Scot McKnight, *A Fellowship of Differences: Showing the World God's Design for Life Together*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015, 127.

### *Great Learning*

Great Learning is the forty-second chapter in the Book of Rites, which is a collection of the treaties from Confucianism, written in the second or third centuries B.C.<sup>12</sup> According to Zhuxi, a famous Neo-Confucian philosopher in the Song Dynasty, the author is Zengzi in his commentary about the Great Learning. The contents of the Great Learning are centered on the manifesting of illuminating morality. Eight strands or conditions to become the one manifesting illuminating morality are like this:

The ancients who wished to manifest illustrious virtue throughout the world, first ordered well their own states. Wishing to order well their own states, they first regulated their own families. Wishing to regulate their own families, they first cultivated their own selves. Wishing to cultivate their own selves, they first rectified their own minds. Wishing to rectify their own minds, they first sought for absolute sincerity in their thoughts. Wishing for absolute sincerity in their thoughts, they first extended their knowledge. This extension of knowledge consists in the investigation of things.<sup>13</sup>

Qiyun Zhang (also known as Chiyun Chang) stressed these eight layers as eight strands, making them easier to understand.

These eight strands of Great Learning are

- a. Investigating the things
- b. Extending the knowledge
- c. Making your will sincere
- d. Rectifying your mind
- e. Cultivating your person
- f. Regulating your family
- g. Governing your state
- h. Bringing peace to the world<sup>14</sup>

However, the first two strands have weaker influence in modern society. These two are investigating things and extending their knowledge. In the modern era, investigation of things and extending knowledge are considered as types of skills, which have limited relevance to moral practice and character formation. This opinion became popular because of Yangming Wang, a philosopher who greatly influenced the Chinese in the sixteenth century, Ming dynasty.

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<sup>12</sup> Qiyun Zhang, *Confucianism: A Modern Interpretation*. Singapore: World Scientific Pub. Co., 2013, 43.

<sup>13</sup> Youlan Feng and Derk Bodde, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* New York, NY: Free Press, 1997, 18.

<sup>14</sup> Qiyun Zhang, *Confucianism: A Modern Interpretation* Singapore: World Scientific Pub. Co., 2013, 24.

In Yangming Wang's commentary, he prioritized the feature of making the will sincere, which is the starting point of the Great Learning philosophy in this article.<sup>15</sup> The sequence includes *Making the Will Sincere, Rectifying the Heart, Cultivating the Self, Regulating the Family, Governing the State, and Bringing Peace to the World.*

The framework of this article will combine the biblical foundation “your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” as the first and final stage (Matt. 6:10) of the theology of home in the Chinese context, for we know that God works through people in different contexts, as the scripture says, “for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill His good purpose” (Eph. 2:13), and Paul reminds us,

To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some” (1 Cor. 9:20-22).

### *Integrating “Home” in Chinese Philosophy From Heaven*

In Chinese philosophy, the home is the starting point of the divine order.<sup>16</sup> In the Great Learning, the concept of the Junzi (君子/Gentleman) is given to help understand the divine order from Heaven.<sup>17</sup> The Junzi dedicates himself to his lord without considering whether he will be acknowledged, and successful or not, reflecting an attitude of obedience.<sup>18</sup> In Great Learning, they practice the sequence of the divine order from their home and bring it to the state and the world. Redderbos describes about the heaven from the teaching of Jesus, the bliss of the kingdom of heaven, as the inheritance of the new earth, as being filled with the divine righteousness, as the seeing of God, as the manifestation of the children of God, all of these expressions pointing beyond the order of this world to the state of bliss and perfection that will be revealed in the future world.<sup>19</sup> Through the Holy Spirit, we pray that the will of God that is

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<sup>15</sup> Yangming Wang, “Wang Yangming's Commentary on the Great Learning,” Chinese Philosophical Texts Project, Last modified 2016, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&#38;chapter=759384&#38;remap=gb>.

<sup>16</sup> Niu Da, “The Church: The Gathering of the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth -- A Brief Discussion on the Relationship between the Kingdom of God and the Church from a Biblical Theological Perspective,” *The Church*, Last modified July 11, 2015, <https://www.churchchina.org/archives/150703.html>.

<sup>17</sup> The translation from Junzi (君子) to Gentleman follows James Legge's book *The Chinese Classic*. It delivers the nuance of patriarchal society in ancient Chinese culture. In modern days, the translation of Junzi can be a noble person or a saint. The opposite of Junzi in Confucius's philosophy is Xiaoren (小人), a petty person who does not acknowledge the heavenly mandate and divine order.

<sup>18</sup> Leichuan Wu, *Christianity and Chinese Culture*. Beijiao, HK: Published by Youth Association Bookstore, 1948, 169.

<sup>19</sup> Herman N. Ridderbos, Henri de Jongste, and Raymond O. Zorn, *The Coming of the Kingdom*. Philadelphia, PA: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1962, 37.

done in heaven will be done on this earth through Christlikeness from the family to the church. Therefore, home is the primary place of building a kingdom on earth from the perspective of connecting Chinese philosophy and Christian theology.

### *Making the Will Sincere*

In Great Learning, making the will sincere is the starting point of moral practice and the space for practicing inner harmony (he/和). The harmony means the result of obedience to heaven's mandate.<sup>20</sup> Sincerity here means honesty without self-deception and obedience to heaven's mandate.<sup>21</sup> The family is a significant place where the Junzi practices benevolence, restraint, and reverence according to Heaven's mandate and virtue. Spiritual discipline is in heaven's rituals and the daily ethical practice that makes people resonate with heaven's mandate. It is related to the Bible in the way of understanding God and obedience (Deut. 4:39, 6:4). That is why family is the first manifestation of heaven's divine order. The household is a spiritual foundation that links divine order through inner sincerity.

### *Rectifying the Heart*

Cultivating the mind is a key process in cultivating inner discipline in Chinese culture. It purifies the intention and aligns the emotion and desires with reason and the divine order. It involves justification to distinguish between exemplary and evil and cultivating selflessness. In the household, a Junzi will cultivate the righteousness in awareness of the family's responsibility, just as the expression of a beautiful mind and the profound truth of God.<sup>22</sup> Rectifying the heart is not only a process of moral refinement but also a process of renewing discipline spiritually. It is a process in which people cultivate their hearts and resonate with the heavenly mandate daily. It is the teaching of Great Learning and that of Confucius. Confucius' vision about the rectifying heart is related to governance since it begins from moral self-cultivation to gain the Chinese understanding of virtue (de/德).<sup>23</sup> Transformation comes through renewing the mind to understand God's will and goodness (Rom. 12:2). Therefore, the household is also where people cultivate their hearts to distinguish right from wrong, good from evil, and selflessness from selfishness.

### *Cultivating the Self*

"Cultivating the self" is a key practice of the Confucian inner discipline; it is a process of acting out the "making the will sincere" and "rectifying the heart." Junzi practice in households is not only for moral discipline but also the embodiment of a spiritual life. Junzi will practice divine order through familial responsibility in daily regulations. Such practice is not only for

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<sup>20</sup> Chenyang Li, "The Confucian Ideal of Harmony," *Philosophy East and West* 56, no. 4 (October 2006): 583–603, doi:10.1353/pew.2006.0055, 588.

<sup>21</sup> James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*. HongKong: HongKong University Press, 1986, 366.

<sup>22</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*. New York, NY: HarperCollins e-books, 2009, 141.

<sup>23</sup> Karyn L. Lai, "The Cultivation of Humanity in Confucian Philosophy: Mencius and Xunzi," *An Introduction to Chinese Philosophy*, July 31, 2008, 35–54, doi:10.1017/cbo9780511800832.005, 51.

individual practice but also the foundation of the order and regulation of the political order.<sup>24</sup> From the perspective of spirituality, practice brings about the embodiment of the divine order. It is not saying that spiritual growth comes from practice or discipline, since spiritual growth or transformation is the gift of God. However, it does not mean that we should not do any practice and discipline. Richard Foster described it vividly:

It might be helpful to visualise what we have been discussing. Picture a long, narrow ridge with a sheer drop-off on either side. The chasm to the right is the way of moral bankruptcy through human strivings for righteousness. Historically this has been called the heresy of moralism. The chasm to the left is moral bankruptcy through the absence of human strivings. This has been called the heresy of antinomianism. On the ridge there is a path, the Disciplines of spiritual life. This path leads to the inner transformation and healing for which we seek. We must never veer off to the right or the left but stay on the path. The path is fraught with severe difficulties, but also with incredible joys. As we travel on this path, the blessing of God will come upon us and reconstruct us into the image of Jesus Christ. We must always remember that the path does not produce the change; it only places us where the change can occur. This is the path of disciplined grace.<sup>25</sup>

### *Regulating the Family*

Regulating the family is the first external process in the Great Learning philosophy. It is a process that adds application to individual practice, expanding to the process of the familial order. After a Junzi cultivates the self, one should regulate their family members through love, benevolence, and self-control to make the family members capable of inheriting the divine orders and spiritual practice. This process is not only concerned with the harmony of kinship, but also the dissemination of divine order within human relationships, which is also emphasized in scripture regarding marriage and family (Eph. 5:21-6:4). Therefore, the divine order will succeed through the family, not the individual, but emphasizes the importance for all groups of family members. It is the place of procreation and child-rearing.<sup>26</sup> So, family becomes a dynamic vessel of disseminating spiritual manifestation and divine order.

### *Governing the State*

“Governing the state” is the expansion of moral practice in Great Learning. It extends familial management into the public. After regulating the family, in Chinese culture, Junzi is supposed to govern the state through righteousness and moral education to expand the policy of divine order. This perspective could be dangerous, due to the negative consequences of coercive power trying to override self-autonomy in others. However, it provides restraint of egoistic

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<sup>24</sup> Tongxin Tian, “On ‘Confucian Christian,’” *Institute of Ancient Books Compilation*. Sichuan University, Last modified April 14, 2009, <https://rxy.scu.edu.cn/info/1040/1818.htm>.

<sup>25</sup> Richard J. Foster and Kathryn A. Helters, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. London: Hodder, 2008, 28.

<sup>26</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger and David W. Jones, *God, Marriage, and Family: Rebuilding the Biblical Foundation*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010, 292.

impulses, which is far greater than the intrinsic impulse for human beings.<sup>27</sup> The country's management should demonstrate heaven's benevolence, expand heaven's mandate to society, and form a community. Otherwise, corruption could lead to social injustice that affects its citizens (Isa. 24:4-6). Furthermore, church leaders in the community should understand the different kinds of challenges of its citizens like psychological, financial, temporal, intergenerational, conflictual, and marital/familial.<sup>28</sup> The leader should have the ability to understand power structures and to act as the public vessel of divine order, a place to make history and organizational structures through spiritual life.

### *Bring Peace to the World*

This is the culmination of moral practice in Great Learning, which expands righteousness and divine order to all people in Chinese culture. After the Junzi governs the state, the Junzi will use righteous politics and moral discipline to make the world harmonious and guide people into righteousness. Bringing peace to the world relates to political harmony and spiritual life propagation, as shown in human history. From this Chinese perspective, the world is a vessel of divine order, which includes all humanity that respects heaven's mandate. This vision of peace is different from globalization, which conceals hidden dominance such as neo-liberalism.<sup>29</sup> In contrast, it is a status that the Junzi lives out the divine order and brings peace to the world, not from power but from righteousness.

### *Earth*

Through all these processes from the theories of Great Learning, the divine order can pour down to the earth. This has an important implication for human beings in Chinese philosophy, in both Taoism and Great Learning, even though these two are from different roots. However, the purpose of philosophy is producing harmony and bringing peace to the world.<sup>30</sup> As the starting point, as mentioned above, home is the place for spiritual practice. Therefore, the influence of home affects the family, the state, and the world in a process of expanding the divine order to the world. John Wesley mentioned, "I look upon all the world as my parish"<sup>31</sup>. Junzi or believers should practice cultivating themselves and regulating their family to expand the divine order or the word of God to influence the state and world. From this perspective, the theology of home indicates the process of bringing divine order from heaven to earth.

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<sup>27</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021, 261.

<sup>28</sup> Yaxin Lu, Loren Marks, and Loredana Apavaloia, "Chinese Immigrant Families and Christian Faith Community: A Qualitative Study," *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal* 41, no. 2 (December 2012): 118–30, doi:10.1111/fcsr.12002, 128.

<sup>29</sup> Max L. Stackhouse, *God and Globalization. Volume 4, Globalization and Grace*. New York, NY: Continuum, 2007, 5.

<sup>30</sup> Xiaofeng WANG, "Traditional Chinese Philosophy of 'Harmony' and Its Contemporary Values," *Advances in Philosophy* 12, no. 01 (2023): 78–81, doi:10.12677/acpp.2023.121015, 80.

<sup>31</sup> John Wesley, *The Journal of John Wesley*, ed. Nora Ratcliff New York, NY: Thomas Nelson & Sons., 1940, 98.

The methods can be different according to the context, and this is not a restriction that one has to bring peace to the earth in the way of this Junzi. As a Christian, bringing divine order to the earth is not limited to this. All the religions in this world have their own limitations with some embarrassing history, since it came from both culture and from the imago Dei (image of God) in people. At the same time, peaceful resources must overlap in the cultural and religious foundations.<sup>32</sup> Using their own voice from a different context is a way of bringing peace to the world in the process of resonance.

### *Identity in the Theology of Home*

In establishing the theology of home, the identity is not focused on the individual practice, but is rooted in the family, society, and the world. Again, in Great Learning, home is the starting point of moral discipline for saints. In the theological view, home is endowed as part of the spiritual community by the mission of God, expanding heaven into earth. It is the intersection between human governance and divine governance. Junzi cultivate themselves and govern the family and nation with virtue and morality. At the same time, the sovereignty of God will be manifested on the earth through His Holy Spirit to human beings. In Christian theology, all humans are already in a relationship between God as creator and judge in the covenant of creation. Just like what Michael Horton mentioned:

Much Christian faith and practice has also tended to divorce the kingdom of God from or confuse it with the kingdoms of this world. Divorcing the kingdom of God from the kingdoms of this world is accomplished by failing to recognize that all of creation, especially all humans, stand already in a relationship to God as creator and judge in the covenant of creation. We are all bound together ethically in mutual responsibility. Each person, Christian or not, bears God's image, and we can work side by side with non-Christians to fulfill the scriptural command to show love to our neighbors. We must, therefore, take this world seriously because we share that image of God with non-Christians and participate with them in ordinary secular callings and cultural endeavors.<sup>33</sup>

People and God bond together in mutual responsibility. People, whether they are Christians or not, are already the image bearers. There is a spiritual command to show love to our neighbors. The identity in the theology of home is the relationship between human beings and God, and it is human beings reflecting the will of God in the cultural orders. In the Chinese Christian context, replacing the term "Junzi" we can adopt the expression "heavenly saints" from different contexts.

By integrating divine order and cultural order, the identity of heavenly saints requires living a spiritual life in morality, responsibility, and discipline, in which faith is not limited to church life but embodied completely in all aspects of life. The family, the society and the world

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<sup>32</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Baker, 2013, 141.

<sup>33</sup> Michael Scott Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009, 17.

can all be places for spiritual practice, to God's will in history and policy. Establishing the theology of home is about embedding this identity into the cultural content to make the personal faith present in public life. It echoes with the adoption into God's family, which discusses the relational identity between God's individual, societal, and communal framework.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, home is not the place for individuals; it is the manifestation of divine order, and heavenly saints react to their life in the will of God.

### *Family as the Starting Point of Building Identity in the Theology of Home*

In the Chinese context, family is the fundamental unit that establishes the “theology of home.” It is the central area for spiritual formation through practice. Family is the starting point of practice in the grand learning theory, just as family is the unit for building spiritual community, for understanding God's promises and His divine will. Cultivating and regulating the family is not only the obligation of morality, but also the reflection of the calling of God.

Joseph Hellerman noted that family is the expansion of marriage and the starting point of the church's expansion. When family members establish spiritual relationships, the result is mutual help between them, emotional sharing, and child education which establishes the cultural and spiritual intersection in the family. It thrives on marriage and deepens the practice of becoming a church member.<sup>35</sup> This is the Hellerman's family lived experience, a testimony of how faith, love, and a family's mutual support create a foundation that strengthens both families and the church community.

In the Chinese family, heavenly saints mainly focus on respect, kindness, and self-control in the interaction between family members. These are the moral standards, but also a form of spiritual formation. In the family, heavenly saints should practice prayer, respect for their parents, and the following of the regulations for specific Christian festivals. From the meaning of the culture, family is the intersection between tradition and belief, and it has succeeded in history. From the family, it extends to the society. Just as Darren Iselin mentioned “Embodied and emplaced learning communities will reflect and celebrate these living traditions—putting flesh and bone around these networks of meaning-making as a placemaking priority.”<sup>36</sup> It forms the future, which grows by expanding the kingdom's culture through the process from family to society. Therefore, the theology of home influences the members in the family and reflects the heavenly mandate and the will of God to the society through the heavenly saints. It is the process by which God's will can be done on this earth.

### *Social Mission in Christ*

The renewed spiritual identity, heavenly saints, is a result of transformation. Heavenly saints are endowed with a new standard of morality, which is centered on service, love, and loyalty, so as to be the witness to the lived out kingdom culture.

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<sup>34</sup> Trevor J. Burke, *Adopted into God's Family*. Lisle, IL: IVP Academic, 2016, 36.

<sup>35</sup> Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family Recapturing Jesus' Vision for Authentic Christian Community*. Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2014, 208.

<sup>36</sup> Darren Iselin, “Home-Coming: Restoring a Theology of Place within Christian Education,” *Innovating Christian Education Research*, 2021, 45–58, doi:10.1007/978-981-15-8856-3\_4, 55.

In the family, heavenly saints will build their identity from the foundation of love by re-evaluating their responsibilities and developing intimacy. The husband will not work as the leading authority but through sacrifice (Eph. 5:25). The wife will never passively follow the husband's authority but establish the home together with the husband working in a way of wisdom and mercy (Prov. 14:1, 14:26). Children are not the extension of the bloodline but Christ's image bearers and disciples in making so that the family becomes the place for spiritual discipline and the micro-manifestation of the will of God (Prov. 22:6).

In society, the heavenly saints are not like executives in the role of a business or job, but more like mission carriers. Whether they are teachers, engineers, or any other job titles, they have the same roles in their identity as the kingdom's citizens. No matter how busy they are, they will rediscover spiritual formation and discipline.<sup>37</sup> They will bring justice, benevolence, and honesty into-policy and relationships. Heavenly saints will lead lives just as "they live heaven in the earth"; it is an intersection between the personal mission and social responsibility, making it a new dynamic for renewing Chinese culture.

Therefore, the heavenly saints reshape the family and society. Heavenly saints will witness God's governance in their lives, making family a sanctuary and God's mission in society, and expanding their spiritual life to history and their culture to reflect God's calling to build a kingdom on earth as it is in Heaven. This is their new identity; they are heavenly saints.

### *The Direction for the Future*

The theology of home is a framework of how Chinese Christians build their identity in Christ; it also provides profound formation in spiritual practice. It reminds us that spiritual life is not only inside the church but also rooted in the family, society, and cultural structure. From the missional perspective, family becomes the starting point of the practice and witness of the word of God. It will nurture disciples to practice the love of Christ with their relatives and in daily life. It spreads out the mission of God from the family to the world. From the perspective of epistemology, home is not only a place where people learn the word of God, but also a significant place for spreading morality and spiritual discipline to cultivate beliefs from the cultural context, making it naturally inherited.

God provides the model of the intersection of governance between God and human beings. If the order, responsibility, and benevolence from family expand to the social policy and public participation, it will encourage the renewal of spiritual culture. The disciplines are not the worshipper in the church, but the influencers in society, based on the family and bringing the spiritual value into the working place, policy making, and public conversations. It is the mission to be holy, just as what Christopher Wright mentioned :

Once again, then, we find that an essential part of the mission of God's people is nothing other than to be what they are – by living out the holiness of God in

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<sup>37</sup> Jiahui Yan, "Contemporary Christians Need to Rediscover Spiritual Formation and Spiritual Guidance," *Spiritual Formation in Trinity Theological Seminary News*, Last modified August 2023, <https://www.ttc.edu.sg/chinese/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Trumpet-Aug-2023C-Full-Copy.pdf>.

practical everyday living. Mission is not something that happens when you go somewhere else. It starts in your own home and neighbourhood. That is where we are called to be holy.<sup>38</sup>

In the future, the theology of home can bridge the conversation in the Chinese church between theologies in an intercultural context by connecting the Great Learning philosophy and biblical foundation to create the local and global spiritual narratives. It can cultivate the identity of Christ for the disciples, but also re-establish the practical spiritual formation, to expand the spiritual life in history and culture, to reflect the calling of God, and reflect the order of Heaven.

### *Conclusion*

Theology of Home, as the structure built in the Great Learning philosophy and biblical foundation, provides an important theoretical innovation and synthesis. It provides a different way of understanding the home. It recognizes the home as the embodiment of the divine order and provides the core of identity, cultural practice, and social mission. Through “making the will sincere,” “rectifying the heart,” “cultivating the body,” “regulating the family,” “governing the state,” and “bringing peace to the world,” it provides Chinese society with the logic of home providence, and also the theories in the moral layer to a synthesized reality of heaven and earth.

From the innovation of this theory, the theology of home redefines the formation of identity as a Chinese Christian. It emphasizes the personal relationship between God and people, and the response and practice between the family, society, and country. This kind of perspective is not just focused on the church anymore but has embedded the belief in daily life practice.

Therefore, theology of home is encouragement for intercultural theology and provides power of integration. It encourages Chinese believers to understand their identity in a pluralistic world and to manifest God’s will through human practice in different contexts. It allows the personal God to expand into society and history, reflecting God’s will to the world. In this article, the people who lead such lives are called heavenly saints.

Theology of home combines the philosophy of “Great Learning” and biblical concepts of heaven and earth, showing great potential in its framework. Future research can focus on deepening theoretical foundations, exploring resources on education, mission, and policy, ensuring spiritual formation embedded in the intercultural contexts.

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<sup>38</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010, 146.

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