CONTEXTUALIZATION THE ASIAN WAY: RELATIONAL CONTEXTUALIZATION

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to propose "relational contextualization" as Asian way of practicing contextualization. Etymologically speaking, contextualization derived from "*contextus*" (Latin) meaning "weaving together,"[1] i.e. the messenger "weaves" with the receivers in their cultural situations. The definition of "relational contextualization" is "the effort of Christians committing themselves to the Gospel by formulating, presenting, practicing, and embodying the Scriptures and the Christian faith that connect people of other cultural backgrounds with the Gospel in relationship." In "relational contextualization," the Gospel, the messenger, and the receiver "weave" together in an intimate, dialogical, and creative relationship. The distinctive feature is: bringing relationship into focus. It is tailored to the Asian context that relationship is highly valued. Moreover, it is offered as a new attempt to practice Christian mission in the context of post-modernist ethos.

THE CHALLENGES OF CONTEXTUALIZATION

The focus hence is on hindrances or challenges for relational contextualization.

Rationalist and Compartmentalized Approach

According to Jackson Wu, the practice of "contextualization" by Evangelicals have its focus on the interpretation, communication, and application of the biblical text in view of a cultural context.[2] Most of the practice of contextualization in the west tends to be reductionistic focusing on biblical text, and interpreting/communicating the message intelligibly and cognitively to the receivers. Most of the emphasis is merely on the technique, method, and especially the content of the message.

It is out of the ordinary that two American missiologists do not follow the popular trend of programmatic and communicative contextualization: (a) Larry Poston proposes that we contextualize not only our faith, but also ourselves. He uses the Apostle Paul as an example and suggests that Paul

"himself was a form of 'contextualization'."[3] (b) Marvin Newell uses "self-contextualizing" to describe the adaptation of the messenger to another culture.[4] The contextualization of the person, as proposed by Poston and Newell is outstandingly different from popular rationalist approach. The western way of emphasizing cognitive understanding of the message in contextualization is characteristically rationalist – devoid of the recognition of "relationality" (i.e. the quality and emphasis on relationship in the practice of contextualization).

Ethnocentrism and Cultural Relativism

The Elton Law propounds that both ethnocentrism and cultural relativism bring syncretism in contextualization by the following diagram.[5]
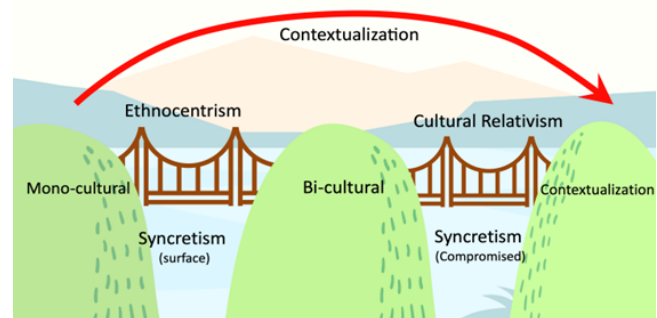

Figure 1: Syncretism in Ethnocentrism and Cultural Relativism in the process of Contextualization[6]

When contextualization starts from a mono-cultural orientation, there is lack of awareness of ethnocentrism. The Gospel presented is assumed to be supra-cultural and universally conditioned. This type of contextualization is minimal, focusing on the surface level: i.e. the use of local language and certain indigenous cultural forms. Contextualization in such approach tends to unknowingly blends one's own culture with the Gospel - prompt to syncretism.

In addition to the problem of ethnocentrism, another challenge is cultural relativism when meaning is separated from form. If, (a) form-meaning separation and (b) the over-elevation of culture, then anther form of syncretism[7] is inevitable in the contextualization

1. John Mark Terry, ed., *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions,* Rev. ed. (B&H Academic, 2015), 281.

2. Jackson Wu, "How Do Evangelicals Define 'Contextualization'?," Jackson Wu, May 24, 2013, accessed April 4, 2021, https://www.patheos.com/blogs/jacksonwu/2013/05/24/how-do-evangelicasl-define-contextualization/.

3. Larry Poston, "Cultural Chameleon: Contextualization from a Pauline Perspective" 36, no. 4, *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (2005): 460–469.

4. Marvin J. Newell, *Crossing Cultures in Scripture: Biblical Principles for Mission Practice* (Westmont, U.S.: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 248.

5. Siu Lun Elton Law, "Contextualization" (lecture, Yan Fook Seminary, Hong Kong, October 17, 2022).

6. Law, "Contextualization."

7. Yoshiyuki Billy Nishioka, "Worldview Methodology in

process.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF RELATIONAL CONTEXTUALIZATION

Relational contextualization is the integration of "relational realism" into ontological praxis of contextualization.

Wan's "Relational Realism"

Relational realism is offered by Enoch Wan as an alternative paradigm to critical realism.[8] This ontological orientation of relational paradigm is a response to and corrective of the managerial, programmatic, pragmatic and outcome-based model of popular missiology.[9]

Relational Approach to Cultural Differences

Ethnocentrism and cultural relativism are the first obstacles in contextualization and the subsequent strategy to manage cultural differences affect the approach to contextualization, proposed by Sonia Chan as a relation-based strategy to cultural difference.[10] Of the various strategies managing cultural differences, Milton Bennett posits a difference-based approach from ethnocentrism to ethno-relativism.[11] However, the distinctive of the relational approach of this paper is: the awareness of the differentiated but related presence of others as whole beings, additional to identifying cultural differences and similarities. Therefore, the ideal positions are "ethno-relational," given the definition of "ethno-relationality" as "a reciprocal and dialogical posture in recognizing the presence of other beings of different cultures as differentiated and connected, and engaging in dialogues with one another." The goal of ethno-relationality is to develop more authentic, intimate, and creative relationships with God vertically and others horizontally.

A MODEL OF RELATIONAL CONTEXTUALIZATION

The process of contextualization is a relational, reciprocal, and dialogical interaction of: (a) personal Being/being of the Triune God, the messengers, the receivers, the community, and (b) the Gospel and culture. Relational contextualization is not a linear

process; it is multi-dimensional and multi-directional with the consideration of multiple relationships involved. The following diagram shows the various interactive relationships in contextualization.
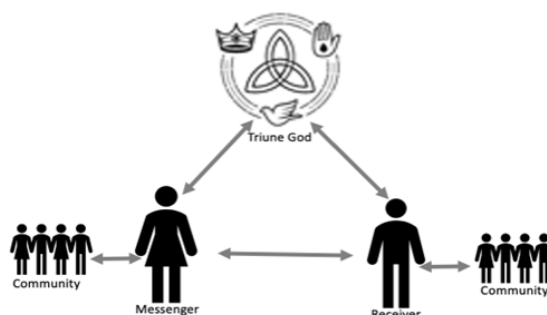

Figure 2: Interactive Relationships within Relational Contextualization

Transformation Process and Outcome

Contextualization is a process of transformation. The following table and diagram are presented to show the process and outcome of transformation in contextualization. The process of contextualization is a dialogical process moving from ethnocentric to ethno-relational for both the messengers and the receivers. The outcome of contextualization is the transformative relationships with God, the messengers, and the receivers.

Process		Outcome	
A Dialogical Process from Ethnocentric to Ethno-relational		Transformative Relationships with God, the messengers, and the receivers	
Being	Identity Awareness	Authenticity	New Identity
Becoming	Dialogical Relationship	Intimacy	New Relationships
Belonging	Narrative Encounters	Creativity	New Creation

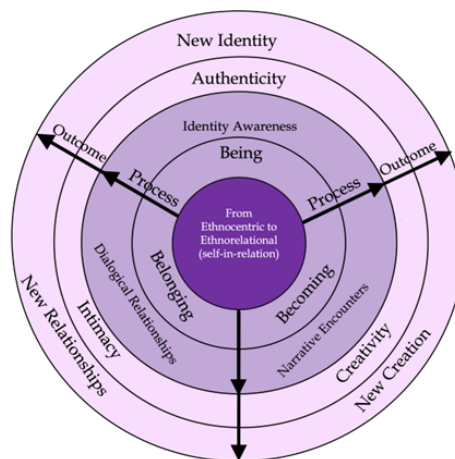Table 1. The Process and Outcome of Transformation in Relational Contextualization

Figure 3. The Process and Outcome of Transformation in Relational Contextualization

Mission Theology: A Comparison between Kraft's and Hiebert's Approaches," *Missiology* 26, no. 4 (October 1, 1998): 457–476.

8. Enoch Wan, "The Paradigm of 'Relational Realism,'" Occasion Bulletin 19, no. 2, *Evangelical Missiological Society* (2006), 1.

9. Wan, "The Paradigm of 'Relational Realism,'" 1–4 and Enoch Wan, Diaspora Missiology: Theory Wan, Enoch Wan, *Diaspora Missiology: Theory, Methodology, and Practice,* SECOND EDITION. (2nd edition). 2014: chapter 7.

10. Sonia Chan, "Communication Principles In An Ontological Praxis Of Intercultural Communication And Learning" (EdD research paper, Western Seminary, 2021).

11. Milton Bennett, *Basic Concepts of Intercultural Communication: Paradigms, Principles, and Practices*, 2nd ed. (Intercultural Press, 2013), 5.
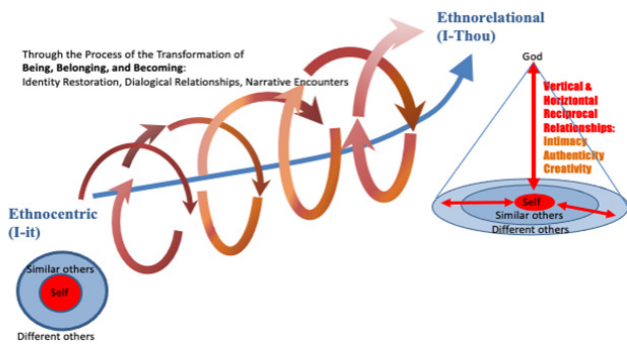
Figure 4. The Relational Contextualization Model

The three phases of transformation process in Relational Contextualization model are: being, belonging, and becoming, with the theoretical framework of Relational Interactionism.[12] The three phases are understood as interconnected and cyclical in this model. The order of practice is not strictly sequential. Each process will help the advancement of the contextualization in the other two processes.

Transformation of "Being" with New Identity
Identity negotiation is part of the contextualization process. It is communal that the receivers enter a period of incorporation and find who they are and where they belong. Both messenger and receiver experience the identity negotiation, from being an outsider becoming an insider. The following model by Richard Hibbert is helpful in understanding how identity negotiation takes place in contextualization.[13]
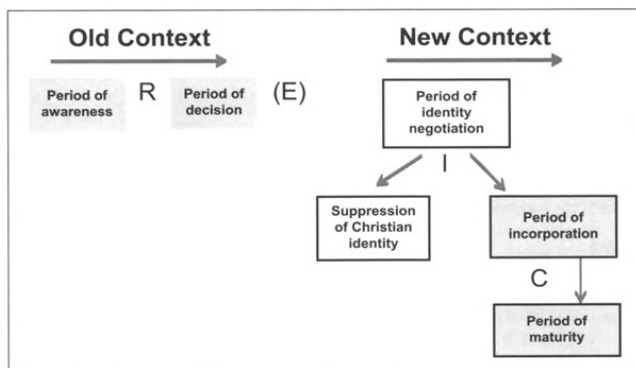

Figure 5. Modified model of conversion
(adapted from Tippett, 1992).

Transformation of "Belonging" New Relationships

Both the messenger and the receiver are to be considered in contextualization. Once the receivers become Christians, they will experience and continue the process of the contextualization. Both the messenger and the receiver interact in this process of contextualization together. They are in dialogues

with each other, changing from I-it relationship to I-Thou relationship.[14] They involve in dialogues with God, the Gospel, their cultural context, and also their community—both faith and local.

Transformation of "Becoming" > New Creation
New creation is generated and embodied through the new narratives and story-telling can foster new connectivity and meaning-making in contextualization.[15] It invites us to interpret our lives within the framework of a larger story of God's meta-narrative. This learning must be achieved through our new relationships with Christ in the community. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." (2 Cor. 5:17)

CONCLUSION

This paper is an attempt to introduce the Asian way for the practice of contextualization: a relational approach and relational ontological orientation. Most evangelicals' attempt of contextualization thus far is in western style: rationalist, cognitive, programmatic, pragmatic and outcome-based. In this paper, relational contextualization is proposed as an alternative Asian way by integrating theories (of "relational realism" and "relational interactionism") and the practice (of narrative approach, relational approach and dialogical interaction).

14. Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man,* 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2003), Chap. 1, Loc. 480, Kindle.

15. For details of the use of narrative framework and "relational interactionism," see Enoch Wan and Jon Raibley, *Transformational Change in Christian Ministry* (Western Academic Publishers, 2022:chapter 2),

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12. Enoch Wan and Jon Raibley, *Transformational Change in Christian Ministry* (Western Academic Publishers, 2022), 11.

13. Richard Y. Hibbert, "Negotiating Identity: Extending and Applying Alan Tippett's Model of Conversion to Believers from Muslim and Hindu Backgrounds," *Missiology: An International Review* 43, no. 1 (January 2015): 59–72.