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*We would like to dedicate this handbook to Asian and Asian American biblical scholars who forged Asian American biblical hermeneutics over several generations. In particular, we would like to honor two previous anthologies, without which this work would not have been possible: Tat-siong Benny Liew and Gale A. Yee, *The Bible in Asian America* (2002), and Mary F. Foskett and Jeffrey Kah-Jin Kuan, *Ways of Being, Ways of Reading: Asian American Biblical Interpretation* (2006).*

Uriah Y. Kim and Seung Ai Yang, Editors

Engaging Ecclesiastes Narratively and Polyphonically with a Chinese Lens: Traditional Wisdom and “Collective Lived Experience under the Sun” in Dialogue

Barbara M. Leung Lai

Toward a reading strategy

Three factors shape the reading perspectives of my present undertaking. First, adopting John Goldingay’s “narrative” approach to constructing theology based on the Hebrew Bible (Goldingay 2003, 2006, and 2009), we are encouraged to engage ourselves in hermeneutical inquiries arising out of humanity’s collective lived experience under the sun with an elevated dosage of vigor and vitality. Engaging in this endeavor, I have come to a fuller understanding of the interface between perceiving “dogma” as the most exciting “drama” in the Christian church *and* “narrative” as a dynamic and powerful approach to constructing biblical theologies, especially for the Hebrew Bible. While highlighting the diverse Asian interpretive traditions and the rich *cultural-mix* of Asian Americans are the primary objectives of this collaborative project, as a Hebrew Bible scholar, I will add another dimension in reading Ecclesiastes—laying “raw” in front of readers the kind of “helplessness” and “perplexity” in humanity’s search for meaning. With “the collective lived experience under the sun” (i.e., “text and experience” as Smith-Christopher (1995) has coined the term) as the common denominator, what it meant to the first audience of Qohelet’s time would, to a certain extent, be equally meaningful for the readers of today.

Second, a multiplicity of speaking voices can be identified in Ecclesiastes. This area of inquiry has become one of the most current and vibrant research as appropriated to the reading of this strange book—Ecclesiastes (Leung Lai 2011; Holmstedt 2010, 1–27; Bartholomew 2009; Fox 1997; Greenwood 2012). As a significant point of entry, my refreshed identification of the competing speaking voices serves as a *directive* into the meaning-significance of the book for contemporary readers.

Third, as a bi-cultural, first-generation Chinese Canadian woman reader, my previous readings of the book have been referred to as “culture-specific” interpretations

(Leung Lai 2013, 265–78; Leung Lai 2014, 214–16). In the course of this interpretation, I have asked myself several times the following two questions: (1) under the rubrics of text and culture and contextual biblical interpretation—in what ways would “a” Chinese Canadian reading shed light on the meaning-significance of Ecclesiastes to the community of (Chinese) readers? (2) Rooted in humanity’s collective lived experience under the sun and in the broader context of text and praxis—in what ways would the outcome of a culture-specific reading contribute toward “a” paradigm of “How to live” from the Book of Ecclesiastes?

Text, culture, and contextual biblical interpretation

In what ways would “a” Chinese Canadian reading shed light on the meaning-significance of the Book of Ecclesiastes to the community of (Chinese) readers?

The Book of Ecclesiastes is a self-narrated “I-Text.” Reading and hearing the “I” voice of Qohelet pronouncing boldly the summary appraisal—“Utterly senseless! Everything is meaningless!”—captivates the mind and arouses the emotive response of the reader. This chapter focuses on the interface of “text and culture” and “text and lived experience.” I seek to explore the ways that (1) the Chinese concept of self/selfhood; (2) the idea of “emptiness/meaninglessness” in the Chinese mind; (3) the virtue of “perseverance” upheld as one of the most esteemed qualities of a person in Chinese philosophy; and (4) the diaspora experience of Chinese immigrants in Canada may impact how Chinese readers read and understand the meaning-significance of the book. It is hoped that this endeavor may provide “a” demonstrated example of the vibrant dynamics and power in the “art” and “science” of “narrative hermeneutics”—a reading that takes seriously the flesh-and-blood collective lived-experience of the community of Chinese readers.

Four ports of entry can be identified toward a Chinese Canadian ethno-cultural reading of Ecclesiastes: (1) The Chinese concept of “self” in dialogue with Qohelet’s “I”-voice; (2) The Chinese idea of “emptiness/meaninglessness” in response to the bold pronouncement in the summary appraisal: “Utterly meaningless!”; (3) The notion of “perseverance” in the Chinese philosophy of life and the adaptation of a “cross-graining” reading strategy; and (4) The collective lived-experience (the “mega-text”) of the first-generation Chinese immigrant community interacting with Qohelet’s exploration in life.

The Chinese concept of self in dialogue with Qohelet’s “I”-Voice

Interdisciplinary studies on “self” represent a variety of goal-oriented approaches.¹ They are methodologically eclectic and generally postmodern (Callero 2003, 115–33,

¹ For a general orientation of the multidisciplinary scholarly research on the concept of self, see Leung Lai 2011.

esp. 116). The end products of this “multiple-diverse-postmodern” inquiring situation may cast new light on the interconnectedness of self, community, the shaping of one’s “life-context,”² and the narratival interpretive thrust in reading Ecclesiastes.

First, self-construction and identity are found in the community and in the communal experience. It is not in the transcendence of society to search for a single, private self (Bjork 1992). Self of an individual character is formed by the surrounding community and this could be referred to as one’s communal lived-experience shaping one’s life context. Second, as to the relationship between self and narrative, it is the “ability of narrative to verbalize and situate experience as text” (Schiffrin 1996, 167).³ Third, the psychological approach to the self-concept presents strong empirical evidence in support of the existence of the “other” in its construction.

This pluralistic model of the self perceives an individual as inextricably in dialogue with others (Brown and Cooper 1999). It is interesting to note that approaches to the concept of self in psychology and the humanities converge at this point. Also, this *plural* self-idea bears notable resemblance to the Russian literary scholar Mikhael Bakhtin’s theory of the “dialogic self” (2004). The context of this dialogue is within the “Grand Narrative”—the collective lived-experience of humanity under the sun.

Remarkably, the Chinese concept of the “self” shares much in common with the results of the above investigation. In traditional Chinese culture, the *autonomy* of the “self” is not recognized. Taken negatively, people often say that a Chinese person has “no self” and that the notion of “private self” is not encouraged. The Chinese “self” can be described as both interdependent and socio-centric (or situation-centered) (Hsu 1985). Adopting this Chinese concept of the “self,” the juxtaposition of self, community, and life-context forms the theoretical backbone of my ethno-cultural reading of Ecclesiastes as a first-generation Chinese Canadian. On the one hand, moving from the Chinese idea of the nonexistence of the “autonomous self” to the postmodern ethos of “free self” has been a long and difficult path.⁴ One has to consciously put the previously subdued Chinese “private self” to the foreground of interaction. Yet, on the other hand, this culture-specific mentality paves the way for Chinese immigrants to adapt ourselves to the postmodern concept of self, one that is pluralistic and in constant dialogue with our environment—the “others.” In other words, my reading cannot be isolated from my community’s reading perspectives as my own experience is a slice of the reality contributing to the community’s flesh-and-blood collective lived-experience.

Qohelet’s “I” is constantly in active interaction with his surroundings through the dynamics of the cycle of “seeing-reflecting-perceiving-concluding” (1:14-18; 2:1-26; 3:16-22; 4:1-12, 15-16; 5:13-20; 6:1-12; 7:15-18, 25-29; 8:10-12, 14-17; 9:1-18;

² Or, as Anthony C. Thiselton calls it, “life-worlds” (1992, 247–52). David R. Blumenthal draws on the same concept and refers to the whole flesh-and-blood lived-experience of an individual as a “text-of-life” (1993).

³ Deborah Schiffrin’s approach to narrative analysis brings about the power and effectiveness of constructing the self and identity for individuals.

⁴ Postmodern theorists differ considerably about the determinacy of the context and agency of the self. However, as a commonly accepted maxim, the postmodern self is socially constructed, fluidic, and multiple.

10:5-15). Rooted in the Chinese mentality, the idea of corporate personality shapes the path for Chinese readers to initiatively orchestrate our individual “text-of-life”—the “small self” (*Xiao Wo*) into the bigger whole—the “Mega Text/Grand Narrative” (*Da Wo*). This interconnectedness of the components of “self-community-‘life-con text’-narrative” becomes the *interpretive thrust* of my ethno-cultural reading. At the same time, I seek to exemplify the vibrant dynamics of “a” version of narrational hermeneutics.

**The Chinese concept of “Emptiness/Meaninglessness”
in response to the bold announcement in the summary
appraisal: “Everything is utterly meaningless!”**

There is no equivalent term for “meaningless/senselessness” in Chinese philosophy. Buddhism does emphasize on “emptiness” which may resemble the meaning of the Hebrew word *הבל* (*hebel* “vanity”) used many times in Ecclesiastes. The Chinese perception of “meaninglessness” is not so much a philosophical concept; it is rather engrained in one’s lived experience. On the larger scale, the “cultural revolution” (1966–76) and the June-4 massacre in Tiananmen Square (1989) were the most unforgettable dark moments in Chinese modern history. The drastic political changes, famine, national disasters, civil wars, and most recently, the extent of the helplessness felt by the people of Hong Kong over the failure of the umbrella democratic movement,⁵ have all left a lasting impact on the global Chinese diaspora communities. With sheer disappointment toward the government of Hong Kong/China and a deep sense of powerlessness, immigrant families and the 1.5 generation (youths) in Canada know very well the meaning of “meaninglessness”!

The “I”-voice of Qohelet invites all readers to identify with him the kind of vanity and senselessness that he has witnessed under the sun, and the emotive impact that these “commonalities” bear on him—“Everything is utterly meaningless” (1:1, 12–14; 2:1)! The magnitude of the absurdity in life (cf. 2:7; 3:16–17; 7:15; 8:12–14) drives Qohelet to a weighty summary appraisal: seeking to make some sense out of the nonsensicality in life is like “chasing after the wind”—doomed to fail! What he shares with readers are not merely deep, self-reflective statements; the weight of his outcries is found in the burdensome commonalities that he embraces (in all “flesh”) and his address to slices of the reality of the “Grand Narrative” in which all readers (Chinese or non-Chinese) share and contribute to crafting—again, with our flesh and blood (Leung Lai 2014, 214–16).

As I put my “I” (small self [*Xiao Wo*]), into the communal “we” (big self [*Da Wo*]) of Chinese readers, I have found the eruption and intensity of Qohelet’s “outcry” both enlightening and liberating. In a culture that values the communal dimension of lived-experience and discourages the autonomy of the “self”—reading Ecclesiastes and

⁵ Perceived as the first democratic movement of Hong Kong (as China’s “Special Legislative Region”) which involved and was supported by the majority of her citizens—people from all walks of life and professions.

hearing the “I”-voice of Qohelet provide the body of “language” for Chinese readers to cry out boldly as we resonate with the rational mindset and the emotive disturbance of Qohelet. Like the psalmist of Psalm 44, Chinese faith communities are encouraged to reclaim the costly loss of lament—“crying out heavenwards towards God” out of our collective/respective situatedness.

Text and lived-experience and the Chinese notion of perseverance

In rethinking contextual issues, it is a commonly accepted maxim that “all content is subject to context” and “there is no text without context” (Fetzer and Oishi 2011). Meaning-significance is context-bound, but context is boundless. Appropriating the collective message of Ecclesiastes to the context of the Chinese diaspora community is, in essence, a “context-selection” enterprise. In a culture that regards “eating bitterness” (literally, or “perseverance” conceptually) as one of the highest virtues, Chinese readers have been nurtured with a better capacity in enduring suffering (to the extent of extreme trials in life) and in coping with difficulties in one’s life-context. In the case of Ecclesiastes, Chinese readers can have a better grip of the core message engrained in the book—“embracing *co-existing dialectic tensions is the way to live!*” To translate this to the meaning-significance for Chinese readers, it could be dynamically articulated as—instead of finding a way to cope, the Chinese diaspora community would tend to have acquired the inner strength to sustain ourselves as we embrace dialectic tensions in our individual and communal life contexts. Deeply rooted in Chinese ideology, the ability of “sustaining in tension” is more esteemed than that of “resolving tension” This culturally and ideologically shaped approach to life and its sheer reality (i.e., life is complex and full of dialectic tensions) is acquired through the passing on of family legacy and cultural values.

Text and praxis: toward “a” paradigm of “How to Live”

In what ways would the outcome of a Chinese Canadian culture-specific reading contribute toward “a” paradigm of “How to live”?

The discussion in the previous sections provides a community-based and ideologically/culturally shaped profile of the Chinese reader. As a point of departure, I will focus on the juxtaposition of the Chinese community’s capacity in embracing coexisting tensions in life and a newly emerged reading strategy for the Book of Ecclesiastes (i.e., reading “cross the grains” (2013, 265–78; Leung Lai 2014, 214–16)). On the one hand, this is a unique perspectival reading of the book. On the other hand, this reading may potentially add yet another layer of depth to the meaning-significance of Ecclesiastes as appropriated by the Chinese community. Not only it is meant to provide an exemplar of “narrative hermeneutics,” but also, I aim at demonstrating “a” Chinese-specific version on “How to Live”—one that is rooted in the collective lived-experience of the Chinese diaspora community and is brought to the foreground through the vehicle of a “cross-graining” reading strategy.

Reading Ecclesiastes ideological-critically with a Chinese lens: Reading “Cross the Grains”

i. Voice and ideology:

The interface of voice and ideology is firmly established in the field of biblical studies (Leung Lai 2011, 30–39; Landy 2004, 113–51; Landy 2000, 19–36). Ecclesiastes is predominantly an “I”-text, where the character speaks in the first-person “I”-voice, but it is also a polyphony (multi-voiced). Identification of the different voices represented in Ecclesiastes has been an area of interest especially in the recent past (Holmstedt 2010, 1–27, 75–83; Bartholomew 2009, 75–83; Fox 1997, 83–106). Incorporating earlier attempts, Kyle R. Greenwood has provided a precise analysis of the three voices in the book.

The *first* voice is the collective voice of the sages, referred to as the “true voice of wisdom,” which primarily speaks in the second-person imperative. It represents the wisdom tradition in ancient Israel (or embedded ideology in the text). The *second* voice is the voice of Qohelet speaking as Solomon in the captivating first-person “I”-voice. It represents the reshaped ideology of Qohelet which is cast in sharp contrast with the embedded ideology in the text (the wisdom tradition). The *third* voice serves as the “Frame Narrator,” and is found in the third-person sections of chapters 1 and 12.⁶ My reading leads me to *add* to these identifiable voices another two voices: (1) the voice of the epilogist in 12:9–14 who seeks to provide a quick fix to the surfaced tensions from chapter 1 to 12:8 through Qohelet’s search for meaning; and (2) the inner voice of Qohelet which emerges from the imaginary dialogue within monologues (e.g., “I said with my heart saying, I, behold” [cf. 1:16; 2:1, 15; 3:17]).

Along the above-stated interpretive path, there is another voice, the interpretive voice of the Chinese reader representing the *readerly ideology* one brings to the text, interacting with the embedded textual ideologies (of traditional wisdom and that of Qohelet). The textual dynamics is such that there are at least *two levels of readerly response*. Through Qohelet’s compelling “I”-voice, readers are invited to respond to his summary appraisals as he interacts with traditional wisdom ideological—critically. Moreover, the reader is also responding to the epilogist’s attempt to “making-it-right” (12:9–14)—defending the traditional wisdom ideology. This readerly ideology is, in essence, an interpretive choice.

Considering polyphony as the characteristic feature of Ecclesiastes, the analysis and textual dynamics of narration, reflection, inner debate, explanation, and resolution (especially the role of the epilogist in the book) take on new dimensions of meaning. The intertwining of speaking voices in Ecclesiastes provides a framing for reading

⁶ I see the voice of the epilogist in chapter 12 as another distinct voice, seeking to provide a quick fix toward resolution of the existing tensions surfaced in chapters 1–11.

⁷ It is a triple emphatic use of the preacher’s “I”-voice here. As Adele Berlin (1994) has noted, “הנה” (‘Behold’) functions almost like an ‘interior monologue,’ an ‘internalized viewpoint’ that provides a kind of ‘interior vision.’”

and hearing the text,⁸ making this ideological-critical path a vibrant, self-engaging endeavor for the Chinese reader.

As a highly reflective people, the Chinese reader has adopted a worldview that life is made up of a plurality of competing choices (just like the multiplicity of contending speaking voices represented in the book). The Chinese philosophy of life and its ideals is grounded in centuries of rich wisdom tradition (or a “mega-text” crafted with layers of depth through the collective lived-experience of the ancient Chinese community). We all carry the baggage of traditional Chinese values (e.g., the “cause and effect” approach to life: “Be good and you will be rewarded with goodness” in the so-called “order of things”). Against the traditional Israelite wisdom of the “Two-Way Doctrine/Blessing and Cursing” (cf. Deut. 11:26-28; Prov. 3:33; Deuteronomy 28), Qohelet wrestles with the nonsensicality in life in his self-engaged explorations (cf. 6:1-6; 7:7:15; 8:14-17). In like manner, Chinese readers resist coming to terms with the epilogist’s oversimplistic attempt to provide a quick fix to “making-it-right” by defending the traditional wisdom (12:9-14). We are being compelled to echo with the summary appraisal uttered by Qohelet: “Everything is meaningless” if we lay raw our collective lived-experience under the sun against the ideals in traditional Chinese wisdom. The vibrant interpretive thrust for a Chinese reader could be found in the liberating “space”—crying out boldly in affirming the absurdity in life and its nonsensicality. Crossing borders between the home and the host culture, Chinese immigrant families have to go through the journey of alienation, adaptation, assimilation, and, for some, re-orientation in life. Just like the competing speaking voices/ideologies, pleasure or pain, success or failure, blessing or cursing are among the possibilities of this border-crossing experience in the diaspora.

ii. Reading “cross the grains”

Using the imagery of woodworking, just like wood, all texts have grains or directionality. I have picked up Carol A. Newsom’s “plywood” analysis here but with a more focused appropriation (Newsom 2009). There are two conventional reading strategies that could be applied to the reading of any given text: reading “with the grain” and reading “against the grain.” Engaging Ecclesiastes calls for a reading that is “crossing the grains.” “Cross-graining” is applied to the production of plywood, through gluing together layers (veneers) of adjacent piles having the wood grain at right angles to each other, a high-quality, high-strength wood panel is formed. Specifically, plywood is bonded with grains running against one another and perpendicular to the grain direction. Several thin layers of wood bonded together are stronger than one single thick layer of wood. It produces the strongest kind of wood that is hard to bend. As a Chinese reader, I have found this “cross-graining” imagery quite fitting to a reading strategy that incorporates both conventional “against the grain” and “with the grain” and has the potential of moving into a multilayered, more enriched meaning of the book.

The narrational-hermeneutical thrust could be found in two levels of Qohelet’s reflection in life. *First*, Qohelet is interacting “against the grain” of the ideologies embedded in traditional Israelite wisdom (his “pretext”). *Second*, Qohelet is inviting

⁸ For texts of a polyphonic nature, the practice of “hearing the text” (i.e., “the hermeneutics of hearing”) is perhaps, a necessity (Snodgrass 2002).

all readers (his first audience and contemporary Chinese readers) from our different ideological locations to respond to his discourse “with the grain” through his compelling “I”-voice.⁹ This involves consideration of the roles of both the narrator (1:1-11; 7:27)¹⁰ and the epilogist (12:9-14) (Shead 1997, 86–91).

Reading as an engaged reader seeking to appropriate the book’s message to the life-context of the Chinese community, four ideologies could be identified in this “cross-graining” endeavor: (1) the ideology of traditional Chinese wisdom to which we are interacting “against the grain” (i.e., “be good and you will be blessed,” and this is “the order of things”); (2) the multilayered ideology upheld by Qohelet and embedded in our community’s collective lived experience (e.g., life is utterly meaningless in spite of all human efforts; do enjoy life while we can [cf. the *carpe diem* short sayings: 9:7-9; 11:7-9]); (3) be sustained in dialectic tensions in life while entertaining the reshaped ideology proposed by the narrator (i.e., defending the traditional wisdom and its values) and especially by the epilogist’s quick-fix approach to making-it-right in 12:8-14; and (4) the readerly ideology as a result of “cross-graining”—navigating through the options of one’s interpretive choice and negotiating by placing the existing interpretive tensions side by side as an “enriched” whole.

While Qohelet’s ideology clashes with the ideology ingrained in traditional wisdom, Chinese readers are left with *three interpretive choices*: (1) being drawn to the affirmation of the preacher’s ideology—the absurdity of life overarching the “order of things”¹¹; (2) adopting the perspectives proposed by the narrator and epilogist, reaffirming the reality of the two-way doctrine, or one that is “cause-effect” oriented (12:13-14; cf. Deut. 11:26-28); or (3) bringing into the reading another *readerly* ideology through embracing, rejecting (especially, refuse to accept the epilogist’s oversimplistic way of providing a quick fix to defend tradition wisdom¹²), or reshaping Qohelet’s and epilogist’s ideology through cross-graining. Putting the two conflicting ideologies together (i.e., [1] and [2] above)—like the production of plywood, with wood grains running against each other (i.e., “cross-graining”)—has the potential of coming up with a more enriched, multilayered meaning-significance of the collective message of the book. As a Chinese reader in diaspora, I have just made my interpretive choice—life is complex, the plurality of existing dialectic tensions is part of life’s reality. They are the “givens.” Embracing tensions gives diction to “how we should live.”

iii. What would a reading that is “Cross the Grains” yield?

For an average engaged reader, reading the whole book of Ecclesiastes “with the grain” or “against the grain” are both possible and natural. The reflective “I” voice of Qohelet has the power to entice readers’ engagement into his “I”-discourse, reading “with

⁹ This could be considered as a unique example in the Hebrew Bible.

¹⁰ For a detailed analysis of the narrative structure of Ecclesiastes, esp. the “frame narrator” in 1:2, 7:27; and 12:8-14, see Christianson 1998, 45–50.

¹¹ The same dynamics and alternatives have been spelled out in Walton (2011, 130).

¹² Michael Fox (1997) supports the idea that in an effort to protect Qohelet, the epilogist is combing **הביל** and **רָאָה** to present a composite view of reality: fear God is the right attitude, along with the trust that God is “just.” However, to Roland Murphy (1992), reading Ecclesiastes from the perspective of the epilogist as exemplified above is an “oversimplification” of the preacher’s ideological conflicts as echoed everywhere in his “I”-voice.

the grain” along his treatise. However, as a Chinese reader, I find that the role of the epilogist is at odds with the deep, reflective momentum in this “I”-discourse. In a way, it disrupts the vein of Qohelet’s arguments—that there is no order of things in human experience under the sun—total chaos. In this respect, reading the whole book of Ecclesiastes “against the grain,” the epilogist made an overly simplistic attempt toward a quick fix for the limits of wisdom. As with the Book of Job, it is an open ending. Readers find it difficult to come to a closure of the senselessness of life laid raw in front of us with such a heavy statement—“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep his commandments—for this applies to every person” (12:13). This conclusion *deconstructs* the whole ethos spelled out in Qohelet’s burdensome “I.” It *silences* the inquiring voice of all “faith-seeking-understanding” inquiries! One thing stands out clearly—for the book of Ecclesiastes, either reading “against the grain” or “with the grain” are inadequate in grasping the totality of the book’s message.

As a Chinese reader, I seek to further spell out the vibrant dynamics of my *interpretive path*: reading “cross the grains.” Two distinct ideologies surface in the two different directional readings exemplified above. *First*, Qohelet holds on to the ideology that all attempts to search for the order of things in this chaotic world will meet with sheer disappointment. *Second*, the ideology ingrained in the text—“fear God and keep his commandments” is required for all humanity. Qohelet seeks to embrace both in all “flesh” but finds it burdensome and oppressive. The epilogist seeks to defend the latter by underscoring twice in the “afterword” of Qohelet’s “I”-discourse: “And more than that” (12:9) and “more than these” (12:12). Two sets of ideologies are presented side by side. My attempt is neither to harmonize (synthesize) the two conflicting ideologies nor to pick one against the other as a hermeneutical choice. A reading that “crosses the grains” of both ideologies may help to put the two conflicting ideologies side by side together as “coexisting realities.” Moreover, the nature of these coexisting tensions is of a polar nature. The woodworking imagery of the production of plywood fits in beautifully to this endeavor. By placing the veneers with wood grains running against each other and gluing them together at right angles perpendicular to each other, I aim at uncovering the existence of the *many cross-graining fibers* that constitute Ecclesiastes—that is, the collective message of the book. Shaped by our cultural and ideological values, Chinese readers could have the capacity to engage in this “cross-graining” reading endeavor.

Toward “a” paradigm of “How to Live”

The purpose of this “cross-graining” reading trajectory/directionality is not gearing toward resolutions, but the “hows” of embracing life. As stated previously, the Chinese reader is nurtured with the kind of capacity to embrace life along with all its complexities. In this sense, when reading Ecclesiastes within the contextual situatedness of Chinese readers in diaspora, it appears to be a profoundly significant book—providing “a” version toward a practical theology on “How to live our lives.” With the shared *common denominator* of the “collective lived-experience under the sun,” we echo each of the outpoured cries of Qohelet and the deep-rooted, burdensome (though occasionally uplifting) concluding statements he utters. The shared ideological reflections of

Qohelet are not constructed sophistically or after a rigid frame of reference. Rather, it is rooted in the “flesh-and-blood” collective lived-experience of all humanity. This reflects the true essence of narrational hermeneutics. Embracing coexisting tensions (at times of polar nature) is the *way* to conduct our lives—to *live*. Amid the harshness of life, there are still glimpses of uplifting momentum (e.g., 7:29; 8:12b; 11:7-9; 12:9-12).

Conclusion

Returning to the question, “In what ways would a culture-specific reading contribute towards ‘a’ paradigm of ‘how to live’?” To some, to be able to identify what makes my reading an ethnic-gender-culture- “specific” reading is, perhaps, wishful thinking. On the other hand, conforming to the loosely established Chinese Canadian or Asian North American way of reading may handicap ourselves and minimize our capacity to transform the meaning-significance of the text of Ecclesiastes. To this end, to what extent could we speak of the contribution of this “cross-graining” reading and appropriate its results toward “a” paradigm of “How to Live” as Chinese-specific? Or, alternatively, what makes it a uniquely “Leung Lai” reading that reflects, to a certain extent, a Chinese Canadian woman’s reading?

Afterword: mapping the term “Narrative Hermeneutics”

This reading provides a mapping of the practice of “narrative hermeneutics,” laying out a robust drama of the dogma rooted in humanity’s collective lived-experience. We ask, what are the “normative” claims that could be drawn from a culture-specific reading of the Book of Ecclesiastes—in our case, reading it narratively hermeneutically? In hammering out a reading strategy for Ecclesiastes, somehow, what looms large in this endeavor is that it not only addresses the mind cognitively, but also appeals to the soul emotively. As a Chinese woman biblical scholar, I have learned something essential regarding the task of biblical interpretation; it is by demand, a vibrant and vigorous engagement of the whole “self”—mind, will, emotion, and imagination. As I put my Chinese “small self” (*Xiao Wo*) into the “bigger self” (*Da Wo*), or alternatively, as I engage my flesh-and-blood experience in my community’s collective lived-experience, I can identify several layers of connectedness in this grand narrative.

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