Finally Belonging:
The Reception of the Parable of the Prodigal Son Among Asian Americans

Daniel K. Eng
University of Cambridge

Introduction

This article examines the reception of Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32) among Asian American readers. First, we will discuss the dynamics of the parable that show similarity with Asian values, particularly (1) *honor and shame* and (2) *Confucian values.* Second, this article will discuss the parable's elements that mirror the experience of those with Asian descent in America in three areas: immigration, the model minority, and liminality.

Asian Values

In what follows, we will examine the values held by the original hearers of Jesus' parable, and demonstrate how they show affinity to values prevalent in Asian cultures: (1) *honor and shame* and (2) *Confucian ideals*.

Honor and Shame in the Parable

In this section, we will examine the dynamics of honor and shame in the parable, keeping in view the honor-based worldview prevalent among Asian Americans.[1] Like many Eastern cultures, the social values of the first-century Mediterranean world were built on the priority of the group. In such collectivistic cultures, the actions of an individual affect the honor of the collective. One would be expected to place the reputation of the group above one's own needs. On one hand, *honor* is a positive social value associated with one's status within the collective. On the other hand, *shame* is a response of diminished esteem connected to failing to meet the group's expectations. Both honor and shame can either be *ascribed* at birth and *achieved* through behavior. In addition, honor relates to *acceptance* in a group, while shame relates to *exclusion*. In what follows, we will highlight how an Asian American reader might respond as the honor and shame dynamics shape the parable through its three main characters.

Much like its first-century hearers, many Asian Americans would grieve at the younger son's leaving with his inheritance. By taking his property and departing (Luke 15:13), he leaves his father without a large portion of his livelihood. While the Jewish teaching allowed for a patriarch to give assets to his children before he died, he still had the right to live off of them until his death.[2] In addition, adult children in first-century Rome, much like adult children in

[1] I have written elsewhere in more detail regarding the dynamics of honor and shame in the parable. See Daniel K. Eng, "The Widening Circle: Honour, Shame, and Collectivism in the Parable of the Prodigal Son," *The Expository Times* 130, no. 5 (2019): 193–201.
[2] See, for example, Sir 33:19–21 and *m. B. Bat.* 8.7.

modern Asian cultures, were expected to provide for their parents in their old age.[3] Therefore, the younger son shamefully forsakes his responsibility to care for his father, an act condemned in Sirach 3:10–16.[4] Thus, many Asian American readers, who may already see the younger's initial request as insulting to the father, would comprehend the cultural significance of the son renouncing his duty to care for his father and denying him a significant portion of his subsistence.

The strong identification with a collective facilitates the Asian American reader to understand how the younger son's actions reflect poorly on his family and his people. His spending of the family fortune among foreigners amounts betraying his family and the Jews as a whole. As a result, he is separated from his people, excluded from relationship. The younger son's shame is poignantly illustrated in his self-assessment. He assigns an intrinsic worth to himself because of his actions: he concludes he is unworthy to be his father's son (Luke 15:18, 21).

Understanding the younger son's shame allows the Asian American reader to identify with the ostracized hearers of Jesus' parable. Much like the younger son, the tax collectors and sinners present (Luke 15:1) also experienced shame. Their actions caused them to be ostracized from their own people. They are outcasts, regarded as unacceptable.[5]

While an Asian American reader might be shocked at the younger son's actions, the older son's actions are also disgraceful. His refusal to join the celebration violates the expectation that the eldest son would have a prominent role in important family occasions.[6] More shockingly, however, the older son shames his father with (1) his refusal to enter and (2) his angry tirade. Doing so at a public occasion hosted by the father is a deep affront to him, one that "cuts more deeply" than the younger son's earlier actions.[7] The older son denies his father the honor due to him for being a generous benefactor. The public display of disrespect and insubordination would be unthinkable in many Asian American households.

While told in a parable, the tactic that Jesus employs to challenge the Pharisees and scribes (Luke 15:2) may seem drastic to the Asian American reader, since it publicly shames them. However, this is an occasion for drastic measures. Their grumbling reflects their hateful attitude towards their 'sinner' brothers and sisters: they continue marginalizing them. They do not approve of Jesus' inclusion.

Both a first-century hearer and a modern Asian American reader would be surprised at the father's actions towards both of his sons. His acts violate the norms of society; they would be considered shameful. As the *paterfamilias,* he was probably expected to refuse his younger son's

[3] Richard Saller, "Corporal Punishment, Authority, Obedience," in *Marriage, Divorce, and Children in Ancient Rome*, ed. Beryl Rawson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 148; Peter Balla, *The Child-Parent Relationship in the New Testament and Its Environment* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 64–68.

[4] In addition, Charlie Trimm makes a thorough argument that the command to honor one's parents in the Decalogue was primarily meant for adult children and includes physical support of elderly parents. See Charlie Trimm, "Honor Your Parents: A Command for Adults," *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 60, no. 2 (2017): 247–63.

[5] For more on the "factional term" *sinner,* see James D. G. Dunn, "Pharisees, Sinners, and Jesus," in *Social World of Formative Christianity and Judaism: Essays in Tribute to Howard Clark Kee*, ed. Jacob Neusner et al. (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress, 1988), 277.

[6] Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 132.

[7] Kenneth E. Bailey, *Finding the Lost: Cultural Keys to Luke 15* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1992), 170.

demand or stop his son from leaving with the family fortune.[8] In welcoming his son back, the father shames himself. Lifting his robes to run to his son, he loses his dignity.[9] In addition, the father defiles himself by embracing his unclean son. The father's response to the older son would also be deviant and shameful. He responds lovingly to his older son (Luke 15:31) after he has been publicly shamed by him. Instead of punishing both sons for their defiance, he responds with love and acceptance. For many Asian Americans, not being punished by parents for shameful activity (through withdrawal of affection or diminished status in the family) would seem farfetched. The Asian American reader might also be shocked that a proud patriarch would lower himself and show affection to his sons who affronted him.

Through the father's response to the older son, Jesus challenges the elite Jews to change their attitudes. They are called to celebrate the inclusion of their brethren, the tax collectors and sinners. Jesus uses the parable to urge the Pharisees and scribes to stop shaming and excluding the deviant, but to celebrate their inclusion (See Luke 15:32). In describing the father, Jesus teaches that the heavenly Father desires to include sinners in his family above adhering to custom or convention. The shameful acts of the father in the parable should not be minimized; they illustrate the heavenly Father's cost in welcoming the wayward, the ones marginalized. The Asian American reader is challenged, like the older son, to accept the fundamental nature of this inclusivity in the Jesus movement.

Confucian Ideals

The societal expectations portrayed in the parable are similar to those in cultures influenced by Confucianism. Confucius taught that social order is maintained when individuals adhere to normative hierarchical relationships, such as *father-son* and *old-young*.[10] Furthermore, fulfilling one's duty to the larger group (family, race) is of greater worth than what feels right or honest to oneself.[11] In the parable, the older son's angry speech (Luke 15:29–30) reflects values that closely mirror Confucian ideals. Remarkably, the older son is correct about his younger brother's heinous impropriety.[12] After all, the younger son has failed to express filial piety; he has dishonored his father and failed to care for the father's needs.

Furthermore, the older son appears to believe that no matter how hard he works, he is being cheated out of a reward. He claims perfect obedience, yet he sees his disgraceful brother receive honor. In lamenting the absence of a young goat to enjoy with his friends, he appeals to

[8] The reputation of a patriarch in Roman society was tied to having an orderly household. See Emiel Eyben, "Fathers and Sons," in *Marriage, Divorce, and Children in Ancient Rome*, ed. Beryl Rawson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 115–16.

[9] Alicia Batten asserts that the shameful nature of the man's running lies in its seemingly feminine appearance. See Alicia Batten, "Dishonour, Gender and the Parable of the Prodigal Son," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 13, no. 2 (1997): 194.

[10] Wei-Ming Tu, "Probing the 'Three Bonds' and 'Five Relationships' in Confucian Humanism," in *Confucianism and the Family*, ed. George A. De Vos and Walter H. Slote (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), 123.

[11] Paul Tokunaga, *Invitation to Lead: Guidance for Emerging Asian American Leaders* (InterVarsity Press, 2012), 36; Wei-Ming Tu, "Confucius and Confucianism," in *Confucianism and the Family*, ed. George A. De Vos and Walter H. Slote (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), 6, 13.

[12] For more discussion on the older son's experience in comparison with that of a Confucian family, see Rohun Park, "Revisiting the Parable of the Prodigal Son for Decolonization: Luke's Reconfiguration of Oikos in 15:11-32," *Biblical Interpretation* 17, no. 5 (September 1, 2009): 512–13.

the pull of *obligation* and *reciprocation*, which is also valued by the Confucian mindset.[13] His angst comes out in anger as he complains about the unfairness of the father's actions. An Asian American who upholds the values of obligation and reciprocation may sympathize with the older son's complaint.

Ironically, the older son's angry tirade, which is shameful in Jesus' context, would also draw the ire of an audience that adheres to Confucian values. Confucius taught that parents must only be gently admonished, and that children should never be resentful (Analects 4.18).[14] Thus, the older son's tirade would be a great affront in a culture influenced by Confucianism.

Furthermore, the contrast between the father and the older son would be appreciated by an Asian American familiar with Confucian values. While the father shows mercy and compassion to his younger son, the older son does not show mercy to his brother. Calling this brother *this son of yours* (Luke 15:30), the older son effectively denies relationship with him. Furthermore, the older son publicly maligns his brother, shaming him in front of the guests. Confucius taught that family members should cover up each other's misconduct (Analects 13.18),[15] something the father in the parable does, but the older son does not. Many Asian American readers who are influenced by Confucian values would be horrified by the older son's public reviling of his brother and father.

The Minority Experience

Elements of Jesus' parable mirror the experience of many Americans with Asian descent. In what follows, I will discuss how certain elements of the parable mirror three experiences of Asian Americans: *immigration*, *the model minority* and *liminality.* Notably, as we will see, aspects of both sons' experiences in different places have affinity with the America-based experiences of those with Asian descent.

Immigration

First, the younger son's leaving from his father parallels the experience of immigration. The Lukan Jesus describes the totality of the son's departure from his home: he *gathered everything* (συναγαγὼν πάντα, Luke 15:13). In addition, Jesus places emphasis on the sheer distance the man travels. The text uses ἀπεδήμησεν (*he went on a journey,* 15:13), a verb found only in the Synoptic Gospels to refer to traveling far from home.[16]

In the new land, the distance is doubly emphasized by the adjective μακράν (*far off,* 15:13), which describes the younger son's destination country. This term is again used at Luke 15:20, describing the distance between the father and the son. The son seeks better circumstances in the distant country. In the same way, Asian immigrants to America take all they have, often leaving relatives in order to relocate. They seek a better life, and going to a distant country, their "Gold Mountain," to find it.

[13] Virstan B.Y. Choy, "Decision Making and Conflict in the Congregation," in *People on the Way: Asian North Americans Discovering Christ, Culture, and Community*, ed. David Ng (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1996), 251.
[14] Confucius, *The Analects of Confucius*, trans. Burton Watson, Translations from the Asian Classics (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 34.
[15] Confucius, 91.
[16] See Matt 21:33; 25:14–15; Mark 12:1; Luke 20:9.

The Model Minority

The older son's complaint illustrates his value of industriousness, which is mirrored by the Asian American identity as the model minority. However, like the older son, Asian Americans often feel that they receive unfair treatment in their homeland.

Asian Americans share the 'model minority' stereotype that they, as a group succeed in America by working hard and not upsetting the status quo. This dutiful industriousness is mirrored in the older son. He has worked hard for years, always fulfilling his own duty and never even indulging in a young goat (Luke 15:29). Asian Americans may find that this speech deeply resonates with them, as many work hard without complaining.

However, along with the industriousness comes a common angst when someone viewed as less deserving is given honor. The older son, seeing his deviant brother receive a party with the fattened calf, is furious. Examples of similar angst among Asian Americans can be found in the controversy surrounding race and college admissions, or being passed over for a job promotion in favor of someone with lesser qualifications. The older son's complaint ultimately mirrors the 'model minority' experience of working hard for assimilation in American society yet still feeling cheated.[17]

Liminality

The younger son's experience in the distant country parallels the Asian American experience of liminality. In the new land, he compromises the revered values of his own people. One could possibly add apostasy to his sins, without the opportunity to attend a synagogue and hear the Torah. In addition to being separated from his people, he is an outsider in his new country, and destitute in the land that previously held great promise. The only job he can find is the lowliest: feeding pigs. The reference to *a citizen of that country* (15:15) highlights the fact that he is not a citizen but an outsider.[18] The younger son is both separated from his people and marginalized in his new home.

Like the younger son, many Asian Americans, experiences liminality, having no sense of belonging.[19] Many Asian immigrants find that they are denied the opportunities they had in their country of origin. Like the younger son, many end up settling for jobs for which they are overqualified. Matthew D. Kim recommends that Asian American preachers consider how they themselves have encountered marginalization in America, and how they can assist their "congregants to embrace the narratives of biblical characters to cope with their pain."[20] This

---

[17] Derald Wing Sue and David Sue, *Counseling the Culturally Diverse: Theory and Practice*, 2nd ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1990), 329–30.

[18] Fittingly, Ambrose of Milan comments on the younger son, "Surely, whoso separates himself from Christ is an exile from his country, a citizen of the world…Let us not look askance at those who return from a distant land, because we, too, were in a distant land, as Isaias teaches." Saint Ambrose of Milan, *Exposition of the Holy Gospel According to Saint Luke: With, Fragments on the Prophecy of Isaias*, trans. Theodosia Tomkinson (Etna, CA: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 1998), 318.

[19] Russell Jeung recalls a Chinese American pastor lamenting that he and his church members are "in other people's country." Ostracized from mainstream society and culturally estranged from the immigrant community, Asian Americans are especially alienated. See Russell Jeung, *Faithful Generations: Race and New Asian American Churches* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 38.

[20] Matthew D. Kim, "Asian-American Preaching," in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching: A Comprehensive Resource for Today's Communicators*, ed. Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson (Zondervan, 2009), 201.

'hyphenated identity' of not belonging is painfully familiar to the experience of many Asian American readers.

The yearning to belong among many Asian Americans renders the corresponding elements of the parable especially appealing. The Jesus movement, as epitomized in the parable, has widened the boundaries to include the marginalized into a new family, and urges the celebration of this inclusion. Unlike the family in the parable, inclusion into this family is not based on descent, but on an invitation accepted through faith.[21]

Conclusion

Many Asian Americans remarkably share an experience that makes them relate to both sons in the parable. Coming from a far country like the younger son, the Asian American is beckoned by the promise of inclusion in the family of Jesus. Having worked hard to assimilate and succeed like the older son, the Asian American is invited to rest—not work—in eternal familial security.

Ultimately, the message of Christianity features a divine figure who endures the shame of the cross in order to remove the shame of the lost and include them into his family. They are no longer ostracized and excluded; they are given full status and high esteem. Followers of Jesus place their hope in being honored with him in the end.[22] This is indeed good news for the liminal.

[21] Tat-siong Benny Liew writes that Christian community is portrayed through a differentiation between *faith* and *family*. See *What Is Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics? Reading the New Testament* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), 40–44.

[22] Benjamin C. Shin and Sheryl Takagi Silzer, *Tapestry of Grace: Untangling the Cultural Complexities in Asian American Life and Ministry* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 45–46.