Abstract

This contextual theological study addresses the gap in Asian-American discipleship by employing a contextual theological approach, focusing on integrating Asian cultural traits with scriptural principles. Utilizing insights from Bryan S.K. Kim, Donald R. Atkinson, and Peggy H. Yang, the study examines key cultural traits including collectivism, conformity to norms, emotional self-control, family recognition through achievement, filial piety, and cultural humility in contrast with American values. By proposing a framework of Christian marginality, the article aims to provide a foundational model for effective Asian American discipleship. This approach seeks to enhance the development of culturally relevant discipleship strategies within the field of Asian American ministries in the context that embraces all Asian Americans from various ethnic heritages.

Key Words: *Asian American Discipleship, Ministry Strategy, Spiritual Formation, Contextualized Framework, Asian Cultural Traits*

Introduction

Discipleship in the 21st century faces significant challenges. John Stott observed that the church's growth in the latter half of the 20th century, continuing into the 21st century, has often been "growth without depth," marked by insufficient advancement in discipleship (Stott, quoted in Steer 2009, 267). Despite numerous analyses and strategies, there remains a notable lack of focus on Asian American discipleship, a gap that is glaringly evident in the theological research landscape. For instance, the Theological Research Exchange Network (TREN) contains only 13 theses or dissertations addressing Asian Americans, none of which specifically focus on discipleship, despite a catalog of over 18,511 theological papers from 151 institutions (TREN 2024; U.S. Census Bureau 2016). This gap is particularly concerning given the

Asian American population in the U.S., which the U.S. Census Bureau estimated at 21 million in 2015, projected to double by 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau 2016).

This article addresses the need for a robust, scriptural discipleship framework tailored to Asian American contexts. Utilizing the six common Asian cultural traits identified by Bryan S.K. Kim, Donald R. Atkinson, and Peggy H. Yang—collectivism, conformity to norms, emotional self-control, family recognition through achievement, filial piety, and cultural humility—this article explores the cultural tensions between these traits and their American counterparts (Kim et al. 1999, 342-352). It proposes the concept of Christian marginality as a solution, integrating these competing cultural poles to form a foundational framework for Asian American discipleship.

Definition of Key Terms

Asian: Individuals originating from the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent.[1]

Asian American: An American citizen of Asian descent.

Christian Marginality: The scriptural integration of conflicting cultural values through theologizing (Wan and Raibley 2022, 89-90).

Discipleship: The process of glorifying God by living under the authority of Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit, in fellowship with His people, aiming to become like Christ and help others do the same (Wilkins 1997, 12).

Framework: A theoretical systematic structure which serves as a foundation for theoretical and practical refinement and elaboration in formulation and implementation of various techniques, strategies, conjectures, evaluation, and assessments.

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[1] This definition was taken and used from the U.S. Census Bureau: U.S. Census Bureau, "*About*" (July 2013),l http://www. census.gov/topics/population/race/about.htm.

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Christian Marginality From the Six Asian Cultural Traits with Their Competing American Cultural Traits

As highlighted by Jane M. Bennett in *Education for the Intercultural Experience*, failure of forming Christian marginality from the Asian culture and the American culture is characterized by disintegration in shifting cultures, loose boundary control, difficulty in decision making, alienation, self-absorption, no recognized reference group, troubled by ambiguity, etc. (Bannett 1994, 113). This section in this article will focus on the six cultural traits that are commonly found for being an Asian along their American counter cultural traits, and provide a scriptural foundation in how to formulate Christian marginality for each of the trait pairs (categories). While this article does not aim to address foundations for each of the six categories extensively, it aims to provide scriptural backbones for each which further delineation and Christian marginality can be elaborated and extended. This would be reasonable given the limitations of the page numbers in this article. Nonetheless, such provision would be enough to facilitate and fabricate further work in each of the respective areas for Asian American discipleship as a whole.

The following table summarizes the six cultural traits from the Asian culture and their American counterparts at tension in tandem.

Table 1. Asian and American Cultural Traits That are in Tension With One Another
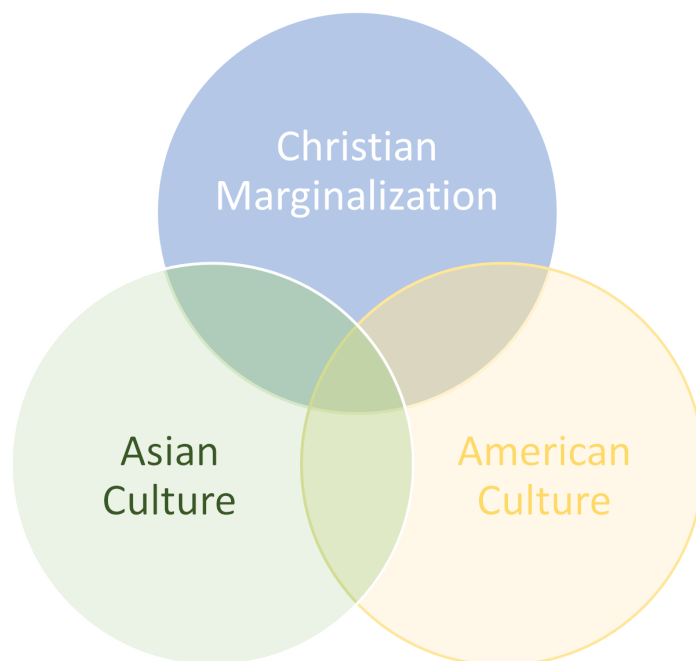
Common Asian Cultural Traits	Common American Cultural Traits
Collectivism	Voluntarism
Conformity to norms	Change and Mobility
Emotional Self-Control	Openness, Honesty, and Direct Communication
Family Recognition Through Achievement	Individual Achievement for Personal Success
Humility	Egocentrism
Filial Piety	Independence, Self- Help, Self-Reliance

Even though an individual's interaction with an Asian culture might be minimal, because culture is the context/consequence of patterned interaction of person with Being(s)/being(s), the formation of Christian marginality is vital for diverse scenarios, contexts, and in extent even though the patterned behavior and thought may be

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minimal in their complexities in a person; the degree of complexities might be low in magnitude, but its involvement and its impact on an individual's life cannot be ignored regardless.[2]

Figure 2.

The Necessary Scriptural Integration of Asian Culture and American Culture for Christian Marginality in an Asian American Disciple[3]

In the following pages, consideration for each of the six common Asian cultural traits, their   American counterparts, and Christian marginality formation for each of the six trait pairs is given with some relational transformationalism applications.

"Collectivism" versus "Voluntarism"

Formation of Christian marginality from the convergence of collectivism and voluntarism must result in spiritual contours that includes but which does not limit to the following: 1. recognition of an individual's value and uniqueness (2 Tim. 2:19; Rom. 12:14-15, 14:12) 2. proper recognition of a corporate (or group) value and the identity of the church (Ecc. 4:12; 1 Cor. 12:12-13, 12:26, Phil. 2:2, 2:4).

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[2] This definition of culture is taken and employed from Enoch Wan and Jon Raibley, *Transformational Change in Christian Ministry*, 2nd ed. (Portland, OR: Western Academic, 2022), 5-6.

[3] Note that the area of overlap between the top circle in the diagram with each of the circles below can vary widely; the theologizing process gets to determine the borders regarding what gets to be included in the Christian marginalization circle from each of the two cultures from the two circles below.

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3. denial of a human sovereignty (Prov. 16:9, 19:21; Ps. 115:3) 4. recognition of God's Sovereignty and His place as the Creator over the creations (Isa. 45:7-9; Eph. 1:11; Col. 1:16-17) 5. recognition of an individual's creatureliness and dependency on God (John 1:3; 1 Tim. 6:13). While modern American voluntarism is anchored in self-autonomy and egocentrism as highlighted by modernity and postmodernity, proper understanding of self involves understanding human being's derivativeness and human creatureliness created in the image of God. Because human beings are not the very image of God but created according to the image as the image bearers (Gen. 1:26; 1 Tim. 6:13; Ps. 62:5; John 15:5), they depend directly on Christ Who is the very image of God for their very ontological substance- for their existence, their beings, their make-up's, and everything given to them both in the present perfect and in the future temporally (John 3:27). Having such truth can safeguard the right knowledge of oneself against American voluntarism that is often characterized by self-autonomy and self-sufficiency, and it can help an individual to properly see himself in light of true and rightful vertical relationship which takes precedence over all other relationships.

While the careful delineation of unscriptural elements from the Asian collectivism (characterized by thinking one's group over self, others' needs over self needs, viewing one's achievement as family's achievements) and America's voluntarism (characterized by self-autonomy and self-sufficiency) in lieu of creating the proper contours for the Christian marginality circle is essential for laying a foundation for Asian American discipleship, the conveyance of the truth in the area both doctrinally and practically from a discipler to a disciplee is additionally affected in what kind of interactions and dynamisms the two persons get to have according to relational transformationalism paradigm.[4] One strategic application of relational transformationalism in this area could be helping the disciplee discover and develop his spiritual gifts. Such help in the discovery and development process of the disciplee's gift would highlight the truthfulness of a disciplee's uniqueness in Christ, deepen his understanding and appreciation of his value in the Body of Christ with others, help him grow to have a deeper appreciation for other believers' values and importance, and help him reflect on the collective roles as a body in seeking the advancement of the kingdom of Christ and His gospel with broadened horizons.

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[4] These descriptions of collectivism directly adopted from Kim et al. for consistency; Bryan S. K. Kim, Donald R. Atkins, Peggy H. Yang, "The Asian Values Scale Development, factor analysis, validation, and reliability" *Journal of Counseling Psychology* (1999): 345. Please refer to the following for more detailed discussion of American voluntarism: Claude S. Fischer, *Made in America: A Social History of American Culture and Character* (Chicago IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 10.

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"Conformity to Norms" versus "Change and Mobility"

Formation of Christian marginality from the convergence of Asian culture's conformity to norms (not deviating from familial and social norms and consideration of bringing disgrace to one's family reputation as the worst thing one can do) with common America's cultural trait of change and mobility (acceptance and appreciation for change as progress and growth) results in refusal of conformity to the world and worldly standards with emphasis in renewal of mind and progressive sanctification after the likeness of Christ.[5] While Asian cultures emphasize to conformity to the norms of a society in general, this can easily lead one to accept scripturally unlawful ideas, transgressional customs, and sinful viewpoints with a lack of discernment. Furthermore, Asian societies' cultural pressure to conform to societal norms and standards stands clearly opposed to the Scripture as Romans 12:2 commands to "not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind." Much more, as Jesus warns to "walk through the narrow door" in Matthew 17:13, the path of discipleship cannot be characterized by conformity to the majority standards nor to a simple compliance to a society's norms and majority standards. On the other hand, recontouring of the cultural trait pairs of the category for Christian incorporation does not imply acceptance of almost any arbitrary change as progress and growth neither. As can be seen from many pages of the Scripture, not all changes are good (i.e. Adam and Eve's change of status before God after eating from the forbidden fruit, Cain's receiving of the curse after killing his brother Abel, etc.). This is further delineated by Enoch Wan as he distinguishes two kinds of change from Being(s)/being(s) to Being(s)/being(s) interactions to be either transformational or transgressional (Wan and Raibley 2022, 7). Contrary to America's commonly held cultural value of equating change as progress and growth, renewal of mind and growth in sanctification after the likeness of Christ needs to be emphasized in Asian American discipleship. Such emphasis is scriptural (2 Thes. 2:13; 2 Tim. 2:21; Col. 3:1, 3:5; Heb. 12:14; etc.), and is especially important in Asian American discipleship who may have some societal collectivistic tendencies left remaining because progressive sanctification demands disciples' as well as disciplees' individualistic responses and roles for synergistic efforts (Col. 3:10; Phil. 3:12; 1 Pet. 1:14-16; 2 Tim. 2:21; 1 Thes. 4:3).

While teaching to refuse conformity to the world and to the worldly standards and emphasizing the renewal of mind and growth in sanctification after the likeness of Christ is essential in Asian-American discipleship, the conveyance of this teaching from

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[5] The defining characteristics of "conformity to norms" was taken from Ki.et al. for consistency; Bryan S. K. Kim, Donald R. Atkins, Peggy H. Yang, "The Asian Values Scale Development, factor analysis, validation, and reliability" *Journal of Counseling Psychology* (1999): 345.

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a discipler to a disciplee is additionally affected in what kind of interactions and dynamics the two get to have according to relational transformationalism. One strategic application of relational transformationalism in this area could be identifying weak areas of a disciplee (i.e. patience, kindness, generosity, etc.), sharing experiences in the areas together, and giving godly and helpful guidance and mentoring in the areas by the discipler to the disicplee. In order to implement this more effectively, a discipler can devise particular settings where the two can be immersed and interact in tandem in relation to those particular weak areas and thereby where both can be strengthened. Such particular settings could be multiple. For instance, this could be requiring participation in larger amount of daily scriptural readings for growth in perseverance, serving frequently in a homeless ministry for more kindness, or cleaning a particular church facility regularly to facilitate growth in diligence and faithfulness (Lk. 16:10) among many others. These settings will provide opportunities for the disciplee to watch the discipler, interact with him, and learn from him not only in "etic" but in "emic" perspectives.

"Emotional Self-Control" versus "Openness, Honesty, and Direct Communication"

Healthy control and management of one's emotions is a crucial part of a discipleship. Nevertheless, such control and management of one's emotions are beyond one's complete control and one's own power. While Asian cultures highly emphasize emotional self-control (adherence to the belief that "one should have sufficient inner resources to resolve emotional problems", association of the ability to control one's emotions as a sign of strength, and belief that "parental love should be implicitly understood and not openly expressed"), due to the lack of total control and one's own power over one's emotions, such emphasis has led many Asians rather to hide their emotions that remain unresolved in the state of conflicts.[6] Because this has led to the state of inner conflicts, it cannot be called as leading to true monitoring, management, and control of one's emotions. On the other hand, the America's general tendency of openness and honesty has allowed many sinful desires and ungodly emotions to be expressed and take root in various aspects of the society. While the Asian culture's emphasis on emotional self-control deserves a merit, it needs to be emphasized that such control and management are not possible solely based on an individual's will and based on mere individual's power. On the other hand, while tolerating an allowable

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[6] These characteristics are adapted directly from Kim et al. for consistency with the research; Bryan S. K. Kim, Donald R. Atkins, Peggy H. Yang, "The Asian Values Scale Development, factor analysis, validation, and reliability" *Journal of Counseling Psychology* (1999): 345. Helen Pong and Meekyung Han point out that many researchers attribute Asian American students' high suicidal rate to underutilization of professional services and link this to failure or poor emotional self-control; Helen Pong and Meekyung Han, "Mental health help-seeking behaviors among Asian American community college students: The effect of stigma, cultural barriers, and acculturation." *Journal of College Students Development* 56 (2015): 1-14.

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expression of self-emotion is not necessarily bad, it needs to be taught through the scripture that even such expression needs to be articulated for building up the Body and for the glory of God. This is clear as Ephesians 4:29 declares, "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear," and as 1 Corinthians 10:31 explicitly states, "whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

While guarding one's emotions is essential in Christian life and discipleship, this is an area where relational interactions is crucial. Such crucial role relational interactions play in guarding and managing one' emotions can be seen in Proverbs 2:24-25 which states, "Make no friendship with a man given to anger, nor go with a wrathful man, lest you learn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare." Furthermore, Proverbs 18:24 teaches that "whoever walks with the wise become wise," and with the wise there is control and management of expressions of internal dealings and conditions (Proverbs 29:11).

Christian marginality for this trait pairs involves inclusion and exclusion of various elements. While it may not be possible to list all these elements exhaustively here, it must: 1. exclude emotional self-control based solely on the reliance of self's inner resources 2. exclude egocentric self-expressions that are sinful and rooted in self-autonomy. 3. incorporate expression of self for edification and for God's ultimate glory. 4. Include(account) room for individualistic creativity and uniqueness in Christ. Relationally, these exclusions and inclusions can be strengthened and secured by walking (sharing life together) with the discipler who walks in wisdom, and by establishing interactional networks among other disciplees who also have considerable amount of wisdom and who also walk in it.

"Family Recognition Through Achievement" versus "Individual Achievement for Personal Success"

Although Asian cultures generally promote the zeal for family recognition through achievement ("acceptance of one's need to achieve academically to make one's parents proud," belief in one's "educational failure brings shame to the family," acceptance in one's "occupational failure as bringing shame to the family") and Western culture generally emphasizes one's achievement and success over against establishing and maintaining relationships, Asian Americans need to have Christian marginality of choosing, aiming, and acting according to what brings honor and glory to God in all aspects of life and valuing relationships in Christ against functionalism tendencies (Kim et al. 1999, 345).[7]

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[7] These characteristics pertaining to the Asian "family recognition through achievement" are directly adapted from Kim et al. for consistency with the research. For additional descriptions in relation to the American value on achievement and

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Seeking the family honor is not necessarily unscriptural. This can be observed by recognizing special honor bestowed on certain families with Messianic promises given to them in the Old Testament (Isaac–Gen. 21:12; Jacob–Gen. 28:14:10; Judah–Gen.49:10; David–2 Sam. 7:12-13). Moreover, seeking the welfare and well-being of one's own family is scriptural (Acts 11:14, 16:33; 1 Tim. 5:8). Nevertheless, such seeking, though important, must be carried within the grand theme of honoring and glorifying God in the forefront. This delineation is crucial because without such delineation many Asian Americans can suffer in encapsulated marginality. It is crucial to teach to disciplees that a proper delineation can place a disciplee into occasional scenarios and contexts that may appear as to some others as if the disciplee is neglecting a family and family recognition for the sake of Christ and for God's glory. As a case in example, this is illustrated in Matthew 8:22 as Lord Jesus does not approve the disciple-to-be to go and bury his dead parent for the family honor. Another clear instance is Christ' crucifixion; such act stood clearly in contrast to seeking the welfare of Mary and the honor of Mary's family. Nevertheless, such occasions are not to be misunderstood as breaking the law since honoring and glorifying God is the ultimate aim and goal of one's life (Matt. 12:3-4, 5-8).

Helping a disciple to navigate through and to have proper and broadened perspectives on family welfare, success, self, and glory of God with all their various interconnections that encompass various scenarios and contextual factors, however, might take time and be particularly challenging. This, nonetheless, can be aided by attempting to strengthen a disciplee's trust to the discipler relationally. Such trust can be strengthened as the discipler lives and demonstrates his seeking of God's glory at the expense of risking misunderstandings by others. In addition to such, the trust can be further strengthened by constant support and encouragements from the discipler and other disicplees to a particular disciplee when the disciplee makes a right yet difficult choice in a family related issue. Such building up of faith will strengthen him to understand more (Eph. 3:18-19) and to make the right decision in the future even if that may be very difficult in his context of the time.

"Humility" versus "Egocentrism"

Asian culture's promotion of humility and American culture's general egocentric tendency need to be filtered through the scripture for true scriptural humility and true selflessness. Asian culture's promotion of humility is linked to developing skills and realizing relations because such Asian culture readily recognizes egocentrism as a

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success, refer to the following: Gary Althen and Jane Bennett, *American Ways*, 3rd ed. (London, Intercultural Press, 2011), 21-23.

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major hindrance in forming harmony (Parkes 2012, 69-88). Nevertheless, although such recognition may not seem wrong in and of itself on the surface, such Asian culture's recognition which has roots in Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism is inherently fallacious because they all begin with wrong premises; they begin with the wrong premise that fallen human beings can truly be free from total depravity and its effects without true regeneration and rebirth through faith in the gospel. Moreover, many criticisms from both inside and outside the Asian societies in regard to Asian societies' failures to show harmony in their respective Asian countries throughout evidently show the lack of sophistication and the lack of proper understanding behind such recognition; such recognition is doomed to failure because it fails to recognize the root cause of human problems but only sees the surface. Furthermore, Y. Joel Wong, Seong Yeon Kim, and Kimberley K. Tran's research on Asian American adherence to Asian values suggests that adherence to such Asian value has positive correlation with depression (Tran, Kim, and Wong 2010, 1).[8]

Because the problem of lack of humility is so engraved in the human nature, one cannot arrive to true humility unless one learns to humble oneself before God and submit to God and to His words through Jesus Christ and His gospel. Without the recognition of one's place before the Absolute One without a forensic justification and without submission to God and His words through Christ and His gospel, one cannot learn true humility nor can one truly be humble. Without a crucifixion of self with a transformation through the gospel, one's acts that may be portrayed as humility according to some is only pretense and suppression of oneself rather than true lowering and self-emptying of self (emptying of one's desires, preferences, use of privileges, rights, egocentric tendencies, etc.) that characterize true humility.

American egocentrism needs to be rejected in like manner due to its antagonistic nature to the scripture and its sinfulness (Matt. 16:24; Mk. 8:34; Lk. 9:23; Gal. 2:20). Moreover, the principle of egocentrism only sets the stage for an individual "for his complete loss of liberty" and ultimately deprives himself protection "from the idol state (Schlossberg 1990, 217)."[9] In order to cultivate true selflessness opposed to egocentrism in the lives of the disciples, a discipler must rely on the power of the gospel of Christ and the re-creating power and the re-creating act of the Holy Spirit.

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[8] Although these researchers used five distinct Asian cultural values in their research including humility as one, they did not specify each of these categories to describe each of their affects on depression in drawing their conclusion. This is because they were more interested in the general construct of relationship of the adherence to the five Asian values (conformity to norms, family recognition through achievement, emotional self-control, collectivism, and humility) altogether by an Asian American with depression.

[9] Please refer to Herbert Schlossberg's *Idols for Destruction: The Conflict of Christian Faith and American Culture* pages from 216 to 217 for more of egocentrism's potential adverse effects on an individual and on the society.

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An application of relational transformationalism in aiding the formation of Christian marginality from the two apparently competing cultures namely Asian cultural humility and America's egocentrism, is directing a disciplee to Christ and aiding him to focus on Him, His character, and His work. This is because the scripture prescribes focusing on Him, His character, and His work as a prescription to cultivate humility (Phil. 2:5). As a young disciplee may experience unhealthy distractions, a discipler can redirect his focus onto Christ, His character, His work, and His words (Matt. 11:29; Lk. 14:11, etc.) by a constant reminder through various kinds of interactions and lessons.

"Filial Piety" versus "Independence, Self-Help, Self-Reliance"

Asian culture's filial piety needs to be filtered and veered to scriptural way of honoring parents, and American culture's high emphasis on independence, self-help, and self-reliance needs to be replaced with reliance on God and healthy dependence on other members of the Body in Christ. According to Iris Chi, James Lubben, Neena Chappell, and Nelson Chow, the authors of *Elderly Chinese in Pacific Rim Countries: Social Support and Integration*, filial piety (*xiao*) is defined in three levels - the first level as looking after the material needs including caring when ill, the second level as paying attention to parents' wishes and obeying their preferences, and the third level as incorporation of pleasing parents and bringing them honor by one's behavior (Chi et al. 2001, 125-136). While these descriptions may not seem harmful at a quick glance, filial piety can enslave one's mobility in following Christ, inhibit an individual's exercise of creativity, hinder a person from yielding his heart according to the directives and desires that are given to the person from God because it presupposes parents' ultimate and supreme authority over the children over all others. Although there has been some modern research which seems to indicate that filial piety is waning with industrialization and modernization, much of it has still been lingering among many Asians in various ways in their cultural make-up (Yeh 1997, 171-214).

On the other hand, the American culture's independence, self-help, and self-reliance stands as a stark contrast to the fifth commandment and scriptural patterns of filial ethics and directives (1 Tim. 5:8; Eph. 6:1-3; Matt. 15:4-6; etc.). Moreover, Christian marginality formation from the two cultures from filial piety conjoined with independence, self-help, and self-reliance is complicated due to various possible scenarios and contextual factors. Several generic principles can be laid out, however. Christian marginality formation from the two cultures' filial piety and independence must incorporate at least the following factors: 1. Parents need to be honored horizontally not overshadowing the vertical relationship. 2. Material support needs to

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be provided to the parents when they are incapable of sustaining themselves to the best of the children's ability. 3. Ill parents need to be shown honor by being given the appropriate care by the children when God empowers the children with the abilities and resources to do so 4. Parents' desires and wishes should be obeyed as long as they do not contradict the will and the desires of God.

Relationally, a discipler can function to both push and pull a disciplee in this category verbally. According to the speech act theory, verbal comments or sentences have action inducing force.[10] Relationally, a discipler can employ various illocutionary acts of verdictives, exercitives, commissives, behabitives, expositives, and declarations along with a locution (Scripture) prayerfully out of a healthy and dependent vertical relationship for the push and pull to help the disciplee to be found in a safe cultural location (Austin 2020, 95-104).[11]

Conclusion

This study undertook to lay a basic foundation for an overarching Asian American discipleship framework from the perspective of Christian marginality formation for Asian Americans. By synthesizing cultural insights from Bryan S.K. Kim, Donald R. Atkinson, and Peggy H. Yang, it offers a comprehensive structure that addresses the current gaps in Asian-American discipleship paradigms. This foundational framework aims to enhance the understanding and practice of discipleship within the context of Asian-American communities and in communities where multiple Asian ethnic heritages are mingled, paving the way for further development and refinement in these fields.

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[10] For more on the actual impact of a verbal utterance, see John R. Searle's Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech; John R. Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[11] These illocutionary acts are not limited to only this categorical value pairs but are applicable in others as well.

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