# *In Deference to Difference:*

## *A Path to the Enrichment of Cultures*

*—Jin H. Han*

The facile resemblance of "difference" and "deference" conveys a *sign*ificant connection—rich in signification. In spite of their divergent etymology, signaled by their distinctive features of /i/ and /e/, the enchantingly similar sound of the two words conjures kinship, perhaps that of lost kinsfolk. Often, in social exchanges, difference triggers the protocol of respect for others, whereas at times it is just as capable of engendering enmity and conflict. Theological education, grounded in a long tradition of respecting others to the extent of declaring total strangers brothers and sisters, takes a special interest in the nurture of deference to difference. While the deferential negotiation of differences is relevant to many cultures, this article focuses on Asians and Asian-Americans with no exclusionary geo- or geno-centrist agenda.

**Superabundance of Difference**

The ubiquitous process of differentiation applied to any set of multiple objects may well be biologically hardwired. A child who looks at his or her two hands apparently likes one over the other, while right- or left-handedness is prenatally determined. In the binary, one is virtually doomed to choose the sinister one, which is not always the left (Lat. *sinistra*). A binary reductionism sprawls like an invasive plant into any field of observation, in which one of the pair takes up a privileged position. The social and ethical matrixes enforce the binary paradigm as seen in the clash of "us" and "them," right kind and wrong kind, good guys and bad, and so forth. In modern times, the political platforms are aligned in the framework of right or left until none but moderates are left. The Western discourses often cite the Asian philosophy of *yin* and *yang* to proffer the binary as universal while being oblivious that *yin-yang* is merely one of many articulations of the Asian cosmogony.[1]

To learn how to categorize a set of sundry items based on their different features is reinforced by traditional forms of instruction, which rate it as an essential skill useful beyond the ovarium of learning or the seminary. Theological schools have been no exception to the trend of privileging the analysis of different details over the synthesizing. In Jewish and Christian traditions, creation theology summons Genesis 1, in which various creatures are depicted as being created after their own kind, distinct from others. The rhetoric can easily flow over into exclusionary practices that are deemed "according to their kinds" (see Gen. 1:11, 12, 21, 24, 25, RSV).[2]

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1  Other cosmogonic conceptualizations of Asia include Laotzu's Dao-filled *wú* or Chuangtzu's *xū* charged with *qì*, both of which may be comparable to the Greek *plēnē* rather than to the Latin *nihilum*.

2  By contrast, the NRSV brings out more clearly the abundant variety of creatures of "every kind" (*lĕmînēhû*).

The discriminatory posture to any difference, however, runs the risk of missing the jubilant celebration of the diverse ways the universe is constructed, as made amply clear in the speech by Wisdom in Prov 8 (see also Pss 8, 29, 104).[3] The confusion over the ambience of creation may be compared to the commotion at the maternity ward where a question is raised as to why a newborn cries. Is it over the terror of leaving the womb and heading for the tomb? Alternatively, is it the nascent thrill of nativity bursting into the world—like Bergson's *élan vital* or Baudelaire's *frisson*—after the period of gestation that lasts nine months (or ten months as many Asians would say)? At any rate, children's growing pains include the diligent effort to retain the capacity to marvel at different phenomena, whose infinite variety is analogically depicted in a Chinese Daoist phrase *sēn luó wàn xiàng* that can be roughly translated as "forest-like network of ten thousand phenomena." Jorge Luis Borges toys with the idea that the 10,000 beings (*wàn xiàng*), "the very conservative estimate," have the generativity for an infinite number of different metaphors.[4]

Living in such a world of superabundance of variables, finite human beings learn to construct their identity based on the differences they observe in their social locations. In the fluid universe of identity, however, differentials are never static. Susceptible to changes, they may also be affected by the very act of those who seek to understand what their identity entails, in a way that simulates Heisenberg's uncertainty principle.

The array of differences in the world resists and never succumbs to the totalizing efforts of the dominant discourses that seek to reduce everything to a certain binary pair and write codes of conduct for them. Upliftingly, there is an alternative. Difference is best approached as a category of *superabundance*. Paul Ricoeur has popularized the term for the boundary-crossing possibility of ethics of care, for example, by juxtaposing the superabundance of love with the equivalence of justice.[5] Whereas the latter calls for satisfaction, the former is governed by a different kind of equation that permits extraordinary grace.

**Deference Lost**

While difference is a fact of life, deference in the sense of respecting the Other (divine or human) is attested to more often in ethical and theological discourses than in social praxis. Human beings have shown the tendency to shape their postures and actions based on what they perceive to be different in those whom they defined as others. Grievously, difference has been used as a pretext to sponsor pogroms, genocide, discrimination, and prejudice. Otherness has also facilitated the argument that proposes slavery as something natural. Even noble egalitarian efforts can be tainted when everyone is said to be equal before the law with privileges instituted for some. In a comparable way, everyone may be equal before God, and some are more equal than the others.[6] Can the respect of others ever be restored?

The troubled history of differences summons the ubiquitous notion of alterity. Emmanuel Lévinas advances it as the very basis of ethics, when he says, "I understand responsibility as responsibility for the Other, thus as responsibility for what is not my deed, or for what does not even matter to me; or which precisely does matter to me, is met by me as face."[7] In other words, the Other deserves respect for being different, not because of any reciprocity that he or she can altercate. Lévinas casts the net wide to capture the notion of the Other

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3   Emanuel Lévinas, The reduplication in Hebrew *ša'ašû'îm* ("delight") and *yôm yôm* ("daily") in Prov 8:30 highlights the perpetual joy attested to in creation.

4   Jorge Luis Borges, *This Craft of Verse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 21.

5   "Hope and the Structure of Philosophical Systems," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 44 (1970): 58; see also Andreea Deciu Ritivoi, *Paul Ricoeur: Tradition and Innovation in Rhetorical Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 116.

6   Cf. "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others" George Orwell, *Animal Farm: A Fairy Story* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1989, 192; originally published in 1945), 88.

7   *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans., Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 95.

that covers all who have a face. Although it is not clear whether he would include non-human or inanimate entities, the choice of figurative speech is instructive in that the Hebrew word for "face" is based on the root *pnh*, which means "to turn." The Other is someone who can turn to present his or her face. In other words, turning to face him or her activates the ethical mandate in the face-to-face encounter, which gives birth to responsibility to the Other, "whether accepted or refused, whether knowing or not knowing how to assume it, either able or unable to do something concrete for the Other."[8]

While alterity as configured by Lévinas is uplifting, it struggles to be manifested in the public arena. Difference can inspire many things including Frankenstein's sibling jealousy. In connection with the perennial way existentialism can make one intelligently miserable, one may recall Jean Paul Sartre, in whose play, *No Exit*, Joseph Garcin says in hell, "You remember all we were told about the torture-chambers, the fire and brimstone, the 'burning marl.' Old wives' tales! . . . . Hell is—other people!"[9] It is hardly fair to lampoon the playwright for what his character says, and Sartre should not be charged with xenophobia. It is eminently to his credit to construct the line that warns about human existence, in which the way one relates to others can make a difference of heaven and hell.

Near the top of the list of the main causes of infelicity in human relationship, there is indifference to others. While there is a constructive side to forgetting differences in pursuit of forgiveness of "those who trespass against us," indifference can be easily co-opted to the perpetuation of injustice. It may take the global form of economic exploitation. It may also involve the local manipulation of wages. While prophets speak of the former in broad strokes, the biblical literature includes concrete instances of engaging the latter that impacts the powerless and often goes with no restitution (e.g., Mal. 3:5; James 5:4). Malachi, the prophet of the Old, and James, the wisdom teacher in the NT, join to warn that the failure to defer to the underprivileged—the others—is bound to have a damning impact upon the community and society.

By contrast, a moral crisis can be transformed into an opportunity to pursue justice in the interest of the disenfranchised, depending on what one does with it.[10] There is a possibility of lucid parody in the word play Jacques Derrida advances with the amalgamation of *différence* and *différance*, indistinguishable in the French pronunciation. On the one hand, one can be engaged in the serpentine deferral (*différance*) of what fairness to the other means. On the other hand, one can take *difference* as "something that 'constantly folds the infinite back into the finite' and reminds us that it 'cannot fail to upset our common representation of history and time.'"[11] Differences in others can facilitate deference to the Other, when they are inducted into a context of recognizing the value of the Other.

The title of this section ("Deference Lost") is poised to recall John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667). Theologians living in a post-lapsarian world have no access to what it was like before Adam and Eve ate of the tree of knowledge of good and evil; however, poets help to imagine what has been lost and look forward to the possibility of regaining it. The rabbinic interpretation of Genesis 3 as a story of growing up[12] may imply that there is no going back, for even Albert Einstein was dubious about the possibility of reverse time travel. Looking forward, the apocalyptic may serve as a guiding angel for the future. As one of the main threads of

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8    Ibid., 97.

9    Jean Paul Sartre, *No Exit (Huis Clos): A Play in One Act* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), 61.

10  The ambiguity inherent in challenge may be best portrayed by the Chinese word for "crisis" (*wēijī*), which is made of two syllables that mean "danger and opportunity."

11  Sarah Wood, *Derrida's Writing and Difference: A Reader's Guide* (London and New York: Continuum, 2009), 3; quoting Geoffrey Bennington, "Derridabase," *Jacques Derrida*, eds., Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 118.

12  In this regard, Moses Maimonides entertains a question as to how a human should receive the intellect as a punishment for disobedience. He replies that after sinning Adam knew "necessary truths," while thereafter, "apparent truths" (*Guide for the Perplexed* I.2).

the apocalyptic, the vision of the reign of God (commonly rendered as the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God) nurtures the hope of a world where oppression ceases. While it is not hard to run into a call to *build* the kingdom of God, the biblical literature depicts it not as something human beings construct, but as what God brings into the world in due time. Without presuming to establish a human version of the reign of God, the apocalyptic offers a vision of the end time where "all tribes and peoples and languages" honor God (Rev 7:9; see also Dan 7:14). One may count among the offerings of many peoples Asian cultures of deference as outlined in the next paragraphs.

### Asian Cultures of Deference

The Confucian tradition of "five virtues in human relations"[13] is well known. Although this aretalogy is usually construed as based on the hierarchical understanding of society, it can also accommodate the idea of promoting the interest of the lower in status. For example, the "amity" stipulated for the parent-child relation does not exist unilaterally. The idea that there is an order for the young and the old often has been summoned in defense of the privilege of the elders, but the notion of precedence also mandates that the older should care for the younger and be a good role model for them.

One may find a historical example of the care that the powerful exercised for the powerless in Asian history. For example, the Korean royal annals of King Sejong, the fourth king of the Yi Dynasty, record that an edict was issued in the eighth year of his reign (1426), stipulating that the maid servants throughout the country be given a hundred-day maternity leave,[14] and in the sixteenth year of his reign (1432) a supplement to the decree adds that the father be given a thirty-day paternity leave, as well.[15] The edict is apparently motivated by the care for those with no privileges, providing a provocative illustration of the biblical teaching of *ḥesed*. While this Hebrew word is commonly translated as "loyalty" in modern biblical studies, Katharine D. Sakenfeld underscores its extraordinary connotation when she says, "The word 'loyalty' is often used in English for the attitude that a subordinate should exhibit toward a superior, but rarely the other way round. We will discover that the biblical notion of *ḥesed*/loyalty refers more often to just the opposite direction of relationship: the powerful is loyal to the weak or needy or dependent."[16]

Asiatic cultures are at times caricatured as ruthless and barbaric.[17] There is virtually no society that has not left the traces of exploitation and oppression, however. Asian cultural practices can include the abusive demand of unconditional obedience to the elders or the rulers and the exploitative arrangement in the spousal or other familial relationships. The lamentable manifestations of inequity are not uniquely Asiatic problems. While human relationships in Asia are often depicted in the order of hierarchy, which is also not confined to Asiatic societies, they aspire not for domination and exploitation but for "humaneness" (*rén*), whose pictographic implicature highlights the relationship of two human beings, and it will be not be in violation of the lexical meaning of *rén* to extend it to all that are created by God. While the unfinished struggle to bring down "the dividing wall" (Eph. 2:14) remains imperative, one should not lose sight of many good things that historians and other scholars of humanities continue to uncover in Asian cultures of deference and elsewhere.

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13  In a sketchy but modernized version, the five relations refer to (1) parents and children; (2) king and the subject (or people); (3) spouses; (4) young and old; and (5) friends.

14  http://sillok.history.go.kr/id/kda_10804017_004 (accessed May 1, 2016).

15  http://sillok.history.go.kr/id/kda_11604026_003 (accessed May 1, 2016).

16  Katherine D. Sakenfeld, *Faithful in Action: Loyalty in Biblical Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 2.

17  See, for example, John M. Hobson's analysis of a certain Eurocentric conceptualization of international politics in *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory, 1760-2010* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 127.

## Being Asian-American

While the totalizing discourse of scholarship occasionally errs by lumping Asians and Asian-Americans together, the latter deserve to be discussed on their own terms. Much has been said about the hyphenated shape of their descriptor. Whether or not the hyphen is inserted, the combination of the two words immediately indicates hybridity, which may be biological or cultural. Whereas pure culture has often been paraded as an ideal, history repeatedly recalls the idiocy of ethnic, cultural, or ideological purge, let alone that projects of purity advanced by beings that are eminently incapable of attaining or retaining it are doomed from the outset.[18] By contrast, identity is discovered or constructed with the input and aid of many other elements of alien nature.

In negotiating with what one inherits from progenitors as well as what he or she embraces as his or her own, Asian-Americans have a special blessing of being able to go back and forth in multiple cultural realms and shape their own cultures. They can embrace many perspectives, paying heed to ancient Greeks who dreaded the one-eyed Cyclopes. Citing the modern social theorists who are wary and weary of the surveillance of the panopticon,[19] Asian-Americans can also articulate who they are without being lured into the predatory profiling practice of totalization. Although their particular location can make them look like eternal visitors to America, the ambiguity inherent in being Asian-American facilitates detecting and exposing unfairness and inequalities that intersect in many areas.

This extraordinary social location plays a role in the creative output by many Asian-American writers, including Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, David Henry Hwang, and Chang-rae Lee. They capture the lives of those who are caught, trapped, or enthralled in the interstices of more than one culture. A growing number of Asian-American authors, whose works are listed under "marginalized literatures" for indefensible reasons, continue to tell the stories of those who put up a good fight with multifaceted challenges against the odds. By giving voice to those who could not have been heard, they pay respect to those who have led a different life in history and modern times.

Asian-Americans are obliged to wrestle with: "Where is my home?" In seeking to give voice to the home-ambiguous, Asian-American discourses often introduce what appears to be insider knowledge: for example, what seems to be a typical conversation in immigrant families but must sound foreign to outsiders. To create this familiar-and-unfamiliar world, Asian-American writings often include non-English words printed in italics with or without translation. Perhaps, any effort to lift up what had been yet to be said and heard of Asianness should speak in strange tongues. These measures to introduce something new in its authentic garb can reinforce the idea of Asia being such a foreign world that used to confound the West. However, this is a worthwhile risk that needs to be managed, not avoided, when Asian-American writers set out to present what they have discovered in and around them. One may compare it to what Frederick Douglass says about the African-African spirituals:

> I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear. They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension;

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18  Vince Marotta, "The Multicultural, Intercultural and the Transcultural Subject," *Global Perspectives On The Politics of Multiculturalism in the 21st Century: A Case Study Analysis*, ed., Fethi Mansouri and Boulou Ebanda de B'béri (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 92.

19  First proposed by Jeremy Bentham as a penal structure; later appropriated by Michel Foucault as a metaphor of the all-seeing grip of social control (*Discipline and Punish: Birth of the Prison*, New York: Vintage Books, 1979; originally published in 1975).

they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and the complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish.[20]

The world will be better served by the inside knowledge of those who can describe "the bitterest anguish" that urges one to speak on and off the published pages on behalf of the Other.

**Design of Deference**

Respect apparently requires the external expressions to become tangible. William Shakespeare eloquently speaks of the necessity of means for any noble effort, when he says, "But passion lends them power, time means, to meet."[21] Likewise, deference to the Other needs a platform and is commonly associated with etiquettes, protocols, manners, and *les moeurs*. Whereas these socially useful items presuppose a connotation of submission by one class to another, this article has advocated the possibility of another kind of deference, one that respects the difference in the Other. In actual social contexts, it signifies deference to the poor and the powerless, that is, those *other* people who may be deemed to require no respect.

The effort to sustain the customs of deference to others is bound to encounter a treacherous terrain. As Terry Eagleton points out, "otherness is not the most fertile of intellectual furrows."[22] Without repeating his list of horrible ways *others* are portrayed in literature, one may concede that those who are inscribed as different make it difficult to know what to do with them. Many of Asian and Asian-American writers have done a remarkable job in presenting such alterity of their experience. Even when their creative task may not include an immediate action plan, they are to be credited with opening up what Homi Bhabha calls "Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot 'in itself' be conscious."[23] The Third Space, however, comes with no guarantee to stay open and available, and postcolonial discourses have to be on constant watch for the tide of the empire that strikes back.

Bhabha and other postcolonial thinkers highlight the treacherous terrain one encounters in the colonial or neo-colonial configuration. The line between the colonizer and the colonized is no longer as distinct as it used to be, and there is ample reason to suspect that the structure of colonial exploitation is intact. Furthermore, a struggle to fight the monstrosity of the power structure could turn one into a comparable beast, as one can detect in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, in which Captain Ahab increasingly takes after the monster he fights. As Sheng-mei Ma observes, "Asian American cultural practice routinely risks reinscribing Orientalist stereotypes in the name of refuting them."[24] For a related reason, there is something alarming about the fact that Asian and Asian-Americans' work is assessed in conformity with the Western measures of success. This insidiously perpetuates a modern myth in which one's value is determined by what one can produce with the grim prospect of literally outliving one's usefulness in being able to produce material and other goods. In such a framework, valuation is again reinstituted based on power and prestige, not on the alterity of the Other.

In this Kafkaesque metamorphosis, one may keep up the appearance of the prophetic vocalization engaged in subversive speeches against the social edifices of domination. In spite of the great advances in social critiquing in and outside theological reflection and education, however, the world is yet to witness peace for all living

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20  Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (San Francisco: City Light books, 2010), 121.
21  William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Acts 2, Prologue, line 13.
22  Terry Eagleton, *Figures of Dissent: Critical Essays on Fish, Spivak, Žižek and Others (London and New York: Verso, 2003), 2.*
23  Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 36.
24  Sheng-mei Ma, *Diaspora Literature and Visual Culture: Asia in Flight* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 96.

beings—not just human beings but all the created, animate and inanimate. Lamentably, contemporary history continues to deny the hope to find the twenty-first century to be a better era than the previous. Privileged classes continue to stay in power, handing out concessions to "other backward classes." From time to time, a call goes out for the celebration of the postmodern trend of recognizing cultural diversity. However, the grand narrative is still in sway. In this configuration of reality, one has to suspect that the contention that the grand narrative is dead is also part of the grand narrative that now eludes social critics. To borrow from Eagleton, again, "Nothing is now more stereotyped in literary studies than the critique of stereotypes."[25] Dismantling persistent power structures that do not value respecting others for their difference is undoubtedly a formidable task, but there is the resilience of hope, as Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, Hasidic rabbi of the eighteenth century, says: "Never despair! Never! It is forbidden to give up hope!" (Likute Moharan II:78).

One may find the solid basis of such hope in the biblical vision of community, which is elucidated in Father Gerhard Lohfink's book, *Wie hat Jesus Gemeinde gewollt?*[26] It is arguably less than propitious that the American publisher felt compelled to provide the subtitle *The Social Dimension of Christian Faith*. The erudite addition has the apparent advantage of highlighting the social change that the book advocates, while blurring the straightforward agenda of presenting what kind of community Jesus desired. In the book, Lohfink underscores the life and death of Jesus, who renounces power, empowering the believing community to do likewise. A community that chooses not to be fixated on power is not a Christian invention, but a biblical convention already manifested in the people of Israel that care for the poor, as elucidated by the older Lohfink brother, Father Norbert Lohfink.[27] The message the two Jesuit brothers have fostered reveals the biblical provenance of the idea of deference extended to others, not because they are powerful and can repay favors in a social network of patron-client, but because God takes a special interest in everyone, especially those who may be set aside or glanced at askance or tossed aside for being somehow different—the Other.



**Jin H. Han** is Professor of Biblical Studies at New York Theological Seminary. His publications include *Six Minor Prophets* in the series of Blackwell Bible Commentaries (with Richard Coggins).

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25 Eagleton, *Figures of Dissent*, 2.
26 Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimension of Christian Faith*, trans. John P. Galvin (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).
27 See for example, Norbert Lohfink, *Options for the Poor: The Basic Principle of Liberation Theology in the Light of the Bible* (Berkeley: BIBAL Press, 1987), 16-32.

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