Music in Religion, Religion in Music: Christian Faith and Confucian Filial Piety in the Lifeworld Practices of Two Musician-Educators

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Abstract: Phenomenological research seeks understanding through descriptions of lived experiences using history, culture, and society to identify the true essence of human experiences. This study examined the relationships between faith community, socialisation, and occupational choices. Specifically, it investigated two musician-educators’ identity development and practices as educational leaders, focusing on the interplay between religion, music, cultural heritage, and stewardship. Confucian collectivism and Christian individualism served as the theoretical underpinnings where concepts of filial piety, Christian love, and the Protestant work ethic were explored. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to interpret the data gathered in semi-structured interviews. Overarching themes that emerged from both narratives were analysed. Both participants became renowned educators and role models in society. Their journeys were reframed into “The Parable of the Talents,” where they attributed their successes to God’s provision, and their work as stewardship to the institutions they served. Finally, faith-based institutions play an important role in the shaping of moral people that continues to positively influence them long after their graduation. Weekly chapel assembly was perceived as a key element in the planting of seeds in young minds. Further research is needed to explore the interactions between music, religion, cultural heritage, and stewardship in all cultures and faiths.

Keywords: Christian Faith, Confucian Filial Piety, Music, Stewardship, Identity

Background

This phenomenological study is part of a larger project that investigates the interaction of Confucianism and Christianity on the development of musical lives amongst the Chinese Diaspora. Hong Kong musicians are targeted because this city has Chinese Christian musicians connected to the investigator’s collegial network. In phenomenological studies, participants are purposively-selected, carefully-situated, and drawn from small homogenous samples where each person has experienced the same phenomenon. The connection between music and religious rituals is long established in all cultures (Cole 2011; de Rosen 2014; Rouget 1985; Theorell 2014; Waugh 2005). This article examines the unique relationships between faith community, socialisation, and occupational choices. Specifically, it investigates two Hong Kong musician-educators’ identity formation, their spiritual ways of life, their lifeworld practices as educational leaders, and focusing on the interplay between religion, music, cultural heritage, and stewardship. Being born as Chinese in a former British colony Hong Kong, these musicians were immersed in Confucian teachings and Christian values since birth. It is imperative to first discuss the theoretical underpinnings of this study before retelling their stories.

Theoretical Basis: Confucian Collectivism and Christian Individualism

Kong-Zi, Confucius ( Kı ) (551–479 BCE) was the most influential philosopher in Chinese history; and Confucianism is the foundation of Chinese culture. Confucius was a great teacher, editor, politician, artist, and musician. During the Warring States Period in the sixth century BC, China was in the midst of ideological crisis and civil war. Confucius recognized an obligation to reinforce the societal values of compassion and cultural tradition. Confucius’s social philosophy is based on the principle of loving others while exercising self-discipline. Each person is not only answerable to his or herself, but to everyone that is in his or her sociocultural world (de Bary,
Confucian values posit the collectivist standpoint, emphasising the need for people to follow set rules within familial and societal hierarchies in order to maintain harmony (Kong-Zi 2010). Filial piety is the cornerstone of Confucianism; it denotes that each person should submit to his or her kinfolk and honour their ancestors (Ho 1994; Hwang 1999). Confucius asserted that ren (human being) should abide by this rule—do not impose on others what you do not wish for yourself (Kong 2010). In interpreting Confucianism, Chen (2006) emphasises the six virtues in the development of a junzi (a noble man): benevolence, knowledge, trustworthiness, righteousness, courage, and strength. Confucius’s political beliefs maintained that a leader must be humble, compassionate, and lead by example (Li 2003a). His philosophy of education focuses on teaching people to live with integrity. The primary purpose of a person in life is to live with good virtues and become role models for others (Wu and Singh 2004; Yang 2007).

With the death of Jesus Christ, Christianity entered human history 500 years after Confucius (Smith 1981; Neusner 1984). The core teaching in Christianity is “love God, love men” (Barker, Burdick and Burdick 1995; The NIV Study Bible, Matthew 22:40). All human beings were said to be created in God’s image (Genesis 1:27), and those who believe in the redemption of their sin through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross are regarded as born-again-Christians (John 3:16). Christians should offer themselves as holy sacrifices and live righteously (Romans 12:1). No one is an accident on earth (Isaiah 44:2; Psalm 139:15); each person should strive to find their own callings from God (Psalm 138:8) and glorify God by cultivating virtues (2 Peter 1: 5–8) and doing good works on earth (Psalm 34: 14; Romans 14:19). Christians should follow the new commandment of loving each other (John 13:34) and the great commission to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28: 16–20). The Protestant work ethic argues that to work hard and embody symbols of success is a virtue, which in turn brings glory to the Creator. The roots of this work ethic go back to Luther and Calvin: For the first time in history they set a cultural norm that doing a good job for its own sake has a positive moral value as a service to God (Weber 2002). This work ethic stresses individualism—a personal relationship with God where everyone is accountable for his or her own edification. Protestants see no need to have an intermediary in the form of a priest between God and man (Lim and Lay 2003). This work ethic gave rise to the spirit of capitalism and scholasticism that demands hard work, and a lifetime of dedication and service (Trueman and Clark 2006; Schaltegger ad Torgler 2010; Gorski 1993; Swatos and Kaelber 2005).

The Role of Music in Confucianism and Christianity

The Confucian Canon consists of The Four Books and Five Classics written before 300 BC. These nine texts had been re-compiled by Neo-confucian scholar Zhu Xi in the fourteenth century. By the late sixteenth century, The Four Books and Five Classics were translated by Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci and his student; hence Confucianism was spread to Europe (Yao 2000). The philosophical thoughts of Confucius were influential during the Enlightenment and made profound impressions on many European thinkers (Rowbotham 1945).

One of the Confucian canon—The Book of Rites, recompiled by Confucian scholars—describes the use of the arts and rituals for moral cultivation (Kong 1885). This book is closely related to the current discussion of music learning and lifeworld practices of two musician-educators. Confucius argued that to run a country smoothly, political leaders should rely on traditional rituals to cultivate morality among people (Kong 1885). Music is the most powerful art form of all rites that contribute to the seeking of dao (the way) where one is engaged in the transcendentual flow state (Tu and Chou 1996). It is through engagement in musical activities that self-perfection will be cultivated.

The functional use of music and rituals in Confucianism draws parallels to Christian worship (Tse 2012). Comparative studies between Confucianism and Christianity have been exhaustive (Legge 1881; Ching 1977; Chao 1928; Young 1983). Scholars have considered, for example, the
Confucian holy man and Christian sanctification (Wang 2009), Confucian benevolence and Christian love (Shu and Zhang 2002; Dong 2010), Confucian Jen and Agápe (Yao 1997), and the father and son in Christianity and Confucianism (Bellah 1965). Table 1 shows the commonalities between Confucianism and Christianity: Both promote the cultivation of morality and make extensive use of music to achieve a pre-determined purpose. While Confucianism focuses on benevolence and filial piety, Christianity emphasises the four loves (Driskell 2012; Viard 1979; Barr 1987). These concepts will be applied to the lifeworld practices of the two musicians in their unfolding stories.

Table 1: Similarities between Confucianism and Christianity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Confucianism</th>
<th>Christianity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>finding dao (the way)</td>
<td>seeking the truth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>promoting benevolence: the intention to be good and take action to do good</td>
<td>promoting four types of love: Agápe, selfless love, moral goodwill to love the undeserving; Philia, natural affection and friendship; Storge, familial affection between kinfolk; Éros, sexual love</td>
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<tr>
<td>filial piety: obeying and respecting family members, feeling obligatory about the welfare of the extended families</td>
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<tr>
<td>learning to be a ren (human being) who stands to be a societal role model</td>
<td>learning to be a compassionate person who is an example of Christ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cultivating morality so to become a jingzi (noble man)</td>
<td>cultivating morality so to become a righteous person, a disciple of Christ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>striving to become a zhengren (holy man), a divine being</td>
<td>striving to be a saint or to be a living sacrifice of God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>using music extensively in rituals, ceremonies for the purpose of societal and familial harmony and self-perfection</td>
<td>using music extensively in worship and gatherings for the purpose of promoting love, harmony, and unity between people and personal spiritual experience</td>
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To summarise the theoretical underpinnings of this study, I will use a diagram to illustrate the interplay of the variables to enable a greater understanding of how music, religion, cultural heritage and stewardship interact with each other within the larger framework of identity formation of the two participants.
Hermeneutic Phenomenology: IPA and the Case Study Approach

Heidegger developed hermeneutic phenomenology where he questioned the meaning of “Being.” He offered an analysis of the ontological, epistemological, and methodological perspectives of the tradition which is considered to reside within an interpretivist and constructivist paradigm of inquiry—understanding is a reciprocal activity in the hermeneutic circle (Heidegger 1996; Annells 1996; Benner 1994; Van der Zalm and Bergum 2000; Ajjawi and Higgs 2007). This study employed the phenomenological interpretative analysis (IPA), which has three characteristics: It is phenomenological in its concern with understanding participants’ experience, it is interpretive in dealing with both the participants’ and researchers’ interpretations, and it is ideographic in understanding the participants’ experience in a particular context using the case-study approach (Smith 2004, 2008; VanScoy and Evenstad 2015). A case study explores a real-life phenomenon bound by time and space (Yin 2013; Hancock and Algozzine 2006); participants’ voices can be heard via rich text generated from their narratives in semi-structured interviews (Tellis 1997).

Transcripts of interviews were analysed case by case through a systematic, qualitative analysis. This was then turned into a narrative account when the researcher’s analytic interpretation was presented in detail and was supported with “verbatim extracts” from participants (Smith, Flowers, and Larkins 2009). Unlike quantitative research, phenomenological study is concerned with experience in its own terms, and the findings do not claim to have generalisability over the entire population. However, the specific can illuminate the general, and the validity of the study is assessed by these four broad principles (Yardley 2008): sensitivity to context, commitment and vigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance.

Ethical approval to conduct this study was granted by my university before I travelled to Hong Kong. I conducted two face-to-face interviews with the participants in their offices—each lasting one-and-a-half hours. The interview questions explored upbringing and schooling, music learning experiences, significant role models, and finding their callings and their work. I transcribed each interview and the transcripts were checked by the participants. The empirical evidence is the basis of this study and consists of interview data that has been subjected to deep analysis. IPA is an experiential qualitative psychology that recognises the unique role of the investigator who brings into the study his or her background experience. I am a participant-
researcher who shares a similar cultural, educational, religious, and occupational background as the participants. As a reflexive researcher, I take both the emic and etic positions by keeping a journal to monitor my personal influences on data collection and analysis to support bracketing/epoché (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009). IPA has been described as an iterative and inductive cycle (Smith 2004; Smith and Osborn 2007; Larkin, Watts, and Clifton 2006; Eatough and Smith 2008; Shinebourne 2012), and I adopted the following strategies: identifying key words and patterns, finding emerging themes and a complete reframing of the overarching themes from both stories into full narratives, supported by detailed commentary on data extracts. Each stage of the analysis involved collaboration and external audit from an expert colleague to test the coherence and plausibility of my interpretation. Interpretation of the data has been cautious and the stories presented are credible, rigorous, and transparent (Smith 2015; Smith and Osborne 2008).

After a brief introduction of the common demographic and occupational backgrounds of the two participants, three overarching themes emerged from both stories will be discussed: 1) music in religion—childhood immersion in music; 2) transition—critical incidents and positive role models; 3) religion in music—Confucian filial piety, trials, and tribulations.

Common Demographic Information of the Two Participants

Naomi and David were born into middle-class families and raised in the former British colony Hong Kong. Both music educators were immersed in music in their childhood as a result of attending Christian schools and being exposed to music in church; they were self-motivated to learn music. Both participants are married without children, and are dedicated educators who regard their educational institutions as their second homes. Coincidentally, the commencement of their tertiary music education was delayed for different reasons. Both specialised in choral and ensemble conducting in their graduate music studies and became internationally renowned musician-educators. Both held a combined individualist and collectivist worldview. They acknowledged that their lives are blessed by God with the gift of music; they wanted to use music reciprocally to serve their Creator and never regretted following music as a career.

Current Occupational Profiles of the Musician-Educators

Naomi is about sixty years old; she is a pianist, organist, singer, conductor, and a widely-published author. Naomi has been the Head of Sacred Music at a theological college for twenty-four years. After her early retirement, Naomi has begun a sacred music resource centre to support the needs of Chinese Christians with a focus of training music ministers in mainland China. Naomi is frequently invited by theological colleges to teach in the mainland. Her staff run summer music camps in Hong Kong that attract global musicians; these events generate the main income for the resource centre. Naomi continues to be a part-time academic staff member at her home university in Hong Kong. She also volunteers to serve in a number of music committees that host professional-development programs in South-east Asian countries and surrounding regions in Australasia.

David is about fifty years old; he is a singer, choral and orchestral conductor, and plays a number of instruments including the piano, flute, and cello. After a highly-successful career working as a music director for more than two decades, he became the principal of the same school. This school is regarded as one of the most prestigious private schools in Hong Kong with an emphasis on music and sports. Since David became the principal, he re-introduced the daily chapel assembly, which was a lost tradition. As an educator, his passion is to “influence people with Christian values and plant good seeds in young minds.” Apart from running his school, David is regularly engaged in public speaking forums and conducts an alumni choir that enters international choral competitions.
Music in Religion: Childhood Immersion in Music

Naomi came from a family that valued education. Her mother was very good at managing the household finances. Naomi has an older brother and a younger sister. When she was six years old, Naomi asked her mother for piano lessons, but her mother said it would be more economical to wait six years until her younger sister was older so they could commence lessons together. Accordingly, Naomi’s piano lessons were delayed until she was twelve. Naomi reported that she had no problem motivating herself to learn the piano because her learning was delayed and she was “crazy about playing and practising.” If a new book was given to her, she would play it through in no time. Her sister “was only mildly interested and she was not self-motivated to keep a regular practice routine.”

By the time Naomi reached Form six (age eighteen) in senior high school, she had completed eighth grade piano from the Royal School of Music. For Naomi, music was embedded in religion and religious education because her church and Christian school provided a nurturing musical environment. She recounted: “During the summer holiday of my primary Grade Six, I began to go to church. Before that, I was surrounded by music already because I went to a school run by an Anglican church. We had Chapel, weekly assembly and I was immersed in music around Grade Two. I loved the sound of choral singing but could not get into the school choir because the teacher only chose the brightest kids.”

David grew up in a musical family with a younger sister. His father completed a degree at an American university with a strong church music tradition. David described his musical surroundings: “My childhood was exposed to classical music because my dad loves it. I also sang in a church choir … When I was about six, my dad enrolled me in a children’s choir directed by a well-known conductor. Our family attended a local church during my childhood; my dad conducted the English choir, and my mum enjoyed singing in the Chinese choir.”

David’s social world was filled with music, mostly Christian choral music. To him, music was interwoven into his childhood experiences of faith and religion, in and outside of home. David always felt that the choral sounds he heard were not “quite right…could have been better.” This set the scene for his later desire to become a great conductor who holds the power to shape the sound of a choir/ensemble.

Transition: Critical Incidents and Positive Role Models

In the 1950s, there were only two universities in Hong Kong. The University of Hong Kong (HKU) followed the British system and offered three-year bachelor courses; whereas the Chinese University (CU) followed the American system with four-year bachelor courses. Both universities used English as the medium for instruction and entry was highly competitive. Naomi studied in an English high school and eventually took the examination for entrance to HKU. At that time, HKU had not begun offering music and she was accepted into social work; but being unfamiliar with face-to-face interviews, she failed to secure a tertiary place. She was put on the waiting list and waited for an offer from HKU. Although her tertiary education was delayed, life took an interesting turn. Naomi was advised to apply to CU to study music where “the Chinese lecturers at CU Music were mainly Christians; I was influenced by them and was called to serve God in church music ministries. So when I graduated, I knew my direction.”

David had several positive role models that shaped his passion for music. The children’s choir conductor was his first mentor who had a great impact on his musical journey later on. He recalled that: “When I was a kid singing at the junior choir, the music in the senior choir had always been more interesting. I overheard them singing at the upper level of a primary school. I often peeped through the windows and wished that I could grow up faster so I could join them.”

As soon as David began school, he joined the Boys’ Choir of the Primary Division at school. This was an enjoyable experience and he eventually proceeded to the Secondary Division where
the change of his voice brought a new musical opportunity: “Around Form 4 (age sixteen), when most boys’ voices had broken before that time, my voice just changed from a lovely Treble to something not so pleasing. I asked the director to let me conduct and I began to conduct the Treble Choir with sixty Form One students. With the early exposure to conducting, I was confident that I could follow music as a career. My school music teacher also said that I could take his baton when I graduated.”

Two years later in Form Six, a photo changed David’s life; he explained: “I saw a photo of master conductor Claudio Abbado which captured something special about conducting. I found out that Abbado was an excellent educator who had a vision to train and encourage young musicians. I wanted to become someone like him.”

Although David had his mind set on becoming a good conductor, the commencement of his music course was delayed, which he gave spiritual meaning to all that happened to him.

**Religion in Music: Confucian Filial Piety, Trials, and Tribulations**

David’s father was a businessman. His family enjoyed a luxurious lifestyle until his father’s business empire collapsed. This financial hardship influenced David’s high school years. He remembered having issues with piano lesson fees and pocket money. He described:

> I had to enter the work force after completing Form 6 to help to repay my dad’s loan. During the day, I had an office job and in the evening, I worked as a tutor. It was a huge struggle for me because I was scheduled to begin my music studies in America. I was eventually able to commence my course a year later. I believe it was God’s guidance and I was very thankful that at this university, I received the best training in music. These four years were a key period of my musical life; the teachers there were very demanding yet very supportive.

David was the oldest child at home. According to the Confucian teaching (父債子還), “the loan of the father has to be repaid by the son.” Being an obedient son practising filial piety, David took responsibility for the debt which accords with a collectivist Chinese view. He worked hard to repay his father’s loan and left for America only after his dad found employment. David also attributed his later music study opportunity being the guidance of God:

> During the time that my family’s business took a down turn, we had to keep moving from big to small apartments... I was being squeezed into a small space without any privacy. While my other university peers were complaining about adjustment problems; I was delighted that I finally had a cosy room to study, a personal desk and wardrobe and only shared such space with one other fellow student. I was extremely thankful for God’s provision. After dinner, I worked in the music library to subsidise my tuition fees. Somehow, I had just enough money to get by. I also received a number of scholarships later.

In David’s understanding, his Christian faith was woven into his musical life. In Hong Kong, there was plenty of musical-spiritual worship at church. While in America, David experienced religion in music where he believed his opportunities and academic success were God’s provision. His Christian faith sustained him in the trials and tribulations he encountered, financially and personally. David experienced music in religion, religion in music.

David repeatedly spoke about the concept of “loyalty,” which is a core Confucian virtue. David’s filial piety to his family, sacrificing a year to help to repay his father’s debt, was replicated in his loyalty to his school. He explained: “Students at our school are nurtured to think that they owe their lives to their school; loyalty is slowly cultivated through the formative years at primary and secondary school. We were happy to contribute to our school in any way which
required our services. It was natural for me to come back to teach although there was a temptation to stay in America.”

Despite being tempted to stay in the US after graduation, David returned home to teach at his old school. His music teacher retired and let him “take over his baton” as promised. David directed all twenty ensembles for four years and then returned to America to obtain a master’s degree in choral and orchestral conducting. David said that the temptation to continue with his doctoral study troubled him, but this desire subsided after he consulted his former school principal—an inspirational mentor—a “father figure” that he respected. David explained his change of mind:

He wisely wrote back and said, “If you follow your mind, you will be successful but might not be content; if you follow your heart, you might not be successful, but you will be content.” The key of it was that I must follow my heart to find myself. I knew my loyalty was at my old school, so I came back. I often recite these words in my school assemblies, “XX School is a life-time business.” We cultivate a Big-Brother Culture; older students are models to younger ones and they take on considerable leadership roles. They think they run the school; and I like to let them think that way.

David perceived his school as an extension of his family. This is congruent with the Chinese collectivist view; he felt he was obliged to work for a school that nurtured his growth. While cultural outsiders might think that he sacrificed his opportunity to stay in America, David viewed it as mandatory reciprocity—“natural for me to come back.” David was emotionally attached to his school, he chose to teach there with a willing heart; and treated his service as an act of stewardship. He regarded his former principal as a “father figure,” his schoolmates as “big brothers” who had autonomy and power in making decisions about school affairs. All senior students would presumably have received loving care for years to have developed a sense of belonging to the big school family (以校為家) that they feel “they owe their lives to their school.” David’s filial piety for his biological father paralleled his loyalty to his school-family being “a lifetime business.” While working, David completed a graduate program in educational leadership that led to his career advancement as a principal. Demonstrably, he aspired to become the best he could be, enacting the Protestant work ethic that understood his personal excellence as a service to God. David held a combined individualist and collectivist view of life; every action David took since his high school graduation was aimed for the ultimate benefit of his school-family that he felt he was eternally tied to. He has been a good role model to society, as advocated by Confucius; an effective moral leader; and a knowledgeable teacher (a junzi). At the same time, David is acting as a humble servant, in partnership with God, to his school community. David’s alternative educational philosophy made him a powerful public speaker; his inspiring thoughts were crystallised in his final words:

Something unique in the history of our school is that we always have very big turn-up numbers at our reunions (twentieth to fiftieth). Our former students are very loyal, the oldest chorister (70+) died just before our departure to the XX Choir Games some years ago. Often the old boys request to have a morning assembly re-run for them to celebrate their time here… We might have planted a seed at the time when they were small, but the seed has come to its fruition at last. So we are firm about running the Chapel Assemblies. We still keep the old conjoined student desk-chair sets because the legacy must carry on. As a musician and a Christian, I am always looking for deeper meanings and want to influence others. In the rite of passage, we must allow students to grow and make mistakes together, embrace and invest in their failures because they become their life lessons; let them mature and have the courage to live according to their callings.
The simple act for a highly profitable private school to keep old furniture demands interpretation: the old furniture blending with twenty-first century technology seemed a little odd, but it carried a legacy that must continue as David elaborated, “We are well off enough to change the furniture all at once if we desire, but we won’t. They are not comfortable to sit on, but keep students alert. The old benches with signatures of old boys from war time turned into raw materials for the making of tree houses right outside my window…Look.”

The ending of David’s evocative story offered the beginning of a new story as yet untold (Pace 2012). Perhaps it could be about the reimagining of the sacrifice of the war heroes, or about how the current students suffer discomfort while achieving. The endless possibilities prove the power of narratives—the breathable words that carry life which oscillate forward and backward in time; zoom inward and outward mentally; and situate in multiple spaces, dimensions, and places while moving tangentially with infinite trajectories.

According to Naomi, her lifeworld is comprised of trials and triumphs. As the middle child, Naomi reported having experienced a common lack of attention from her extended families. Naomi’s older sibling is a boy who is naturally loved by everyone, especially her paternal grandparents, and her younger sister needed close parental supervision. Suffering from this middle-born child syndrome (Curtis 1993), Naomi desired to be the best in whatever she did. Her self-efficacy made her an excellent student. Upon her tertiary graduation in Hong Kong, Naomi decided to serve God in church ministries. She pledged God that she would teach church music in Hong Kong, only after she had first gained the highest possible qualification in this field—a Doctor of Musical Arts (DMA)—because in her words, “God deserves the best.” This is congruent with the Protestant individualist view that she wanted to achieve personal excellence to glorify God. Naomi described herself as “living a life with abundant blessings and miracles.” This theme recurred in her recounting of critical events that happened to her and her extended families. Naomi said she never sought graduate studies, but opportunities kept knocking and she received them gracefully. Naomi explained: “My American teacher at CU encouraged me to go for graduate studies. I told him my passion was in church music. Although he was not a Christian, he found a church music course for me in UK. I was there for three months and found the study not satisfying. I came back to wait for scholarship offers from America instead. Meanwhile, I commenced instrumental teaching, and engaged in freelance music activities based at church. Eventually, a full scholarship offer for a master’s degree in US came, and I studied church music and choral conducting there.”

Not only were Naomi’s intellectual needs met, but God also looked after her financial, social, and psychological needs: “I commenced working part-time at a Baptist Church within the university. The congregation was small but consisted of highly educated people in the university environment. Not only was I given an opportunity to work and practise my conducting skills, I was cherished as a family member. Most people were older than me; they were my grandmas and grandpas. I missed them when I had to leave.”

Towards the end of Naomi’s scholarship when money was about to run out, the chair of her conducting department told her to attempt to obtain a doctorate degree. Naomi responded:

I said I had no money to fly around within US for interviews. He found a school in another state for me that charged no fees, and told me to drive down there for an audition and interview. I had a week to prepare the piece to conduct. The panel had never offered full scholarships to students who came out from a master’s degree. I said there was a need to teach church music in Hong Kong; and church musicians should not be seen as second-class musicians…God deserves the best and I wanted to achieve the highest academic level before I began teaching back home. They were convinced and offered me the scholarship. I was extremely thankful and knew that if God wanted me to do this, He would provide my needs.
Religious faith was knitted into every aspect of Naomi’s personal life. She accepted unsought opportunities in the US and worked hard. Naomi attributed her achievements to her faith in God. Naomi understood that it was through God’s work in her that she broke several records at her university: receiving a full doctoral scholarship as a fresh master’s graduate and being the first to complete a doctorate in three years. Naomi described temptations to abandon her calling when she was offered tenure at her university: “When I completed my DMA, my advisor-professor wanted me to become a staff member; but I said I had a vision and mission to go back home… he respected my choice. Before his retirement, he tried to recruit me again, but I refused the offer and followed through what I set out to do. It was a test of my will and I stood firm on my belief.”

As a result of experiencing God’s provision, on her return home Naomi pledged to God that she would tell her parents the good news about Jesus and hoped that they could share her blessings. To enable that to happen, Naomi began to write home weekly while studying abroad, addressing letters to all members of her extended families. One by one, her family members became Christians, she explained:

My maternal grandpa got lung cancer and asked for prayer support; I sent out a prayer chain request to my network. Three months later, he died in peace at home. My grandma believed my God was awesome that blessed her husband’s passing without sufferings and became a Christian. When I was a kid, she did not pay attention to me, simply because I am a female child and the offspring of her daughter. But she grew to love me. At the end, she left me with her house, her only valuable possession. I prayed for their health and salvation and God answered my prayer.

As Naomi reflected on her journey, “God has been faithful to my family. My father also became a Christian and I was never deprived of anything.” Naomi’s father became gravely ill while in Australia visiting her brother. Her father’s operation prompted her brother’s renewal of his faith and led to his wife’s conversion to Christianity. Naomi recalled:

My father was unconscious... My brother [a doctor] thought that he had no hope of surviving. I told my brother to let me try my way with prayers. I earnestly prayed and his conditions continued to improve with the operation being successful. Unfortunately my father did not live because he suffered post-operational complication. After his passing, my brother said that it was God’s punishment on him that he could not cure his own dad, he felt useless. My brother had gone astray from church; I told him God is forgiving and he finally returned. He said he was astonished that I had so much faith in God. He also passed the good news to his wife and she too became a Christian.

First, Naomi’s maternal grandfather and grandmother, then her father, her brother, and sister-in-law became Christians; but Naomi really longed for her mother’s conversion and love. As mentioned, Naomi was the middle child who experienced unintentional childhood neglect. Her father’s passing changed everything. Naomi described what happened: “My mother never liked me much as a kid and favoured my brother, the male child naturally. Mum said that I was foolish not to work for universities, but chose to teach at a theological college where the financial reward was smaller. With so much drama in the family, my mother’s view about me and my God changed. She became a Christian and loved me the most among her three children.”

For a female adult-child to eventually earn love from her mother after so many years must have been emancipating for Naomi. She never complained but consistently prayed for the salvation of each person in her extended families. Naomi walked by faith and was rewarded with “prayers answered.” The stories about the conversion of Naomi’s family members to Christianity demonstrated her collectivist worldview and her spiritual ways of life; her trust in God, and her filial piety and love for her family.
As a child, Naomi was drawn by the beauty of music in chapel services at school and at church. Naomi felt a need to teach church music in Hong Kong. Opportunities to study overseas found her demonstrating God’s intentions and care to Naomi. Her response was to stand firm on her belief regardless of temptations. To her, religion and music are inseparable; music carries spiritual meanings as she eloquently explained: “… listening in depth, hearing the philosophy, registering the Creator, discerning the insight... If you can hear the lesson, the meanings behind the music in a spiritual level, there is hope. These lead to harmony, not division. Music, without the Holy Spirit, becomes the tool for self-gratification and glory. The magnetic force of God draws mankind to Him through the mystery of fine music.”

Discussion and Conclusion

David and Naomi’s spiritual ways of life, occupational choices, and practices as educational leaders showed a combined individualist and collectivist worldview. Both were influenced by Confucianism and Christian faith. They strove to achieve personal excellence in their music studies, teaching, and leadership; and became knowledgeable educators and moral role models to society. By doing that, they brought glory to their Creator. They demonstrated filial piety and Christian love by their lifetime dedication and servanthood—they behaved like humble servants who preserved the sense of stewardship, mutual obligation, and reciprocity where they looked after their family members, responded timely to their personal callings, partnered with God, and served diligently with loyalty and humility in their ministries. Their life choices can be interpreted with the “Parable of the Talents” (Matthew 25: 14–30) that culminates with God’s blessing, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

Both musicians are renowned educators who can be viewed as receiving “talents” from the master. They made good investments and received much. David and Naomi might have understood that they were entrusted with “more,” and for those with more, God wants more back. They contributed to their society more than was expected in a worldly sense, but they based their life choices on the Godly principle of reciprocity and stewardship. Financially neither participant might be regarded as successful, but they are influential educators who have given their best years in the moral shaping of many young minds.

David saw his father’s debt as his own and repaid the loan. His view of the father extended from “God the Heavenly Father” to his “biological father” to “the exemplary father at school—the former principal.” He experienced “unconditional love” with his principal, the “father-figure” who nurtured his personal maturity in his rite of passage. He became a father-figure to his students at his school-family. David demonstrated filial piety and Christian love—Agápe, Philia, and Storge in his role as a son and a school principal. David’s own salvation was freely paid for through redemption by faith in the resurrection of Jesus. The Son of God was without sin but took on the sin of all to atone for humankind.

In her childhood, Naomi experienced gender discrimination and emotional deprivation as a female middle child. She grew up experiencing Agápe that repaired all brokenness and held no grudge against her family. Through music, she found her calling to serve God in the teaching of church music in Hong Kong. Her experience of the “loving and kind” grace of God the Father overcame her undesirable childhood experiences. Naomi offered herself as a living sacrifice and desired that her kinfolk experience God’s love—she became a compassionate disciple of Christ with a heartfelt need for her family members’ salvation. She took action to lead them to Christ, as well as studying theology to further equip herself in God’s Word. Ultimately, her family as a whole experienced benevolence, filial piety, and the Christian Agápe, Philia, and Storge. Although Naomi did not expect any reward from being loving and forgiving to her family, she received a house from her grandmother. Naomi perceived this as God’s reward to His loyal servant who stood firm on her faith.
In conclusion, both musician-educators have experienced how music and religion were entwined in their personal, educational, and professional lives. This study examined identity formation and focused on the interplay of religion, music, cultural heritage, and stewardship, and found that Confucian filial piety, Christian love, and the Protestant work ethic had shaped the musicians in becoming who they are. They made their life choices based on faith and walked by faith, demonstrating the Christian principle of being in the world but not devoured by worldly values. However, their dreams in music might not have been realised without the nurture of faith-based educational institutions.

**Implication and Limitation**

Both musicians went through Christian schooling from primary to tertiary education and benefited from the moral lessons they received. David and Naomi acknowledged that the weekly chapel assemblies combining music and sermon were good opportunities to plant seeds in young minds, although the harvest might not be immediate. Faith-based institutions have an important role in the molding of moral people. There is a sense of mission in these institutions that they would train young people to serve within their own chosen ministries. Although Naomi did not satisfy the pre-requisites for a doctoral scholarship in the US, she talked her way in. Naomi refused to give in to temptations and stood firm on her faith, returning home to teach church music. She served at her theological college until her retirement and continues to live her life as a role-model for her faith community. These findings encourage ordinary people like us to reflect on our faiths as educators or policy makers in order to identify areas of needs and take actions to bring change to society. Australia has become a multi-faith but non-religious country; it is unlikely that Naomi’s story can be repeated here in this paradoxical social context. This forces faith community leaders to assess the impact of religion and spirituality in diverse societies. Furthermore, the cultural-political climate in different parts of the globe can affect how religious faiths can be applied to the lifeworld practices of people within a society.

David treats his school as his family and feels eternally tied to his school for life—“a lifetime business.” David was a son to his biological father, now he is “father” and principal to his school. Spiritually, he continues to be nurtured by his Heavenly Father. David’s image of himself as a “father-figure” has important implications for teachers. If educators can reimagine themselves as father-figures to their students, who may or may not have stable, loving homes, they could become moral role-models as well as people who deliver knowledge. With a sense of mission, such educators would probably walk an extra mile and take personal interest in their students, to foster all aspects of their holistic development. In David’s words, “invest in their failures... let them mature and have the courage to live according to their callings.” For ordinary individuals, we are inspired to follow callings and act accordingly with courage and passion. Only then, can we be said to be true to ourselves. Only then, would we have applied our faiths and lived lives with meanings that transcend material rewards.

The research paradigm of phenomenology is based on a small selective sample, where individual, unheard voices can be heard. The participants’ narratives serve to provide rich data for in-depth analysis. As mentioned, the findings are not intended to be generalised to the population; however, the specific can illuminate the general. The participant-researcher, while also experiencing the same phenomenon, was aware of her own background in influencing her interpretation of the data. Denzin (2014, 5) observes that, “Stories, then; like the lives they tell about, are always open-ended, inconclusive, and ambiguous, subject to multiple interpretations.” Further research is needed to explore the interactions between music, religion, cultural heritage, and stewardship in all cultures and faiths.
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