

Article

# How Might Positionality Be Used in Biblical Studies? Philippians 1:27–2:4 as an Example

Melissa C. M. Tan 

Department of Divinity, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen AB24 3FX, UK; melissacmtan@gmail.com

**Abstract:** Using Philippians 1:27–2:4 as an example, this article will explore the role of positionality in biblical studies. Although the process of reflecting on one’s positionality is more prevalent in empirical-based research, one’s positionality is also relevant in text-based research, such as in biblical studies. This article will demonstrate this by observing the following: first, how some analyses of the collectivistic cultural context of Philippians have been inappropriately influenced by certain implicit individualistic perspectives; and second, how an interpretive lens derived from my positionality as a scholar from an explicitly collectivistic culture is able to highlight a mostly ignored intrinsic correlation between social relations and virtue.

**Keywords:** positionality; emic; etic; honor; shame; collectivism; individualism; Confucianism; face; Phil.1:27–2:4

## 1. Introduction

In her 2019 SBL presidential address, Gale Yee said, “The triad of gender, race, and class—my Chinese American ethnicity, my lower-class origins, and my female gender—have made deep marks on my interpretation of the biblical text, whether I consciously knew it or not” (Yee 2020, p. 7). Yee’s statement demonstrates a self-awareness that her particular identity markers (her race, class, and gender) have influenced her engagement with the biblical text. Although she does not explicitly use the term, Yee’s statement is essentially a brief acknowledgment of her positionality, a concept common in empirical research.

Andrew Holmes defines positionality as follows: “The term ‘positionality’ both describes an individual’s worldview and the position they adopt about the research task and its social and political context” (Holmes 2020, p. 1). The researcher’s worldview affects their ontological and epistemological assumptions as well as assumptions about human nature and agency (Holmes 2020, p. 1). As a researcher, having awareness of one’s worldview as it potentially influences the research task—or one’s “positionality”—is crucial when engaging in empirical research involving methods such as conducting interviews or participant observations. However, this positionality can also be valuable—even at a minimal level—to researchers who engage with ancient primary texts or inanimate objects because those texts or objects themselves represent, or were an integral part of, a social world. As a social being, the researcher still engages with that social world, even if it is mediated through an intermediary source such as an ancient text that was written by a person who once lived in the social world and evinced it. “Positionality, therefore, can be seen to affect the totality of the research process. It acknowledges and recognizes that researchers are part of the social world they are researching and that this world has already been interpreted by existing social actors” (Holmes 2020, p. 3).

In relation to the discipline of biblical studies, the same concerns apply. As social beings from a particular social location, the positionality of biblical scholars influences the manner in which they engage with the social world of the biblical text, the assumptions made about that social world, and possible implicit biases and blind spots that arise from those assumptions.



**Citation:** Tan, Melissa C. M. 2024. How Might Positionality Be Used in Biblical Studies? Philippians 1:27–2:4 as an Example. *Religions* 15: 638. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15060638>

Academic Editors: Isaac Blois, Gregory Lamb and Corné Bekker

Received: 14 March 2024

Revised: 13 May 2024

Accepted: 18 May 2024

Published: 23 May 2024



**Copyright:** © 2024 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Further, as the researcher engages with the social world of the ancient text, the related anthropological/sociological principles of the emic and etic perspectives should be considered in the reflection on one's own positionality. The emic perspective refers to the insider's perspective, where the researcher is either a member of the social world or has some close connection to it and thus has prior familiarity with idiosyncratic beliefs and behaviors from within that culture, resulting in the articulation of a more authentic, "thick" description of the culture.<sup>1</sup> The etic perspective refers to an outsider's perspective, where the researcher is not from that social world, has no prior knowledge of the culture, and thus is also able to maintain a distance from it. This distance or unfamiliarity affords the researcher some level of objectivity and the ability to ask sensitive questions about the culture being studied that an insider might think were taboo.

There are advantages and disadvantages of both perspectives, and the relative positions of the emic versus etic perspectives can be perceived as a continuum or even be a combination of both perspectives to differing extents (Holmes 2020, pp. 5–7).<sup>2</sup> However, interpretive bias and blind spots are pitfalls for both perspectives, with neither side exempt from making incorrect assumptions of the culture being studied. These issues necessitate the process of considering one's positionality as an honest effort towards mitigating those interpretive biases and blind spots, as well as placing oneself in the best position to observe all the aspects of the social world that are relevant to one's research project (Holmes 2020, p. 6; Jacobson and Mustafa 2019, p. 9).

In order to explore these questions around positionality, this study will first consider the honor–shame model<sup>3</sup> of Bruce Malina as an example of a body of scholarship that was inappropriately influenced by the positionality of its researcher—namely his implicit individualism—throughout the scholarship in question. Then, it will consider the positionality of *this* study's researcher and how aspects of my collectivistic cultural background—such as my emic understanding of collectivistic social sensibilities—have legitimate cultural coherency with the culture of the biblical text and, therefore, can be appropriately utilized to nuance Malina's existing models.

Finally, the nuanced understanding of honor–shame will be used to observe Philipians 1:27–2:4 in order to highlight and explicate aspects of group dynamics and honor–shame, which otherwise were omitted or insufficiently explored according to Malina's own models as well as the established reading. Given the accepted collectivistic nature of the cultures represented in the biblical text,<sup>4</sup> the cultural proximity of this researcher to the biblical text should legitimize this exercise to at least the same degree as Malina's models and probably even more.

## 2. Bruce Malina's Honor–Shame Scholarship as a Case Study in Implicit Individualism

Approximately 40 years have passed since the publication of Bruce Malina's watershed book *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural-Anthropology* (Malina 1981). Now in its third edition, this publication heralded the start of his utilization of cultural-anthropological models in New Testament interpretation and collaboration with a group of scholars who would eventually be known as the Context Group. Malina's significant contribution to New Testament scholarship must be acknowledged at the outset, not only for its introduction of social-scientific tools to aid with uncovering the social context of the biblical world,<sup>5</sup> but also for introducing these concepts and terminology into the wider church context (c.f., Georges and Baker 2016). Although his scholarship drew from the scholarship of cultural anthropologists and sociologists from the twentieth century, Malina relied on cultural continuity as a strong argument for the plausibility that cultural dynamics from antiquity can continue into modernity. In particular, the concept and vernacular expression of honor–shame—a key concept in collectivistic cultures, both ancient and modern—have been invaluable to Christian missionaries engaging in cross-cultural efforts to articulate the gospel message to group-oriented societies (c.f., Georges and Baker 2016). Today, scholars still continue to accept Malina's insights as part of the interdisciplinary toolkit of analysis,<sup>6</sup>

academic institutions around the world use *The New Testament World* as required reading;<sup>7</sup> its lingering impact should not be underestimated.

However, although Malina's strategies to acquaint himself with the foreign nature of the ancient Mediterranean were commendable and understandable, his comparisons and the scholarship that followed have now been criticized for their over-simplicity and generalization, as well as still being ethnocentric and anachronistic.<sup>8</sup> The criticisms themselves have mainly revolved around the issue of generalization as well as Malina's inappropriately rigid approach to applying his cultural "models" to the biblical text (c.f., [Horrell 1996](#); [Harvey 2016](#)). Until now, no detailed analysis of his scholarship has been conducted regarding the presuppositions foundational to his cultural worldview, which led to those very issues.<sup>9</sup> With the benefit of hindsight and a reflection on my positionality as a scholar from a different cultural worldview than Malina's worldview, I have determined that the problematic issues with Malina's research reside in an implicit individualistic perspective associated with his US/Western background. He underestimated the extent to which his individualistic perspective affected his role as a researcher of another culture. This especially affected his understanding of the nature of social groups in collectivistic cultures and, subsequently, his understanding of honor and shame.

The problems observed with Malina's models that relate to his implicit individualism can be grouped into three main categories: 1. An individualistic understanding of boundary lines; 2. A simplistic understanding of honor–shame; 3. An omission of the face metaphor. Malina's publications are large in number, but his main work concerning the honor–shame model is *The New Testament World*. He also lays out his broader theories of model-making in *Christian Origins and Cultural Anthropology: Practical Models for Biblical Interpretation* ([Malina 1986](#)). My evaluation of Malina's scholarship will reference material in these two works.

### 2.1. An Individualistic Understanding of Group Boundary Lines

The foundations of Malina's model of honor–shame start with an individualistic understanding of group boundary lines. This individualistic understanding appears in Malina's *The New Testament World* introduction to his chapter on honor–shame. In the opening paragraph, he introduces the idea of boundary lines between social groups with a generalized, abstract picture of two hypothetical groups of people who encounter each other in a desert for the first time.

Now imagine a group of people coming on the scene. With their hands in the supple sand, they start making lines to indicate to each other that this side is "my side", that side is "your side". Another group comes along, makes a line, and declares that this side is "our side", that side is "your side". The wind comes and covers over the explicit lines, yet all continue to act as though they were still there, implicit in the sand ([Malina 1981](#), p. 27).

Malina continues to explain the role of these lines in constructing meaning and defining individuals and groups from each other. When applying this preoccupation with line drawing, he uses the first-person-plural pronoun "we",<sup>10</sup> and indicates that this preoccupation is something that extends back to one's ancestors.<sup>11</sup> However, Malina does not specify which culture he is describing, thus implying that he understands this line drawing to be culturally and temporally universal. The problem with Malina's description here is that this preoccupation with boundary lines between social groups is not a universal one held by both individualistic and collectivistic cultures but is, in fact, predominately an individualistic one, as it revolves around a concern for the self and personal agency, concepts about which collectivistic cultures are less concerned.<sup>12</sup>

In *Christian Origins*, Malina applies this same understanding of social groups and boundary lines to his description of groups operating within a collectivistic culture ([Malina 1986](#), p. 37). He describes them as follows:

... a proliferation of competing groups, each attempting to be self-contained, to win out over its competitors, to defend its gains, and to consolidate its holdings.

Thus, there is strong concern in the respective groups about maintaining social boundaries, but the boundaries seem porous. The inside of the social body is under attack; there are informers, spies, or deviants present (Malina 1986, p. 38).

Malina's choice of terms ("self-contained", "win", and "defend") draws attention to the emphasis on maintaining each group's boundary lines. Malina observes that some lines are not solid, calling the boundaries "porous". Malina, this porosity is a bad thing, allowing the group to be vulnerable to external influences, all bad ones: informers, spies, and deviants. This need to maintain solid boundary lines between groups and an inherent sense of competition between groups are all markers of individualism.

In *The New Testament World*, Malina continues to apply this understanding of boundary lines to the first-century Mediterranean world. He says, "Now, in the first-century Mediterranean world, every social interaction that takes place outside one's family or outside one's circle of friends is perceived as a challenge to honor, a mutual attempt to acquire honor from one's social equal" (Malina 1981, p. 36). Although it may seem that family and friend groups are equally prioritized, later in the same discussion, it becomes clear that the family group is elevated above all other groups. Malina says, "A person can always trust his blood relatives. Outside that circle, all people are presumed to be dishonorable—untrustworthy, if you will—unless proved otherwise" (Malina 1981, p. 36). This understanding of group boundary lines forms the foundation for his understanding of honor–shame and influences the contours of his model of honor–shame.

## 2.2. A Simplistic Understanding of Honor–Shame

In conjunction with this individualistic understanding of group boundary lines, Malina also draws from the scholarship of various cultural anthropologists and sociologists, such as John Peristiany, Julian Pitt-Rivers, Mary Douglas, and Pierre Bourdieu, to build his model of honor–shame. For example, Malina discusses a means of gaining honor known as the "challenge-riposte" (or "challenge-response") game, a social phenomenon that he drew from Bourdieu's own observations of the Kabyle people in Northern Algeria (Malina 1981, pp. 33–46). (C.f., Bourdieu 1965, 1977). Based on his assumption of solid group boundary lines and an inherent competitive attitude between groups, Malina assumes that in collectivistic cultures, Bourdieu's "game" can be applied to every social interaction that occurs outside of the family or friend group and be "perceived as a challenge to honor" (Malina 1981, p. 36). This is problematic for a few reasons.

First, Bourdieu does not claim this game occurs with every social interaction. While honor challenges can occur between individuals or groups, they do not occur as regularly or frequently as Malina infers. He also observes a high level of respect between the two "players" in the game, a component that is, according to Bourdieu, inseparable from the challenge itself. He says, "Self-respect, respect for the rule, respect for one's opponent and one's offer to be respected by him—these are inseparable" (Bourdieu 1965, p. 204). This observation highlights the mutual respect and collegiality present between the two players. Bourdieu also devotes much of the essay to discussing the myriad ways in which honor is demonstrated in the Kabyle society, identifying twelve different Kabyle lexical terms that denote honor. The inclusion of this detailed lexical analysis demonstrates Bourdieu's recognition of the complex nature of honor–shame in this society, something which was lacking in Malina's works.<sup>13</sup>

Second, both solid group boundary lines and an inherent competitive attitude are characteristics more associated with individualism than collectivism (c.f., Triandis 1993, pp. 165–66). Thus, what Malina has effectively done is apply his implicit individualistic understanding of social groups to his application of honor–shame dynamics in collectivistic cultures. By not taking his positionality seriously enough, Malina underestimated the extent to which his individualistic perspective permeated his interpretation of the collectivistic social groups. In contrast, as will be demonstrated in Section 3, collectivistic cultures commonly have more porous, fluid group boundary lines and thus also have more collegial, cooperative attitudes between groups (c.f., Triandis 1993, pp. 165–66).

Malina also applies this strict understanding of social groups to his discussion of limited good. According to Malina, due to the limited nature of resources or “goods” in the first-century Mediterranean and the inherent competitive nature of the culture, any improvement in a person’s resources or social position (including power or honor) would naturally be viewed as a “threat to the entire community” (Malina 1981, p. 89). Malina assumes this is the universal behavior in response to the shortage of a resource. However, this assumption is yet another presupposition arising from his individualistic perspective. His assumption of solid, clearly demarcated boundary lines leads to another assumption that any given interaction or negotiation for resources is a zero-sum game, isolated primarily between the two social groups involved in the negotiation. But in collectivistic cultures, the reality is much more complicated and nuanced. While the main negotiation appears to be primarily between two parties, their connections to other social groups not present are still significant enough to influence the negotiation to the extent that the actual negotiation is between more than two groups, and thus, the resources are really split between multiple groups. Here, contrary to individualistic sensibilities, it is possible for both parties physically present at the negotiation to reach an amicable agreement that benefits *both* parties rather than benefitting only one.

Notably, this is where the sociological concept of capital as developed by Bourdieu—whether it be in the form of concrete resources such as food, finances, or land, or in the form of symbolic social capital such as power, status, or honor—is a better framework for understanding the exchanging of financial or symbolic capital within a collectivistic culture (Bourdieu 1986). In fact, Bourdieu also describes an alternate version of the game where the challenge to honor was issued through the giving of gifts (Bourdieu 1965, p. 204).<sup>14</sup> Here, the lines between financial capital (an actual gift) and symbolic capital (an honor bestowed) are blurred. Where mutual gift-giving occurs, honor is mutually given and received, potentially resulting in a win-win.

### 2.3. An Omission of the Face Metaphor

Finally, Malina almost completely omits a significant feature of honor–shame: the concept of *face*, an embedded metaphor for a person’s status, reputation, or presence, commonly recognized and analyzed in research on collectivistic cultures (c.f., Ting-Toomey 1994). In his section titled “How Honor is Displayed and Recognized”, Malina appears to consider this metaphor as he discusses how one’s body might represent a “sort of personalized road map of the social values of our society” (Malina 1981, p. 38). When applied to honor, Malina makes a statement that the head and face play prominent roles in this “symbolized replication of the social value of honor” (Malina 1981, p. 38). However, in his explanation of this statement, he only understands that the significance of the face is located in its awareness of others. He says, “To affront someone is to challenge another in such a way that the person is, and cannot avoid being, aware of it” (Malina 1981, p. 39). Malina seems to refer to the fact that, as human beings, we see each other, and we recognize challenges made to our faces when we see them. Without further clarification, he continues to connect this insight to the Hebrew term for the nose (“the center of the face”) and how it can be used to connote anger metaphorically (Malina 1981, p. 39). Although there is nothing problematic with this insight regarding the nose itself,<sup>15</sup> this constitutes his main discussion on a person’s appearance and face. Thus, even though Malina demonstrates some general awareness that appearance and face play significant roles in social interactions, he stops short of grasping the full extent of that significance, namely how one’s face and even one’s general appearance can connote status or honor (or shame, the lack of honor).<sup>16</sup>

## 3. Confucianism as a Paradigm for an Explicitly Collectivistic Honor–Shame

I am of Chinese descent, but I was born and raised in Britain. My social location is drawn from both the Chinese and British cultures. British culture contains many elements of individualism. Chinese culture is a strongly collectivistic culture that has main-

tained cultural continuity since antiquity. My positionality has afforded me a cultural vantage point from which to recognize the implicitly individualistic aspects of Malina's understanding of collectivistic cultures, *and* it has also afforded me an emic understanding of collectivistic cultures. Thus, as a methodological exercise to counter this implicit bias present in Malina's scholarship, I have constructed an alternative, heuristic lens of interpretation from the explicitly collectivistic Chinese culture represented in Confucianism. My cultural proximity to the collectivism of the biblical culture affords a valuable perspective and insight regarding that culture, which was less explicit from Malina's perspective.

Notably, to guard against potential anachronism, the understanding of those Confucian concepts has been derived directly from the ancient primary source material rather than from modern secondary sources.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, this section will use Confucius's writings (and those of his disciples, one of whom was represented here) to provide a picture of social groups and social boundary lines that is present in an explicitly collectivistic culture such as Chinese culture. Out of this picture will emerge an understanding of honor–shame that is more nuanced and complex than the existing model of honor–shame put forward by Bruce Malina, as discussed in the previous section. Further, this Confucian understanding of honor–shame contains a robust version of the face metaphor, which was missing in Malina's model.

There are different strands of Confucianism, encompassing the writings of Confucius himself (551–479 BCE) (Ivanhoe 2000, p. 1) and philosophers that continued developing his thoughts afterward, among which is the most prominent disciple, Mencius (391–308 BCE) (Ivanhoe 2000, p. 16). Each strand has its own particulars as well as much coherence and convergence, especially between Confucius and Mencius (Tamney 2012, pp. 128–29). Thus, Confucian scholars are comfortable with the moniker “Confucianism” being used to describe their discipline as a whole. In light of this coherence, texts from the collective teachings of Confucius and Mencius will be employed in this chapter to build an understanding of the societal dynamics of their time and the mechanisms by which honor–shame considerations were formed.

### 3.1. A Confucian Understanding of Group Boundary Lines

The following passages will demonstrate the fluidity of boundary lines in Chinese social groups. Boundary lines can exist between geographical groups and class groups. Core Confucian virtues such as *ren* 仁 (translated as goodness, benevolence, or human-heartedness) and *yi* 義 (righteousness) can also operate in the background and have a considerable influence on how loyalties and respect between two persons (whether within the same social group or across two different social groups) can be expressed.<sup>18</sup> For example, in *Analects* 1.6, Confucius teaches the following:

A youth, when at home [*ru* 入], should be filial [*xiao* 孝], and, abroad [*chu* 出], respectful to his elders [*di* 弟]. He should be earnest and truthful. He should overflow in love to all, and cultivate the friendship of the good (Legge 1861).

The Chinese concept of *xiao* 孝 (filial or filial piety) is a fundamental concept in Chinese thought and society, denoting the proper level of respect, care, and conduct towards one's parents.<sup>19</sup> The other concept that also appears in this teaching is *di* 弟 (respect for one's elders). *Di* itself is the Chinese character for a younger brother, and in this context is connoting the idea of being a good younger brother.<sup>20</sup> In this teaching, loving, collegial, respectful conduct is not only expected within one's family, one's inmost social group (*ru* 入 “at home”), but also towards any persons considered to be an elder in external social groups (*chu* 出 “abroad”). The term *chu* can refer to any location outside of one's home, ranging from one's immediate vicinity all the way to countries abroad.

The fluidity of social dynamics was not limited to geographical boundaries but class boundaries as well. In *Analects* 5.15, Zigong, a disciple of Confucius, questions the grounds for awarding the title *Wen* 文 (translated as “Cultured”) to a government minister, Kong Wenzi (“Cultured Master Kong”). Confucius responds with this praise for the minister's conduct: “He was of an active nature and yet fond of learning, and he was not ashamed

to ask and learn of his inferiors! On these grounds he has been styled *Wen*" (Legge 1861). Confucius draws attention to the minister's propensity for learning to the extent that he was not ashamed to learn from someone of a lower social class. *Chi* 耻, one of a handful of terms denoting shame, is used here. Confucius dispels any concerns regarding interactions between classes or people of differing status. It is possible for someone of higher status to learn from someone of lower status without garnering shame. This is evidence of a society where class boundaries are not so simply delineated. In fact, those members of a higher class would not only interact with but also learn from members of a lower class, essentially placing themselves in a lower position, where they showed respectful deference to that person as someone more knowledgeable than them. Further, Confucius's words make a statement regarding what behavior is considered "cultured" or honorable.

### 3.2. A Confucian Understanding of Honor–Shame

Rather than understanding honor only in terms of gaining value or worth in the eyes of others (as per Malina and Pitt-Rivers<sup>21</sup>), Confucianism also recognizes a moral, ethical dimension to honor. As the following passages show, the teachings vary in their focus, such as either advising that honor without virtuous behavior is, in reality, shame or that the path to honor is behaving virtuously. But no matter the focus, the two components are closely connected in a causal manner. For example, in *Analects* 4.9, Confucius teaches, "A scholar-official who has set his heart upon the Way, but who is still ashamed of having shabby clothing or meager rations, is not worth engaging in discussion" (Slingerland 2003). The "way" (*dao* 道) is a key umbrella concept in Confucianism that encapsulates the human pursuit of "the foundation of a harmonious universe, a peaceful society and a good life", which includes aspiring towards all moral virtues taught by Confucius (Yao 2000, p. 140). Thus, here, Confucius highlights the incongruity between having a focus on the "way" and a desire to appear honorable and wealthy. Honor can only come via actual righteousness, not the mere semblance of it.<sup>22</sup> It also shows an underlying assumption that clothing (appearance) and food (a marker of wealth) represent one's level of honor, status, or reputation, which will be discussed in further detail in the next section.

In *Analects* 7.16, Confucius teaches on the futility of attaining honor via immoral means: "With coarse rice to eat, with water to drink, and my bended arm for a pillow; I have still joy in the midst of these things. Riches and honors acquired by unrighteousness are to me as a floating cloud" (Legge 1861). Confucius does not condone aspirations for wealth or status by any means necessary. In fact, he dismisses efforts to attain wealth or status by immoral (unrighteous) means, describing them as flimsy and unsubstantial as a floating cloud. Here, he sets up a standard of honor, which necessarily includes righteousness.<sup>23</sup>

Further, communities are maintained through physical manifestations of two core Confucian virtues, *li* 禮 (ritual propriety) and *he* 和 (social harmony), practiced through gift reciprocity. In his *Book of Rites*, 1.10, Confucius teaches the following:

In the highest antiquity they prized (simply conferring) good; in the time next to this, giving and repaying was the thing attended to. And what the rules of propriety [*li* 禮] value is that reciprocity. If I give a gift and nothing comes in return, that is contrary to propriety [*li* 禮]; if the thing comes to me, and I give nothing in return, that also is contrary to propriety [*li* 禮]. If a man observes the rules of propriety [*li* 禮], he is in a condition of security; if he does not, he is in one of danger. Hence there is the saying, "The rules of propriety [*li* 禮] should by no means be left unlearned" (Legge 1885).

Over time, countless gifts or favors are given and received, and the members of that society become more and more mutually dependent on each other. "The unity of the intimate group depends on the fact that each member owes countless favors to the other members" (Fei 1992, p. 124). When you owe another person a favor (*renqing* 人情), you have to look for an opportunity to return a bigger favor (Fei 1992, p. 124). "So it goes, back and forth; the continuing reciprocation maintains the cooperation among people in the group" (Fei 1992, p. 125). This continual obligation to return favors is never fully settled, as that would

end the reciprocal relationship. “If people do not owe something to each other, there will be no need for further contact” (Fei 1992, p. 125). This ongoing cycle of gift reciprocity is the means through which ritual propriety and social harmony are cultivated and maintained, two Confucian virtues and bedrocks of the community. This gift cycle is similar to Bourdieu’s symbolic capital. However, whereas the goal of Bourdieu’s gift-exchanges is the gaining of honor, the *telos* of the Confucian cycle are the relationships themselves and the cultivating of the relationships within the community or between communities, not honor. Honor is one of the means to build up those relationships, with relationships as the end goal. Social interactions are not reduced to commodities. Relational beings are involved in those interactions and should not be reduced to parts of a transaction.

As shown in these examples, based on more fluid social groups, the dynamics of honor and shame manifest in more complex ways than envisioned by Malina. For example, honor can also be a commodity that is exchanged in a non-competitive, non-zero-sum manner, where reciprocity of honor-giving between parties can exist in a cyclical, never-ending arrangement in order to build and maintain relationships. In addition, honor–shame can function in conjunction with ethical behavior (as the public, outward dimension of ethical behaviors); they cannot be separated from each other as unrelated considerations because, as social beings, interactions between two humans always have social dimensions.

### 3.3. Appearance as Metaphor for Status and Honor

Finally, because social interactions are discerned through observation of the outward appearance, actions, and behaviors of the people involved, attention should be paid to any description that provides that information. As observed, Malina alludes to this concept, but he does not address it directly in his works at all. In modern academic research on collectivistic cultures, this has become known as the concept of face<sup>24</sup> and is a culturally-embedded metaphor for a person’s status, honor, reputation, or presence. In modern discourse, this metaphor has largely been isolated to the actual face itself. However, in ancient Chinese texts, the metaphor can be broadened to any part of the person’s body or clothing, their actions, behavior, and, in fact, any aspect of the person’s being that is visible or on display.<sup>25</sup> In this present study, this broader version of the face metaphor will be labeled as the Confucian appearance metaphor. For example, in *Mencius* 4A14, Mencius describes the pupil of one’s eye. He says the following:

Of all the parts of a man’s body there is none more excellent than the pupil of the eye. The pupil cannot be used to hide a man’s wickedness. If within the breast all be correct, the pupil is bright. If within the breast all be not correct, the pupil is dull. Listen to a man’s words and look at the pupil of his eye. How can a man conceal his character? (Legge 1861).

Here, Mencius understands the eye as an indicator of a person’s character, whether it be wicked or good.

In the previous section, *Analects* 4.9 depicted clothing and food as metaphors for one’s reputation. In particular, Confucius took the existing assumption that having good quality clothing and food equated with having honor but questioned the assumption that having the appearance of honor was enough when having virtuous behavior was more important. Confucius applies this same understanding in 8.21 and again in 20.2. In 8.21, he says the following:

I can find no fault with [the legendary sage-king] Yu. He subsisted on meager rations, and yet was lavishly filial [*xiao* 孝] in his offerings to the ancestral spirits. His everyday clothes were shabby, but his ceremonial headdress and cap were exceedingly fine. He lived in a mean hovel, expending all of his energies on the construction of drainage ditches and canals. I can find no fault with Yu (Slingerland 2003).

Here, Confucius extols the merits of the sage-king Yu, who became known for his efforts to tackle flooding issues in China (Slingerland 2003, p. 85). Confucius points out that Yu was



modest regarding his own living conditions but lavish and generous regarding his ritual and moral duties to others. Each statement connects either Yu's behavior or appearance to his inner good, virtuous character, and by implication, his good reputation.<sup>26</sup> And thus, Confucius introduces and concludes this tribute with the same pronouncement: "I can find no fault with Yu". This can also be understood to imply that Confucius also sees himself as being unworthy to be counted as Yu's equal (Slingerland 2003, p. 85).

In conclusion, this section proposed an alternative paradigm to Malina's model of honor–shame, drawn from Confucianism, which represents the philosophy of ancient Chinese culture, a culture with strong collectivistic values and behavior. The Confucian paradigm, with its more complex social dynamics, can be considered a more persuasive alternative paradigm to provide more nuance and fill in the gaps of the current honor–shame model as put forward by Bruce Malina. In summary, the Confucian paradigm contains three components: 1. A more nuanced understanding of the underlying group dynamics, in particular, how boundary lines function; 2. More diversity and complexity in honor and shame manifestations; 3. The presence of a metaphor this study has labeled the "Confucian appearance metaphor"—a conceptually broader version of the face metaphor—a socially embedded metaphor for one's status or standing, which indicates one's level of either honor or shame.

This section has constructed this heuristic tool based on the social location of myself, the researcher of this study, as an exercise in culturally and methodologically countering the implicit biases associated with Malina's own social location.

#### 4. Applying the Confucian Paradigm to Philippians 1:27–2:4

At this point, the Confucian paradigm for honor–shame, which is more alert to social dynamics in collectivistic cultures, will be applied to a reading of Philippians 1:27–2:4.<sup>27</sup> This passage provides the context to the famous Christ Hymn of 2:5–11, a passage rich with honor–shame dynamics. However, 1:27–2:4 itself also merits a close reading for its own honor–shame dynamics in terms of how Paul utilizes those social dynamics to add weight to his instructions to the Philippian church regarding their moral behavior. Where this reading differs or goes beyond Malina's reading (and the established reading) will be observed and noted.

In Philippians 1:27–2:4, Paul exhorts the Philippians to live a life worthy of the gospel, specifically living in harmony with one another, in love and humility. These exhortations can be considered simply moral or ethical ones, but they also contain honor–shame dimensions, which are important to the collectivistic Philippians.<sup>28</sup> Reading these verses (particularly 1:27 and 2:3) through the Confucian lens, the following observations can be made regarding the social dynamics of the Philippian church and various terms that have connotations of honor–shame. By paying attention to these connotations, the importance of community and relationships for the Philippian church, in Paul's words, is highlighted.

Beginning in 1:27, when viewed through the Confucian paradigm, the main verb πολιτεύομαι could be considered to be a Confucian appearance metaphor. The action inherent in this verb is on display for everyone to see. Further, the verb connects ideas of citizenship—a status that carries honor—with appropriate behavior that represents the church as a group following social norms distinct from outside groups.<sup>29</sup> In his analysis of this passage, Te-Li Lau also recognizes the citizenship allusions in 1:27, along with their associated honor–shame dynamics. He describes the social connotations of πολιτεύομαι in terms of the "ethos and demands of the body politic, discharging their responsibilities with honor, integrity, and sensibility", but also emphasizes the irony that those social norms are now the ones established by God, not by Roman Philippi and its "dominant cultural rhetoric" (Lau 2020, p. 125). Notably, although Malina also observes the civic obligations associated with the verb, he makes no comment on its honor connotations (Malina and Pilch 2006, p. 304).<sup>30</sup>

Modifying πολιτεύομαι is ἀξίως, which is related to ἀξίωμα, a term also synonymous with honor and reputation.<sup>31</sup> This connection with ἀξίωμα aids in understanding that in the whole phrase ἀξίως ... πολιτεύεσθε (1:27), honor and reputation are embedded

in that visible, public behavior (“to live a life worthy of the gospel”) instructed by Paul,<sup>32</sup> and thus one could view this phrase as a form of the Confucian appearance metaphor. This behavior has both moral and social (visible) dimensions, as becomes clear as Paul continues, describing the manner in which he is aware of this behavior, namely ἰδὼν ὑμᾶς ... ἀκούω τὰ περὶ ὑμῶν. Paul is aware of this behavior because he is able to see it for himself or hear about it from others if he is away. The Philippians’ behavior is not hidden but public, outwardly discernible (through sight and sound) to all. These two verbs of seeing and hearing may seem simple and innocuous, but in fact, they point to an important aspect of collectivistic cultures: the public dimension of any action. Knowing that their behavior is public and on display reminds the Philippians that their reputation and honor are at stake here, too.<sup>33</sup> And thus, it is not simply a matter of heeding Paul’s teachings for their own personal growth; rather, their behavior also impacts their individual reputations and social standing within their community and their reputation as a group to outsiders.

Paul further fleshes out what this behavior entails in both 1:27 and 2:1–2, asking the Philippians to have a spirit of cooperation and collegiality in their conduct with one another.<sup>34</sup> He draws a social boundary line around the Philippians by challenging a group of opponents for whom the unified spirit of the Philippians is an indicator of their own destruction. Conversely, this same spirit is how the Philippians will recognize their salvation, which is from God (1:28). Paul explains that the basis for this is their belief in and suffering for Christ, which were given to them by God.<sup>35</sup> With the verb χαρίζομαι, connotations of favor and gift-giving can be understood (Hellerman 2015, p. 84).<sup>36</sup> The idea that suffering can be considered a favor or gift from God may be jarring to a modern Western audience. However, it is culturally coherent to a collectivistic audience who is comfortable with shameful sensibilities such as suffering for positive, constructive purposes.<sup>37</sup> For example, Paul’s reference to suffering as a gift may also foreshadow his desire in 3:10 to participate in Christ’s suffering, something he has already been reflecting upon, given his own current sufferings, which he references at the end of 1:29. Here Paul also repeats the same two verbs of seeing and hearing (εἶδετε ... ἀκούετε) when he relates this back to the Philippians’ awareness of his own suffering. Malina is also alert to the favor-granting connotations of χαρίζομαι, understanding it as a “patronage favor” from God (Malina and Pilch 2006, p. 305). However, he glosses over the cultural significance of suffering as a favor, instead commenting that the idea of suffering on someone’s behalf involves a military metaphor. His reasoning for reading military connotations into this idea stems from Paul’s use of the term ἀγών (“contest”, “competition”) to describe his current struggles, which itself carries athletic connotations. Essentially, Malina sees conceptual overlaps between the two metaphors to the extent that upon seeing the use of the ἀγών term, he leans into the conflict aspects of the term in order to reach his conclusion that the suffering must be a military metaphor. This is telling, given Malina’s propensity to see all social interactions as challenges or competitions. In contrast, Joseph Hellerman does not conflate the two metaphors but supports the athletic metaphor, not as an idea connoting conflict, but rather as “the struggle of the sage toward virtue”, a more constructive activity, attested in ancient moral discourse.<sup>38</sup> However, Hellerman does not discuss the shame connotations of Paul’s mention here of suffering being “granted” to the believing community.

Moving on, in 2:1–2, Paul exhorts the Philippians to build a community characterized by unity and love for one another. In 2:3, Paul elaborates upon this instruction, cautioning the Philippians against acting with strife or with conceit (κατὰ κενοδοξίαν)<sup>39</sup> but instead with humility (τῆ ταπεινοφροσύνη); they should consider (ἡγούμενοι) one another more significant than themselves (ἀλλήλους ... ὑπερέχοντας ἑαυτῶν). When viewed through the Confucian paradigm lens, key phrases in this verse also carry metaphorical connotations related to one’s appearance, which indicate issues of honor–shame implicit in them.<sup>40</sup> Firstly, κενοδοξία is derived from κενός (empty) and δόξα (glory, honor), while δόξα itself is derived from δοκέω (to appear, seem). Conceptually, this term denotes more than just “conceit” or “vanity”, as it is commonly translated, but more accurately, the idea of “appearing empty”, or “a vain or exaggerated self-evaluation”.<sup>41</sup> Paul is warning against

striving for honor for the sake of honor itself.<sup>42</sup> This sentiment parallels Confucius's teachings against the mere semblance of honor, as discussed in the previous section.<sup>43</sup> This term also foreshadows Christ's self-emptying in 2:7 (ἐαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν) and God's glory in 2:11 (δόξαν θεοῦ πατρὸς).<sup>44</sup>

Secondly, when Paul advises on the correct behavior towards one another, he uses the term ταπεινοφροσύνη, derived from ταπεινός (lowly) and φρήν (mind, thought). Not only is ταπεινός an explicit term related to honor–shame, but it is another term that foreshadows Christ's humiliation on the cross (2:8).<sup>45</sup> Via the LXX, ταπεινός also has conceptual connections with the Hebrew term נָנָה (lowly, humble) in a number of passages, including prophetic passages that concern messianic expectation.<sup>46</sup> In these passages, a theme emerges regarding the lowly (or humble) being regarded positively by God or negatively by oppressors (Macaskill 2019b, pp. 65–66). This picture of the lowly (with strongly implicit shame) being regarded positively may seem contradictory, but when viewed through the Confucian paradigm, it parallels the positive, desired notions of shame in the Confucian texts. This positive trait also carried forward to ταπεινός through its usage in the LXX. Thus, in 2:3, Paul's use of the term ταπεινοφροσύνη also contains positive connotations. Its figurative meaning of lowliness (with the same strongly implied shame) as the correct attitude in 2:3 provides a stark contrast to κενοδοξία, as the conceptual opposite of a futile effort to gain honor or increase one's status, but instead the mindset of humility.<sup>47</sup> Thirdly, the verb that Paul uses in this instruction (ἡγήσομαι), while an innocuous one in this context, becomes significant elsewhere in both Phil. 2 and 3.<sup>48</sup> In addition, as a verb related to the sense of sight (consider, regard) it plays its part in this appearance-focused, culturally loaded phrase. Notably, the appearance aspect is located in the grammatical object of the verb. As the object seen by the subject of the verb, the object is what is visible and, therefore, known by the subject. In this context, it is the other members of the community who are known by the Philippian audience who are seen and should be considered as better (or superior) than themselves.

At the end of 2:3, the participle ὑπερέχοντα also carries honor–shame connotations. In a literal sense, this verb indicates a spatial position of being higher than or above another object. Figuratively, this verb can indicate being in a higher (or superior) position of power or authority or indicate a superior quality or value.<sup>49</sup> Given the prevailing context of community-building and honor–shame, the meaning here is “being in a superior position of power or authority”, which entails a superior status as well.<sup>50</sup> But the second meaning related to value cannot be dismissed entirely due to its base verbal cognate ἔχω (to have), which adds further meaning to that status as something of value to possess and leverage for honor. Here, Bourdieu's conceptual apparatus of capitals, specifically his symbolic capital, helps to understand ὑπερέχοντα as a commodity of sorts (c.f., Bourdieu 1977, pp. 179, 180; Also c.f., Barclay 2015, pp. 22–24). It is in this manner that, as something that contains the leverage for honor, this participle can also function as a Confucian appearance metaphor.<sup>51</sup> And thus, having just advised the Philippians not to strive for vain honor but rather to have an attitude of lowliness, Paul's use of this term carries much irony, as he teaches them to attribute the superiority of status (which they want for themselves) to one another *rather than* themselves (Hellerman 2015, pp. 101–2).<sup>52</sup> The remainder of 2:4 continues this advice in practical terms, not just to regard others as superior to themselves but also to place others' interests before their own, which is what Paul's understanding of humility entails.

Malina makes no comment on any of the honor–shame connotations in 2:1–4. However, he correctly understands the focus of Paul's exhortation here to be on “ingroup harmony”. Unfortunately, his definition of humility is rather narrow and still inward-looking, betraying his implicit individualistic lens: “being satisfied with one's status in society, not striving for honor at the expense of others” (Malina and Pilch 2006, p. 305). In contrast, there exists an interesting conceptual alignment between Paul's definition of humility and the Confucian paradigm, in particular one of its core virtues, *ren* (goodness, benevolence, human-heartedness), with its focus on the “other” in interpersonal relations.<sup>53</sup> Paul's defi-

nition of humility, with his focus on others, concurs with the ideals of the Confucian relational self. Paul's instruction here also anticipates his presentation of Jesus's act of humility on the cross (2:5–11) as the ultimate act of putting others' interests ahead of his own.

## 5. Conclusions

This study has explored the task of positionality, probing its potential value and role in disciplines such as biblical studies that conduct text-based research. As it relates to the researcher's social location, the process of understanding one's positionality prompts the researcher to develop self-awareness regarding the various identity markers related to their social location. This self-awareness should lead to an awareness of how one's social location can illuminate or obscure the ways in which the researcher approaches the research task from beginning to end. In the case of biblical studies, where the task at hand may be an analysis of the social context of the biblical text, the researcher should be aware of how their own social location may impact how they observe that social context.

Bruce Malina's honor–shame model was a significant part of his pioneering use of social scientific tools, now considered his watershed contribution to New Testament scholarship. However, this study examined how the model revealed his lack of awareness regarding the influence of his social location of the modern West—along with its implicit individualism—on the ways in which he observed and analyzed the collectivistic social context of the biblical text. The consequence of this lack of awareness led to the construction of a model of what he claimed to be collectivistic honor–shame, which was inappropriately based on individualistic presuppositions regarding social boundary lines, leading to what is essentially individualistic honor–shame.

As a response, I reflected upon my own positionality as a scholar of Chinese extraction. Keen awareness of the overlaps in the collectivistic characteristics between Chinese culture and the social context of the biblical text led to the construction of an alternate, more nuanced paradigm of honor–shame drawn from ancient Chinese culture, represented in Confucianism. This paradigm corrected the issues besetting Malina's model regarding social boundary lines, leading to a more robust understanding of honor–shame, which included a correlation between honor–shame and virtues. The paradigm also included an alertness to how descriptions of a person's appearance or behavior can also implicitly communicate the person's status or honor. These descriptions were labeled the "Confucian appearance metaphor".

Finally, the Confucian paradigm was used to analyze Philippians 1:27–2:4 for its honor–shame dynamics. From the analysis, it became clear that Paul used vernacular expressions with honor–shame connotations in his moral exhortations to the Philippians in order to appeal to their honor–shame sensibilities and, thus, heed his advice. In particular, Paul framed the Philippians' suffering as a gift from God, not only to encourage them in their plight but also because Paul himself understood suffering in positive, desirable terms, as evidenced later in the letter (2:7; 3:10). These observations were more easily made with the aid of the Confucian paradigm, proving its effectiveness in analyzing the Jewish collective context of the Philippian epistle.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The term "thick description" was first coined by Gilbert Ryle but developed further and became more famously associated with Clifford Geertz (Geertz 1973). Geertz used this term in relation to having an emic understanding of a culture, its idiosyncratic

behaviors, and the motivations underlying that behavior (in contrast to a “thin description”, which would only consist of surface-level observations of that behavior with no understanding of motivation or cultural significance). Geertz describes this culturally-idiosyncratic behavior as “a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular and inexplicit, and which he [the ethnographer] must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render” (Geertz 1973, p. 10).

According to Holmes, although these two perspectives can be understood as a static dichotomy, a flexible continuum seems more likely (Holmes 2020, p. 7).

Malina’s choice to use this term has not been without criticism, given that his application of such “models” in the biblical context differs from the application of models in modern empirical studies (c.f., Horrell 1996; Harvey 2016). However, for consistency’s sake, this study will retain the term when referring to Malina’s scholarship.

The cultures represented in the biblical text have become understood as collectivistic in nature, owing to their emphasis on the group rather than individuals, and their prioritization of family and kinship (including fictive), leading to collective honor and shame. For example, in the Hebrew Bible, Paul Joyce’s work demonstrates how Israel should be understood as a collective unit (not as separate individuals) in Ezekiel (Joyce 1989). Also, Joel Kaminisky’s study recognizes and analyzes the emphasis on the community as a whole in how YHWH relates to ancient Israel (Kaminisky 1995). This understanding has led to attention paid to the presence of honor and shame in those cultures as well (c.f., Laniak 1998; Wu 2016; Hwang 2017). In the New Testament, see the following studies on honor-shame which also rest upon this understanding: (Lawrence 2003; Hellerman 2005; Harvey 2016; Blois 2020; Lau 2020).

Regarding Malina’s legacy, James Crossley comments, “More than any other New Testament scholar, Bruce Malina is responsible for bringing cultural/social anthropology into the study of Christian origins. His famous 1981 book, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, has proven to be hugely influential on New Testament scholarship and is often cited as one of the authoritative places to look for understanding the social world of the earliest Christians” (Crossley 2012, p. 175).

(C.f., Barclay 2015, p. 443, n29; Macaskill 2019a, p. 49, n9). However, Macaskill has since recognized the need to criticize Malina’s model as part of the wider anthropological reassessment of honor-shame approaches while acknowledging that it remains influential in the field, see his recent essay (Macaskill 2024).

In Markus Bockmuehl’s review of its third edition, he calls it a “celebrated twenty-year-old textbook classic” and acknowledges “the book’s years of service among undergraduates in North America and beyond” (Bockmuehl 2002).

For his claims, see (Malina 1981, pp. 11–17). These criticisms have been meted out by such scholars as David Horrell (Horrell 1996), Louise Lawrence (Lawrence 2003), Zeba Crook (Crook 2004), and David Harvey (Harvey 2016).

(C.f., Crossley 2008, 2012). James Crossley does devote one chapter in each of these monographs to a discussion of what he has observed to be the problematic cultural influences on Malina’s scholarship (namely imperialism and orientalist stereotyping of the Middle East, Crossley 2008, p. 112; 2012, p. 185), but his attention in each chapter is more towards exploring the origins of those influences than on the resultant problematic insights on the biblical text.

“We are all born into systems of lines that mark off nearly all our experiences” (Malina 1981, p. 27).

“Our ancestors passed down to us the set of lines they inherited, and thus we find ourselves in a cultural continuum that reaches back to the sources of our cultural heritage” (Malina 1981, p. 28).

Regarding the contrasting concepts of individualism and collectivism, this present study draws its understanding from Harry Triandis’s work in cross-cultural psychology and his extensive work on these two concepts across different cultures (C.f., Triandis 1993). Triandis’s individualistic self is a self that is defined as an independent entity with a mindset that places great value on one’s own freedom, rights, and autonomy, prioritizing them over those of the group (Triandis 1993, pp. 165–66). As such, this self also values competition and is comfortable with confrontations between individuals or groups (Triandis 1993, p. 166). Triandis’s collectivistic self, in contrast, is defined in terms of the ingroup and relationships, with a mindset that focuses on the needs of the ingroup over the individual. Security, obedience, duty, and ingroup harmony are valued and prioritized by this self (Triandis 1993, p. 166).

For this list, see (Bourdieu 1965, p. 209; Also c.f., Tan 2023, pp. 65–90) for more in-depth discussions of the differences between Malina and Bourdieu’s work, and Peristiany, Pitt-Rivers and Douglas.

Also (c.f., Bourdieu 1965, p. 215) for a chart depicting the process of gift-giving as a challenge to honor.

BDB defines  $\eta\alpha$  as the nose, nostril, face, and anger (BDB, s.v.,  $\eta\alpha$ ).

David Harvey’s recent work (Harvey 2016) acknowledges the significance of the face in honor–shame contexts; however, he narrows his focus to only the face itself (with his focus on the lexeme  $\mu\upsilon\sigma\omega\pi\acute{o}\nu$  and its related cognates).

Although the consideration of my positionality was what first prompted this study of Confucian concepts, the analysis of the Confucian literature was conducted as a purely literary analysis, with every effort made to consider the material without imposing my own modern lens on it.

Mencius describes *ren* as man’s peaceful abode and *yi* as a straight path for a man to follow (Mencius 4A10).

- <sup>19</sup> Filial piety plays a significant role in maintaining stability in a society. Where respect for one's elders extends to respecting traditions and rituals established by previous generations, any change to a society can only be gradual, thus resulting in a stable society. (*Analects*, 1.11; c.f., [Fei 1992](#), pp. 130–31).
- <sup>20</sup> *Di* 弟 also appears in the noun *dizi* 弟子 which appears in the *Analects*, referring once simply to a youth (*Analects* 1.6), but more commonly, a disciple (c.f., *Analects* 6.3, 7.34, 8.3, 14.7) which leans further upon the concept of a younger person learning from an older person. Mencius also uses it twice (2A1.4; 2B10.3).
- <sup>21</sup> Although not explicitly cited, it is generally accepted that Malina's definition of honor takes its cue from Pitt-Rivers's oft-quoted definition ([Malina 1981](#), p. 30; c.f., [Pitt-Rivers 1965](#), p. 21).
- <sup>22</sup> Also see Mencius 7B83 regarding the futility and hypocrisy of disingenuous virtuous behavior.
- <sup>23</sup> C.f., Cua observes this connection, saying "In Confucius's view the established conventions concerning good behavior as requiring courtesy, deference, deportment, and ceremonies have no ethical significance unless they are justifiable in the light of *ren* and *yi*" ([Cua 2003](#), p. 156). Further, Cua emphasizes the particular role of *yi*: "*Yi* provides the ethical standard of justification for the acquisition of honors, as it provides a standard for right and reasonable conduct" ([Cua 2003](#), p. 157).
- <sup>24</sup> Following modern discourse, David Harvey refers to *face* in this manner ([Harvey 2016](#), p. 47).
- <sup>25</sup> As a point of cultural proximity between Chinese and Greco-Roman cultures, also see Carlin Barton's discussion on faces in Greco-Roman culture, where she also observes the embodied manifestation of honor or shame more broadly than just in the actual face, but also in anything visible or on display, anything spoken, and in behaviors and actions ([Barton 2001](#), pp. 56–87).
- <sup>26</sup> Statements that connect one's appearance to one's virtue can also be found in ancient moral discourse. However, this connection is missing in Malina's work.
- <sup>27</sup> Although this paradigm is being deployed as a heuristic tool due to its conceptual overlaps with the biblical text, a case can also be made for using it as a tool of historical analysis as well, due to the connections between the East and West in antiquity via the Silk Routes trade network. Second Temple Judaism scholarship, as well as scholarship from Classics and Ancient History, have each observed cultural and philosophical connections developed from the trade and economic connections of the Silk Routes trade network, which connected the West and the East (with one of the routes terminating in the city of Chang'an (modern-day Xi'an), the capital city of Shaanxi Province, China), (C.f., [Reed 2009](#); [Thorley 1969](#); [Schiedel 2009](#)). Thus, it is plausible that by the first century, the Apostle Paul was exposed to this cultural framework from as far east as China, whether directly via the travelers and tradesfolk traveling along the Silk Routes or indirectly through an accumulated cultural influence of the civilizations located east of the East Mediterranean.
- <sup>28</sup> Given Paul's choice of language, this passage has also been understood as political discourse (c.f., [Vollenweider 2006](#), p. 458). Vollenweider also acknowledges the increased focus on the social context of the text from approaches such as cultural-anthropology and social history ([Vollenweider 2006](#), p. 458).
- <sup>29</sup> Vollenweider makes an interesting insight that Paul's use of this verb, instead of the more generic *περιπατέω*, is intentional in its citizenship connotations ([Vollenweider 2006](#), p. 459). Paul returns to this citizenship idea in 3:20 when discussing their heavenly citizenship. ([Fee 1995](#), pp. 162–63); Helleman recognizes the honor connotations of this verb ([Helleman 2015](#), p. 78); further, in his own monograph on Philippians, Helleman also observes the honor elements in a selection of public inscriptions excavated in Philippi, demonstrating the importance of honor in the civic life of this colony ([Helleman 2005](#), pp. 88–109). Hawthorne does not explicitly use the term *honor* in his discussion of this verb, but he does state that this verb meant Greek and Roman rights, privileges, duties, and responsibilities ([Hawthorne 1983](#), p. 55).
- <sup>30</sup> Similarly, these commentators do not acknowledge the status/honor aspects of this verb: ([Fee 1995](#), pp. 161–63; [Holloway 2017](#), p. 106; [Bockmuehl 1997](#), pp. 97–98).
- <sup>31</sup> Lau acknowledges the honor connotations of this adverb, but does not extend the insight to the Confucian metaphor ([Lau 2020](#), p. 125, n4). C.f., LSJ defines ἀξιωμα as 'that of which one is thought worthy, an honour', and also lists 'honour, reputation' as a second definition (LSJ, s.v., "ἀξιωμα").
- <sup>32</sup> Vollenweider observes that the standard set for the worthiness is the Gospel, saying, "Der Apostel nimmt dabei Bezug auf das *Evangelium*, das den Massstab der Würdigkeit vorgibt" ([Vollenweider 2006](#), p. 459).
- <sup>33</sup> C.f., Gal. 6:12, where Paul uses the *hapax legomenon* and verbal cognate of *πρόσωπον*, *εὐπροσώπεω* "to give a good face" to draw attention to the hypocrisy of attempting to appear righteous through circumcision without actually obeying the law. Harvey's work recognizes the honor/status connotations of this public behavior, understanding *πρόσωπον* as "a synecdochical way of describing the person in terms of their social status or rank" ([Harvey 2016](#), p. 82).
- <sup>34</sup> C.f., Standhartinger for a brief discussion of an implied contrast between the unity of the Philippians and a message of unity promoted by the imperial family via coinage ([Standhartinger 2006](#), pp. 377–78).
- <sup>35</sup> It is generally accepted that the implied agent of the passive verb *ἐχαρίσθη* is God, from the previous sentence ([Helleman 2015](#), p. 84).
- <sup>36</sup> The NRSV also acknowledges this meaning, rendering the verb "grant this privilege". Also (c.f., [Crook 2004](#), pp. 117–19; [Chavel 2012](#), p. 15) for further discussions on divine gift-giving and benefaction in the biblical text.

- 37 Also, c.f., Ezekiel 39:21–29, where the LORD God shames Israel (by hiding his face from them, delivering them into the hands of their enemies, and allowing them to fall on the sword) as a reminder of their sin, in order to draw them back his covenantal relationship with him.
- 38 (C.f., [Hellerman 2015](#), p. 86). Also, see ([Arnold 2015](#)) for an extended discussion on the athletic connotations in Philippians.
- 39 A verbal form must be supplied or assumed here, either a participle (to continue elaborating upon what τὸ αὐτὸ φρονητε entails) or an imperative (which would start a new sentence, but logically would still continue elaborating upon what was expressed in 2:2). Also, both κατ' ἐριθείαν and κατὰ κενοδοξίαν function adverbially, presumably to modify the missing verbal form ([Hellerman 2015](#), p. 99).
- 40 The term ἀλλήλους emphasizes the importance of relationships within the community, something also highly valued in Confucianism (c.f., Section 3.2). Barclay also observes the importance of relationship in Paul's writings, saying, "This articulation of mutuality (ἀλλήλους or ἀλλήλοις) occurs so frequently (32 times in the undisputed Pauline letters) that we are apt to overlook it, but it is a significant principle, and the product of careful reflection" ([Barclay 2017](#), p. 120).
- 41 BDAG, s.v., "κενοδοξία". (C.f., [Barton 2001](#), p. 63, n151), where Barton observes a similar attitude present in Greco-Roman culture, citing Polybius, who says, "The man who would not, or could not, submit his *persona* to challenges was weightless" (Polybius 3.81.9). Here, "weightless" is synonymous with "empty".
- 42 Lau recognizes the honor connotations of this term, saying, "This quest for social honor is ill-founded. It is empty and vain (2:3), as they are looking for honor where it cannot be found" ([Lau 2020](#), p. 126). Also see 2 Cor. 5:12. Utilising the lexical term πρόσωπον for its status connotations (similar to the Confucian appearance metaphor), Paul describes opponents of the Corinthian church as ones "who boast in outward appearance and not in the heart" (τοὺς ἐν προσώπῳ καυχωμένους καὶ μὴ ἐν καρδίᾳ). This is a criticism of the opponents' concern over how their outward conduct reflects their status and reputation while ignoring what is in their hearts.
- 43 C.f., Confucius's claim in *Analects* 8.21 that the truly virtuous individual will not be ashamed of having "shabby" clothing, etc. Notably, Malina's model of honor–shame is not alert to these nuanced expressions of honor that are present in the Jewish collective context within which Paul is operating.
- 44 Hellerman opines that "it is not by accident that the two parts of the compound (κενός + δόξα) appear in vv.6–11 to describe the kind of self-emptying that is the precisely opposite of κενοδοξία" ([Hellerman 2015](#), p. 99), also (c.f., [Fee 1995](#), pp. 186–87, n68). Oakes also observes the social significance of this term, defining it as "pride in one's high (social) position" ([Oakes 2001](#), p. 183). In his monograph, Oakes demonstrates some alertness to status considerations, but such insights are surprisingly few in number, given his focus on the social make-up of the Philippian community.
- 45 BDAG, s.v., "ταπεινός", L&J, s.v., "ταπεινός".
- 46 The term ܢܝ is rendered as ταπεινός in the LXX a total of 17 times (Isa. 14:32, 26:6, 32:7, 49:13, 51:21, 54:11, 66:2; Jer. 22:16; Zeph. 3:12; Ps. 17:28, 71:4, 81:3, 87:16; Job 24:9; Prov. 3:34, 16:19, 30:14). (C.f., [Macaskill 2019b](#), pp. 63–67).
- 47 Becker recognizes the significance of this theme of lowliness, not just in this passage, but expanded to the first two chapters of this epistle, "The semantics of lowliness of Phil 1–2 makes itself felt in the spheres of theology of the apostolate, Christology, and ecclesiology" ([Becker 2020](#), p. 82).
- 48 In Phil. 2:6, (2:25), 3:7, and 3:8 (twice).
- 49 BDAG, s.v., "ὑπερέχω". Oakes also adds that it carries the sense of "more important" rather than "more virtuous" ([Oakes 2001](#), p. 186).
- 50 Few, if any, commentators observe the status connotations of this verb (c.f., [Hawthorne 1983](#), p. 70).
- 51 Later in the letter, Paul leverages this term again, with similar meanings, first in Phil. 3:4 (ἔχω) and then in 3:8 (τὸ ὑπερέχον). In 3:4, Paul repeats the same base verb ἔχω from the participle ὑπερέχοντας in 2:3, which this study determined signaled connotations of symbolic capital implicit in its verbal meaning "to have", and therefore by default also carried status connotations as well ("having high status"), making interpretation of ὑπερέχοντας a verbal form of the Confucian appearance metaphor plausible. Both of these aspects can be applied here to the participle ἔχω) in 3:4 as well. In this verse, the implicit status (or honor) refers to two lists that Paul is about to give in 3:5–6. Macaskill draws attention to the meaning of the verb, preferring the synonyms 'to possess' or 'to own' thus making Paul a "possessor" or "owner" of the contents of the two lists, which emphasizes the commodity connotations implicit in the metaphor even further ([Macaskill 2019a](#), p. 44). The two lists consist of Paul's own privileged background and accomplishments, which, until now, Paul, as the "owner" of them, had leveraged to increase his status and honor. Then, in 3:8, the substantival participle ὑπερέχον can also be interpreted to be functioning as the Confucian appearance metaphor, carrying connotations of status and honor in their meaning, by way of representing the symbolic capital that *is* status. In a conceptual contrast to the symbolic capital implicit in Paul's list of honor-laden accomplishments, which he previously "owned", Paul now applies an extreme, emphatic version of the same verb to what is to follow. Paul considers the ownership of what is to follow to be of superior quality and value and, along with it, superior status compared with what he owned before (BDF §263.2 observes that the verb (used as an abstract noun) is more concrete and graphic than its cognate noun ὑπεροχή. Also (c.f. [Hawthorne 1983](#), p. 137). Macaskill renders it "hyper-having" as a clever way of retaining the ὑπερ- prefix and emphasizing its meaning ([Macaskill 2019a](#), p. 45).

- <sup>52</sup> Also c.f., Barclay's discussion of this phrase in (Barclay 2017, pp. 120–25), where he relates the posture of humility to Christ: "whatever investments are made to one another in mutual self-giving are triangulated by, and incorporated within, the relation of each party to Christ or God" (Barclay 2017, p. 122). "The Christian 'self' is not only given here an encouraging example: it is reconstituted in its identity, meaning and goals. Since its whole system of 'symbolic capital' is now stripped down and rebuilt by allegiance to Christ (3:2–11), the interests of the 'self' are hereby redefined" (Barclay 2017, p. 124).
- <sup>53</sup> This aligns with Jewish social relations, which Barclay highlights in this insight: "Instead of losing honor by thus giving it to others, the ethic of reciprocity means that believers are bound together in relationships where everyone's responsibility is to give honor to everyone else" (Barclay 2015, p. 510).

## References

- Arnold, Bradley. 2015. Striving for the Summum Bonum: Athletic Imagery and Moral Philosophy in Philippians. In *Paul's Graeco-Roman Context*. Edited by Cilliers Breytenbach. Leuven: Peeters, pp. 579–90.
- Barclay, John M. G. 2015. *Paul and the Gift*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Barclay, John M. G. 2017. Benefiting Others and Benefit to Oneself: Seneca and Paul on 'Altruism'. In *Paul and Seneca in Dialogue*. Edited by Joseph R. Dodson and David E. Briones. Leiden: Brill, pp. 109–26.
- Barton, Carlin. 2001. *Roman Honor: The Fire in the Bones*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Becker, Eva-Marie. 2020. *Paul on Humility*. Translated by Wayne Coppins. Baylor-Mohr Siebeck Studies in Early Christianity. Waco: Baylor University Press.
- Blois, Isaac D. 2020. *Mutual Boasting in Philippians: The Ethical Function of Shared Honor in Its Scriptural and Greco-Roman Context*. Library of New Testament Studies. London: T&T Clark.
- Bockmuehl, Markus N. A. 1997. *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians*, 4th ed. Black's New Testament Commentaries. London: Black.
- Bockmuehl, Markus N. A. 2002. Review of *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology (Third Edition)*, by Bruce J. Malina. *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*. Available online: <https://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2002/2002.04.19> (accessed on 29 February 2024).
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1965. The Sentiment of Honour in Kabyle Society. In *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society*. Edited by John G. Peristiany. Translated by Philip Sherrard. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 191–242.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1986. The Forms of Capital. In *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. Edited by John G. Richardson. Translated by Richard Nice. New York: Greenwood Press, pp. 241–58.
- Chavel, Simeon. 2012. The Face of God and the Etiquette of Eye-Contact: Visitation, Pilgrimage, and Prophetic Vision in Ancient Israelite and Early Jewish Imagination. *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 19: 1–55. [CrossRef]
- Crook, Zeba A. 2004. *Reconceptualising Conversion: Patronage, Loyalty, and Conversion in the Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean*. Berlin: De Gruyter, Inc.
- Crossley, James G. 2008. *Jesus in an Age of Terror: Scholarly Projects for a New American Century*. London: Equinox.
- Crossley, James G. 2012. *Jesus in an Age of Neoliberalism: Quests, Scholarship, and Ideology*. London: Equinox.
- Cua, Antonio S. 2003. The Ethical Significance of Shame: Insights of Aristotle and Xunzi. *Philosophy East & West* 53: 147–202.
- Fee, Gordon D. 1995. *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.
- Fei, Xiaotong. 1992. *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society: A Translation of Fei Xiaotong's Xiangtu Zhongguo, with an Introduction and Epilogue*. Translated by Gary G. Hamilton, and Zheng Wang. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. New York: Basic Books.
- Georges, Jayson, and Mark D. Baker. 2016. *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures*. Biblical Foundations and Practical Essentials. Downers Grove: IVP Academic.
- Harvey, David S. 2016. Face in Galatians: 'Boasting in the Cross' as Reconfigured Honour in Paul's Letter. Ph.D. Thesis, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK.
- Hawthorne, Gerald F. 1983. *Philippians*. Word Biblical Commentary 43. Waco: Word Books.
- Hellerman, Joseph H. 2005. *Reconstructing Honor in Roman Philippi: Carmen Christi as Cursus Pudorum*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hellerman, Joseph H. 2015. *Philippians: Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament*. Nashville: B&H Academic.
- Holloway, Paul A. 2017. *Philippians. Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Holmes, Andrew Gary Darwin. 2020. Researcher Positionality—A Consideration of Its Influence and Place in Qualitative Research—A New Researcher Guide. *Shanlax International Journal of Education* 8: 1–10. [CrossRef]
- Horrell, David G. 1996. *The Social Ethos of the Corinthian Correspondence: Interests and Ideology from 1 Corinthians to 1 Clement*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
- Hwang, Jerry. 2017. 'How Long Will My Glory Be Reproach?': Honor and Shame in OT Lament Traditions. *Old Testament Essays* 30: 684–706. [CrossRef]
- Ivanhoe, Philip J. 2000. *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation*, 2nd ed. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- Jacobson, Danielle, and Nida Mustafa. 2019. Social Identity Map: A Reflexivity Tool for Practicing Explicit Positionality in Critical Qualitative Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 18: 1–12. [CrossRef]



- Joyce, Paul. 1989. *Divine Initiative and Human Response in Ezekiel*. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 51; Sheffield: JSOT Press.
- Kaminsky, Joel S. 1995. *Corporate Responsibility in the Hebrew Bible*. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 196; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
- Laniak, Timothy S. 1998. *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*. Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 165; Atlanta: Scholars Press.
- Lau, Te-Li. 2020. *Defending Shame: Its Formative Power in Paul's Letters*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Lawrence, Louise Joy. 2003. *An Ethnography of the Gospel of Matthew: A Critical Assessment of the Use of the Honour and Shame Model in New Testament Studies*. WUNT. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Legge, James, trans. 1861. *Confucian Analects, the Great Learning, and the Doctrine of the Mean*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Legge, James, trans. 1885. *Confucius. The Book of Rites*. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Macaskill, Grant. 2019a. *Living in Union with Christ: Paul's Gospel and Christian Moral Identity*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Macaskill, Grant. 2019b. *The New Testament and Intellectual Humility*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Macaskill, Grant. 2024. Symbolic Capital and the Dynamics of Leadership: The Gospel and the Idolatry of Status. In *Not So with You: Power and Leadership for the Church*. Edited by A. Mark Stirling and Mark Meynell. Eugene: Wipf & Stock.
- Malina, Bruce J. 1981. *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*. Atlanta: John Knox Press.
- Malina, Bruce J. 1986. *Christian Origins and Cultural Anthropology: Practical Models for Biblical Interpretation*. Atlanta: John Knox Press.
- Malina, Bruce J., and John J. Pilch. 2006. *Social-Science Commentary on the Letters of Paul*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Oakes, Peter. 2001. *Philippians: From People to Letter*. Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 110; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pitt-Rivers, Julian. 1965. Honour and Social Status. In *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society*. Edited by John G. Peristiany. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 21–77.
- Reed, Annette Yoshiko. 2009. Beyond the Land of Nod: Syriac Images of Asia and the Historiography of 'The West'. *History of Religions* 49: 48–87. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Schiedel, Walter, ed. 2009. *Rome and China: Comparative Perspectives on Ancient World Empires*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Slingerland, Edward, trans. 2003. *Confucius. Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*. Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.
- Standhartinger, Angela. 2006. Die paulinische Theologie im Spannungsfeld römisch-imperialer Machtpolitik. Eine neue Perspektive auf Paulus, kritisch geprüft anhand des Philipperbriefs. In *Religion, Politik und Gewalt*. Edited by Friedrich Schweitzer. Veröffentlichungen der Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft für Theologie 29. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, pp. 364–82.
- Tamney, Joseph B. 2012. The Resilience of Confucianism in Chinese Societies. In *Confucianism and Spiritual Traditions in Modern China and Beyond*. Edited by Fenggang Yang and Joseph B. Tamney. Leiden: Brill, pp. 97–129.
- Tan, Melissa C. M. 2023. Centring a Relational Paradigm for Honour-Shame from Confucianism for Biblical Interpretation. Ph.D. Thesis, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK.
- Thorley, John. 1969. The Development of Trade between the Roman Empire and the East under Augustus. *Greece & Rome* 16: 209–23.
- Ting-Toomey, Stella, ed. 1994. *The Challenge of Facework: Cross-Cultural and Interpersonal Issues*. SUNY Series in Human Communication; Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Triandis, Harry C. 1993. Collectivism and Individualism as Cultural Syndromes. *Cross-Cultural Research* 27: 155–80. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Vollenweider, Samuel. 2006. Politische Theologie im Philipperbrief? In *Paulus und Johannes: Exegetische Studien zur Paulinischen und Johanneischen Theologie und Literatur*. Edited by Dieter Sänger and Ulrich Mell. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, pp. 457–69.
- Wu, Daniel Y. 2016. *Honor, Shame and Guilt: Social-Scientific Approaches to the Book of Ezekiel*. Bulletin for Biblical Research Supplements 14. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns.
- Yao, Xinzhong. 2000. *An Introduction to Confucianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Yee, Gale A. 2020. Thinking Intersectionally: Gender, Race, Class, and the Etceteras of Our Discipline. *Journal of Biblical Literature* 139: 7–26. [[CrossRef](#)]

**Disclaimer/Publisher's Note:** The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.