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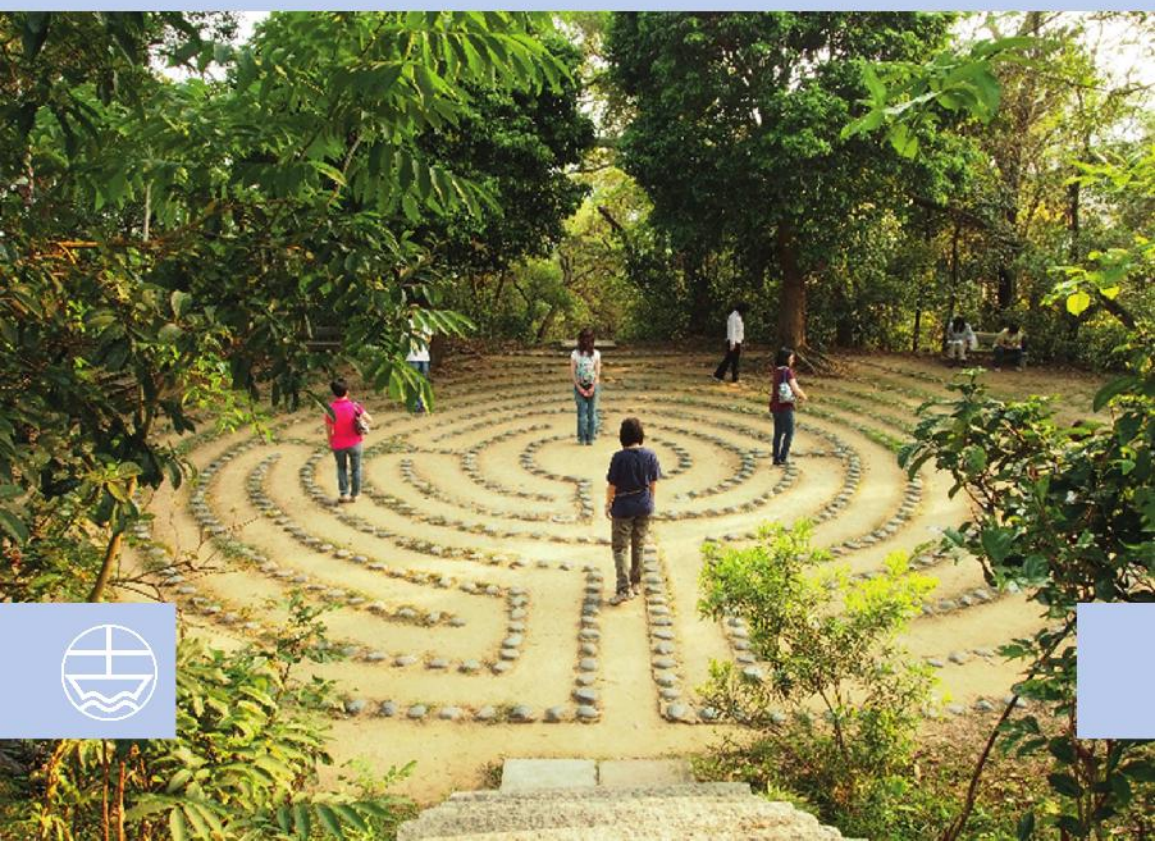
Interactive Pluralism in Asia

Religious Life and Public Space



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LWF Studies 2016/1

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Edited by
Simone Sinn and Tong Wing-sze

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Problems in Theologies of Religions

Over the last few years, the intellectual discourse on religious diversity has undergone a highly interesting development with numerous theologians having taken a critical distance from the tripolar typology of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. Not only do they deem the typology to be insufficient in dealing with the complexity of the problem, but they have also tried to redeem the situation by adding other alternatives, revising the typological structure, or simply abandoning it.[1] The basic objection to the classical typology is that it fails to create a clear and robust classification that does justice to very diverse positions among Christians toward other religions.

I propose to employ the Trinitarian concept of perichoresis as a theological category when dealing with religious diversity.[2] What I suggest is not that the typology should be fully abandoned, but that the Trinitarian idea of perichoresis could give more space to being a more radically exclusivist (Gavin D'Costa), a more radically inclusivist (S. Mark Heim), or even a more radically pluralist (Raimundo Panikkar) typology, while still maintaining the basic dialectics of Christian commitment and interfaith openness.

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[1] Perry Schmidt-Leukel has surveyed the various criticisms and mapped them into eight major categories. See Perry Schmidt-Leukel, "Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Pluralism: The Tripolar Typology-Clarified and Reaffirmed," in Paul F. Knitter (ed.), *The Myth of Religious Superiority: Multifaith Explorations of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005).

[2] Joas Adiprasetya, *An Imaginative Glimpse: The Trinity and Multiple Religious Participations*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013).

My Trinitarian position can be seen as more radically exclusivist in the sense that it always begins with a tradition specific perspective. It is more radically inclusivist in the sense that the Trinitarian view of reality enables us to interpret all religious traditions as multiple relations to, or multiple participations in, the Triune communion. Finally, it is more radically pluralistic, since the diversity of religious ends are respected on their own terms without being "converted" into a singular language alien to them. While such an analysis might seem strange to those who always rigidly employ the classical typology, I would argue that my position demonstrates that the typology itself, if used rigidly, is not sufficient in dealing with the complexity of interreligious relationships.[3]

Without the Trinitarian perspective one cannot properly approach interreligious encounter because, as I will discuss later, the fundamental problem of the one and the many or unity and diversity can be found precisely in the perichoretic *koinonia* of the Triune God. My proposal is not without precedence as many theologians have proposed their own models using the Trinitarian lens (Raimundo Panikkar, S. Mark Heim, Gavin D'Costa, Amos Yong and others), although mine distinctively uses the particular idea of perichoresis as the main category.

The problem is that the majority of the proponents of the Trinitarian theologies of religions do not relate the "abstract" theological concept of the Triune God to the "concrete" interfaith conversation in the public sphere. They tend to discuss religious diversity merely as a theological or metaphysical problem and, in so doing, turn out to be an abstract discourse on, for example, the ultimate destiny of people of other faiths, or the possible salvific values of non-Christian religions. Therefore, the comparative theologian James Fredericks rejects any theology of religions as always having started with "a grand theory of religion in general that claims to account for all religions."[4] Instead, he believes that we must begin with "studying other religions on their own terms and then exploring their own Christian faith using what they have learned about the other religions."[5]

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[3] My position seems to be consonant with Robinson B. James's finding that in Tillich's theology of religions we can find the three positions. See Robinson B. James, *Tillich and World Religions: Encountering Other Faiths Today* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003). It is also similar to the fifth objection in Schmidt-Leukel's list, that is, that the typology is so coarse and abstract that it "does not do justice to the more complex and nuanced reality of real theologies." Schmidt-Leukel then argues that this objection implies the possibility of simultaneously seeing other religions through the three positions. See Schmidt-Leukel, op. cit. (note 1), 16.

[4] James L. Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 167.

[5] Ibid., 168.

Thus, the most obvious difference between theologies of religions and comparative theologies is the methodology: the first begins with an abstract and general claim and then applies it to particular religions, while the second starts with the study of a particular religion and looks anew at the own religious tradition.

As much as I appreciate the proposal of comparative theologies, I would like to add two important comments. First, both methodologies seem to be too linear. We are made to choose between a linear process from-general-abstraction-to-particular-religion on the one hand (as in theologies of religions) and a linear process from-a-particularity-to-another-particularity on the other (as in comparative theologies). Second, the comparativists fail explicitly to acknowledge the fact that they learn about other religious traditions as Christians. Thus, for example, when Francis X. Clooney suggests a form of "theology after Vedanta" to read Aquinas after his learning of Advaita-Vedanta, we must acknowledge that Aquinas has already influenced our tradition. So we must certainly read it as a "theology after Vedanta after Aquinas."[6] In other words, when we learn about another tradition we cannot fully leave our own religious tradition behind. The Christian stories that "haunt" us when we learn about other traditions will not let us forget the abstract and universal worldview that has taught us to see the whole universe from a specific perspective.

What I suggest here is a more modest way of approaching the issue. We do not need to choose whether we should begin with the abstract-general or the concrete-particular. Rather, we begin by holding both dimensions together and maintaining the tension between both dimensions along the way. In so doing, we can talk about the dialectic of unity and diversity, of the one and the many, both theologically and publicly. To do so, I would explore the notion of "space" as a loose, valuative category that links the Trinitarian inner-relationship and the public struggle with diversity toward a social unity.

The Trinitarian space: perichoresis and participation

In order to start the discussion I shall borrow Jürgen Moltmann's idea of the Trinitarian space that maintains the place of creation simultaneously in- and outside God. Using the cabbalistic notion of *zimzum* or self-contraction, Moltmann argues that God vacates space within Godself to make room for all creation. This divine action is not done by a singular God but by a

[6] Francis X. Clooney, *Theology after Vedanta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology*, Suny Series, Toward a Comparative Philosophy of Religions (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

Triune God with the three persons working together in love and mutuality. In such a process, the Spirit fills the entire universe with life, bridging the gap between the Father's love for the Son and their love for the world. At the same time, God's kenotic act creates the universe through the Son, so that the Son becomes the *khora* or space for all creation to exist. Moltmann also maintains that God,

> throws open a space for those he has created, a space which corresponds to his inner indwelling: he allows a world different from himself to exist before him, with him and *in him* ... . So the space of creation is at once outside God and within him. Through his self-restriction, the triune God made his presence the dwelling for his creation.[7]

The result is imaginative and beautiful. The perichoretic relation among the Triune persons is now extended to the perichoretic relationship between God and creation. Each of the three divine persons not only makes space for the other in mutual love; they also open up their *koinonia* to be the dwelling space for creation. Thus the diversity in creation is justified in the inner diversity of the Triune God and the unity of creation is made possible because they are unified by and within the mutual indwelling of the three persons. In other words, creation is characterized by diversity because God is also multiple; creation is a unity because God is also a unity.

One fundamental problem here is the issue of univocality. Moltmann has been criticized by many theologians for having used the idea of "space," "person" and "perichoresis" for both divine and non-divine spheres literally.[8] He says, "Just as the three Persons of the Trinity are 'one' in a wholly unique way, so, similarly, human beings are the *imago Trinitatis* in their personal fellowship with one another."[9] The statement illustrates Moltmann's understanding that we can copy whatever we find in the Triune life to the non-divine life.

Although the critique is fully justified, I do not want to abandon the value of Moltmann's contribution completely. I would propose the following: first, we should still connect the idea of space within the Triune God and the space of creation metaphorically or, better, imaginatively. In so doing, we

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[7] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 298–99.

[8] For example Ted Peters, *God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 186; Karen Kilby, "Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity," in *New Blackfriars* 81, no. 956 (2000), 444.

[9] Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, The Gifford Lectures (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 241.

should treat the ideal perichoresis within Godself as the "grammar of faith" through which we engage with creation because of our faith in a Triune God, whom we perceive as persons-in-communion. Second, we should situate the imagination within the eschatological hope for a unifying moment for all creation within God's Triune communion in the future.[10] This is to say that the space of the Triune communion will finally become the space for all creation partaking in it. Combining the two proposals enables us to maintain the qualitative difference between God and creation as well as relating God and creation in a more imaginative way.

The Triune God

It is through this dual action of the Son and the Spirit that the perichoretic space of the Triune God is made available to all of creation. The Son and the Spirit as the two hands of God—to use St Irenaeus's idea—"overflow" the whole creation with God's love. The Son becomes the space within which all creation indwell in God's communal life, while the Spirit exists as the permeable or porous membrane between God and creation so that all creatures can still live as other-than-God in the Triune life, while at the same time the Spirit can penetrate the whole creation through divine immanence.

The Son

I was intrigued by the inscription in the monastery of Khora in Istanbul and by the icon of Christus Pantokrator, which refers to Christ as *he khora ton zonton* (the container of the living). Echoing what Paul says in Colossians 1:15-16, the inscription and the icon depict the Son as the space within which all differences of creation are united; this is possible since the Son is also present as the "other" to God the Father in the power of the Spirit.[11] Thus, in such an imaginative metaphor, we could understand Paul's clause, "in Christ" (*en Christō*) more easily.

[10] It is also Ted Peters' proposal to modify the Rahner's Rule—the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, and vice versa—by accepting the first part and qualifying the second part eschatologically. See Peters, op. cit. (note 8), 178.

[11] John P. Manoussakis succinctly maintains that the Son in the Istanbul's icon is "*par excellence* the *khora* that receives both humanity and creation in their entirety, but with no confusion, in His incarnate person." John Panteleimon Manoussakis, *God after Metaphysics: A Theological Aesthetic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 92.

The Spirit

I imagine the Spirit as the porous membrane that becomes both the boundary and the connector between God in the Son and creation. While this membrane separates God from creation it is also porous, so that the relationship between God and creation is made possible. I would argue that both the Son and the Spirit function in the Triune economy as the principle of universality and particularity, unity and diversity, insofar as we have put both divine persons together.

Having settled the discursive environment above, I suggest that the classical idea of participation (*methexis*) is of great help. While the qualitative difference between God and creation is maintained, creation is still allowed to participate in the communion of the Triune God. The idea of participation makes it possible for creation to have communion with God as its ultimate goal. We frequently come across different understandings of the concept of participation in the West and the East. On the one hand, Western Christians strongly emphasize the difference between God and creation, often suggesting that the participation of creation occurs through copying what happens in the Triune communion in the life of the church. If the Triune communion implies equality, love and mutuality, then these values must also be present in the life of the church. On the other, Christians in the East understand participation in a more mystical sense. Thus, the participation in the Triune communion must be real. Creation is united in the divine communion. The distinction can easily be found in many ecumenical documents on the church. For instance, the latest document of the World Council of Churches (WCC), *The Church: Toward a Common Vision*, expresses both ideas.[12] The document employs the Western image claiming that the church is "a reflection of the communion of the Triune God" (§ 25); the authority of the church also "reflects the holiness of God" (§ 50); furthermore, in (§ 53) the document states "The quality of synodality or conciliarity reflects the mystery of the Trinitarian life of God, and the structures of the church express this quality so as to actualize the community's life as a communion." However, the document also uses the Eastern idea when it asserts that the church "is fundamentally a communion in the Triune God" (§ 23). Again, the church is "an effective sign and means (sometimes described by the word instrument) of the communion of human beings with one another through their communion in the Triune God" (§

[12] World Council of Churches, *The Church: Toward a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper 214 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), at **www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/the-church-towards-a-common-vision**

27). Thus, the two models demonstrate the tension in Christian theology with regard to the relationship between God and creation.

Multiple religious participation

The above reflection on the perichoretic space and its possibility for creation's participation in the communion of the Triune God suggests that whatever relationship occurs between God and creation it must keep intact the qualitative difference between both, as well as the possibility for creation to partake in the Triune communion. The basic tension creates another tension within creation, that is, that all are created as particular and different beings but still as a unity. This is so, because we can find the principles of unity and diversity within Godself, particularly in the economy of the two hands of God: the Son and the Spirit. The Son becomes the wide space for creation to celebrate their unified differences; it is through the power of Spirit that creation receives life as a multiple unity.

How is it relevant to our discussion on the reality of multireligious traditions? I have proposed in my previous work that such an imagination enables us to glimpse multiple religious participation. Each religious tradition can partake in the communion of the Triune God in its own unique and particular way. The Buddhist way of participation must be different from the Christian way, but both take place in the Triune perichoresis. The multiplicity of participation is possible because of the multiplicity of dimensions of perichoresis.[13] One particular way to participate can appear as a "No" to other religious traditions but can be a different, yet authentic, "Yes" to God, since it relates to a particular dimension of perichoresis. Thus, "the possibility of multiple 'Yeses'—which also implies the possibility of multiple 'Noes' from a particular perspective—reflects the superabundant excess of divine love and grace."[14] Once again, multiple participation is made possible within the Son as the space for all creation, through the living and embracing power of the Spirit. In other words, the Son's "Yes" to the Father becomes the space for the "Yeses" of all religions. "At the same time, although affirmed by the Son's 'Yes,' the 'eses' of other religions must be seen as different from the Christian 'Yes.'"[15]

Employing such a model for understanding the plurality of religious traditions, I would posit that we have to come to a more radical pluralist position, in

[13] I proposed at least four dimensions of perichoresis: unity of reality, *khora*, personal relation, and the possible to appropriate diverse religious traditions. See Adiprasetya, op. cit. (note 2), 165-73.
[14] Ibid., 162.
[15] Ibid., 163.

which all religious traditions are invited to participate equally, yet differently, in the communion of the Triune God. It also offers a more radical, inclusivist position, in which all religious participation is embraced by and included in the Son as the participatory space. Finally, it provides a chance for us to be more radically exclusivist, since we can affirm that there is no life outside the Son as the living space for all creation in the power of the Spirit.

The imaginative Trinitarian space for society

I would now like to enter the discussion that has been avoided by many, namely the social implication of a Trinitarian or perichoretic theology of religions. I believe that the danger of a direct application of the abstract theological sphere to the concrete social sphere is that we are tempted to employ an idea univocally for both spheres, as I have discussed briefly above. However, I have also suggested two different ways of dealing with the issue. First, we can still directly apply the idea insofar as we put it in a more mystical and eschatological perspective. Second, we can draw some values from the abstract theological sphere and treat them imaginatively. Both ways, however, require a sort of perspectivism (Nietzsche) that encourages us to make clear that the understanding we propose is based on what we believe as Christians. Such a perspectival position prevents us from being absolutists and imposing our particular perspective as the only true position. However, at the same time, we cannot deny that our position is universal in the sense that it is how we see the entire reality from our own Christian point of view.

Based on this perspective any social hope that we offer to our pluralistic society must indeed come from our Christian faith. I believe this is what has been lacking in many social theologies dealing with the issue of religious plurality. Instead of viewing the social reality from their Christian tradition, many have employed some other allegedly neutral, objectivist, or non-theological theories of social plurality. This approach, which I reject, has certain advantages. For example, we are encouraged to take an interdisciplinary approach to address social issues. But, the disadvantage is also obvious: we hardly have a coherent view of all reality based on our particular perspectivism.

In contrast to the non-theological theories, I would argue that it is necessary that we use the Trinitarian lens to understand and interpret social issues, including the plurality of religions. The Trinity therefore becomes the *omnium gatherum*, a miscellaneous collection, within which we attempt to put all aspects of life and from which we construct our theological imagination. Of course, Miroslav Volf is correct when he warns us

about the impossibility of applying any term used for the Triune God to our social life. He says,

> First, since ontically human beings are manifestly not divine and since noetically human notions of the Triune God do not correspond exactly to who the Triune God is, Trinitarian concepts such as "person," "relation," or "perichoresis" can be applied to human community only in an analogous rather than a univocal sense. As creatures, human beings can correspond to the uncreated God only in a *creaturely* way.[16]

However, I would also add that it is not only when we talk about "human community" that we should apply the Trinitarian principles "in a creaturely way," but also when we talk about the Trinitarian community.

Thus, using this principle, we can limitedly—or creaturely—construct our social theologies in response to religious diversity in our societies. I would propose some preliminary thoughts on public space from the Trinitarian perspective. First, this discussion requires us to decide what valuative elements should be taken as fundamental and then to employ them as our "grammar of faith" in talking theologically about abstract theological and concrete social dimensions. For example, the values of love, equality, mutuality and freedom, which are fundamental in the Trinitarian idea of perichoresis, could and should also be our grammatical values in speaking in the public space where we meet the religious other and attempt to construct a better future for our communities.

Second, what is called the public space is in fact an imaginative space that exists in the quotidian or everyday space where people meet and interact with one another. There is no public space that is specifically interreligious in character without being related to other human dimensions. The public space is a space where gays and straights, rich and poor, men and women, and other identities meet and is not limited to the interreligious public space. Whatever identity we express in the meeting, we meet as human beings. Hauerwas expressed his insight beautifully, when asked about his theory of religious plurality.

> I, however, apologized for being deficient of such theory, but asked, "How many Buddhists do you have here in Conway? Moreover, if you want to talk with them what good will a theory do you? I assume that if you want to talk with Buddhists, you would just go talk with them. You might begin by asking, for example, "What in the world are you guys doing in Conway?'" I then suggested I suspected that

[16] Miroslav Volf, "'The Trinity Is Our Social Program:' The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement," in *Modern Theology* 14:3 (1998), 405.

> the real challenge in Conway was not talking with Buddhists, but trying to talk with Christian fundamentalists. We should also ask whether we have anything interesting enough the Buddhist would even want to talk about with us.[17]

What Hauerwas is trying to say is that Christians are called to make it worthwhile to live in the public space and to treat the religious other humanely. In Hauerwas's words, our task is "to suggest why Christians, if we are to be Christians, owe it to ourselves and our neighbors to quit fudging our belief that God matters."[18] I believe such a task indeed becomes the public face of our Trinitarian faith. We are called to be ordinary human beings, living in an ordinary community called by the church into open relationships with the others, expressing the ordinary love of the Triune God in the midst of extraordinary evil powers of hatred, injustice and discrimination. As such, our Trinitarian politics is a "politics of life," in which all religious traditions, including Christianity, are called to fight for the common good. In that sense, indeed, the theology of religions is the politics of religions, and vice versa.

Furthermore, we must understand that our participation in the communion of the Triune God is to be reflected in our everyday spirituality, in the sense that we see through new eyes that the public space in which we engage with our neighbors is indeed part of the living space of the Son in the power of the Spirit. This new perspective enables us to affirm that, whenever we participate in nurturing the common good in the public, we are indeed participating in the life of the Triune God. In such a spirituality, the distinction between the sacred and the profane, the extraordinary and the ordinary, will fade away. Each face of the other that we encounter, be it a Buddhist or a Muslim or an atheist, is the "inspirited" face of God in the Son.[19]

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[17] Stanley Hauerwas, *The State of the University: Academic Knowledges and the Knowledge of God* (Malden, MA & Oxford: Blackwell Pub., 2007), 58–59.

[18] Ibid., 58.

[19] For an excellent work on quotidianity, the others, and the face of God, see Richard Kearney, "Epiphanies of the Everyday: Toward a Micro-Eschatology," in John Panteleimon Manoussakis (ed.), *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

In today's multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Asian contexts, religious plurality is one of the hallmarks of many societies. This book provides new insights into the current realities of religious life in Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia and Myanmar, highlights the influence of religious commitment on the public space, and examines how Christian theology engages with contemporary realities in Asia. Christian theologians of different denominations offer fascinating theological reflections on justification, salvation, the Holy Spirit and the Trinity, and discuss interactions within and between Asian societies as well as with the world at large.

CONTRIBUTORS: ADIPRASETYA, Joas; BWA Saw Hlaing; HO Wai-yip; JOHNSTON LARGEN, Kristin; JUNGE, Martin; KIT Sivin; KUNG Lap-yan; LAI Pan-chiu; MIN, Anselm K.; MIYAMOTO, Arata; MOK Kie Man Bryan; RAJKUMAR, Peniel Jesudason Rufus; SIHOTANG, Fernando; SINN, Simone; THELLE, Notto; TONG, Wing-sze.

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