

# ASIAN THEOLOGIANS<sup>1</sup> BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

## A Postcolonial Self-understanding

**Wong Wai-ching**

Theology Division  
Chinese University of Hong Kong  
Shatin, Hong Kong

### Introduction

Postcolonial theory has recently emerged as one of the most important hermeneutical theory in cultural discussion especially among Afro-American and South Asian scholars in the United States.<sup>2</sup> The prominence of this discussion represents American public's awareness and, to a certain degree, its recognition of the pluralistic strands of thought brought about by the increasing presence of ethnic minorities in the country. Because of this new emerging reality, Afro-Americans and other ethnic minorities of the States have allied themselves with the "Third World people" and become the chief protagonists of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Schreiter rightly points out that theology such as that of Asia emphasizes much on the community as a key source for theology's development and expressions and thus, to use the term "theologian" in the narrow sense of authorship is inaccurate. See Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985), 16-18. However, for the purpose of analysis in this paper, I shall refer to theologians of Asia as a group of writers who have consciously taken up the task of building a theology of regional (Asian) identity in the new context of Asia after the Second World War.

<sup>2</sup> One representative series titled "Subaltern Studies" devoted particularly to studies of Indian history from a postcolonial perspective has been started since 1982.

postcolonial narrative as unfolded in the American academia. If this postcolonial drama unfolds itself mainly in the context of the academia of the West, why then Asians, especially in our case, Asian theologians, who have recently engaged rigorously in reclaiming our indigenous identity, have yet to bother about another Western agenda?

There is some further ambiguity involved when we pose the discussion of colonialism and postcolonial theory in Asia. The subject of colonialism has not been brought up in Asia as openly as countries from Africa or the Caribbean and Latin America. For instance, there are people who argue that not every country in Asia had experienced colonialism and hence the irrelevance of a postcolonial discourse; other argue that "neo-colonial" much more than "postcolonial" be an accurate description of the present Asian sociopolitical and economic scene. If colonialism has a history which involved the consolidation of imperial power in the form of settlement of territory, exploitation of resources and governing of the indigenous inhabitants of occupied lands, what do we mean by postcolonial in the context of Asia needs further clarification.

Rey Chow, a Hong Kong native now teaching in the States, takes note of this ambiguity of the postcolonial discussion. She laments at the general elusion of the subject by people in Asia (for her, particularly people from East Asia).<sup>3</sup> She contends that the discourse on colonialism — or, "Orientalism" as the paradigm Edward Said uses to fuel the whole discussion<sup>4</sup> — is not only about military and territorial occupation of one country by another but also about its general and continuing *ideological* role.<sup>5</sup> For Chow, colonialism is a legacy constituting our everyday culture and value as Asians. One of the best illustration of such is the case of East Asia where imperialism as ideological domination succeeds without physical coercion, i.e. without actually capturing the body and the land.<sup>6</sup>

If colonialism did not only dominate geographically in history but continues to dominate ideologically, postcolonial theory has also come

---

<sup>3</sup> Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural studies* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 10.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Said published his *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978) and hence laid a milestone on the discourse of colonialism and postcolonial theory.

<sup>5</sup> Italics original.

<sup>6</sup> Chow, *Writing Diaspora*., 7-8.

to take on changes in power structures after the official end of colonialism as well as colonialism's continuing effects. As such, "postcolonial" becomes an umbrella term that has gradually come to cover different critical approaches which deconstruct European thought in a wide-range of areas including philosophy, history, literary studies, anthropology and etc. For most Third World intellectuals, postcolonial discourse involves literature and criticism not of a simple periodization but rather a methodological revisionism which enables a whole sale critique of Western structures of knowledge and power, particularly those of the post-Enlightenment period.<sup>7</sup> In short, it questions fundamentally the distinction between "pure" and "political" knowledge and work to destabilize the former and thereby dismantle the West-as-center.<sup>8</sup>

Based on this understanding, I shall examine in this paper the role of Asian theology and the location of Asian theologians in the light of the postcolonial discourse on identity, power and the politics between East and West. In fact, in view of a postcolonial critique, I shall argue in the following that while Asian theology has successfully established itself as an counter-movement to the prevalent dominance of Western Christian traditions, Asian theologians themselves are being caught in the polemics of East versus West and "allow" Asia to remain as "other" to the West.

### **The Location/Vocation of Asian Theologians**

"The master's tools can never dismantle the master's house."<sup>9</sup> This famous citation from Audre Lorde poses a serious question for every Christian in the postcolonial Asia, namely: Is Christianity, as extensively manifested through its missionary churches and theology in Asia in especially the last two centuries, a tool of the master for Christians of the post-colonial<sup>10</sup> countries? Or, in another way, if Johannes Fabian

---

<sup>7</sup> Padmini Mongia, "Introduction," in idem., ed. *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (London: Arnold, 1996), 2.

<sup>8</sup> See Cornel West's analysis in "The New Cultural Politics and Difference," in Russell Ferguson et. al., eds., *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 19-36.

<sup>9</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches* (Freedom: The Crossing Press, 1984), 112.

<sup>10</sup> In this paper, I am using the helpful delineation of Elleke Boehmer in reserving the hyphenated "post-colonial" for the historical period after World War II and the non-hyphenated

is right that colonial power and control are constituted very much by their language,<sup>11</sup> how can any postcolonial Asian Christian be "faithful" to both his or her national affinity as well as his or her Christian conversion which was primarily conveyed to him or her in the semiotics of the colonial countries of the West? This dilemma of being caught in a fundamental conflict between one's conversion into a religion of the colonizers and one's imminent sense of identification with one's own newly recovered independent nation, is what precisely the problematic of Asian theology since its inception. In this sense, Asian theologians have, from the beginning, taken upon themselves a postcolonial task which aim to dismantle the Western construction of Christianity and reformulate a theology that would not be a tool of its historical colonial master, but rather one that challenges the "master's" discourse of the Divine.

The need for an Asian theological agenda is clear. What the post-colonial Church of Asia has inherited from its counterparts of the colonial West are: a history of Christianity organically associated with Western imperialism, a church bureaucracy that has taken more seriously the demands of the Western Church than that of the local congregations, a theological tradition that has assumed the cultural superiority of the West, and the subsequent alienation of its Christians at large from their cultural traditions and local communities. As M. M. Thomas, one of the pioneer Asian theologians,<sup>12</sup> summons, the crucial turn had to be made by Asian Christians and the churches as they took part in the Asian national movements "as partners in the common struggle for the

---

"postcolonial" later to denote the dynamic textual and political practices which critically scrutinizes the colonial relationship and where colonized peoples seek to take their place as historical subjects. Cf. Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 1995), 3.

<sup>11</sup> See Johannes Fabian's very important discussion of how Swahili (a constructed African language) was developed and domesticated by France and Belgium mission agents to become a means of political control over the natives in especially Eastern Coast of Africa. Cf. *Language and Colonial power* (Berkeley: University of California press, 1986).

<sup>12</sup> M. M. Thomas, an Indian theologian, who has served at various world-wide ecumenical organizations including the executive secretary of World Student Christian Federation and a Central Committee member of World Council of Churches in 1950s. He was the founder and director of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, Bangalore, and governor of the northeast Indian state of Nagaland. He has published extensively on social, cultural, and political issues. His most representative works include: *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* (London: SCM Press, 1970); *Man and the Universe of Faiths* (Bangalore: CISRS-CLS, 1975), (Bangalore: CISRS-CLS, 1976). His most recent publication is *My Ecumenical Journey 1947-75* (Trivandrum: Ecumenical Publishing Centre, 1990).

secular conditions for true human living."<sup>13</sup> In his address to the Inaugural Assembly of the East Asia Christian Conference (now the Christian Conference of Asia)<sup>14</sup> in 1958, Thomas outlined for Asian churches the goals of "nation-building" to serve as their primary call to meet the challenges after Second World War.<sup>15</sup>

Being greatly excited about the prominence of national movements in different Asian countries after the War, Thomas contends that, nationalism and nation-building, seen from the angle of people's first time awareness of history as a consequence of freedom rather than fate, are "divine preparation for the Gospel":

It is creating a situation in which Christian social thought and action and the preaching of the Gospel are integral to each other as raising the Question and giving the Answer. And therefore in the participation of the Church in the tasks of repatterning society and in nation-building the Church is really posing the ultimate questions God is asking the people regarding the nature and destiny of man for a decisive answer. *Nationalism is therefore an essential preparation of Asia for the gospel.*<sup>16</sup>

What Thomas has tried to articulate here is the very inception of a theology which attempts to address the primary context of a post-colonial Asia. National reconstruction, as he outlines and theologizes above, is what he finds the churches of a post-colonial Asia must participate in and contribute to. For him, this would be the only way to shed the tinge of Western imperialism off the churches of Asia and allow Christians of the churches in Asia to be full participants of their societies.

Nevertheless, majority of the Christians in Asia, despite their being fully aware of the history of Christianity and its close relationship with

---

<sup>13</sup> Thomas, "The Challenge to the Churches in the New Nations of Africa and Asia," in *Towards a Theology of Contemporary Ecumenism* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1978), 76, 79.

<sup>14</sup> The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) is a major regional ecumenical body whose organization and functions in Asia parallel to that of World Council of Churches (WCC) in the global settings.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas, "Towards a Christian Interpretation of Nationalism in Asia," in *Towards a Theology of Contemporary Ecumenism*, 40-43.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas, "Towards a Christian Interpretation of Nationalism in Asia," 56. Italics mine. What Thomas wants to emphasize here is the importance of national movements in building the welfare of the peoples and the states after the detrimental impact of the colonial era. He is, however, fully aware of the defects in the development of nationalism in some cases. See *ibid.*, especially 44.

colonization in their countries, often find themselves caught in a position where they are blended as Western as opposed to "authentic" native or indigenous due to their affiliation to the missionary churches.

For instance, quoted from her favourite Malay proverbs from childhood, "*Seperti katak di bawah tempurung*" (Like the frog under the coconut shell), Marianne Katoppo,<sup>17</sup> an Indonesian theologian, laments that theology has been for too long meant only "European theology" and Christians "European Christians." Like the frog being encompassed by the coconut shell, Asian Christians were taught to believe that theology outside of European formulation is heresy; that everything beyond "the shell" is pagan. It follows that Asian cultural expression and their experience, being so different from the European, are denied validity.<sup>18</sup>

Consequently, Christian theologians of Asia, most of whom being offered the opportunities to be trained in the West after the War, find themselves in an even greater dilemma: they were asked to learn the great traditions of Christianity as evolved through the ages in primarily the West and yet came back to a generally nationalistic, "anti-West" or "West-resistant" political culture nurtured during the colonial period. C. S. Song,<sup>19</sup> originally from Taiwan now teaching in the United States, uses a sarcastic, figurative analogy to compare Christian theology of Asia which tries to absorb everything passed onto it from the West to a "big-bellied man" troubled with indigestion:

It could hardly walk or run with its huge belly of undigested food — a belly crammed with schools of theology, theories of biblical interpretation,...all originating from the church in the West and propounded by traditional theology. It became even more obese when the vast space of Asia, with its rich cultures,

---

<sup>17</sup> Marianne Katoppo is a journalist and theologian from Tomohon, Indonesia. Her *Compassionate and Free: An Asian Woman's Theology* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1979) has been the first and only single-authored feminist account of Asian theology until the late 1980s.

<sup>18</sup> Katoppo, *Compassionate and Free*., v.

<sup>19</sup> C. S. Song has formerly served as the Associate Director of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, Principal of Tainan Theological College in Taiwan, and presently a Professor of Theology and Asian Cultures at the Pacific School of Religion, Berkeley and Regional Professor of Theology at the South East Asia Graduate School of Theology in Singapore and Hong Kong. He has published extensively, the most recent being a Christological trilogy which includes: *Jesus, the Crucified People* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990); *Jesus and the Reign of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993); and *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

vigorous religions, and turbulent histories, began to compete for room in that already over-loaded theological belly. The result is painful indigestion.<sup>20</sup>

In short, like the majority of Asian intellectuals trained in the West, Asian theologians have primarily been constituted by the tides of a post-colonial era. This implicates at least two things: First, they are highly conscious of a "hostility" generated by nationalists of their countries toward former colonial powers; Second, they are caught, consciously or unconsciously, in a situation where they have learned to rely on the resources and privileges of the West rather than live with the material and physical deficiency of their own national intellectual environment. In the face of nationalist intellectuals of their countries, Asian theologians have often been challenged the whole-heartedness of their national commitment and the privileges they have acquired through Western resources. In another words, theologians who are native to Asian countries have to answer, from the beginning, the question of whether they identify themselves with the East or the West.

In this respect, Asian theology is as much a counter-movement to the Western dominance of a discourse on the Divine as an effort of Asian theologians, among other colonial élite who have benefited from Western relations, to reconcile their "foreignness" with their awakened national consciousness. It is precisely because of their very conscious separation from the West that most Asian theologians have produced an identity of Asian as one unified collective self, other to the West.

### **The Making of an Asian Christian Identity**

Asia, as Joseph Kitagawa acutely points out, was hitherto unknown until the latter half of the twentieth century.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, "Asianness," argues K. M. Panikkar, an Indian historian and philosopher of religions, did not originate from the drive of those newly or yet to be "formed" countries for progress, it was resulted from their "determination to resist the foreigner who was pressing his attack in all directions, political, social, economic and religious."<sup>22</sup> In other words, Panikkar argues that

---

<sup>20</sup> Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986), 1-3.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Mitsuo Kitagawa, *The Christian Tradition: Beyond Its European Captivity* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992), 29.

<sup>22</sup> K. M. Panikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1959), 23.

Asia was "produced" out of Asians' reaction to the "unified" aggression of the Europeans:

...the sense of Asianism is exclusively the counterpart of the solidarity of European feeling. Before the end of the nineteenth century there was no such feeling as Asianism. But in the beginning of this century we find the great Japanese artist Okakura Kakuzo opening a book with the startling declaration "Asia is one."<sup>23</sup>

In this sense, Panikkar has already foreshown, in a preliminary way, the parasitic constitution of the opposing identities of the "Occident" and the "Orient," which Edward Said came to expound much later. Understanding this way, Asia as a regional identity is also an "imagined community" constructed to serve a particular political purpose in time,<sup>24</sup> and "Asian" is thus also an alternative name for "non-Western."

What does it mean, then, when pioneer Asian theologians such as M.M. Thomas, D. T. Niles, Aloysius Pieris, Marianne Katoppo, and C. S. Song call for an Asian way of "doing" theology? In short, through the work of Asian theologians in the last few decades, it has come to mean at least three "different" approaches in "doing" theology in Asia.<sup>25</sup> These are: first, the formulation of an indigenous theology which takes into serious consideration of the local cultures and traditions of Asia; second, the articulation of a theology of the poor which addresses the "liberation" of the Asian poor majority from national and transnational economic and socio-political oppressions; and third, the emphasis on a practical theology which makes "commitment the first act of theology" and engages in "critical reflection on the praxis of the reality of the Third World."<sup>26</sup> All three approaches, viewing in the light of Elleke

<sup>23</sup> Panikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance*, 322.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

<sup>25</sup> While majority of the articles on Asian theology are found in *Asian Journal of Theology* (formerly *East Asian Journal of Theology*), there are several anthologies which collect more comprehensively representative works of Asian theologians over the years, namely: Gerald H. Anderson, ed., *Asian Voices in Christian Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1976); Douglas L. Elwood, ed., *What Asian Christians are Thinking* (Manila: New Day publishers, 1976) and *Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Themes* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1980); England, op. cit.; Virginia Fabella and Sun Ai Lee Park, eds., *We Dare to Dream: Doing Theology as Asian Women* (Hong Kong: AWRC, 1989); and R.S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *Frontiers in Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Trends* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994); idem., ed., *Asian Faces of Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995).

<sup>26</sup> Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres, eds., *Doing Theology in a Divided World* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985), x.



Boehmer's analysis of nationalist literature, represent a major effort of the formerly colonized to "restore" their native Christian identity.

In Elleke Boehmer's analysis of nationalistic movement of the post-war period, she finds nationalist writings — an early stage of postcolonial literature — an important maker of the decolonization movement. She observes that culture, and writing in particular, was mobilized in the nationalistic movement as a weapon of political liberation. As such, postcolonial writings took up a specific role in transforming social and political consciousness which would not come automatically with political independence. In fact, the post-1945 movement of anti-colonial and usually nationalist upsurge produced the first postcolonial literature which identified itself with the broad movement of resistance to, and transformation of, colonial societies.<sup>27</sup>

More important, Boehmer sees a special role that nationalist writers have taken onto themselves. With the entrenched opposition between natives and the colonizers, nationalist writers have been asked to "take sides." They are tasked to help transform social life and become the soothsayers or the seers of political movements. Their role has been seen as to reinterpret the world and to grasp the initiative in cultural self-definition.<sup>28</sup> It is this particular role of the early nationalists that Asian theologians, too, have taken upon themselves when they put forward the agenda of doing theology in an Asian way with Asian indigenous resources amidst Asian realities.<sup>29</sup>

When Asian theologians set out to differentiate theology from its Western constitution and declared their commitment to people's movement in Asia, it is meant, in a way, to construct an autonomous religion of Christianity for postcolonial Asian Christians as a colonial-resistance force and a moving spirit in their respective nationalist struggle. As much as postcolonial theorists have challenged the "orientalist" mode of knowledge production in Europe, Asian theologians summoned criticism of imperialist Christianity of especially the last two centuries and denounced the usefulness of a theology that came with gunboats

---

<sup>27</sup> Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, 185.

<sup>28</sup> Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, 185.

<sup>29</sup> Found most spelled out in Song's speech for the inauguration of the "Programme for Theology and Culture in Asia" in Kyoto in 1987, see Song, "Freedom of Christian Theology for Asian Cultures," in *Asian Journal of Theology* 3:1 (1989), 87.

and territorial annexation. In their critical differentiation of Asian theology from Christianity's Western constitution, they join the nationalists of their countries in a call to reclaim a distinctive Asian identity and contend for the legitimacy of different formulations of theology with respect to the cultural and sociopolitical histories of the formerly colonized countries.

There is one major attempt in their indigenization and contextualization of theology in Asia that parallels to the nationalists': the search for a restorative identity.<sup>30</sup> In her analysis, Boehmer calls such a nationalist search for roots, founding myths, ancestors, or national fore-mothers and -fathers a "fictional return of the native" to one's culture and history. In the context of postcolonial politics, such a search and hence reconstruction of the native's identity, whether it is in nationalist writing or Asian theology, implicates a radical rupture from what one has "received" from the colonial legacy; it implicates a rewriting of a history of resistance. In Homi Bhabha's words, it is a painful remembering of the dismembered past, a putting together of a "history" fragmented, displaced or discredited under colonialism in order to reconstitute cultural integrity.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, such a restorative effort in either the nationalists or Asian theologians carries also an overweighing effect. That is, in the process of their coming to terms with their national identities, these postcolonial intellectuals very often seek to "retrieve" or "invent" their indigenous traditions as some "edenic" homelands or lost spiritual traditions set in an "unspoiled pastoral." The fact is that when these postcolonial intellectuals, including Asian theologians, strive in the beginning to break through a kind of cultural alienation stamped by their Western/colonial religion and education, they sought, in the first instance, an inversion of imperial values. The message they communicated is distinguished by a strenuous defense of the virtues of native culture characterized as rich, pure and authentic. The idea was that a people's identity, though long suppressed, lay embedded in its cultural origins and was recoverable intact, unadulterated by the depredations of colonialism. And this culture — in the form of reinterpreted history, religious revivals, elegiac and nostalgic

---

<sup>30</sup> Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, 185-86.

<sup>31</sup> Homi Bhabha's foreword to Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, xxiii.

poetry — has been developed into an important front for postcolonial struggle.<sup>32</sup>

In order to underscore a postcolonial Asian Christian identity, theologians of Asia have, for the last few decades, delved into Asian histories, cultures and traditions in order to formulate an indigenous theology of Asia. In this light, both the efforts in reconstructing a history of the Minjung (the oppressed people) in Korean theology and a history of "Hsiangtu" (homeland) in Taiwan theology reflect a radical restoration of a native history of the Christians in the respective countries and hence an attempt toward building an Asian postcolonial Christian identity.<sup>33</sup> Some other elaborate efforts were made by theologians such as Aloysius Pieris in his immersion into Buddhism and the reality of poverty as the religion and identity of Asian peoples,<sup>34</sup> or C. S. Song's reconstitution of an Asian identity and an Asian way of doing theology vis-à-vis a direct correlation between the understanding of the Divine and the experience of Asian peoples as expressed in their folkstories, stories about their life, and images and symbols taken from the history and religious traditions of Asia.<sup>35</sup>

In many ways, theology of Asia as formulated by theologians so far has been a postcolonial practice in the re-conception of independent regional/national identities. It has developed a symbolic plane that was recognizably indigenous — or at least other to European representation.<sup>36</sup> In effect, Asian theologians engage themselves in the

---

<sup>32</sup> Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*; 104.

<sup>33</sup> The most representative volume of Minjung Theology of Asia is: Kim Yong Bock, ed., *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History* (Singapore: CTC-Christian Conference of Asia, 1981). For "Homeland Theology," see Wang Hsien-chih, ed., *Hsiangtu Shenhsueh Lunwenji* (1) (Tainan: Tainan Theological Seminary, 1988).

<sup>34</sup> Aloysius Pieris, S. J. is a Sri Lankan Jesuit, considered as one of the most eminent of Asian theologians. He was founder and until present director of the Tulana Research Center in Kelaniya, Sri Lanka. He earned the first doctorate in Buddhist studies ever awarded a non-Buddhist by the University of Sri Lanka. His two books, *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988) and *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, ) are widely recognized as important resources for Asian theological themes. He is also the editor of the journal *Dialogue*.

<sup>35</sup> His masterpiece of a theological interpretation of folkstories is published as a booklet titled, *The Tears of Lady Meng: A Parable of People's Political Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1982); another book of the same genre is *Tell Us Our Names: Story Theology from an Asian Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1984).

<sup>36</sup> Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, 117-18.

recuperation of oral and mythic traditions, so as to find a wealth of signifiers to achieve authentic self-definition: songs and tales testifying to indigenous cultural richness; or metaphysical systems, predating the colonizers, that had eluded their interpretative grasp.<sup>37</sup>

### **The Present Dilemma**

The above vigorous restoration of an Asian Christian identity has until present produced two major results: first, the construction of a cultural and historical identity of Asian in opposition to the West; second, a theological self-representation of Asians as both victims of Western imperialism and revolutionaries of national political movements. In effect, it has produced an "imagined" community of Asian Christians who continue to wrestle with the perpetuating Western ideological and material influences among particularly the churches of the post-colonial Asia. It is an identity built to invert imperial values by recovering anew a people's identity from among the damages done by mission churches which have been in close association with colonialism.<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, while Asian theology as a postcolonial discourse has contributed to the significant remaking of indigenous identity of Christians in a postcolonial Asia, its assertion of Asia as opposed to the "West" is not without problem. Such a demarcation of East and West is much criticized in Edward Said's thesis of orientalism. He contends that such a demarcation only enforces a relationship of power and domination, through which the European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self:

Whereas orientalism is produced as a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between the Orient and the Occident, the Orient is contained and represented by dominating frameworks.<sup>39</sup>

Gyan Prakash, an Indian-American cultural critic, finds a parallel essentialized notion of a nation created out of the colonial polarities. While these polarities help to form a unity and constitute a national

---

<sup>37</sup> Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, 187.

<sup>38</sup> Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, 104.

<sup>39</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 40.

essence opposed to that of colonizers, they are maintained at the cost of keeping the East/West distinction in tact.<sup>40</sup>

Suffice it to say here that the unity of Asia is constructed mainly opposed to the West, Asian theology can easily be understood as another name for "non-Western" theology. In this sense, Asianness and nationalism alike, will easily fall into the old trap of orientalism which fixes "the Orient" in time and place and thus continue to legitimate the dominance of the Western discourse. Internally, the unity of a people or nation is produced at the expense of social, regional, and ethnic differences. In Prakash's words, the unity is forged in the space of difference and conflicts.<sup>41</sup>

Furthermore, as Asian theology attempts to re-write its history and reclaim its culture and religious resources as its indigenous traditions, it joins the nationalists' in the making of a grand narrative of a nation and its past. In its vigorous distinction from the "West," it may easily be trapped in the grand narration or mythology of the Orient, romanticized and, again, overvalued by the Orientalists as well as Asians themselves. Probably due to this heavy emphasis on retrieving Asian identity in their doing theology, Asian theologian have not been able to be critical of its native culture and traditions, especially in its being articulated as distinct from the theology of the West.

The consequence of these shortfalls can be clearly seen as in the discussion of the question of women in Asia. Kang Nam Soon, an Korean feminist theologian argues that the recent emphases of some Korean theologians — including feminists — on an incorporation of traditional Korean religions and cultures in their theology serve the interests of the West more than Korean churches themselves. She contends that the recent employment of traditional resources in Korean theology bears a strong tendency of romanticization and idealization which led to a general negligence of sexism hidden in these resources. In fact, the return to some traditional resources in some cases plays the role of sustaining an existing patriarchal value system.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> Prakash, "Introduction: After Colonialism," in idem., ed., *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 9.

<sup>41</sup> Prakash, "Introduction: After Colonialism," 9.

<sup>42</sup> Kang Nam Soon, "Creating 'Dangerous Memory': Challenges for Asian and Korean Feminist Theology," *The Ecumenical Review* 47:1 (1995), 29.

Perhaps, for Asian theologians including feminists, Kang's urge to pay attention to the particularities and diversities of experience among Asians rather than the claims of commonality should be taken up much more seriously. Because, as she finds among Asian women, rather than having one transcending common character, Asian experience is shaped by and in a particular time and place which cannot be universalized. Any tendency of oversimplifying or romanticizing one common Asian experience would only blur the multiplicity of experience of peoples in different countries, in their different localities such as race, class, historical events and the individual himself or herself.<sup>43</sup>

### ABSTRACT

This paper will examine the role of Asian theology and the location of Asian theologians in the light of the postcolonial discourse on identity, power and the politics between East and West. In view of a postcolonial critique, while Asian theology has successfully established itself as a counter-movement to the prevalent dominance of Western Christian traditions, Asian theologians themselves are being caught in the polemics of East versus West and "allow" Asia to remain as 'other' to the West. In order to have their own identities, the writer argues Asian theologians should pay more attention to the particularities and diversities of experience among Asians rather than the claims of commonality.

### 撮 要

本文就後殖民論述中有關東、西方之間對身分、權力與政治的探索，亞洲神學的角色與神學家之方位檢討。從後殖民批判的角度，亞洲神學家經已成功地建立自己，成為西方基督教傳統主流的一個抗衡方向，可是亞洲神學家同時被捲入「東相對於西」的爭拗，而成為西方神學其中一個的「他者」。亞洲神學家若要建立明確的身分；作者指出，須以亞洲的個別性及多樣性的經驗為主，而普遍共同性為次。

---

<sup>43</sup> Kang Nam Soon, "Creating 'Dangerous Memory'," 20, 29.