

Su-Chi Lin

Spaces of Mediation

Christian Art and Visual Culture in Taiwan



Contact Zone

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Explorations in Intercultural Theology

edited by

Prof. Dr. Volker Küster
(Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz)

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The cover design makes use of art works by Solomon Raj, Hendarto, Nyoman Darsane, André Kambaluesa, Hong Song-Dam, an unknown Ethiopian Ikon painter and Lee Chul-Soo (in clockwise order and on backcover; by courtesy of the artists; photos by Volker Küster).

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Introduction

In 2009, I volunteered to design an Easter banner on the theme of resurrection for the Tai-shen chapel (台神禮拜堂) at Taiwan Graduate School of Theology in Taipei. I looked for signs and symbols that would be acceptable for a Protestant faith community in Taiwan. My idea was to adopt Christian symbols of Easter, such as a dove or a lily, in order to capture the spirit of hope. On the wall behind the altar, I hung two long banners made from colorful felt alongside the empty cross. On the right banner, a giant dove carried a leaf of hope flying toward a church building on the left banner. Moving away from the cross, two additional short banners on the side wall were also decorated with thematic symbols of the passion and resurrection. The short banner on the right depicts lilies and the shape of Christ's thorny head, and the one on the left shows a circle of small figures, hand-in-hand, representing the faith community. The colors of these banners are primarily green and white, and its abstract design shows a measured aesthetics of simple piety. I tried to contextualize the Easter message by incorporating the chapel's Chinese roof in a contemporary setting that my peers already recognized.

This liturgical project permitted me to add a new expression to the feast, by using traditional Christian symbols in a contemporary setting. Moving from one cultural soil to another, the making of Christian signs and symbols must be expressed afresh in new ways. However, across churches in East Asia, either in the Protestant or Catholic tradition, the Western forms of "Christian art" have been more acceptable than indigenous art forms made by native artists.¹ Due to the image debate in the

¹ It is difficult to define Christian art. According to Francis Schaeffer, the term Christian art is defined under two categories: (1.) content, and (2.) how well the artist has suited the vehicle to the message. Cf. Francis August Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible. Two Essays*, Downers Grove 1973, 64; As a consultant of the Asian Christian Art Association (ACAA) Ron O'Grady defines Christian art in Asia focusing on three elements: the artist, the theme of the work, and the quality

early church and the event of iconoclastic controversy that resulted from it, traditional Christian iconographies are still deeply rooted in the self-identity of the churches evangelized by missionaries of the past.² Theologians, particularly those in Protestant circles, worry that certain Christian images may distract the viewer in worship. Art becomes binary: either image leads us closer to the truth of God or away from it. For John Calvin, the artist is free to practice his or her talents but needs to avoid any attempt to represent the divinity itself. Only the worship of the invisible God in the abstract form was permitted and any visual depiction of the divinity regarded as dangers of idolatry was rejected.³ The situation remains true among many churches in Protestant circles today.

The experience of making this liturgical project was a significant turning point in my reflections on art and contextualization, which in Catholic missiology has been referred to as the process of inculturation – “the on-going dialogue between faith and culture or cultures. More fully, it is the creative and dynamic relationship between the Christian message and a culture or cultures.”⁴ Different concepts about the relationship of faith and culture have been well discussed in the mission field.

A traditional approach would be accommodation or indigenization which describes a one-way relationship between gospel and culture. That is to say, the gospel message is simply translated or transposed into the new setting by using elements from the local culture in order to communicate meaning. It is an attempt to adapt the gospel message from an old (Western) to the new (Asian) culture, or from the past (clas-

of its deep profundity. O’Grady asserts that the term of Christian art refers variously to art produced or commissioned by Christians, or art with Christian themes. The quality of deep profundity about how the art work speaks to the viewer the Christian values of goodness, truth, and beauty can be incorporated into what is understood as Christian art. Cf. Megumi Yoshika, *The Power of Imaging. Art as Love and Struggle as Beauty*, in: *Asia Journal of Theology* 30, 2006, 275-287. However, according to Alan Chong, Christian art in Asia “is especially remarkable because it was produced by people of many faiths.” The objects were not actually made by Christians, but rather by local artists who might have been Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim and so forth. Alan Chong (ed.), *Christian Art in Asia. Sacred Art and Visual Splendour*, Singapore 2016, 9-13.

² Iconoclasm has resulted in the excessive acts of artistic patronage that aimed at the glorification of the individual rather than that of God. Cf. Michelle P. Brown, *The Lion Companion to Christian Art*, Oxford 2008, 11.

³ For example, any manufacturing of crucifixes was forbidden in Geneva. cf. Herman Selderhuis (ed.), *The Calvin Handbook*, Cambridge 2009, 420.

⁴ Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, Maryknoll, NY 1989, 11.

sic) to the present (contemporary) setting. In the 1970s, Taiwanese theologian Shoki Coe has raised the question toward such past-oriented concept of culture and later coined the term contextualization to replace indigenization.⁵ The accommodation model assumes a static concept of culture: "In the transition from one culture to another, the given, unchangeable gospel gets stripped of its old cultural cloth and dressed with a new one. The new culture is also considered as a constant which, in a way, is supposed to be baptized by the gospel."⁶ The gospel message should not be compromised while transmitting to the new cultural context.

In contrast, inculturation is never the passive reception of the gospel, but rather the active construction and reinterpretation of the message. Inculturation is an integral part of communicating the gospel if the gospel is to be truly communicated in a particular context.⁷ Inculturation acknowledges the high influence of human experience on the reception of the gospel. Every culture has to reflect on faith through its own lens to interpret scriptures, doctrinal formation, ethical concerns, and liturgical customs. The experience of people's lives and beliefs should not be ignored while one reflects on Christian faith through scripture and tradition.

As I reflect on my Easter quilt, several questions surface in my mind: To what extent is the visual representation of the Christian message an example of inculturation? How far can one utilize the contextualized representation of Christian signs and symbols to appropriately and effectively reveal a genius inculturation? How much adaptation in liturgical art should one take in order to speak to the local congregation and enhance creative worship? The chosen image can evoke one's theological imagination in the worship space. However, cultural creation formed by the viewer's context either grows or hinders one's faith. Making this set of liturgical banners for me was a way to sort out the problem of visual representation in the process of inculturation. By this

⁵ Cf. Shoki Coe, Contextualizing Theology in: *Mission Trends 3. Third World Theologies*, Gerald H. Anderson et al. (eds.), Grand Rapids, Michigan 1976, 19-24; 陳南州 Nan-jou Chen (ed.), Introduction to Taiwan Hsiang Tu Shen Hsueh. Wang Hsien Chih Mu Shih Wen Chi (*A Testament to Taiwan Homeland Theology. The Essential Writings of Wang Hsien-Chih*) 台灣鄉土神學-王憲治牧師文集, Taipei 2011, ix.

⁶ Volker Küster, *A Protestant Theology of Passion. Korean Minjung Theology Revisited*, Leiden 2010, 1-18.

⁷ Cf. Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue. Reflections on Christian Mission Today*, Maryknoll, NY 2011, 69.

I mean, either the making or viewing of the art plays a prominent role in achieving inculturation.

The viewer's perception of the image, no doubt, contributes to an on-going dialogue between faith and culture. The viewer's thinking, feeling, and perceiving toward the arts invite a creative reinterpretation of the message. These insights later become one of this study's main concerns that art can be a strategy to unfold the Christian mystery not only for the pastoral purpose but also in academic settings. While engaging in the making of and writing about Christian art in Asia, I began to appreciate the process of dialogue with different social-historical contexts, either old and new. Here is how my banner worked. Culturally contextualized expressions enhance the devotion in the congregational worship and has potential to be the product of inculturation theology. The banners reflect the uniqueness of my context of an Asian church in light of God's mission of the twenty-first century. In this way, art could be an alternative source for theology.

This art-making experience also made me wonder how Christian artists of Asia can be grounded in their own cultural experiences and social realities. When I arrived at Berkeley to study art and theology in 2012, I had a very clear aim in mind: to immerse myself in the rich tradition of Christian art as well as in my own cultural roots and heritage, so that I may be able to articulate how Asian Christians see the complex nature of their relationships to the universal Christian churches by being Asians. Scholars of religions have described the shift of the center of gravity in Christianity to the Global South,⁸ and thus, Asian Christian artists have the capacity to be intercultural partners to the global Christianity.⁹ The discussion about Asian Christian art in this study thereby reflects the tension in an intercultural dialogue between cultures. If one assumes that Asian artists creatively borrow art and symbol from their contexts to express Christian faith, this study *Spaces of Mediation. Christian Art and Visual Culture in Taiwan* tells a story of how artists engage aggressively or passively with the East Asian cultures of the present day in which I feel bound.

⁸ Cf. Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom. The Rise of Global Christianity*, 3rd ed., New York, NY 2002.

⁹ Under the discussion of intercultural theology, Küster proposes three dimensions in the field: Encountering with other religions, other theologies, and other churches. Cf. Volker Küster, Intercultural Theology is a Must, in: *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 38, 2014, 171-176.