



Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion

**Theological Counterpoints:
Transnationalism and Political Theology in the Asia Pacific**

Kwok Pui-lan
Pkwok@eds.edu

Part of
New Overtures: Asian North American Theology in the 21st Century
(Essays in Honor of Fumitaka Matsuoka),
edited by Eleazar S. Fernandez

On August 16, 2010, the headline of *The Wall Street Journal* said China is on track to overtake Japan as the world's second-largest economy.¹ Ever since China overtook Germany as the third-largest economy in 2007, observers have predicted that China would sooner or later

¹ Andrew Batson, Daisuke Wakabayashi, and Mark Whitehouse, "China Output Beats Japan," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 19, 2010, sec. A, 1.

catch up with Japan. It would take decades before China would overtake the United States as the world's biggest economy, for the gap between China's \$7 trillion economy and the United States' nearly \$15 trillion is huge. Nevertheless, this is a significant turning point in global economy. By virtue of its sheer size and collective national wealth, China would be in a position to exert political clout in global politics.

Not coincidentally, the headline on the cover of the British journal *The Economist* the following week read: "Contest of the Century: China v India."² The phenomenal economic growth of China and India has journalists busy talking about modernization with "Asian characteristics" and its impact on the rest of the world. To sustain their pace of growth China and India have voracious appetites for oil, coal, iron ore, and other natural resources from Africa, Latin American, and other countries. The dramatic new trend in South-South economic relations has already disrupted traditional patterns of economic development. Some African countries have redirected their trade and other relationships from the North Atlantic to India and China.³ These two countries, with about forty percent of the world's population, will play decisive roles in shaping the rules that will govern the twenty-first century.

The rise of India, China, Brazil, and other emerging markets challenges Western hegemony and shifts the economic balance of the world. Indian American journalist Fareed Zakaria has predicted a "Post-American world" in which the United States will no longer dominate global economy, orchestrate geopolitics, or exert disproportional influences over

² *The Economist*, August 21-27, 2010.

³ Harry G. Broadman, *Africa's Silk Road: China and India's New Economic Frontier* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2007).

culture.⁴ Perceptions about the rise or fall of Asia have always had direct impact on how Americans look at Asian Americans. In the 1980s, keen competition from Japan, especially by Japanese automakers, led to widespread anti-Japanese feelings. Vincent Chin, a Chinese American, was beaten to death in Detroit by two white autoworkers, because he was mistaken to be Japanese. As trade imbalance between China and the United States continues to grow and negative criticism about China fills the airwave, the old myth of “yellow peril” might be revived.

How should theologians respond to the rise of Asia and changes in geopolitics around the Pacific? Although there has been a resurgence of interest on the relationship between the political and the theological, most of these discussions focus on the European tradition and experience in Western countries. Few of these debates touch on the Asia Pacific as a regional formation poised to change the world. This article attempts to probe the contours of a transnational political theology amidst the hyper-capitalist flow, ingenious hybridity, and shifting religious and cultural identities in the Asia Pacific.

Asia Pacific as a Space for Political Theology

Political theology, as Jan Assman suggests, concerns the “ever-changing relationships between political community and religious order, in short, between power [or authority]: Herrschaft] and salvation [Heil].”⁵ Political theology has a long history in Western Christianity. In *The City of God*, Augustine contrasts the city of God with an earthly city and refuses to

⁴ Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008).

⁵ Jan Assmann, *Herrschaft und Heil: Politische Theologie in Altägypten, Israel und Europa* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 2000), 15, as quoted in Hent de Vries, “Introduction,” in *Political Theologies: Public Religion in a Post-Secular World*, ed. Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 25.

sacralize the Roman Empire. In the medieval period the issue of church and state loomed large due to power struggles between the papacy and secular rulers. During the Reformation Luther proposed the theory of the “two kingdoms”: the spiritual regiment concerned with the soul and the inner person, and the worldly regiment concerned with the body and the world. The Treaty of Westphalia (1648) marked the collapse of “Christendom” and gave secular authorities the power to determine matters of religion in their own state. The authority of the church was further undermined during the Enlightenment, when philosophers pushed for the separation of religion from public affairs. In the development of modern states in the West politics is typically considered to be public, while religion is relegated to the private domain.⁶

This brief historical background helps us understand the surge of interest in political theology in the West, for religion has not disappeared but has entered the public domain and policy discussions, both nationally and internationally. After September 11, religion has been on the forefront of discussions on the “war on terror,” global peace, and reconciliation. Presidents and world leaders, policy-makers, social and political scientists, journalists, cultural critics, and philosophers have commented on religion and observed it with both fascination and—sometimes—frustration. Prominent critics and theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, Terry Eagleton, Slavoj Žižek, and Alain Badiou have joined the fray. Some among them have even explicitly discussed Christian faith.⁷ There is clearly a change of attitude in the secular state and

⁶ See the discussion in Michael Kirwan, *Political Theology: A New Introduction* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2008), 55-104.

⁷ For example, Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute, or Why the Christian Legacy Is Worth Fighting For* (London: Verso, 2000); Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

in the public domain with respect to the enduring impulses of religion and religious communities. Some have called this the post-secular world. Weber's notion of the disenchantment of the world has been cast aside as some begin to speak of the "permanence" of the theologico-political.⁸ However, there is hardly any consensus or unitary theory to explain the relation between the theological and the political. Hent de Vries notes that, while religion can be a "potential source of inspiration and democratic openness, it simultaneously—inevitably?—presents a danger of dogmatism and hence of closed societies and mentalities."⁹ Political theology flourishes in the current lively debates on secularism and the post-secular world in the West.

If the climate for political theology is "post-secular" in the North Atlantic, the context for political theology in Asia Pacific is "post-colonial" and "de-imperial." First of all, "Asia Pacific" was a regional structure formed as a result of colonial impetus. Arif Dirlik calls it a dominantly Euro-American formation. He observes:

Entering the Pacific from the west or the east, the Portuguese, the Spaniards, the Dutch, the Russians, and the English, as well as their colonists in the Americas, all contributed in turn to the creation of a regional structure, in which Asian and Pacific societies provided the building blocks and the globalized interests of Euro-American powers furnished the principles of organization.¹⁰

It is therefore not surprising to find that many of the progressive Asian theologies developed in the twentieth century were politically charged. In the 1930s, during foreign

⁸ Claude Lefort, "The Permanence of the Theologic-Political," in de Vries and Sullivan, *Political Theologies*, 148-87.

⁹ De Vries, "Introduction," 3.

¹⁰ Arif Dirlik, "The Asia-Pacific Idea: Reality and Representation in the Invention of a Regional Structure," *Journal of World History* 3 (1992): 66.

encroachment on China, Wu Yaozong advocated radical social revolution as a means to save China and transform the world. He criticized the aggression of capitalist powers, which led to war and conflicts in China and other parts of the world. He declared that the Christian church should not support the status quo, but should actively participate in social change. His use of Marxism in social analysis and his critique of idealist Christianity anticipated liberation theologies to come decades later.¹¹ After the Second World War when Asian countries engaged in intense struggles for political independence, M. M. Thomas of India emerged as one of leading voices among Asian theologians. In his book *Christian Response to Asian Revolution*, published in 1966, he criticized Western imperialism and the identification of the Gospel with Western culture.¹² With a strong nationalist sentiment Thomas argued that the Asian revolution enabled us to see the transcendence of the Gospel over all cultures. For Thomas, Jesus Christ is a model of new humanity, providing the spiritual foundation, renewal, and ultimate fulfillment of the struggle for full humanity. His view of Jesus was clearly anti-colonial, as he contrasted the messianism of a conquering king with the crucified servant Christ.¹³

On the other side of the Pacific the Civil Rights movement and the protest against the Vietnam War aroused the political consciousness of Asian Americans. From a few small, disconnected and largely invisible ethnic groups, they organized to form a self-identified racial group and they refused to be treated as second-class citizens. Out of these intense political

¹¹ Ng Lee-ming, “A Study of Y. T. Wu,” *Ching Feng* 15/1 (1972): 5-54.

¹² M. M. Thomas, *Christian Response to the Asian Revolution* (London: SCM, 1966).

¹³ See the discussion in Sathianathan Clarke, “M. M. Thomas,” in *Empire and the Christian Tradition: New Readings of Classical Theologians*, ed. Kwok Pui-lan, Don H. Compier, and Joerg Rieger (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 430.

movements Asian American theology arose, during a time when anti-racism in the United States was much linked to Third World liberation. Jonathan Tan points out that the pioneers of Asian American theologians, “engaged in debates with their Caucasian counterparts about the ethnocentrism of U.S. Christianity and U.S. theologies. The significance of their struggles lies in the creation of Asian American Christian identity and theologizing.”¹⁴ Race, nation, and citizenship were important concerns, as Asian Americans were seen as “perpetual foreigners.” They were targeted by the Chinese Exclusive Act of 1882 and were ineligible for citizenship until 1952, not to mention the internment of hundreds of thousands of Japanese Americans during the Second World War. As Asian American theologians reclaim their rightful place as Americans, they have also to negotiate their hyphenated “Asian-American” identity in relation to both sides of the Pacific.

The 1970s saw the rise of the Pacific Rim discourse following the economic success of Japan and the rapid development of the newly industrialized countries such as Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Since the late 1970s, American trade across the Pacific surpassed trade with Europe. The twenty-first century was dubbed the “Pacific Century,” with PBS airing a ten-hour documentary on the topic in 1993. But as Christopher L. Connery has pointed out, the Pacific Rim discourse was a transnational American construct emanating from the spread of multinational capitalism and colored by the Cold War imaginary. The late Cold War required a

¹⁴ Jonathan Y. Tan, *Introducing Asian American Theologies* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2008), 93.

“new spatial mythology for U.S. international capital,” Connery notes.¹⁵ As an extension of America the Pacific was imagined as a place where capital would freely transverse the ocean.

While the Asia Pacific was restructured into a space for the fluidity of capital and commodities, political theology from the region, which developed in the 1970s and 1980s, offered a counter-mapping by articulating the aspiration of the Asian and Pacific peoples. Emerging in the 1970s, Minjung Theology from South Korea offered a political hermeneutic of the Bible and argued that people are subjects of history. Living under Japanese colonial rule and then under suppression of the Kuomintang, Taiwanese theologians articulated the demand for self-determination in their Homeland Theology. The theology of struggle in the Philippines expressed the ferment and protest of Filipinos against a dictatorial regime; the People’s Power Revolution finally toppled the Marcos government in 1986. In the Pacific churches and theologians spoke out against dependence theory and for the protection of the natural and cultural environment of the Pacific. Indigenous theologians across the Asia Pacific articulated the need for social equality, cultural survival, and the freedom to articulate theology in their own idioms. Although shaped by their particular context and demand, these theologies are linked internationally, as the United States plays a crucial role in the geopolitics of the region.

The term “Asia Pacific” proposed by capitalist managers and military strategists, is inadequate to describe the multifaceted and persistent people’s struggle for democracy. Under the veneer of the “Asian miracle,” Asia becomes the factory of the world, and low wage labor enables capitalist entrepreneurs to make great profit. Political theology in the region offers one

¹⁵ Christopher L. Connery, “Pacific Rim Discourse: The U.S. Global Imaginary in the Late Cold War Years,” *boundary 2* 21/1 (1994): 40.

counter-hegemonic space to reflect on the past and imagine a different possible future. With the rise of China and India and the current financial crisis in Europe and the United States, such reimagining is more urgent than ever. As Rob Wilson and Arif Dirlik, two veteran scholars of the Asia Pacific, write, we must begin to “historicize, question, and *undo* those conceptual categories, maps, imaginary geographies, master narratives, self-evident discourses, and configurations of Western knowledge/power,” that threaten the freedom and welfare of peoples living in this vast area.¹⁶

Cultural Imaginary and Political Theology

As Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt have pointed out, today’s Empire has no territorial center of power, as there are no fixed boundaries, and center and periphery are constantly shifting.¹⁷ Within the Asia Pacific region one of the most astute theorists of Empire and deimperialization is Chen Kuan-Hsing, a professor of cultural studies in Taiwan. He elucidates why the process of decolonization is long and tortuous. Because of the uneven distribution of capital and power, some Asian countries might go through a decolonizing process, while at the same time collude with imperial interests. Thus, Asians cannot point fingers at Western colonial powers without going through a painstaking self-analysis and critique. In his groundbreaking volume *Asia as Method*, Chen points to the important roles cultural studies can play in this region: “To further the progress of decolonization, the task of cultural studies is to deconstruct,

¹⁶ Rob Wilson and Arif Dirlik, “Introduction: Asia/Pacific as Space of Cultural Production,” *boundary 2* 21/1 (1994): 6. Emphasis the authors.

¹⁷ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), xii.

decenter, and disarticulate the colonial cultural imaginary, and to reconstruct and rearticulate new imaginations and discover a more democratic future direction.”¹⁸

Chen says the legacy of colonialism has transfigured the inner structure of the cultural imaginary of both the colonizers and colonized. Decolonizing the cultural imaginary involves the following: (1) placing colonialism at the center of analysis, (2) revealing hidden Eurocentrism such that a more balanced account of different regional formation of the world can be presented and (3) emphasizing the relative autonomy of local history and paying attention to the specificities of the historical and the geographical. The shape of the cultural imaginary in a specific time and space depends on the interaction between the colonial, the historical, and the geographical.¹⁹ Since the nation-state is no longer sufficient to explain the workings of the globalized world, Chen proposes we focus on geographical spaces to develop a more appropriate understanding of the formerly colonized world in the neoliberal economy.

Chen’s book identifies three components in reconstructing the cultural imaginary from the particular situations of his East Asian context. The first is decolonization, in which he engages the work of Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, and Ashis Nandy to discuss postcolonial subjectivity and their critique of nationalism, nativism, and civilizationalism. The second is de-cold war, because the entanglement of colonialism and the cold war disrupted the evolution of political structures in the Asian region and heightened conflicts within the nation. The third is deimperialization, which involves an honest and soul-searching analysis of the desire to identify with the Empire and to support imperialist projects. In case after case decolonization quickly

¹⁸ Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 112.

¹⁹ Ibid., 108.

turned into recolonization or neocolonization, because the imperialist cultural imaginary was effortlessly inherited by the colonized without critical reflection. Chen calls Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong “subimperial spaces,” because they were lured by and colluded with the imperialist desires of the Japanese and American empire. Today, the image of a “Greater China Economic Sphere” looms large on the horizon, and the Chinese leadership’s slogan of a “peaceful rise” does nothing to ease the anxiety of neighboring countries.

Theologians can contribute to the process of deimperialization by participating in the critique and reformulation of cultural imaginary. I would like to give examples of the ways theologians and conscientious intellectuals are engaging in this process in the United States and China. Although Chinese leaders have said that China does not want to become a superpower, commentators have coined the term “Chinamerica” and suggested a G2 that would put China and the United States at the head of international affairs. On the American side, Japanese American theologian Rita Nakashima Brock has emerged as a leading theological voice critiquing the American empire. Founder and director of Faith Voices for the Common Good, Brock is a seasoned activist in the women’s movement and in the grassroots movement to stop the Iraq war. Beginning with her first book, *Journeys by Heart*,²⁰ Brock’s theology has been shaped by her concerns for social outcasts and those who toil under multiple oppressions of society, including the abused child, prostitutes and sex-workers, and victims of domestic and military violence.

Brock traces the founding myths of the United States to the Puritan imperative to build a new Eden—a new paradise—in the New World. The Puritans saw the Indians either as innocent

²⁰ Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1988).

or childlike, the original inhabitants of Eden, or as Canaanites, illegitimate occupants of the Promised Land. Most often Indians were seen as agents of Satan to be annihilated to make room for God's chosen people. Puritan theology condoned war to eradicate evil, and Puritans lived by what historian Richard Slotkin calls "the myth of regeneration through violence."²¹ Such a myth absolved the settlers from the sins of killing Indians and taking over their lands and possessions. Genocide, white hegemony, and environmental exploitation were the engines of the nation's expansion.

Brock links imperial nostalgia for the vanquished Indians to the exoticizing and Orientalizing of Asians in white imagination. In this colonial fantasy, Asian men are stereotypically seen as servile and effeminate and Asian women as desired objects, submissive and yet sexually sophisticated.²² In the book *Saving Paradise*, Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker argue that as long as the crucifixion and Jesus' suffering on the cross remain central for salvation, Christianity can easily be used to condone suffering and violence.²³ Their detailed study documents that the first images of crucifixion emerged in the tenth century, a time when Christians used violence to force pagans into conversion. In the first decade, Anselm of Canterbury developed the satisfaction theory of atonement in his *Cur Deus Homo*. Jesus' death became an offering to pay for human's debt of sin, and satisfy God's honor. Violence was no

²¹ Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1660-1860* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1973).

²² Rita Nakashima Brock, "Paradise in the Exotic Asian 'Other'" (paper presented at the annual meeting of Pacific, Asian, and North American Asian Women in Theology and Ministry, Chicago, April 2, 2009).

²³ Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire* (Boston: Beacon, 2008).

longer seen as sinful. Instead, killing in the name of Christ became a holy act, sanctioned by the Christian Church and championed by bishops and theologians.

Brock and Parker offer a counter-hegemonic cultural imaginary, focusing not on Jesus' sacrificial death, but on his resurrection and paradise. The early theologians drew their concepts of paradise from the Bible and Greek, Roman, and Persian thought. They associated paradise with the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Depictions of paradise in Christian art were various: the four rivers of Eden and the Jordan, fecund trees, green meadows, and Jesus appearing as the Good Shepherd. Baptism was immersion into the waters of paradise sanctified by the Holy Spirit, and Eucharist was a feast of abundant life. Instead of salvation through redemptive violence, Brock and Parker reconstruct the idea that salvation is paradise in this world and in this life. Brock writes:

Life in paradise was maintained through doing divine deeds, such as healing the sick, feeding the poor, working for justice, practicing non-violent resistance to oppression, teaching the ignorant, and loving each other as friends of God. The Eucharist trained the senses for love of beauty and appreciation for creation as blessed, and guided virtue toward the ethical standards of the church.²⁴

While Brock and Parker have developed a theology of redemptive beauty to challenge the glorification of suffering and sacrifice in the service of the empire, intellectuals and theologians in China describe the loss of faith in Marxist ideology. The sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China on October 1, 2009, was celebrated with much fanfare and a spectacular military parade. Just months before the anniversary, Liu Peng, a researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, published an important essay on the crisis of "faith"

²⁴ Brock, "Paradise in the Exotic Asian 'Other.'"

behind China's rise. By "faith" he does not mean "religion," but the spiritual and moral foundation of the country and the individual. He said that Marxism, treated as a religion, has been the official ideology in China for the past sixty years. Further, slogans of "liberation" and "class struggle" helped mobilize the masses to participate in the "revolutionary enterprise," but since the late 1970s, with economic reforms and open-door policies, the major concern for the Chinese people has been to become rich as fast as possible. Social and moral problems in China are, therefore, rampant as the result of a spiritual vacuum and a crisis of faith. In short, Liu implies that the cultural imaginary promulgated by the Chinese Communist Party can no longer serve the new China, and calls for the government to adopt more open policies toward religion, since religion can serve important functions in civil and moral education and the satisfaction of spiritual needs.²⁵

Chinese Christian writer and dissident Yu Jie argues that while the government boasts the "rise of the big country" (*daiguo jueqi*), China is plagued by huge inequities of wealth, a corrupted bureaucracy, a weak legal system, and rampant violence and hatred. He believes that Christianity can contribute to the construction of a new value system, social morality, and cultural institutions in Chinese society. He notes that a small minority of Christian public intellectuals has emerged in China who are addressing social issues in the public square.²⁶ Yu and other intellectuals have argued that grassroots Christian organizations can contribute to the

²⁵ Liu Peng, "Zhongguo jueqi de ruanlei: xinyang" (The weak link of China's rise: faith), *Newsletter of the Centre for Christian Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong* 7 (October 2009): 1-9. This is a shorter version of an article first appeared in *Lingdaozhe* (Leaders), June 2009.

²⁶ Yu Jie, "Zhongguo jiating jiaohui de gongkaihua ji Jidu gonggong zhishi fenzi de chuxian" (Chinese house churches becoming public and the emergence of Christian public intellectual community), *Newsletter of the Centre for Christian Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong* 6 (May 2009): 7-12.

construction of civil society in China. “Civil society” has also been called the “voluntary sector,” “nonprofit sector,” and “voluntary sector,” which is separate from the state and capital. The discussion of civil society has captured the attention of Chinese scholars and China observers abroad since the 1990s, especially after the Tiananmen incident and the pro-democracy movement in 1989. According to Yang Fenggang, civil society has often been conceptualized as antagonistic to the state in Western theories. But it needs not be so in China, and Christianity can play a crucial role in enlarging civil society and paving the way for a modern, healthy, and pluralistic society.²⁷

Chinese intellectuals and theologians have also discussed the need to develop public theology in China. For a long time the audience for theology has been limited to the Chinese church and Christians, but with the establishment of religion departments and research institutes in China and growing interest in religion among the Chinese, theology must address different publics: the academy, the church, and secular society. As a public discourse theology must address critical issues of common concern, such as contemporary Chinese social conditions, religious pluralism, and globalization. Its purview includes religious, cultural, and social dimensions.²⁸ Public theology need not shy away from critiquing Chinese politics and its global

²⁷ Fenggang Yang, “Civil Society and the Role of Christianity in China,” in *Civil Society as Democratic Practice*, ed. Antonio F. Perez, Semou Pathé Gueye, and Fenggang Yang (Washington, D.C.: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2005), 197-211.

²⁸ See the discussion in Xie Zhibin, “Hanyu shenxue ‘gonggong’ zhi keneng” (The possibility of Chinese theology being “public”), in *Gonggong shenxue yu chuanjiuhua* (Public theology and globalization) (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chuban she, 2008), 259-78.

impacts. Hong Kong theologian Lai Pan-Chiu argues that the mission of Chinese theology involves the critique of cultural hegemony and serving as a catalyst for cultural transformation.²⁹

If Brock and Parker offer paradise as a vision of hope and healing, Chinese theologians participate in the discussion of Christianity and the construction of harmonious society. Chinese leaders promote the building of a harmonious society as a way to bridge gaps and ease contradictions between rich and poor, urban and rural, men and women, the majority Han and ethnic minorities. Theological faculties in China gathered in Nanjing in 2007 to discuss how Christianity might contribute to this national effort. For them, the construction of a harmonious society depends on harmonious relation between God and humans, between human beings, and between humans and nature. God's love, manifested in the death and reconciliation of Jesus Christ, motivates Christians to create a harmonious earth and society and peace and reconciliation among religions.³⁰

Theological Counterpoints

In 2003 the Academy Award winning Chinese composer Tan Dun conducted the premiere of *The Map* in Boston, a work commissioned by the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Inspired by rural and ritual music Tan heard as a child in Hunan, China, this multimedia event featured video recordings of folk musicians playing within the context of a Western symphonic piece. In a workshop prior to the performance Tan talked about his music, which commentators have said

²⁹ Lai Pan-chiu, “Cong wenhua shenxue zaisi hanyu shenxue” (Rethinking Chinese theology from cultural theology), cited in ibid., 263-64.

³⁰ Gao Ying, ed., *Judijiao yu goujian kexie shehui* (Christianity and the construction of harmonious society) (Nanjing: Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, 2008).

creatively blends the East and the West. He said Bach has created magnificent and sophisticated counterpoints. Going a step further, Tan sought to create counterpoints across the divide of East and West, sound and silence, image and sound. Taking the cue from Tan Dun then, the idea of theological counterpoints can mean creating sound, resonance, and echoes of diverse theological voices from different social and geographical locales. The public space in and from which a theologian speaks is not defined or bounded by the immediate social context in which he or she lives and works. Our theological imagination will be stretched if we can develop the capacity to hear and appreciate the stone cymbals in rural China and the cello at the same time. Just as listening to music across time and space can create new musical genres, theology in the transnational age needs to experiment with new forms and new imaginary.

Given the colonial past, the construction of “the West and the rest” still influences our discussion of political theology in the Asia Pacific to a large extent. The structure of global power is uneven, and Western countries continue to dominate in economics and knowledge production. In terms of political theology, European Christianity has a much longer and rich history than Asian Christianity. But as Chen Kuan-Hsing has noted, global and regional changes have produced impetus and possibilities to break through this binary. He proposes an alternative strategy that “posits the West as bits and fragments that intervene in local social formations in a systematic, but never totalizing way.”³¹ Within such a framework, the West is considered a fragment within the local and a cultural resource among many others, instead of an opposing force to be constantly negated and resisted. To overcome the constant pressure to make the West

³¹ Chen, *Asia as Method*, 223.

the reference point, Chen suggests inter-referencing, fostering dialogues and communications within Asia and with the Third World to create new imaginary horizons for comparison.³² In doing so, we will construct multiple frames of reference unconfined by nativist or Eurocentric viewpoints.

The need to move beyond binary and stabilized constructions of identities, cultures, and geographies is emphasized by Asian and Asian American theologians. Korean theologian Namsoon Kang notes that Asian feminist theology is still largely defined by a sharp contrast between Asia and the West. She argues that a nativist approach will confine Asian feminist theology within “*geographically deterministic and culturally essentialist* discursive boundaries.”³³ Instead, she proposes a *glocal* feminist theology in which the global and local contexts are combined to resist empire(s) of all forms and to strengthen solidarity with women, the marginalized, and the displaced. The task of feminist theology in Asia within this *glocal* purview has two prongs. The first is the internal critique of kyriarchical structures in theologians’ own local cultures and societies. The second is to link theologians’ local realities and the hybrid experience of Asian women in their own contexts with global geopolitical reality.³⁴

Jonathan Tan notes that the Asian American theologians of the first generation have largely directed attention to external racism and discrimination, which they encountered in the

³² Ibid.

³³ Namsoon Kang, “Re-constructing *Asian Feminist Theology*: Toward a *Glocal Feminist Theology* in an Era of Neo-Empire (s),” in *Christian Theology in Asia*, ed. Sebastian C. H. Kim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 221. Emphasis hers.

³⁴ Ibid., 221-22.

church and society. They have paved the way for the second generation, who represent a much broader cross-section of Asian Americans, disciplines, religious backgrounds, and ecclesial affiliations. These theologians came into prominence in the 1990s and 2000s and applied interdisciplinary approaches to theologizing on a variety of issues. In addition to issues of reconciliation and community transformation, they are interested in the relations between faith, Bible, evangelism, ethnicity, and culture. Since Asian American theology has been more or less accepted by the mainstream institutions, the second generation theologians have freedom and space to address internal challenges within the Asian American communities. Newer voices, such as those from Asian American feminist theologians, gay and lesbian theologians, Asian adoptees, and Evangelical and Pentecostal theologians, are being heard.³⁵ Lester Edwin J. Ruiz further notes, “[W]hile not oblivious to the call to engage with the claims of a Pacific and global world, second generation Asian Americans have a clear, substantive, methodological, and political/institutional commitment to their particular locations and positionalities that sees the ‘local’ and the ‘global’ as co-constitutive.”³⁶

A theological horizon that sees local history and positionalities as closely related to changing global realities would require us to conceptualize nation, continent, territory, and race with a new imaginary. In the debates on postcolonial biblical criticism tensions exist between those scholars who “work@home” (anaphora) and those who live in diaspora. Gerald O. West from South Africa has argued that postcolonial criticism done by diasporic scholars in

³⁵ Tan, *Introducing Asian American Theologies*, 99-101.

³⁶ Lester Edwin J. Ruiz, “Recovering the ‘Body Politic’: Racialized and Gendered Diaspora in Accredited Graduate Theological Education,” *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion* 1/6 (2010): 34.

metropolitan centers should not elide those who remain @home and who get their hands dirty in actual postcolonial contexts.³⁷ While I agree that we cannot elide the differences of the concerns and starting points of work@home and diasporic scholars, I want to problematize any stabilized concepts of “home” and “diasporic.” In the Asian Pacific diasporic experience refers not only to those who leave Asia to go to the West, but also successive waves of migration of Asians, such as the Indians and Chinese, to other Asian countries and Pacific islands. In the age of globalization, when the local is constantly impinged upon by the global, one may feel diasporic even if one lives @home. To complexify the picture, many Asian Americans are treated as perpetual foreigners even though they may be second or third generation Americans and are constantly being asked the question, “Where do you come from?”

I agree with Joseph Duggan, who says we need to push established boundaries and “create multiple dialogical openings that foster porosity, interstitial relationships, and hybridity.”³⁸ With the help of technology he hopes to create a public space so that theologians and activists@home, in diaspora, and in metropolitan centers can be in proximity to one another and exchange views.³⁹ My notion of theological counterpoint is to encourage us to hear our own theological voice as a part of the theological symphony, and not isolated from one another. We

³⁷ Gerald O. West, “What Difference Does Postcolonial Biblical Criticism Make: Reflections from a (South) African Perspective,” in *Postcolonial Interventions: Essays in Honor of R. S. Sugirtharajah*, ed. Tat-siong Benny Liew (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 270.

³⁸ Joseph Duggan, “The Performance and Embodiment of Hybridity, Porosity, and Interstitial Relationships: A Vision for the Journal of Postcolonial Theory and Theology,” *Journal of Postcolonial Theory and Theology* 1/1 (October 2010): 3.

³⁹ Duggan operates a Postcolonial Theology Network on Facebook and a Postcolonial Networks Web site (www.postcolonialnetworks.com), and he founded the online *Journal of Postcolonial Theory and Theology* (www.postcolonialjournal.com).

will all be diminished if there is only one hegemonic voice, or when there are multiple voices with one dominant all the time. In the development of transnational political theology in the Asia Pacific it is critical for Asian, Pacific, and Asian American theologians to maintain dialogue, so that we can learn to hear each other's rhythm, discern the coming and emerging horizon, and be open to self-critique.

Fumitaka Matsuoka, who has done much to promote conversations on Asian American theology, speaks of the “monopoly of imagination” when a dominant group uses power to guard and enforce its norms, virtues, and worldviews to the exclusion of others.⁴⁰ He laments that Asian Americans are often anxious that they will remain a “minor key,” irrelevant and insignificant in the eyes of the mainstream. Yet it is in the liminal space of “in-betweenness” that one remains intensely alert and refuses to accept easily what is regarded as common sense. He writes, “A person in a liminal world is poised in uncertainty and ambiguity between two or more social constructs, reflecting in the soul the discords and harmonies, repulsions and attractions.”⁴¹ I believe transnationalism and globalization have thrust many people into living in such “holy insecurity,”⁴² as Matsuoka calls it. We stand at the threshold of a new age, in which technology and the information highway would radically transform our understanding of theological community and enable us to hear counterpoints that we might not have imagined before.

⁴⁰ Fumitaka Matsuoka, *The Color of Faith: Building Community in a Multiracial Society* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1998), 76.

⁴¹ Fumitaka Matsuoka, *Out of Silence: Emerging Themes in Asian American Churches* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1995), 54.

⁴² Ibid., 53.