Doing Theologies in Asian Ways with Asian Resources
- An Introduction to A Theological Movement Launched by PTCA

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Introduction

The attempt to formulate theologies and to implement theological education in Asia, can be dated back to the arrival and establishment of Christians of Oriental Orthodox tradition, and multiplied with successive Christian sojourn to Asia, of Roman Catholic and Protestant Christian missions from Europe and North America. Theological education carried out as institutes of professional higher education has been operated in many of Asian countries for more than a century. Because of the Christian mission legacy, theological education systems implemented in Asia are mostly modeled after theological schools from western countries in all their structures, disciplines and curricula.

Over the years, despite of many challenges and arguments for new form of theological education and many conferences which have been held to urge that transformation be made for traditional models of theological education, there is still ongoing search for appropriate theological education to meet the contemporary ministerial and social challenges voiced by theological faculties, students and church leaders.

Encouraged by the internal conditions of the church mission developments, and the external challenges caused by the international power remapping, an identity awareness of being “Asian” Christian was begun to emerge in Asian Christian communities after Second World War. Theological educators in Asia came together to form associations for theological schools to encourage personnel exchanges, resources sharing, and shaping solidarity for theological development in Asia. Association for Theological Education in South East Asia (ATESEA) was formed in 1957 and increased its members from 16 in the beginning, to 102 at its apex. Asian Theological Association (ATA) was formed in 1970 and has 128 accredited members and 64 associated members. Both associations are committed to the idea of “train Asian in Asia”, while ATESEA has stressed on contextual orientation for theological construction. College of Serampore was established even dated back to 1818 to provide collegiate education to students in the Faculties of Arts, Science and Commerce through affiliation with the University of Calcutta, as well higher theological education to the ministers of the churches through its Faculty of Theology to affiliated colleges in India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh.
It was in the midst of this background, that the Programme for Theology and Cultures in Asia (PTCA) was given birth as a theological movement to the service of contextual theological formation and theological education in Asia.

Critical Engagement of Theologies and Cultures

The Programme for Theology and Cultures in Asia was first formed as a theological workshop in 1983, which was a joint program collaborated by Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), Association for Theological Education in Asia (ATESEA), South East Asia Graduate School of Theology (SEAGST), Center for Religions and Cultures in Tao Fong Shan and Kansai Seminar House. Its first workshop was hosted in Tao Fong Shan, Hong Kong. This theological initiative was given a mission of to do reorientation to the young faculties in the theological schools in Asia and doctoral candidates of SEAGST for a contextual awareness of doing theologies and theological education. It was thus considered a contextual theological movement in Asia.

Four years later in July 1987, an inauguration for the Programme for Theology and Cultures in Asia (PTCA) was formally held in Kansai Seminar House, Kyoto Japan to open a new era for this theological movement on doing theologies with Asian resources. This inauguration has not only marked a milestone for the history of PTCA, but also initiated a new epoch for doing theologies in Asia. The common themes for the series consultations that held by PTCA in the following years on “Doing Theologies with Resources in Asia” has a significance of to steer the theological endeavors in Asia away from the theological methodology of “contextualization”, which was proposed by the third mandate of Theological Education Fund (TEF) of WCC.

Theological development in Asia has gone through different stages after it was introduced to Asian world, these stages are divided according to the theological methodologies applied to the theological construction and the essential role of Asia cultures as elements of theologies. These stages are in my point of view: stage of theological indigenization, stage of contextualization and stage of doing theology with Asian resources. Generally speaking, the trend of indigenization has taken the people’s cultures of Asia as a tool to interpret the Christian faith and theologies that introduced from western churches. Kosuke Koyama can be seen as a representative Asian theologian for this method, in his book on “Waterbuffalo Theology” he explained that through his experiences confronted with the farmers and waterbuffaloes in the muddy paddy field where his church in Northern Thailand was situated, he was reminded the teaching of Paul about his adaptation and self-transfiguration to adjust the contexts given (1Cor. 9.22f), therefore he was inspired and convinced with a decision of
to subordinate great theological thoughts like those Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth to the intellectual and spiritual needs of the farmers.¹

Shoki Coe when served in TEF of WCC commends Koyama on his creative and courageous theological mind to take Asian realities and experiences into account for the theological endeavors. However, he also pointed out that the theological attempt to make use of indigenous cultures as mediums of interpretation for western theologies has its limitation of being static and past orientation. He proposed that theological formation should be done with dynamic and future orientation, through critical engagement with people’s life contexts, providing hope to the victims amidst of their struggles and sufferings. He thus, advocated theological method of contextualization, making an implication of “incarnation” he suggested that theologies done in different contexts need to engage critically Christian texts with people’s contexts. And as context is changing, contextualization of theology should be a continual process of contextualizing.

It was derived from these continual theological joint efforts that Asian theologies have developed to its critical edge, the traditional divisive concept of Gospel and Cultures were called into question. An interesting development was also happened in WCC’s theological formation, an inter assemblies study topic was modified from the “Gospel and Cultures” which was proposed to be studied after the Vancouver Assembly (1983) to that of “Gospel in Diverse Cultures” after Canberra Assembly (1991). This thematic modification implies potent significance of theological transformation, cultures particularly cultures from the non Christian world are then no longer considered opposition or independent entities from the Gospel, but are seen as matrix of it. This revisit of relationship between Gospel and cultures has been understood in Asian contexts through its axiom and theological formula of “text” and “context”. CS Song the first dean of PTCA questioned the methodology of contextualization, he argues, that text can only be understood in its context, therefore no text can be isolated from its original context, and to be contextualized into another context. He thus proposed the theme on “Doing Theology with Asian Resources” for a series of theological seminar workshop that were held jointly by CCA, ATESEA, SEAGST, Kansai Seminar House and Tao Fong Shan, for the purpose to orient and reorient those doctoral students of SEAGST and young faculties in the region. This series of theological workshop continued for 5 years and fruitfully equipped hundreds alumni through its annual workshops.

**Vital and Creative Theologies in Asia**

When the PTCA was founded it was clearly announced that there is no intention to establish a new organization or an institution, rather it was an inception of a theological movement.

¹Kosuke Koyama, Waterbuffalo Theology (great Britain: SCM Press Ltd, 1974) p. viii
CS Song echoed with the founding participants of the inauguration to describe this inception of PTCA as “a fresh beginning” and call upon a collective works for a creative theological community in Asia. He commented on the inauguration consultation after the meeting, said:

This is a fresh beginning in Christian theology, theology not dictated by western theology, but by what has been disclosed and yet to be disclosed in the Bible, by lived and living experiences of people and nations of Asia. the main question is how to bring about this fundamental theological reorientation....The key to the question of how, the consultation concluded, was to be found in the “resources in Asia” - resources related to the lives of people, resources from cultures, religions, histories, in short, resources that reveal the struggles and aspirations of peoples and nations of Asia throughout the centuries. Such resources, abundant and varied, deeply rooted in Asian humanity hold the key to creative living theology in Asia. To affirm these resources as integral parts not only of Asians but of Asian Christians is the beginning of Christian theology in Asia.²

Shift the content of theological recourses to Asian world, advocated by PTCA, can be seen as a milestone for the doing of Asian theologies. Resource has a key role for theological construction. Resource not only determinates the character of a theology, the selection of resource inevitably involves interest of identity concerns. It is thus, shift of theological resources has its implication of the shift of the identity and the shift of Christian mission. The communiqué issued by the participants after the inauguration consultation in Kyoto was started with the following words: “Our aim...is to strengthen through concentrated joint efforts the formation of living theology and to facilitate the growth of a creative theological community in Asia.”³ In another words, the main concerns of the shift of theological resources are aimed at “living” theology and “creative” theological community in Asia. If we do not misunderstand the semantics of the sentences, the participants of the consultation were saying that theologies introduced to Asia at the time were “dead” theology, and the theological community in Asia was a “dispirited” one. Both of which were alien from the contexts and lives of people in Asia. The attempt to format living theologies with Asian resources, according to the communiqué, is to be done through common commitment to solidarity in the causes of peace and justice in the region,⁴ and thus, bring vitalities and creativities to Asian theologies and their theological communities.

Theological vitality and creativity have to do with cultural resources generated from the context. As the communiqué continue to explain: “The Asian Setting Despite the diverse and unique features of life in Asian countries, and their rich racial, linguistic and cultural

² C.S. Song, Fresh Beginning for Christian Theology, unpublished paper dated July 15, 1987
⁴ Ibid.,
heritages and historical backgrounds, Christians in this area have long looked to the West for leadership and for theological insights, neglecting their own resources in culture, history, and spiritual expression.” A movement for theological renewal and vitality in Asian context therefore has its significance of to reconfirm a living God who has always worked and is still working in Asia today. It is this living God who provides gifts of resources for discipleship and theological dynamics for mission. Doing theology in Asia is thus, crucial to act on this awareness and to be imaginative in cultivating the resources we have, so that there will be an authentic living theology firmly rooted in the concrete life of all Asian societies and histories.

**Doing Theologies with Asian Resources**

Taking local cultures as resource for theological construction is not new to theologians both western and third world. John Macquarrie, a Scottish-born theologian, philosopher and Anglican priest, for instance, listed culture as one of six formative factors of theology in his book entitled: “Principles of Christian Theology”, namely, Revelation, Scripture, Tradition, Experience, Culture and Reason. James Cone the pioneer of North American Black theologian has adopted Macquarrie’s 6 formative factors by substitution of Reason with Black history. However, the radical part of shift that black theology proposed about these formative factors is not the substitution of one of the 6 factors, but is the intentionally shift of the order of these 6 factors, in the original order John Macquarrie has arranged to have Revelation, Scripture and Tradition as first group of the formative factors, which according to his understanding are resources for theology providing messages and contents of theology, while the second group includes experiences, cultures and reason are considered instruments and mediums to interpret and mediate the messages generated from the first group. Based upon this framework, James Cone by moving the group of black experiences, history and cultures to the front position of its order, emphasis the black perceptions and point of view toward interpretation and discernment of revelation and scripture messages, has made black theology distinct from that of traditional white theologies in North America and as well Greek-Roman and scholastic trends of theologies.

Cultural resources thus change their role from simply a tool and medium for theological expressions to that of criteria and perspectives of interpretation. In another words, the theological efforts done by North American Black Theology have echoed Shoki Coe’s principle of Contextualization, to take North American black experiences and cultures

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5 Ibid.,
6 Ibid.,
7 See John Macquarrie, Principles of Christian Theology (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1966), p. 4
seriously and critically in a process of struggling to interpret and re-interpret the gospel messages for the liberation of black people in the oppressive situation of North America.

It is however, even in this stage of theological contextualization, the cultures and experiences of particular context are considered objects and not subject of theology. People and people’s experiences are treated either as innocent recipients of Gospel, to be judged and corrected, or as ill-treated object of traditional theologies, fighting to gain right and mastering different methods of theological interpretations. Theological framework remains unchanged and lives of people subjected. The PTCA to launch the movement on “Doing Theologies with Asian Resources” has decisively shifted the paradigm of Christian theology not only from western rational ways of discernment shaped by enlightenment but also from resources of Jewish-Greek and Roman Scenarios that has been endorsed by Christian tradition. Instead, this new paradigm of Asian theology has taken “Asian pagan” cultural resources not only as one of the formative factors for theology, but as essential source for theology to be done in Asia. The significance of this shift of theological resources declares not only a theological leap from Israel and Christian to Asia, but is also challenged to confess a living God who is at work since the beginning and throughout the history of Asia. No more “pagan” can be ascribed to the essence of any stuff that created from God.

**Doing Theologies in Asian Ways**

To advocate the principle of doing theology with Asian resources is in some degree to implicitly illustrate the theological conviction of many Asian theologians that “Identity determines theological resources”. Cultural resources are generated through people’s struggling with their surrounding world throughout their histories; they are not only representing peoples’ historical experiences and their identities, but also disclosing the particular concerns and hopes that people envisioned in the midst of their struggling. Cultural resource thus, is not to be limited to its narrow sense of those written materials or exhibited relics, but has to be understood in a broad sense to include socio-political, economic, ideological and peoples’ spiritual life, which have expressed in local literatures, folk tales, stories, songs, religious texts, symbols, images, and people’s movements etc.

Asian resources understood from this broad definition, have to do with particular contexts of people and their life struggling in the midst of their contexts. They are people’s experiences and wisdoms. Taking these resources as formative elements for theological construction, we are inevitably confronted with different ways of thinking and living. Resources determines methods, doing theology in Asia thus, has to do it in Asian ways.

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9 While enlightenment has stressed on reason, Asian theologies are emphasis more on intuition.
Generally speaking, Asian theological endeavors encounter a fundamental challenge from their twofold identities of being an Asian-Christian or a Christian-Asian. Traditional theologies accompanied by Christian mission equipped by the conversion strategies was introduced to Asian world with a theological presupposition of that being a Christian is to give up or to transform radically their Asian identity in order to inherit the so call Christian identity, which in fact but a western form of cultural expression for Christian religion. This presupposition was derived from the missionary mentality of western superiority, which considering western theologies as universal valid and that local cultures are pagan and sinful and is to be destroyed or replaced. The advocacy for doing theologies with Asian Resources is to deny this assumption of conversion concept, but is instead to enrich and enhance their original identity.

Based upon this self understanding of being a hyphenated identity Christian in Asia, theological methodologies developed in Asia to manage the local resources for their theological constructions, are spontaneously different from those developed from western traditions. The tasks of the mission of PTCA thus, is how to theologize the so call non-Christian cultural resources in Asia, and this is indeed become one of the major contributions that PTCA has offered to the theological world in past thirty years. Three significant methodologies were proposed from Asian theological colleagues to do theologies with Asian resources, they are all concentrated on drawing contributions from Asian cultural resources for a vital and relevant theology to be established in Asian context:

1. **Storytelling method:** proposed by C.S. Song who is advocating story theology. Song has considered that theology is story of people, which tells the passion and hope of people who struggles to understand the meaning of life through their faith in loving redemption of God. He argues that God has done redemptive works in creation through all cultures, even the so-called "non-Christian" cultures. Asian Christians are therefore obliged to articulate an Asian theology coming from the "womb" of Asia. And while Asian way of thinking is more intuitive and story oriented, which is different from western way of logic and rational, which have been influenced by the enlightenment. Stories are reflections of people’s experiences out of their suffering, anguish and hope, therefore they are the vital sources for theology to grasp the people’s struggling and hope. Song thus argues that stories and cultures are not something outside people, but they are people. Theology has to take people, women and men, their live and death, their agony and joy, despair and hope as its essence and purpose. Stories thus have been considered the most relevant resources for theological construction.

While taking story as resource for doing theology, C.S Song has also proposed a storytelling method for theological construction. He contends that telling stories involve storytellers’ identification and imagination. Story therefore acts to merge one’s identity.
Christian storytelling derived from their twofold identities, will bring together biblical stories and their cultural stories to critically weaving each other for a new story to be told with healing and hope.

2. **Cross textual reading method**, introduced by Archie Lee, the second dean of PTCA, who is also a scholar of Hebrew Scripture. Taking the plural religious contexts in Asia, Archie has argued that Christian scriptures in Asia cannot be read isolating from texts of other religious scriptures in the region. He therefore proposes the method of Cross Textual Reading of the Scriptures. Making Asian resources as text A, and biblical resources as text B, he suggests that a cross reading over these two texts for a mutual and critical illumination. This cross textual hermeneutic is also introduced to solve the problem of conflict between Asian identities with their new inheritance of Christian identity.

3. **Re-confessing method**: is a contribution from this writer. Re-confessing method considers that the nature of theology is no other than a critical reflection of one’s faith made to respond to a particular context that church and its believers confronted. Faith reflection to this writer, is a process of confession that involved critically both cultures and the Gospel elements. Gospel and culture are not separate entities, but are mingled together with each other. Epistemological speaking, Gospel can only be perceived through its cultural forms, their value structure and meaning orientation. Thus, there is no Gospel without cultures. Speaking from Christian view of Creation, all creatures are existing under the sovereignty of the creator God; it is therefore, no culture is exempted from the creative elements inherited from God’s creation acts, and thus no culture without gospel.

Taking this theological affirmation of “Gospel in the womb of cultures” into Asian contexts, where their cultures were considered “pagan” and being excluded from theological formation, which resulted in Christian mission the denial of Asian identity for Asian people once they are conversed to Christian religion, this writer argues that Christian mission is not to destroy but to enrich or enhance one’s identity through their faith in Jesus Christ. As all identities are shaped by cultures, while the Gospel element within the culture enacts a transcendent dynamics to free people, the identity struggling of being a hyphenated person, demands an inner struggling and integration within one’s inmost depths, in order to shape a new being out of this critical engagement of the two identities represented for cultural and religious (Gospel) traditions. Doing theology with native cultures in Asia thus involves identity reshaping and transformation and which I describe it as the process of re-confession.
Re-confessing method though is target on the same purpose with storytelling method and cross textual reading hermeneutics to solve the twofold identity problem facing Asian Christians and also to stress on the subjectivity of Asian cultures in the making of Christian theologies. It is however, re-confessing method has its intend to improve both storytelling method and Cross textual reading hermeneutics their defects. While storytelling method has proved risked arbitrary due to its lack of hermeneutic control, the cross textual reading method is confined to the reading of scripture texts, which are mostly past and descriptive.

All these theological endeavors labored by PTCA colleagues are based on a common concern of the identity issue that Asian Christian confronted after being evangelized to bear their Christian identity. A vital theology thus, has to do with the cultural values and the life struggling and hope of people in Asia. Therefore a theological reflection upon these cultural resources has become essential task for doing theologies in Asia.

**Changing Context of Asia and Its Challenges to the Doing Theologies with Asian Resources**

PTCA’s advocacy for “Doing theologies with Asian Resources” was an attempt to shift paradigm of theology to root it in Asian contexts and be characterized by Asian cultures and values. It was nevertheless, distinctive elements of Asia-ness were easier to be identified 30 year ago when the movement was launched. The rapid globalization process taken place to the world in last two three decades has driven the societies of Asia to the multicultural, pluralistic and interconnected world, Asian Resources are today inter-contextually and inter-culturally shaped. Besides, the changes of scenario of theological education implemented in Asia are rapid and significant: the growth of numbers of theological education institutes in the region, the quality upgraded, New initiatives created to share common theological concern, The growing

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11. ATESEA was formed with 16 member institutes half a century ago, it has now grown to 102 members, ATA has almost the same numbers of membership, not counting those independent theological institutes.

12. With hundred years’ labours of theological educators, theological education in many countries of Asia have been vastly upgraded with regard to their quality and quantity particularly over the last decades. Many theological schools initially established to train catechists and evangelist with minimum academic qualifications, are now upgraded to degrees awarding institutions. The qualifications for admission, appointment of faculty, teaching and practical training, library, dormitory facilities are carefully planned to assure quality in theological education.

13. The Conference for Asian Theologians (CATS) formed under the auspices of CCA and other regional theological education associations, providing fellowship for theological scholars and forum for theological exchanges within Asia region and beyond. The Institute for Advance Studies of Asian Theologies and Cultures (IASACT) created by the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia (UBCHEA), has acted to provide young theological scholars an open forum for exchanges and orientation. It is however, the CATS is operated more as a platform for fellowship. And the IASACT of United Board does not particular focus on orientation for contextual theological methodology.
positive attitudes of states toward theological education in different countries\textsuperscript{14}, cross boundaries cooperation and sharing of education resources among theological institutes from evangelical and ecumenical groups\textsuperscript{15}, Challenges from globalization versus quest for local authenticity\textsuperscript{16}, and Increasing financial threats for the long-term viability of institutions of theological education\textsuperscript{17}, are all important factors to be take into consideration for the future journey of Asia theologies and theological education.

As contexts change, their resources are developing, theological endeavors are unavoidably advanced. We are challenged and as well blessed to be commissioned a new task to carry the mission of doing theologies with resources in this complicate world of Asia today, that can bring people, their struggles and hope to the presence of God, and to reflect upon the situations that engaged the God-Human in action critically for a prophetic message to the world. (Thank you)

\textsuperscript{14} Theological associations such as ATESEA, Senate of Serempore and ATA have grown in their membership rapidly and work on accreditation services to their member schools. However, the accreditation done by these theological associations in Asia (except that of Senate of Serempore) are excluded from state recognition and public acceptance in all Asian countries. Nevertheless, This situation has been corrected recently in many Asian countries, as governments of Indonesia, Thailand and Taiwan have recently become open for different degrees of the seminaries or divinity schools to be registered in the state education systems and their degrees to be included in the list of academic recognition. If we add those countries which already allow theological degrees to be admitted and accredited by state authorities such as: Korea, Japan, Hong Kong and the Philippines, the map and landscape of theological education in Asia regarding this concern has already radically changed.

\textsuperscript{15} With the increased numbers of theological institutions in the continent, which are not only divided by the different traditions of their founding denominations, but often also split by the division which exists between the so called ecumenical and evangelical (Pentecostal) camps and the unique Asian phenomenon of ethnic and regional loyalties. The divisions have not only weakened the competence of theological schools to react to the challenges faced; they have also consumed the limited resources for theological education in this continent. Efforts to bring these institutions together to enhance theological education in the region and for sharing fellowship, resources and exchange of theological findings are crucial and really meaningful.

\textsuperscript{16} Traditional theological education which the Asian world imitated from western churches, in general, is a product of Enlightenment. It was predominantly perceived as academic discipline. Therefore, mastering theology as an academic discipline was considered as sufficient tool for managing the Christian communities and their affairs. The contextual orientation has challenged this presupposition, and theological education that is based on that premise even in the West. It calls for a program of theological education which equally takes into consideration the experience of human communities from where the candidates are recruited for training and are sent to serve. The globalization, a renewed contemporary force which tries to homogenize the human cultures and traditions has given further boost for the search for contextuality from the perspectives of retaining and preserving the local identity and priority. The Charismatic and Neo-evangelical Christian movements inspired from outside Asia as well as those originated within Asia have induced new forms of faith expressions and Christian community ethos posing new challenges to prevailing traditional theological education in Asia

\textsuperscript{17} There are increasing signs that several Asian institutions of theological education are facing a crisis in terms of their long-term financial viability as the culminating effects of global recession and rising prices of energy and electricity as well as limitations of churches to provide appropriate salaries for theological professors are affecting theological colleges in Asia