

Imagine the Real: Teaching with Asian Christian Art in the Theological Classroom

—Su-Chi Lin

Being both an educator of theology and art coming from an Asian context, this essay asks the questions from my social-cultural position: How do women artists make God visible in their Asian/North American cultural contexts? In what ways can the theological imagination of Asian Christian art enhance our understanding of the reality of the world?¹ These questions are central to the pedagogy developed for “Christian Art of Asia”, a medium level course offered to M.A. and M.Div. students at the Graduate Theological Union (GTU) in Berkeley.² During my journey of integrating art into the theological classroom at GTU, which started in 2012, I have learned various lessons from my professors and peers. Their diverse nationalities and denominational backgrounds have taught me about the unique ways in which using art in the classroom can serve the function of breaking boundaries and speaking the prophetic voice of freedom and liberation. In this process, both instructors and students discover that engaging the arts collectively in a learning community could be a powerful way to practice theology. This presence can be cultivated in the classroom by knowing the different cultural heritages of the “other” through our imagination.³ To this end, the present essay examines a practical application of theological aesthetics in relation to the prophetic voice of Asian Christian art in global settings of education and faith formation. The intersection of art and social justice is the main concern during the process of perception, translation, and appropriation of biblical messages.⁴ The aim of this essay is to demonstrate that Asian Christian art could be an alternative approach to pastoral ministry, while fostering contemplative and pedagogical possibilities for social transformation.

An undeniable fact is that the art curriculum in theological education at seminary or church settings continues to evolve as a newly developed field. In thinking about teaching with the visual arts in the ministry, we are reminded that the movement of iconoclasm in early church history has led people to be cautious and

1 The term “Christian art” is defined by two categories: 1) content, and 2) how well the artist has suited the vehicle to the message. See Francis A. Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible: Two Essays* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 64. Asian Christian art discussed in this essay reflects the Asian artist’s worldview that can be seen as ultimately in terms of Scripture and deals with religious themes.

2 A whole semester’s class, based on my research topic on art and interculturalism, is under the supervision of Dr. Eduardo C. Fernández, S.J. on mission study

3 Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts and Social Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), 3.

4 For “theological aesthetics,” the Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-88) has articulated a more explicitly “theological aesthetics” that “grounds the theological enterprise in Christian worship, spirituality and contemplation of the Beauty and Glory of the Lord. Balthasar draws on rich resources of the Christian mystical tradition with emphasis on the contemplation of the Divine Beauty as the heart of Christian faith and theology.” Orlando O. Espin and James B. Nickoloff eds., *An Introductory Dictionary of Theology and Religious Studies* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2007), 17.



suspicious with the uses of images in the church. Theologians are afraid that certain Christian images may limit the viewer's imagination in pure worship. Therefore, the result seems to be twofold: either they lead us closer to the truth of God, or away from it. How might the contemplation of Asian Christian art influence our theological imagination in the growth or hindrance of faith in the present context? Nowhere is this tension in how cultures connect seen more sharply than in Asian Christian art, with both global and local aspects that can keep diverse viewpoints together. It is my understanding that doing theology is vital in a dialogue with different social-historical contexts, and this goal could be successfully accomplished by an engagement both with the theological imagination of the visual arts and with the process of art-making. Theological imagination "opens up the realm of alternative ways of being in the world, creating new possibilities for human community."⁵ Through images, memories, and narratives, we explore theological themes regarding beauty and divinity, humanity and suffering. Unfortunately, a stereotyped understanding of Asian Christian art still discloses a notable bias—one which portrays an Asia imagined as a homogenous, oriental, and distant land, rather than seeing it as an invitation for a renewed creativity.⁶ This situation is lamentable, since Asian Christian art and aesthetics, with its intersection between various religious cultures and Eastern wisdom, can illuminate the contextualized expression of Christian faith.

In this essay, I deploy a model of "transcultural mediation" as a course methodology to analyze the many ways Asian Christian art has invited viewers to enter a transcultural dialogue in a diverse learning community.⁷ This framework helps students identify the theological principles in the arts as well as the intercultural exchange for building up a foundation for faith formation. I will first of all demonstrate this interpretive framework for inviting participants to actively engage in an exercise of embodied practice through visual arts in the class. This transformative pedagogy, involved in approaching this particular cultural contact, may enter into an on-going dialogue with other types of cultural contact between other cultures. Secondly, I will present an intercultural aesthetic conversation between visual arts, theology, and social transformation, primarily through sensory responses to the images made by Wang Jen-wen (王貞文) and Chris Chou (周蘭惠). In this session on Christian art in contemporary Taiwan, I create a meeting space of different artistic expressions so as to learn and collaborate with students and to expand our existing insights as we encounter the Christian faith in light of Eastern cultures and wisdom. Throughout the semester, students will facilitate a deep practice for faith formation through a self-chosen creative discipline including visual art, music, or dance from pan Asia. This model introduces avenues for the awareness of each other's different social-cultural locations that students may use to share the creative work they have developed over the semester.

Transcultural Framework for Faith Formation

A model of "transcultural mediation" provides us an interpretive framework to explore the role of social transformation in the intersection between Asian visual cultures and Western Christian iconography. I adopt this idea in perceiving contemporary Asian Christian art as the making of a new medium, which is based on a received old medium from different cultures. We will see that the ambiguity as a signifier of identity correlates Asian cultures and Christian iconography into a "hybrid" form of art.⁸ In the field of theological education, which is dominated by the uses of Western religious paintings for building faith reflection, the theological

5 Judith A. Berling, *Understanding Other Religious Worlds: A Guide for Interreligious Education* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 27.

6 For instance, the early missionaries use Christian paintings in local styles for the propagation of the Gospel message. These pre-existing vocabularies from both Western and Chinese artistic traditions have been used freely in the conception of contemporary Asian Christian art selected and discussed in this essay.

7 Astrid Erll, "Circulating Art and Material Culture," in *Mediating Netherlandish Art and Material Culture in Asia*, ed. Thomas DaCosta Kaumann and Michael North (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University, 2014), 311.

8 Erll, "Circulating Art and Material Culture," 325.



engagement with Asian Christian art gives viewers the opportunity to embrace the “other” and make room for hospitality. This transcultural perspective of interpretation thus helps theological educators to confront the challenges of how different sorts of visual elements and aesthetic experiences have been transformed into hybrid forms of Asian Christian art. Due to the fact that culture is fundamentally transcultural and Christian faith is essentially diverse, it is important to acknowledge that Christian art developed through several centuries is a means of creating a space for dialogue with different cultures and traditions. Christian art is *already* hybrid. But we may still have questions: To what extent is the style, concept or aesthetics of Asian art used with integrity by Christian artists for the sake of ministry? In our cases, two women artists’ works and their theological imaginations bring insights for enriching the expression of Christian aesthetics, while constructing a transformative and inclusive dimension of Asian Christian art and aesthetics.

It is worth noticing that theological aesthetics presents an effective methodology for interlacing engagement of Christian iconography, Asian cultures and personal experiences in the context of theological education. In other words, the theological aesthetics and imagination provided by the images takes faith experiences of the community seriously while understanding the capacity this very art has to help viewers make sense of reality. The transformative power of “imaging” thus functions significantly in the process of an aesthetic perception of the representation of the divine image.⁹ In my plan of using Asian Christian art in the faith formation session, students are, first of all, invited to name the present context of their lives in response to these particular topics for attention through sensory response to the images.¹⁰ The collective experiences of the perception of the images in the classroom are central to a contemplative moment of freely sharing feelings or insights about these images. By doing so, the visual arts allow the participants in the class exercises to retrieve a significant experience from their personal contexts and invite them to respond to the Christian message. The participants/viewers bring insights from the Christian story and vision into the perception of the work and appropriate the story to their lives in a dialogue with one’s own experiences of the past and future. The story of salvation about God’s love and mercy to the Israelites becomes not only Asian artists’ stories and visions but also *our* stories and visions for imagining the kingdom of God. Therefore, the bigger picture of God’s story/vision can be made present in this way of disclosure, and the students can bring their own stories and visions to reflect upon the images, or, to question and challenge what is being presented.

Departing from this transcultural perspective, the liminal space in two Taiwanese women artists’ works is created by the interaction between Taiwanese cultures and Christian iconography. This ongoing process of a joined conversation intertwines with social-historical commitments, reflecting an inclusive vision of a lived Taiwanese Christian faith in a non-biblical world. Through the power of redemption accomplished with Divine Beauty, Truth, and Goodness—manifested in the arts as contextually rooted in the Asian culture—we can thus imagine and envision a kingdom of God that actively partakes in social transformation.¹¹ By using the lens of social justice in Asian/North American contexts, our theological reflections through aesthetic perceptions of two artists’ work bring Asian Christian art and aesthetics from the margins into the center of feminist theological reflection, presenting a much needed effort toward a better understanding of women’s faith and spirituality in the world today. The forms and functions of these cultural objects/images not only meet a congenial aesthetics of the present context of Asia but also challenge the faith community in the process of adaptation. By fostering dialogue between the viewers’ faith experiences and images shaped by cul-

9 Japanese artist Megumi Yoshida uses the word “imaging” as a methodology to restore a holistic approach of doing theology. Megumi Yoshida, “Imaging as Theological Methodology: From Logo-centric to Holistic Approach,” In *God’s Image* 28, no. 4 (Dec. 2009): 36-37.

10 Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing Our Story and Vision* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 214.

11 John W. Gruchy, *Christianity, Art, and Transformation: The Theological Aesthetics in the Struggle for Justice* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001), 248.



tures today, women artists and theologians depict biblical themes with visual imagination, bringing the field of theological aesthetics into Asian/North American perspectives.

Wang Gen-wen's *Christ the Bread of Life*

Wang blends Christian motifs of sharing Holy Communion and an Asian women's context successfully by putting Christ sitting among a group of female disciples. In a watercolor entitled *Christ the Bread of Life* (Fig.1), Christ and the four female disciples are seated in a semi-circle around a dining table. Disciples receive the bread of life through sharing a meal with Christ himself. In the center of the table, a chalice, several small cups of wine and a plate of bread are represented clearly, signifying Christ's body and blood of eternal life. Some natural motifs of leaves and strokes in a dark green background seem to represent the artist's struggles in life, but in the foreground, two white doves suggest the abundance of joy and hope flowing out from this warm and hospitable environment. This composition is arranged to evoke the viewer's engagement with the theme of Jesus' last meal with the twelve disciples, which appears frequently in the masterpieces of religious art in the West. In looking at Wang's art with explicit Christian themes, the viewer is attracted to the example of a translation model of inculturation. The body of Christ is incarnated in peoples of different genders and ethnicities.



Fig. 1, Wang Gen-wen, *Christ the Bread of Life*, watercolor, 2013. Taiwan.

Born in 1965 in Taipei and growing up in Chia-yi, Wang Jen-wen studied for her Ph.D. in theology at Kirchliche Hochschule Bethel in Germany, and now is a professor who teaches Church History and Christian Worship at Tainan Graduate School of Theology in Tainan, Taiwan. As both a church historian and a woman pastor, Wang writes extensively on criticisms of Christianity and Christian literatures. Since 1994, Wang has used the native Taiwanese language, conspicuously overlooked and dismissed, to write poetry, prose, and fiction while studying theology in Germany.¹² Wang's advocacy for preserving Taiwanese women's identity is obvious in her purposeful uses of vernacular language in her many literary works. In 2013, Wang was diagnosed with cancer in a serious situation. Through the process of a series of surgeries and chemical treatments, Wang started to use ink pen and watercolor to make some scribbles and drawings in her pocket notebooks. Wang writes, "Many things not easy to be understood in life have started to settle down through the process of drawing; then, my life became clear with transparency."¹³ Undoubtedly, visual art has continuously opened up new ways for Wang's personal process of healing. As being intrinsic to healing rituals in many parts of the world, word and image have also proved to be ways to record and rediscover the artist's mind and thoughts in her daily practices of prayer and spirituality. This intimate watercolor work faithfully illustrates how Wang's wounded spirit and flesh experience God's providence and protection in the artist's daily pain and suffering.

¹² In 2006, Wang Jen-wen published her first Christian novel *Angel*, and her poetry *Honey Lemon Tea* in 2015. Wang is now regarded as one of the significant Christian writers in Taiwan.

¹³ Wen-hai Lin and Song-un Lo, eds., *Creation is Based on the Christian Faith: An Attempt of Taiwanese Christian Art* (Taichung: Tung-Hai University Art Gallery, 2015), 66.



Interestingly, the visual appropriation of this famous scene of Western church painting into Wang's living reality reflects the artist's awareness of her feminist consciousness and suffering body. The image communicates to the viewer the theological meaning of Christ's hospitality to the suffering, stressing a longing for a deep communion with the Holy One from a woman disciple's perspective. Wang's awareness of her spiritual hunger for Christ's love is recorded in her words and images: The bread of life is Christ himself, not something else, but eternal life.¹⁴ Christ's broken body for His disciples in a liberating and life-affirming spirituality proves to be a source of strength for the artist's broken body and wounded spirit. Wang transposes the composition and atmosphere into her much more subjective style, relating them to her personal narratives in a contemporary Asian women's context. Gender consciousness is definitely one of the expressions, and through it, female subjectivity and spirituality are communicated vividly by its explicit depiction of female discipleship. The viewer is inspired to witness Jesus Christ through an Asian woman's eyes through the most intimate illustrations of the artist's life situation, that is, Christ is the one who empties Himself like the broken bread of life for those who are in need. The aspirations of life, the hope for peace and the gratitude for the graciousness of God are central to the artist's works as well as human existence in a broader cross-cultural context.

Meanwhile, the reinterpretation of the classical iconography of the Holy Communion invites multiple meanings and reinterpretations of those meanings. This is an example of how the artist interprets the great art of the past by embracing the heritage of Renaissance art of the Golden Age. The great art of the past becomes an incomparably precious heritage of meaning for cultural contact and exchange.¹⁵ Wang depicts a female scene of fellowship through experimenting with this classical motif of Western Christian art. Wang's juxtaposition of Christ's image with female disciples echoes C.S. Song's story theology, in which Asian people's stories of old and new, past and present are the abundant sources for developing contextual theology.¹⁶ As an Asian woman theologian, writer and artist, Wang introduces viewers to a theological perception of Western art and aesthetics from an Asian feminist perspective. Wang's feminist imagery invites us to experience the meaning of the arts through the "third eye," that is, the eye of the mind, through an Asian women's interpretation of the vision of an invisible God.¹⁷ Christ offers those who are hungry for love and healing His abundant life of eternity. Wang's female iconography offers us an example of religious art that not only strengthens a believer's faith but also challenges the faith. Theological engagement with the art can be a process of struggling against a dehumanizing status quo. Wang's image speaks to each of God's children and proclaims women's solidarity in the midst of Asia. The depiction of female discipleship not only honors the embodied nature of being a woman with a sense of self-worth but also urges us to pay attention to our bodies and environments with the possibility of opening ourselves to God through our personal reflections.



Fig. 2, Wang Gen-wen, *The Wound is a Fern Leaf*, watercolor, 2013. Taiwan.

¹⁴ Ibid, 70.

¹⁵ See Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Kung's article in *Art and the Question of Meaning* (1981) selected in *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, ed. Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2005), 257.

¹⁶ Choan-seng Song, *Tell Us Our Names: Story Theology from an Asian Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 57.

¹⁷ The term "third eye" is derived from Buddhism. According to the Greatest Japanese Zen master Daisetz Suzuki: In Zen Buddhism, we need to "open a third eye to the hitherto unheard-of region shut away from us through our own ignorance." Choan-seng Song, *Third-eye Theology: Theology in Formation in Asian Settings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 26-27.



A concrete example of depicting the female body is shown in another of Wang's watercolor works entitled, *The Wound is a Fern Leaf* (Fig. 2). The broken body is depicted as having the potential to manifest God's presence to the viewer in realms of life, opening new eyes of compassion within oneself and others. This intimate work shows a half-length nude female body with her torso as a symbol of a tree. The symbol of nature is rooted in this woman's identity and in her experiences of pain and suffering. Looking closely, the nude female with closed eyes seems to sink in her thoughts. Out of her shaven head and shoulders grow lots of small branches, with leaves growing close to the body, which might be associated with the growth of her hair. A round shape of darkness is on the center of her chest. As suggested by the title, this dark, oval shape of a wound in the woman's chest is a fern leaf that grows out of her distorted body. However, the woman's broken body as a metaphor of a fern signifies the woman's wound that will grow up freely, though hidden in the darkness.¹⁸ Wang develops her work out of her personal narratives of bodily trauma and pain and their influences on the artist's self-identity as a woman. But more than this, the female body conveys spirituality through the distortion resulting from the physical suffering and frailty that denote human finitude. The female nude body as a tree becomes the physical site of struggling and anxiety, connecting humanity and divinity through this experience of trauma. The imagery of a female wounded body as a leaf communicates concepts of self-worth as well as the artist's longing for a harmonious relationship with self and others. The metaphor of leaves can be interpreted as expressing the artist's longing for freedom to be connected with the lives of God's creatures. Wang's exaggerated depiction of the body featured as a leaf nourished by the water of life offers the viewer an opportunity to transcend the present world to eternity.

Christ's hospitality exemplifies in Wang's works that Asian Christian art resists being understood as merely the appropriation of motifs of Western Christianity. The truth-claim of the work, emerging from the artist's faith reflection on her trauma experiences, transcends the viewer's personal taste and subjectivity, and leads our theological perception into the depths of Christ's mystery. Wang's hybrid artworks speak to audiences across the boundary of East and West, recognizing the transformative power of the imagery: Jesus came and died for all peoples, no matter how different their gender and ethnicity, and will bring life and hope when He comes again. We see that Jesus is among female disciples in the scene of Holy Communion, transforming into the symbol and assurance of Asian women's hope and salvation.

Chris Chou's *Six Jars*

Compared to Wang's figurative painting with the theme of the Lord's last supper, Chou's depiction of feasting conveys strong dynamics through its abstract illustrations of biblical narratives. Born in Taipei, Taiwan in 1963, Chris Chou moved to the U.S. in 1991 to pursue her career as a painter, and received her MA degree in fine arts at Boston University, Massachusetts. Chou has studied art in Taiwan, Hawaii, New York and Boston, was awarded residencies at several artist colonies and received the Guggenheim Fellow Award in 2007. Chou is currently living and working as a full time artist in Boston. For Chou, drawing has been a way of living just like breathing is necessary for sustaining life. Making art in an abstract form becomes a sufficient visual language of recording the artist's response to God's grace experienced in her daily life. In her oil paintings with organic, dynamic patterns, Chou finds in natural symbols such as dots and circles sufficient ways to express the artist's praise to the truth, goodness, and beauty of God's creation.

Chou's *Six Jars* (Fig. 3) depicts a biblical theme of feasting in abstract forms of dots and circles yet with exquisite colors and strokes. The energetic forms and colors invite the viewer to participate in a world of biblical narrative where the wedding in Cana of Galilee takes place joyfully. Looking closely, the simple composition

¹⁸ See Wang's poem "The Wound is a Fern Leaf" in Lin and Lo, eds., *Creation is Based on the Christian Faith*, 70.





Fig. 3, Chris Chou, *Six Jars*, oil painting, 2006. Boston.

of the work is primitive, but not in an ordinary form. Six ovals lie side by side in front of the viewer's eyes. These oval shapes could be symbols of eggs, life itself, echoing the celebration and rejoicing in this wedding feast of love. Each organic shape is arranged in the composition of a bird's eye view, occupying all of the pictorial space and the viewer's sights. These six organic circles are the six magic stone water jars which witness the miracle story of Jesus turning water into wine. How good it tastes, and what a surprise it is to all the guests at the wedding of Cana! Colors in her works are exceptionally gorgeous and lively, creating a visual effect which demands from the viewer a sensory response. A joyful spirit is hidden inside these primal colors of bright oranges, reds, yellows, blues, and greens.

As one observes these egg-like circles more closely, one sees, in the varieties of dots and circles, that each has a different design. It could be a seed that is full of life energy, or the heavenly bread that comes from above with unknown power to nourish humanity. The design for the dot in the artist's work is inspired by the biblical concept of manna, which tastes like a wafer made with honey. The viewer tastes God's amazing grace by

encountering these manna-like dots. Each dot speaks to the viewer about who God is and how the grace of God is worthy to be tasted. The image comes alive to interact with the viewer, satisfying the viewer's hunger for fellowship with God. These basic, structural and non-objective elements of dots and circles as artistic symbols transcend all reality.¹⁹ The feast of love with an abundance of food and drink reminds viewers of God's fruitful supplies from generation to generation. Viewers smell the fragrance of good wine and taste the sweetness of God's mercy through luxurious colors and the simple designs of dots and circles.

As a woman artist in an Asian American context, Chou's Asian cultural background is expressed both implicitly and explicitly in her works. For example, these circles in *Six Jars*, each with a unique pattern, look like flowers of love in their full bloom. The feminine colors and exquisite strokes permeate the organic symbol and composition of the work. If we notice carefully, two of them have traditional Chinese Characters *Shi* (囍) on the top. *Shi* means "double joy" in the context of Chinese language, conveying a joyful attitude toward life. Through incorporating visual elements of Chinese ideogram into the fusion of the biblical narratives and the artist's Chinese heritage, Chou's universal symbols of dots and circles lead the viewer to enter the depth of human spirituality and a life of solidarity in the context of Asia. Through these organic symbols and images found in her everyday life, Chou's artworks suggest a traditional Asian form of harmony between nature and humanity with warm affection.

As proposed by Ye Lang, the traditional Chinese aesthetics is located in the world of idea-image, the interfusion between feeling and scene.²⁰ Human feeling and the scene cannot be understood as separate from each other but as a harmonious unification. Chou's visual imagination is a significant way to reflect her consciousness of "Asianness" by fusing Chinese ideogram and universal symbols of dots and circles in expressing the

¹⁹ Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen eds., *Theological Aesthetics*, 213.

²⁰ The term "idea-image" (yi-xiang, 意象) refers to feeling (yi, 意) and scene (xiang, 象). Ye Lang, "Several Inspirations from Traditional Chinese Aesthetics," in *Asian Aesthetics*, ed. by Ken-ichi Sasaki (Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2010), 113.



artist's theological thinking. Likewise, it is a means to sense the echoes and responses of humanity reflected by the artist's spirituality and to take action to respond to the message of God. Chou's energetic symbols incorporated from her cultural background and living reality help us to see God's work of creation and salvation, that is, the meaning of Christ's love and hospitality and the Holy Spirit's amazing work, especially through an Asian woman's heart. In this regard, the idea of *Tian-ren He-i*—the continuity between heaven and the human world—has deeply permeated Chou's organic form of iconography. The harmony of the God-human relationship in the East is vividly reflected in its organic composition. Despite the Western techniques of oil painting and abstract form, the Chinese ideogram and shifting the perspective of a bird's eye view echo the artistic and religious tradition in Chinese landscape ink painting. Asian people's mentality and intuition should not be neglected while considering Asian women's spirituality and iconography as manifested in these creative images. For Chou as an Asian female artist, the notion and vision of God come to be associated more with intuition than with reason.²¹ Chou's Christian art and aesthetics demonstrate to us an example of how Christian faith's monotheistic epistemology is negotiated by the artist's Asian cultural and religious heritages.

On a closer look at another work entitled *153 Fishes* (Fig. 4), the Chinese ideograms are clearly depicted on the left-hand side of the work against the blue background. In the center of the work is a big, oval shape, signifying the fisher's net with lots of symbols and numbers inside. Again, on the right-hand side of the work, six circles with egg-like shape are full of life energy or like the heavenly bread that comes from above. A whole scene of the biblical narrative about Jesus' calling His disciples is transformed through visual languages of dots and circles into a vivid contemporary world. The organic elements of dots and circles and biblical symbol of manna are blended together, creating an Asian aesthetic experience of harmony in Chou's hybrid art and transcending the physical world to the presence of divine. The inclusive and transformative theme of the feast suggests the idea of invitation, as the Holy one invites each of us to experience His grace in Christian taste and aesthetics.²² Art as a means of grace bridges cultural boundaries for a diverse faith community to learn to transmit and share the "languages" of differing tastes, so that the basic perception of the Beautiful One can begin to be shared. The conflation of the biblical narrative and the contemporary world in Chou's universal symbols of dots and circles serve as abstract expression of an inclusive vision of the artist's life and spirituality.



Fig. 4, Chris Chou, *153 Fishes*, oil painting, 2006. Boston.

In summary, both artists represent the transformative dimension of the divine image in different ways. Either in the figurative form of the Lord's table or the abstract illustrations of the biblical manna, we have reflected on the contextualization of Asian Christian iconography through discussing how social transformation functions in the intersection between Christian motifs and Asian worldviews. Art as a text for visual theology is an invaluable source to unveil to the viewer not only the artist's internal landscapes of the heart and mind but

²¹ Song, *Third-eye Theology*, 62.

²² Frank Burch Brown asserts that the most useful Christian exercise of taste is to cultivate "ecumenical taste," that is, to enjoy and judge different artistic and aesthetic dimensions of life and worship that contribute to our spiritual growth in an act of love. Frank Burch Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste: Aesthetics in Religious Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 12.

also the truth, goodness, and beauty of God. Taiwanese women's iconography manifests Christ's hospitality in a present context and is subversive to a stereotyped understanding of Asian Christian art in a notable bias. The portrayal of the divine symbols and stories from Asian/North American perspectives create an intimate space for inviting the viewer to experience a liberated moment of creative tension, shown through a joined conversation of the biblical and contemporary world.

Conclusion

This essay has employed a transcultural framework for developing a theological reflection in a learning community. Our engagement with Asian Christian art has led us to see the richness of the aesthetic experiences from multiple perspectives of appropriation. Images from the "other" cultures not only come alive to interact with and speak to the viewer but also look directly to the viewer and demand a reply. For a theological educator, one can be aware of how the viewers' reception of the images and personal stories are relating to the artist's works. How reality is constructed, created, and expressed in these images? What questions on intercultural exchange the images are eliciting, and how the images invite us to reflect on what is both common and unique in our human experiences? In both artists' works, we see that the biblical iconography, Asian cultures, and aesthetic traditions are intertwined in ways that evolve into a novel worldview of Asian Christian art emanating from this process of searching multiple perspectives. The critical hybrid form of Asian Christian art has the ability to move beyond the image and point to the viewer a new direction to comprehend the wholeness of the Beautiful One. As Alejandro Garcia-Rivera proposes, the theological imagination moves the human heart toward the good and true.²³ The viewers are willing to open experience to the mysterious and the strange that can move us to journey where we have never been. Both women artists' works build upon the ambiguity of visual representation to reinterpret traditional Christian art forms and aesthetics, inviting the viewers' revision to their present stories and cultural contexts in light of the kingdom of God. The idea of using art in the theological studies classroom captures the goal of Christian formation so we have the ability to both see the visible world and yet try to see the Holy.

Theological imagination is a way of pedagogy for social transformation and can be transported to any classroom that is seeking to find creative ways of understanding our human condition and responsibility in a world that is increasingly inviting more cultural awareness. This essay approaches both theological education and pastoral ministry by demonstrating the use of contemporary Asian Christian art in a contemplative mode of teaching and research in global settings. Through our engagement with these art forms, traditions, cultures, and our personal experiences we can see how images are intimately interwoven in the cultural and religious fabric of our lives. Images challenge viewers to name our present situations, confront our personal story in light of the faith community's vision, and finally, lead us to make decisions to respond in action. One of the powers images have is to invite us to imagine the reality through the aesthetic perception of Christ's hospitality, such as is the case with the inclusive vision of Asian Christian art. Perceiving Asian/North American artists works becomes a process of sharing cultural backgrounds and life experiences in which people and churches from different parts of the world are bound together.²⁴ Both aspects of local and global in Asian Christian art enable viewers to examine the creative process of cultural exchange and imagine the reality of the world.

23 Alejandro Garcia-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press: 1999), 24.

24 Kenneth McGuire, Eduardo Fernández and Anne Hansen, *Culture-Sensitive Ministry: Helpful Strategies for Pastoral Ministers* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2010), 15.





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