

FRONTIERS IN ASIAN
CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY:
EMERGING TRENDS.
ED. R.S. SUBIRTHARAJAH
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Chapter 12

Mothers and Daughters, Writers and Fighters

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Most Asians inhabit two worlds: their indigenous cultural world, with its own distinctive stories and symbols into which they are born, and the cultural world of Western Christianity into which they are transplanted. In a personal and theological autobiography reproduced here, a Hong Kong feminist theologian recalls her personal history and the experience of inheriting two worlds—Chinese and Christian—and how it enabled her to expand her Christian identity and work out a more inclusive theology.

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Source: *Inheriting Our Mothers' Gardens: Feminist Theology in Third World Perspective*, Letty M. Russell et al., eds. (Louisville: Westminster Press, 1988).

I was born in Hong Kong on the twenty-third of March, according to the Chinese lunar calendar. On this day, many Chinese in the coastal provinces of China celebrate the birthday of Mazu, the goddess who protects fisherpeople, seafarers, and maritime merchants. This is also a festive day for my family, for it is the only day in the year that my father will take a day off and go to offer thanksgiving in the temple.

I am the third child of a family of seven children. My mother gave birth to five girls before two sons came at last. Because of the patriarchal and patrilineal structure of the Chinese family, to produce a male heir used to be the most important

responsibility of women in marriage. My parents had been waiting for twelve years before the sons were born, and, as can be expected, the boys were given most of the attention. From my early childhood, I questioned the legitimacy of a social system that does not treat boys and girls equally.

My mother is tall and thin but very strong. When we were young, we once moved into a new building where the water supply had not yet been adequately installed. To fetch water for the whole family, every day my mother carried two big tins full of water and slowly climbed up seven flights of stairs. This vivid image of her is lodged in my mind. Like many Chinese women of her age, she is a devout follower of folk Buddhist religion. When the moon waxes and wanes, she will offer prayers and thanksgiving sacrifices, and she also makes offerings to the ancestors. When I became a Christian in my teens, my mother did not object to my going to church. I thought that she must have found something important in her religious life.

My mother-in-law belongs to an ethnic group called the Kejia, whose women have a reputation of being powerful and independent. Contrary to the prevailing practice, the Kejia women seldom had their feet bound, since many of them had to work in the field. My mother-in-law came from a poor family and was betrothed to her husband as a child. Without learning how to read and write, she has taught herself to make all kinds of things, and her creativity often surprises me. When she lived with us in Hong Kong, she would grow many different vegetables in our backyard during the summer season. Juicy red tomatoes, fleshy white cabbages, and green Dutch beans made our garden look gorgeous. Our little daughter used to help her in watering plants and plucking weeds.

My mother-in-law does not follow any particular religious practice, but she has a profound trust in life and an unfailing spirit to struggle for survival. I have always admired people like my two mothers, who had very limited life chances yet have tried to live with dignity and integrity and to share whatever they have with others. The stories of these women have seldom been told, and their lives easily fall into oblivion. Nonetheless, it is these women who pass the wisdom of the human race from generation to generation and who provide the context of life for others. The stories of my mothers drive home to me a very precious lesson: as women living in a patriarchal cultural system, they are oppressed by men, but, never content to be treated as victims, they have struggled against the forces that seek to limit them and circumscribe their power.

My Spiritual Foremothers

When I was twelve, one of our neighbors took me to the worship service at an Anglican church. This church is one of two churches in Hong Kong built in a Chinese style, with Christian symbols and motifs embodied in Chinese architecture. I grew to like the liturgical worship, the music, and the fellowship. The vicar of the church was Deacon Huang Xianyun, who was later officially ordained as one of the two women priests in the worldwide Anglican Communion in 1971. Rev. Huang has been a strong role model for me, and her life exemplifies that women can serve the church just as men do. Rev. Huang has always preached that men and women are created equal before God, and she has encouraged women to develop their potential. Because of her influence, many women in our church volunteered to do various

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kinds of ministry. As a high-school girl, I used to accompany them in visiting the sick and calling on those old people who were too weak to come to church. Some of these women volunteers were widows; a few were rich; others came from poor and middle-class backgrounds. Their dedication to others in ministering to the needy helped me to see glimpses of the Divine and sustained me through many doubts and uncertainties.

Just like these women of my church, other Chinese women joined the Christian community in search of an alternative vision of society and human relationships. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, women who joined the church were poor and lower-class; the gentry and the upper-class families would not allow their wives and daughters to follow a foreign religion. To read the Bible and the catechism, these illiterate women had to be taught how to read. Bible-women were employed to translate for the missionaries and to do the home visitations. As the church became involved in social reforms, some of the Christian women participated in literacy campaigns and the antifootbinding movement and organized health-care programs and women's associations.

These activities allowed women to come together to talk about their problems and to find ways and means to tackle them. Amid all the changes in modern China, these women have tried to work for the benefit of women and contribute to society. Like other women in third-world churches, they bear witness to a faith that empowers people to break through silence and move to action. Although many of their names have been lost in history, they are my spiritual foremothers in loving memory.

Between the Two Worlds: As Chinese and as Christian

My double inheritance from my own mothers and my spiritual foremothers has raised a serious question for me: What is the connection between the lives of simple folk like my mothers and Christianity? I have long rejected the arrogance that "outside the church, there is no salvation," for it means condemning my ancestors, mothers, nieces, and nephews. In fact, in the long history of China's encounter with Christianity, the Christian population in China has scarcely exceeded one half of one percent. As a tiny minority, we live among our people in the world's most populous country, which has a long history and civilization. China not only challenges any presumptuous "universal" salvation history but also presents a world of thought, language, art, and philosophy radically different from the Christian tradition. As Chinese Christians, we have been in constant dialogue with this rich cultural heritage, long before the term "religious dialogue" was coined.

But to claim that we are both Chinese and Christian is not an easy matter; in the view of many Chinese, this claim is simply implausible. Chinese identity is defined by participation in a complicated cultural matrix of social behavior, rites, and human relationships, while Christianity is often perceived to be bound up with Western philosophy, liturgy, and cultural symbols.¹ Moreover, Christianity came to China together with the expansion of Western military aggression. We people of Hong Kong are painstakingly aware that in the first unequal treaty between China and the West, Hong Kong was ceded to the British, and at the same time missionaries were allowed to preach at China's treaty ports.

With such a heavy historical burden on our shoulders, we Chinese Christians have to vindicate ourselves to our own people: we are not the instruments of foreign aggressors, nor do we share the same religion as the oppressors. In the 1920s, religious leaders in China began the process of the indigenization of the church, so that Chinese Christians would eventually assume the tasks of self-propagation, self-support, and self-government. Some Chinese theologians at that time believed that Christianity could be the social basis for the revitalization of China. Others believed that Christianity could be a revolutionary force that would lead to social changes.

But as Chinese women, we are much more concerned about how Christianity is indigenized into the Chinese culture. The Confucian tradition has been vehemently criticized in China's recent past as advocating hierarchical social relations, strict separation between the sexes, and a backward-looking worldview. The androcentric moral teachings have been castigated as undergirding the conservative inertia of keeping China feudal and patriarchal.² At the same time, Christianity has been subjected to vigorous dissection and in-depth analyses to expose its dualistic tendency and patriarchal bias.³ For some time, Chinese women have taken comfort in knowing that Jesus advocated equality of the sexes, in spite of the Jewish patriarchal custom, and that Paul's teachings on women were limited by the cultural conditions of his time.⁴ But today, Jewish feminists caution us against anti-Semitic prejudices, and feminist biblical scholars argue that Paul's bias against women took place in a much wider process of patriarchalization of the early church.⁵

In a dazzling way, there is a "shaking of the foundations" on both sides, and we are confronted with a double culture shock. There is no easy path we can follow. As one Chinese poet says, "The road is long and tortuous, we have to search above and below."⁶ Out of this most trying experience, we have come to face both our cultural heritage and the Christian tradition with courage and hope, that we may find new ways to do theology that will liberate us and sustain our faith.

Searching for a Liberating Faith

The crisis of meaning and identity motivates me to search passionately for my mothers' gardens. What is the source of power that they found liberating, and how were they able to maintain their integrity as women against all the forces that denied them opportunities and tried to keep them in a subordinate place? The answer to these questions is not easy to come by, since women's lives have been trivialized and their contributions often erased from our memory. For a long time, the history of Christianity was written from the missionary perspective. These books record the life and work of the missionaries but seldom relate facts about the Chinese Christians. Even when they mention mission for women, they emphasize the work "done for" Chinese women instead of telling the stories and lives of the women themselves. Chinese scholars, too, have tended to focus more on Chinese men, who could write and therefore leave us with so-called reliable historical data. We know too little about the faith and religious imagination of Chinese Christian women.

To be connected with my own roots, I have learned to value the experiences and writings of my foremothers. Many of their short testimonies, gleaned from articles in journals and small pamphlets, would not formerly have been counted as

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"theological data." I have also looked in alternative resources, such as songs, poems, and myths, as well as in unexpected corners, such as obituary notices. Sometimes this requires a fresh treatment of the materials: reading between the lines, attending to small details, and providing the missing links by circumstantial evidence. This meticulous work is done with a deep respect for these women, and in remembrance of their testimony to an alternative understanding of the fullness of life.

Trying to find the link to the threads of their lives, I have come to understand that they were not passive recipients of what was handed down or taught to them. They were brave enough to challenge the patriarchal tradition, both in Chinese culture as well as in Christianity. After they became Christians, some of the women refused to follow the Chinese marriage rites or to participate in the funeral ceremony, which were social enactments of patrilineal and patriarchal family ideals. In addition, some questioned the overt patriarchal bias of the Bible. A Christian woman whose name has been lost to history used a pin to cut out from her Bible Paul's injunction that wives should be submissive to their husbands. When her husband exhorted her to obey what the Bible taught, she brought out her Bible and said it did not contain such teachings. At the turn of this century, a medical doctor named Zhang Zhujun was said to be the first Chinese woman preaching in the church. Commenting on Paul's prescription that women should keep silence in the church, Dr. Zhang boldly asserted that Paul was wrong!⁷

About sixty years after Chinese women started to join the church in recognizable numbers, women organized themselves in the first meeting of the Chinese National Council of Churches in 1922. Ms. Ruth Cheng addressed the Assembly and raised the issue of the ordination of women. She said:

People in some places think that the ordination of women is out of the question and women pastors are simply impossibilities. I do not intend to advocate that the church ought to have women pastors, but I would simply like to ask the reason why women cannot have such rights. If the Western Church because of historical development and other reasons has adopted such an attitude, has the Chinese Church the same reason for doing so? If the ancient Church, with sufficient reasons, considered that women could not have such rights, are those reasons sufficient enough to be applied to the present Church?⁸

These brave acts of women demonstrated their critical discernment, as moral agents, and a radical defiance that uncompromisingly challenged those traditions that were limiting and binding for women.

To claim such a heritage for myself is a process of self-empowerment. First, it informs me that these Chinese Christian women have a history and a story that need to be recovered for the benefit of the whole church. Second, I stand in a long tradition of Chinese Christian women who, with tremendous self-respect, struggled not only for their own liberation but also for justice in church and society. Third, these women brought their experience to bear on their interpretation of Christian faith and dared to challenge the established teaching of the church. It is because of this history that I can claim to do theology from a Chinese woman's perspective.

Toward an Inclusive Theology

I have found several important insights while tending and digging in my mothers' gardens. Their religious experience and quest for liberation point to the necessity of expanding our Christian identity and developing a more inclusive theology. This involves several major shifts in our traditional theological thinking. First, it requires us to shift our attention from the Bible and tradition to people's stories. The exclusiveness of the Christian claim often stems from a narrow and mystified view of the Bible and church teaching. I admit that the Bible records many moving stories of struggle against oppression, and it continues to inspire many third-world Christians today. But I also agree with post-Christian feminists that our religious imagination cannot be based on the Bible alone, which often excludes women's experience.⁹ In particular, I cannot believe that truth is revealed only in a book written almost two thousand years ago and that the Chinese have no way to participate in its inception. Let me give some concrete examples to illustrate what I mean. Coming from the southern part of China, where rice is the main food, I have often found the biblical images of bread-making and yeast-rising as alienating. I also feel a little uneasy when some Western women begin to talk about God as Bakerwoman.¹⁰ The Chinese, who live in an agricultural setting instead of a pastoral environment, have imaged the Divine as compassionate, nonintrusive, immanent in and continuous with nature. The images and metaphors we use to talk about God are necessarily culturally conditioned, and biblical ones are no exception.

The Bible tells us stories that the Hebrew people and the Christians in the early church valued as shaping their collective memory. The Western Christian tradition represents one of the many ways to interpret this story for one's own situation. The Indians, the Burmese, the Japanese, and the Chinese all have stories that give meaning and orientation to their lives. Women in particular have a treasure chest of lullabies, songs, myths, and stories that give them a sense of who they are and where they are going. Opening this treasure chest is the first step to doing our own theology. With full confidence, we claim that our own culture and our people's aspiration are vehicles for knowing and appreciating the ultimate. This would also imply that our Christian identity must be radically expanded. Instead of fencing us from the world, it should open us to all the rich manifestations that embody the Divine.

Second, we have to move from a passive reception of the traditions to an active construction of our own theology. The missionary movement has been criticized for making third-world churches dependent on churches in Europe and America. This dependence is not just financial but, more devastatingly, theological. With an entirely different philosophical tradition, we enter into the mysterious debate of homophobia, and with no critical judgment we continue the modernist and fundamentalist debate of the missionaries, long after a partial cease-fire has been declared in the West. We try our best to study Greek and Hebrew — and Latin or German too, if we can manage — and spare little time to learn the wisdom of our own people. As half-baked theologians, we are busy solving other people's theological puzzles — and thus doing a disservice to our people and the whole church by not integrating our own culture in our theology.

All peoples must find their own way of speaking about God and generate new

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symbols, concepts, and models that they find congenial for expressing their religious vision. We women, who have been prevented from participating fully in this myth- and symbol-making process, must reclaim our right to do so. As a Chinese Christian woman, I have to critically reassess my double heritage, to rediscover liberating elements for building my own theology. Ironically, it is my commitment to feminism that leads me to a renewed interest and appreciation of my own cultural roots. Chinese folk religions have always been much more inclusive, and they do not exclude the female religious image and symbolism. Chinese religious sensibility has a passion for nature and longs for the integration of heaven and earth and a myriad of things. If theology is an "imaginative construction," as Gordon Kaufman says,¹¹ we would need constantly to combine the patterns and weave the threads in new ways to name ourselves, our world, and our God.

Third, doing our own theology requires moving away from a unified theological discourse to a plurality of voices and a genuine catholicity. The new style of theology anticipates that there will be many theologies, just as there are many different ways of cooking food. For those who are raised in a cultural tradition that constantly searches for the "one above many," this will imply confusion, complication, and frustration. For others, like me, who are brought up in a culture that honors many gods and goddesses, this is a true celebration of the creativity of the people.

The criterion to judge the different styles of theologizing is not codified in the Bible, and the norm of theology is not determined by whether it smells something like that of Augustine and Aquinas — or Tillich and Barth, for that matter. Instead, it lies in the praxis of the religious communities struggling for the liberation of humankind. All theologies must be judged regarding how much they contribute to the liberation and humanization of the human community. A living theology tries to bear witness to the unceasing yearning of human beings for freedom and justice; it articulates the human compassion for peace and reconciliation.

Will plurality threaten the unity and catholicity of the church? For me, unity and catholicity cannot be understood in terms of religious doctrines and beliefs but must be seen as an invitation to work together. Unity does not mean homogeneity, and catholicity does not mean sameness. Process theologian John B. Cobb, Jr., captures the meaning of unity well:

The unity of Christianity is the unity of a historical movement. That unity does not depend on any self-identity of doctrine, vision of reality, structure of existence, or style of life. It does depend on demonstrable continuities, the appropriateness of creative changes, and the self-identification of people in relation to a particular history.¹²

The particular history that third-world people and other women's communities can identify with is that God is among the people who seek to become full human beings. Today, as we third-world women are doing our own theology, we come closer to a unity that is more inclusive and colorful and a catholicity that is more genuine and authentic. I heartily welcome this coming age of plurality in our way of doing theology, that our stories can be heard and our experiences valued in our theological imagination. To celebrate Asian women's spirit-rising, I would like to conclude by sharing a song written by my dear friend Mary Sung-ok Lee:¹³

We Are Women

We are women from Burma, China,
India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia,
Philippines, Thailand, and U.S.A.

Chorus:

Eh hey ya ho-o
Eh hey ya ho-o
Cho ku na cho wa (Oh, how good it is!)
Eh hey ya ho-o.

We are women, we are alive,
breaking our silence,
seeking solidarity.

Chorus

We are women, Yellow women,
angered by injustice,
denouncing exploitation.

Chorus

We are sisters, gathered for bonding,
mothers and daughters,
writers and fighters.

Chorus

We are women, spirit-filled women,
claiming our story,
voicing our poetry.

Chorus

Notes

1. For an insightful discussion of the two different cultural systems, refer to Jacques Gernet, *China and the Christian Impact*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
2. The Confucian tradition was criticized as patriarchal in the May Fourth Movement of 1919 and was more severely condemned in the Cultural Revolution during 1966–1976. In the post-Mao era, Chinese philosophers have begun to analyze the limits and contributions of the Confucian tradition as it relates to present Chinese society.

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3. See for example, Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983).

4. Ding Shujing, "Funü zai jiaohui de diwei" (Women's Status in the Church), *Nu Qing Nian* 7 (2):22 (March 1928).

5. See Judith Plaskow, "Blaming Jews for Inventing Patriarchy," *Lilith* 7:12-13 (1980), and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1983).

6. From Qu Yuan, "Li Sao" (Farewell Ode).

7. See "The History of Ms. Zhang Zhujun" in Li Youning and Zhang Yufa, eds., *Jindai Zhongguo nuguan yundong zhiliao* (Historical Materials on Modern Chinese Feminist Movement), 2 vols. (Taipei: Biographical Literature Publisher, 1975), vol. 2, p. 1380.

8. Ruth Cheng, "Women and the Church," *Chinese Recorder* 53:540 (1922).

9. Carol P. Christ, "Spiritual Quest and Women's Experience," in Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds., *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), pp. 228-245. See also her *Laughter of Aphrodite: Reflections on a Journey to the Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

10. See the poem of Alla Bozarth-Campbell, "Bakerwoman God," in Iben Gjerding and Katherine Kinnamon, eds., *No Longer Strangers: A Resource for Women and Worship* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983), p. 54.

11. Gordon D. Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), pp. 263-279.

12. John B. Cobb, Jr., "Feminism and Process Thought: A Two-way Relationship," in Sheila Greeve Davaney, ed., *Feminism and Process Thought* (Lewistown, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1981), p. 42.

13. Used by permission of Mary Sung-ok Lee.