

Theological Truth of Folk-Tales and Christian Education
through an analysis of C. S. Song's Story Theology
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We are a brown race
With white gods
And whitened soul.
We are aliens in our lands,
Hostage by our past.¹

I came to America to study authentic[?] theology and Christian education. During the first semester of my study in America, I was attracted to C. S. Song's class, Story theology, but I was hesitant to take the class because of Asian heritage of the class. With a culture-blind Christian education in the church, I felt that taking Song's class was like crossing a borderline and entering into a forbidden land. Somehow, I unconsciously learned that "cultural assimilation of Western culture" was the best way of being "a good Christian." I confess that C. S. Song is the person who taught me that I can be one of aliens in our lands with "white gods" and "whitened soul."

C. S. Song's story theology is present in the midst of plural religious traditions and multi-cultural Asian contexts. The main theological resources he uses are folk-tales²—stories of people—which are grounded in people's ordinary experiences of political persecutions, and political and economic injustice in their society. His way of doing theology is storytelling. Song does not introduce or invent a theory of story theology; rather, he tells and retells the stories of people through his story theology. As an Asian theologian, he tries to create a genuine dialogue between biblical stories and Asian stories, and between Christian culture and Asian culture. Folk-tales—the stories of people—can be seen as a gateway of his doing theology and a space for developing narrative agency³ which can address, challenge, and reclaim Asians' lived experiences of race, sex, class, culture, and international relations as social constructs in established, learned, and lived stories. Narrative agency is defined as capacity of self-reflexivity, or self-conscious awareness. It is the capacity "to access critically what is going on, exercise moral choice, make wise decisions among available alternatives, act with compassion while

¹ "Aliens in Our Land," *Philippine Resource Center Monitor* 9 (November 1990): 2; quoted in Eleazar S. Fernandez, "Postcolonial Exorcism and Reconstruction: Filipino Americans' Search for Postcolonial Subjecthood" in *Realizing the America of Our Hearts: Theological Voices of Asian Americans*, eds. Fumitaka Matsuoka and Eleazar S. Fernandez (St. Louis, MO.: Chalice Press, 2003), 83.

² Song uses the terms, folk stories, folktales, folklores interchangeably in terms of the stories of people. In this paper I use the term, "folk-tales" which include myth, legends, folklore, folk songs, and the stories of ordinary people.

³ Cf. Archie Smith Jr., *Siblings by Choice: Race, Gender, and Violence* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2004)

helping to create new opportunities with others, and to take responsibility for the consequence of our action.”

With increasing interests in narrative in Christian education, I believe, developing narrative agency through pedagogical practices has to be considered as an important educational task for Christian education. Otherwise, a true sense of self/ narrative agency can be lost in societal/cultural stories, which is noted as a major problem of traditional education in the theories of Paulo Freire⁴ and William Pinar.⁵ Also, we, Christian educators, might continually perpetuate the same oppressive stories to the learners. Therefore, this paper will pay special attention to how C. S. Song develops narrative agency through folk-tales.

A. Practicing resistance

Wang the Third was a stupid man. One day his wife wanted him to buy her a wooden comb, and, being afraid that he would forget it, she pointed at the narrow moon crescent in the sky and said, “Buy me a wooden comb, but it must be like the moon in the sky.” A few days later, the moon shone full and round in the sky. Wang the Third remembered what his wife had told him, and, since his purchase was to be as round as the moon, he bought a round mirror and took it home. The moment his wife saw it, she stamped on the ground, fled back to her parents’ house, and said to her mother, “My husband has taken a concubine.” The Mother-in-law looked into the mirror and said with a sigh, “If only he had chosen a young woman! Why did he take such a hideous old hag?” Later they brought the case before the district judge. When he saw the mirror, he said, “How dare you people, when you have a quarrel, dress up just like me! It is unbelievable.”⁶

Song focuses on two major possibilities of using the folk-tale as a theological resource. One is the possibility of self-exploration and self-discovery⁷ for Asian theologians and Asian Christians; the second is the support for Asian ways of knowing as the core of method of Asian story theology. For the possibility of self-discovery, folk-tales are a space for Asians to practice resistance to “inner resistance” of seeing themselves as respectable theological beings and seeing the stories of Asian people as theological resource.

⁴ Cf. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury, 1968)

⁵ William Pinar, “Sanity, Madness, and the School,” in *Curriculum Theorizing: the Reconceptualists*, ed. William Pinar, (Berkeley, CA.: McCutchan, 1975): 359-383.

⁶ Wolfram Eberhard, ed., *Folktales of China* (University of Chicago Press, 1965), 170; quoted in C. S. Song, *Tell Us Our Names: Story Theology from an Asian Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984), 3. Song uses this folk-tale called “the Mirror” in order to develop the positions of Asian theology.

⁷ The folktale, “The Gungutan and the Big-Bellied Man” in *Theology from the Womb of Asia* is another example.

The story of Mirror tells us that the wife, the mother-in-law, and the judge fail to recognize the reflection on their true images. When they see their reflections in the mirror, they express negative images on their own reflections. They do not like their own self-image. Song says this tale can be “a parable for Chinese/Asian theology”⁸ because Asian theologians or Christians “tend to take a negative view toward the image reflected in the theological mirror and tend to be upset by it, thinking the image of the mirror is the adulteration of the true image that God has given us.”⁹ At this point, the folk-tale is a phenomenological text in which Asian theologians can distance themselves for their self-awareness. The self-awareness of the Asian Christian’s negative self-image is the beginning of doing Asian story theology. The conscious cultivation of the self is the basis for theological renewal in Asian context.

Another story of “The Gungutan and the Big-Bellied Man” describes Christian theology in Asia as a man with “its huge belly of undigested food—a belly crammed with schools of theology, theories of biblical interpretation, Christian views of culture and religions, all originating from the church in the West and propounded by traditional theology.”¹⁰ The transformation of the big-bellied man into a handsome man requires a “painful indigestion”¹¹ It is liberating the individual by breaking down Westernized or oppressed patterns of thought in order to bring Asian experience and Asian resource to the center of doing story theology in Asia.

Folk-tales invite Asian Christians and theologians to be conscious of their negative self-image, which is formed by power or social system, or by the colonial and neocolonial influence of Western Christianity. In this painful indigestion, Asian folk-tales become postcolonial discourse in which hegemonic discourse, images, and representations can be criticized, and new self-identity, and self-awareness of being created and valued by God, can be emerged. In Sugirtharajah’s words, Asian resource in C. S. Song’s theology is a “discursive resistance to imperialism, imperial ideologies, and imperial attitudes, and to their continual reincarnations such wide politics, economics, history and theological and biblical studies.”¹²

B. Practicing Connectedness

This happened in the reign of the wicked, unjust Emperor Ch’in Shih Huang-ti. He was afraid of the Huns and decided to build the Great Wall. He regarded his subjects as grass and weeds. A young man, Was was chosen to be sacrificed as a guardian spirit of the Great Wall. He was ceased at the wedding feast leaving his bride Lady Meng in tears. She began to journey to find her husband’s bones and her weeping “so

⁸ C. S. Song, *Tell Us Our Names*, 4.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ C. S. Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia*, 3.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism: Contesting the Interpretations* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998), 17.

affected the wall that it collapsed,” and Lady Meng got her husband’s bones. She made the Emperor to build a terrace forty-nine feet high on the bank of the river in preparation for her husband burial as a condition to become his Empress. Afterwards, she cursed the emperor for his cruelty and wickedness and jumped into the river from terrace. Outraged Emperor orders his soldiers to cut her body in to little pieces and grind her bones. The little pieces changed into little silver fish in which the soul of Meng lives forever.¹³

Practicing resistance of being “object” of Western traditional theology is claiming Asian’s subjectivity of doing Asian theology. At this point, Song’s theology can be simply defined as doing story theology with Asian resources Asian involved. For the construction of Asian Christian’s subjectivity in doing story theology, Song claims Asian humanity as being of *Immanuel*. It is not just *God-with-us*, but also *God-in-us*.¹⁴ It is a vision that God has been personally involved in their life experience from the beginning of creation. The connectedness with *God-with-us* in Asian humanity situates “Asian experience” at the center of doing theology, and invites multi-cultural stories and multi-religious stories as Asian people’s stories and human stories in which the “lived experience” of human beings can be read in a specific socio-historical context in relation to power, system, ideology and God.

The connectedness with God and Asian experience is not a simple recovering of Asian theological resource, but it is reassuring of “Asian experience” and reaffirming of one’s existential meanings in one socio-historical context. The stories of people, the lived experiences of people become sacred texts in which people find/re-discover who they are, how they live, how they create meanings, and how they deal with injustice and oppression. Asian folk-tales—stories of people in Asia-- become the place where Asian people can find the spiritual world, the mystery of life, and creation deeply hidden in the heart of Asia. Song says, “If you want to know God, we must turn to humanity, that is, to our neighbor, for God loves and is close to our neighbor. *Theo*-logical questions are in reality *authropo*-logical questions.”¹⁵ Human beings’ social, political, psychological, ecological problems have to be the subject matters of theology which need theological analysis and interpretation because we can’t get glimpse of the divine reality if we bypass human realities.

Through the story of Tears of Lady Meng, Song reads and re-tells the theology of Lady Meng as the theology of people. Song tells the story of lady Meng as the story of Jesus because Song sees Jesus in suffering people, furthermore, Jesus as the “crucified people.”¹⁶ In

¹³ It is summarized from the story in the book, *The Tears of Lady Meng: A Parable of People’s Political Theology* by C. S. Song.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 82-83.

¹⁵ C. S. Song, *Third-Eye Theology*, p. 95.

¹⁶ C. S. Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 209-224.

Song's political theology through the folktale, the tears of lady Meng are tears of Jesus. Her suffering is the suffering of Jesus. Her living in the small fish is the resurrection of Jesus. Claiming the folk-tale as theological resource of people's [ordinary people's] theology, Song discovers the truth of people "who are oppressed and condemned to poverty, and deprived of freedom of conscience."¹⁷ This encountering of the truth of people is the heart of his theology.¹⁸

C. Practicing *theo*-logical imagination

Seeing Asian humanity as God's creation means to recover God's image in them. Song says that being created in God image [*Imago Dei*] means that "God has endowed human beings with the imagination of the soul and the facility of words to tell over and over God's story of creation as part of our stories and to integrate our stories into God's stories."¹⁹ Recovering God's image in Asian humanity means to empower them to tell their stories with the power of "*theo*-logical imaging."²⁰ In other words, it is regaining narrative ability with a subjective position on their lived stories.

It is theologically relating the inner world of faith in the Bible and the inner world of faith in Asia. They exist in different time and space, but there must be the human spirit in agony and hope in the grasp of the divine spirit of love and compassion. At the very heart of struggle for human life and destiny they meet together. In the fusion of two worlds, biblical world and Asian world through folk-tales, "God happens." The two worlds of the Bible and Asia come into interaction. Song calls this intense interaction "interpretation" or hermeneutics. Song says that Christian stories and Asian folk-tales are fused together because of the common struggle for humanity, the common experience of joy and suffering. "These stories are not merely about food, water, freedom, peace, or human rights, they are stories of persons created in God's image—persons in whom God imaged God's own self."²¹ In the theological space of folk-tales, Song connects Asian experience with Christian experience. In Song's theology, Asian Christians' identity is not "either-or", "both-and" of being Asian and being Christian. It requires listening to both the stories of Asian people and the stories of Jesus. "This process enables our faith to be rooted in the soil on which each of us lives and our theological efforts to become indigenous to the cultures into which we were born."²² Through this process of juxtaposition, Asian Christians become insiders and participants, not outsiders and strangers. They are not aliens in their lands with the "white God" and with a "whitened soul." At the fusion of the

¹⁷ C. S. Song, *The Tears of Lady Meng: A Parable of People's Political Theology*, 54

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁹ C. S. Song, *Believing Heart*, 65.

²⁰ C. S. Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986), 62.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 127.

²² C. S. Song, *Believing Heart*, 69.

world of biblical stories and the world of stories in Asia, theological meanings and theological truths are disclosed, and the codes of life in Asia and in the biblical world are decoded. In this interaction of stories, Asian stories become Jesus' stories and Jesus' stories become Asian stories.

The interpretation of the juxtaposition of two different stories requires *theo*-logical listening which enables us to connect two different contexts, two different theological worlds. *Theo*-logical listening means to listen to the “inner voices of despair and longing, voices of pain and heartaches” of the stories.²³ This *theo*-logical listening is only possible with God's grace, truth and compassion as Jesus had for the people. It is empathetic listening in order to understand the stories of people. This *theo*-logical listening requires us to connect with “theological imagination”²⁴ because the imagination enables us to participate in God's activity of renewing God's creation in the world of human suffering. According to Song, with this practice of theological, compassionate listening to stories of people with *theo*-logical imagination, we can experience God who became flesh in Asia and in our own lives.

D. Folk-tales and narrative agency

Folk-tales function as phenomenological bracketing through which one can distance oneself from a positioned self by society or by power in relation to race, sex, class, culture, and international relations. This distancitation of oneself through folk-tales become a context in which Asians can be aware of their imposed or learned negative self-image and can practice resistance, practice appropriation and practice theological imagination. Therefore, folk-tales become the text of reflexive analysis which helps Asian people to identify and investigate one's theological assumptions ingrained by Western traditional theology and invites them to be an active interpreter of their past as well as their present. Folk-tale is the place Asians practice resistance of reproduction of existing ideology and hegemony, at the same time, is the place Asians read the tenacity and nobility of the Asian people beyond the destructive life force by power. This self-alienation and resistance on imposed self-identity by Western theology or socio-political system lead one to re-appropriate and re-appreciate one's lived experience. In this process of hermeneutics of retrieval, Asians become subjective theological beings who can claim their own experience as the center of doing theology, of experiencing God in the midst of life-struggle. In this scheme, Song develops Asian Christian or theologian's narrative agency through folk-tales which can resist positioned self-identity by Western and traditional theology, reconnect with *God-with-us*, Jesus, and other people, and re-imagine new experience of God in the juxtaposition of the stories of the Bible and the stories of people. Therefore, folk-tales can be named as “middle-passage” of revealing meaning/truth for Asians in which movement is

²³ C. S. Song, *Believing Heart*, 74.

²⁴ C. S. Song, *Theology from the Womb of Asia*, 16.

possible from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from the experience of Westernized Christian to the experience of Asian Christian, from being colonized to being decolonized, and from being afraid of using Asian resources and to being proud of Asian resource.

Claiming theological truths in Asian folk-tales and developing narrative agency implies much in Christian education. It is not about a simple use of folk-tales in Christian education to stimulate the learner' interest, to get the learner' attention, or to introduce a new concept, rather it is about helping the learner to have positive self-image of him/herself as "respectable and responsible theological being" and to acknowledge their own culturally situated stories as sacred theological texts. It is about bringing/developing one's subjective position in reading their lived stories by practicing resistance, critical distancing and empathetic imagination. It is about learning to converse with Jesus in the space of folk-tales. Borrowing curriculum theorist, Janet Miller's term, folk-tales are "the place where actual and possible forms of social and political consequences are defined and contested. Yet it is also the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed."²⁵ Also, Song's use of folk-tales in his doing story theology can give Christian educators a glimpse of how to develop students' point of view from students' point of view through the students' culturally lived stories.

²⁵ Janet I. Miller, "Biography, Education, and Questions of the Private Voice," in *Writing Educational Biography: Explorations in Qualitative Research*, ed. C. Kridel (New York: Garland, 1998), 21; quoted in Janet I. Miller, *Sounds of Silence Breaking: Women, Autobiography, Curriculum*, A Book Series of Curriculum Studies, ed. William F. Pinar (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 49-50.