Volume 38 Number 2

radix

Where Christian Faith Meets Contemporary Culture

Seeing Jesus through East Asian Eyes

Russell Yee

This past Hiroshima Day, August 6th, I visited Chicago's Hyde Park Union Church (American Baptist/ United Church of Christ). The first thing I noticed were 1,000 red origami cranes hanging throughout the worship space. Earlier that day, only two blocks away, I'd visited the 1967 monumental bronze sculpture "Nuclear Energy" by Henry Moore. It stands where Enrico Fermi and his Manhattan Project team built the first man-made nuclear reactor only 32 months before the *Enola Gay* flew on its fateful mission over Japan.

The Gospel is good news for everyone in every culture, without having to abandon those cultures. The Body of Christ is incarnate in people of all different ancestries, nationalities, complexions, histories, and customs.

As University of Chicago students walked by dressed for summer classes, I thought of Fukushima and of global warming, of friends at Lawrence Livermore Lab and of President Obama's nuclear launch codes. Later, looking through flying cranes to see praise song lyrics projected on screen, we sang of God's faithfulness and care. In all this I felt a sense of place and belonging. Although I've only been a visitor to Chicago, I'm an American, an academic, someone of East Asian ancestry, and a Christian. Even as a visitor that day, the story of that place was part of my story.

Jesus came to the Samaritan woman at her own well. The Holy Spirit came to Cornelius of the Italian Regiment in his own home. After the Jerusalem Council's audacious embrace of Gentile ways, and the Reformation's later insistence on vernacular languages and forms, Christian worship has (in principle if not often in practice) drawn from the particular story and practices of actual worshippers in their own times and places.

The Gospel is good news for everyone in every culture, without having to abandon those cultures. The Body of Christ is incarnate in people of all different ancestries, nationalities, complexions, histories, and customs.

We largely take for granted this process of cultural incarnation. For instance, the use of purple grape juice at the Lord's Table in so many American Protestant churches has become fully embedded—if not sacrosanct!—It's now almost a century and a half after Methodist temperance worker Thomas Bramwell Welch's first application of Louis Pasteur's discoveries to the processing of grape juice. Welch's cultivation of the Concord grape variety *V. labrusca* (different from the historic *V. vinifera* Mediterranean wine grape), his production and sales of grape juice products, and his tireless zeal for "the fruit of the vine, not the cup of devils" were all specifically modern, American developments. At the Last Supper, Jesus could have performed a time-travel miracle and served some 1890 vintage Dr. Welch's Unfermented Wine. Instead, all indications are that Jesus served the common dilute wine of his own time and place.

In my biculturality as a third-generation Asian American, questions of time and place have particular complexities. But exploring that identity has yielded some precious gifts. A few years ago I took part in the third national Southeast Asian Leadership Summit in San Jose, California. The theme was "Deeper Roots, Stronger Shoots," giving particular attention to our roots in ancestral cultures and in family experiences and journeys.

For the final worship service, I was tasked with setting the Communion table. With only a small window of time in which to work, I rushed out to the local 99 Ranch Market (part of the big chain of California-based pan-Asian supermarkets). There I found loaves of sliced bread, all matched in size and shape but all different. I bought coconut, taro (purple!), and red bean breads. For the cup I chose some tropical fruit juices. And then I only needed one more thing: some purple grape juice (which I always try to include when setting out other types of drink for the cup, because some worshippers just don't feel right partaking of anything else at the Lord's Table).

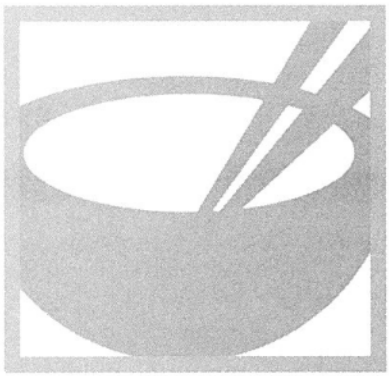
Now, at 99 Ranch Market, where would you find purple grape juice? I was half-hoping they didn't carry it at all, just to make the cross-cultural point. But then I found the Welch's—not in the main beverage aisle, but next to the Coke, 7-Up, and other western beverages. There in the aisles of 99 Ranch Market in San Jose I was literally navigating a cultural border, precisely while gathering food and drink for Communion.

While there I also bought a small bag of rice, thinking about decoratively sprinkling the grains on the Communion table. We spread a gorgeous blue Cambodian tablecloth covered with happy rows of embroidered gold elephants on the table. Then I arranged the breads and juices I had brought, along with flowers, and some art pieces. We needed a cross but I hadn't brought anything to make one. In a moment of hurried inspiration, I took the uncooked rice, poured a cup or two onto the center of the table, and shaped the grains

into a cross. It was perfect: Jesus, the Rice of Life. (Later, an older pastor who travels regularly to a country where Christianity is persecuted was checking it out and said, "Hey, this is a great idea, a rice cross—so if the police show up we can just scatter it and they won't know we were worshipping!")

It was dress-up night and folks wore the kinds of outfits that show up for big Southeast Asian family weddings and other celebrations. Some of the men chose to don Southeast Asian peasant outfits to add to the fun.The moment came when I shared some words about the Communion setting. "Jesus is too beautiful to be expressed by just one culture, or by just a majority culture. Jesus does not ask you to understand a foreign culture for you to meet him." People came up, knelt, lingered, cried, prostrated themselves, prayed, bowed, wept, partook. I knelt and prayed, rubbing some of the grains of rice between my palms.

Among the last to partake was a Hmong American young adult woman who was one of the conference leaders. She was resplendently dressed, head to (barefoot) toes, in beautifully full Hmong glory: a vivid multihued red skirt, shiny embroidered blue and silver top, long black sash, festive headdress, multiple necklaces, and other adornments. She knelt at the table praying, palms up, head bobbing. She was crying. I was there at the table with her. She asked for the mango juice, and I served her, saying "The blood of Christ."



Unplanned, she got up, walked to the front and center and began to dance, with gestures and movements from her heart, her people, her ancestral culture, her war-hammered, fading away, minority way. Though forced migrationed, ignored, misunderstood, patronized, paternalized, objectified, mispronounced, mocked, invisible, clumsily-resettled, dismissed, neglected, her way is yet admired, preserved, treasured, absolutely beautiful, and completely precious.

She cried and danced, finding this place and occasion where she could connect her Christian faith with her identity as a Hmong American woman. She danced and danced, with everything inside her dancing before the Lord.

Later, she shared, "The Lord was asking me to worship Him in my Hmongness: to Hmong dance for Him... A good friend prayed for me and the first thing that came out of his mouth was: 'Worship Him with all of who you are.' That broke me. I thought, 'How could I withhold my worship from the Lord?'" She did not withhold, and her offering to the Lord became a true and beautiful gift to everyone there.

But what form will that cultural self-offering take for her children, and their children? (To add to the variables, she went on to marry someone of a different race.) It is not as if true self-offerings forever consist of preserved or recovered ancestral cultures. There is no quantum or species of cultural authenticity (whatever that is) that guarantees such moments.

My own sense of grateful shared identity with this Hmong American sister was the product of quite an intricate and mixed story of American race relations, of the American war in Vietnam and later regional conflicts, of voluntary and involuntary migrations, of California demographics, and of my personal journey of church homes and ministry involvements. When I was boy growing up in Oakland as a third-generation Chinese American, there was no way one could have predicted such a Hmong American moment would become part of my story.

I love artist Sadao Watanabe's gospel prints and am very glad for the ongoing, worldwide appreciation they garner. His mastery of Japanese printmaking, his folk-art aesthetic, his deep grasp of Jesus' life and ministry, and his own life story and faith journey are gifts to treasure.

When we are in a place of weakness and emptiness, we need to make our way to the empty tomb and learn to grow in new life and strength.

And, yes, part of me is specifically grateful that that I can claim him as a racial kinsman. As an American racial minority person, it means something to me that someone who looked like my relatives created such beautiful and powerful expressions of our shared Christian faith. (I am here conflating Japanese and Chinese ancestries perhaps too readily, but that would be a long and different discussion to sort out, including some intriguing footnotes in my own family tree.) I am proud—I hope in an innocent and proper way—that through Watanabe's work we all get to see Jesus through East Asian eyes.

But claiming Watanabe as a kinsman is also risky because I am not a Japanese national, or an immigrant from Asia (I have only been there as an American tourist). I am not a foreigner of any flavor whatsoever. I am an American. I can't even order convincingly in a Chinatown restaurant. So there is a sense in which Watanabe's work is just as foreign to me as to someone whose ancestry and culture are entirely non-Asian. To me he is both one of "us" (of East Asian stock, black hair and brown eyes, shaped by our long histories with Confucianism, Buddhism, Christianity-from-the-West, and so forth) and also one of "them" (across-the-Pacific foreign Asians). On one level I very much want to be associated with him; on another I don't want to be confused with him.

If this seems tangled and perhaps even contradictory, that's the point. Bicultural identity is an ongoing experience of the tension W. E. B. Du Bois called "double consciousness," of simply wanting to be unselfconsciously myself, but also having to consciously factor in my otherness as perceived by others. To add to the predicament, Asian American identity is still very early in its formation, like a teenager still searching for a first sense of self, voice, story, and place in the world. So half of the bicultural equation is not really in place yet.

I am inspired by Black Baptist worship, with distant roots in West African cultures but fundamentally an expression of the African American experience from Jamestown to the Emancipation Proclamation, from the March on Washington to protests in Ferguson, Missouri.

I am inspired by Native American intertribal Pow Wow culture as it has developed since the 1970s, drawing from ancestral tribal roots but synthesizing them into something quite blended, shared, and new. My hope is that in due time Asian American culture generally and Asian American Christian culture specifically will grow and mature as an unmistakable child of this American soil.

In writing about culture and worship, Eric H. F. Law helpfully reminds us that the Christian life revolves around two centers: the cross and the empty tomb. The cross is about relinquishing and dying to self. The empty tomb is about resurrecting and embracing new life. We move from one center to the other and then back again. When we are in a place of established strength, we need to move towards the cross and learn to die and let go. When we are in a place of weakness and emptiness, we need to make our way to the empty tomb and learn to grow in new life and strength.

Generally speaking, majority-culture expressions of faith and worship need movement toward the cross, while minority and especially nascent forms of faith and worship (such as Asian American forms) need movement toward the empty tomb.

Watanabe's art certainly helps in that latter movement, both in his native Japan and also here and around the world. His art helps more people believe that Jesus really does want to meet them in their very own homes and enter into their stories—that their lives and cultures are the very places where new life can begin. Watanabe's art helps more people believe that this same Jesus can also make their own lives and journeys a beautiful and needed gift to the world.■

Russell Yee teaches at Fuller Northern California (Menlo Park) in the areas of worship and pastoral theology, and has been an adjunct professor at numerous other seminaries. Part of this essay is adapted from Chapter 6 of his book *Worship on the Way: Exploring Asian North American Christian Experience* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2012).