What Is Next beyond the Bhabhaian Reading?

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Defining Asian and Asian American biblical hermeneutics is very challenging because of the many cultural contexts. Nevertheless, cultural hybridity is the primary issue for those with an Asian or Asian American heritage. Homi K. Bhabha provides a proper framework for analyzing biblical texts and theological issues based on the notion of cultural hybridity.

Romanticized Hybridity for the Middle Class

Cultural hybridity is beneficial because it creates a third space to overcome given boundaries. It is possible to expand the sociocultural territory to encompass new territory.[1] However, this does not mean that all former boundaries are erased and instantly disappear. When cultural hybridity becomes a national agenda and moral, various kinds of backlashes arise under the dogma of tradition, values, and law and order. Within the constant tension between so-called national values and cultural identity, many people push to be a model minority and a perpetual foreigner within the invisible boundary, even though they deny this. On this point, Fanon and Bhabha are correct to some degree in their view of immigrants' personalities and psychology. As well-educated adults within colored middle-class families living under white rules, the experiences of Fanon and Bhabha are applicable to those who are facing cultural assimilation and hybridization within a Western/-nized location.

However, Bhabhaian hybridization is a somewhat romanticized notion for those who are striving to accomplish their dreams.[2] It is introduced as a valid way to justify cultural hybridity for those who live in-between, especially in the context of immigration. One can identify oneself as a liminal, marginalized, othered, alienated, victimized, subjugated, and even colonized being. Mostly, it depends on one's memory and perspective, not on historical objectivity. So, it is crucial how one narrates one's own story, which depends on one's perspective and is regardless of one's self in reality. Borrowing a Jungian term, this is the persona of one's self.

Yinyang for Cultural Hybridity

Among biblical scholars with an East Asian origin, Bhabha's concept is usually translated as *yinyang*. Andrew Yueking Lee's and Hyun Chul Paul Kim's understanding of *yinyang* is

[1] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 217.

[2] "The occupancy of the concept of hybridity by pecunious intellectuals like Homi Bhabha is problematic, because it reproduces a romantic idea of a 'hybrid' and serves primarily to profile and stabilize the own identity and position" Lars Allolio-Näcke, "Hybridity," in *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology*, ed. Thomas Teo (New York: Springer, 2014), 927. Arif Dirilik calls Bhabha's project "the utopianization of hybridity" because it "rules out by intellectual fiat the ability of even 'hybrids' to engage in serious revolutionary action; in a very self-contradictory manner, hybridity is rendered into an essential condition of postcoloniality from which there may be no escape." Arif Dirlik, *The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 179. See also Benita Parry's criticism of Bhabha in Benita Parry, *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 55–74.

based on the positive aspects of harmonizing both Asian and Western/American cultures.[3] However, Benny Liew problematizes *yinyang* by highlighting its negative aspects: *yingyang* is neither A nor B.[4] Even though Liew draws on psychoanalytic and deconstructive theories, he does not go beyond the early work of Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. At this point, it is necessary to understand why Gale Yee says that "*yinyang* is not me."[5] This is an important statement for one born and raised in the United States. From the perspective of a native living somewhere in America, filling the gap between being Asian and being American no longer matters. But for early Fanon and Bhabha, it is vital to surviving within a hierarchical society based on skin color.

Another problem is that *yinyang* does not serve the agendas of immigrants in East Asian society from ancient to contemporary times. The primary purpose of *yinyang* is to explain the order of the universe and society in metaphysical terms. We can redefine this ancient concept for our context, but it is still questionable whether this concept could fit every immigrant's context well. Suppose we limit our concerns to Asians and Asian Americans who connect with their East Asian cultural heritage. In that case, it is possible to say that *yinyang* is very useful as a tool to describe Asians and Asian Americans. However, the given boundaries of "Asian" and "Asian American" extend beyond their experiences and expectations.

Pan-Asianism and Asian Americanism

Let us go back to the early twentieth century. Thinkers such as Sun Yat-sen, Kim Ok-gyun, and Fukuzawa Yukichi shared an idealized concept of Pan-Asianism.[6] This concept was also held by An Jung-guen, who killed Ito Hirobumi, the Japanese prime minister, to liberate the Korea peninsula from the imperial regime. However, the problem is that the Japanese Empire misused this concept as totalitarian propaganda in its quest to conquer and exploit Asian countries under the name of Pan-Asianism.[7] This is why Fanon criticized the Négritude movement that aimed to construct Black consciousness; it risked totalitarianism.[8] Instead of racial identity, Fanon focused on the problem of class strife and the use of violence against the dominant class.[9]

This is similar to the case of Asian Americanism. The concept of "Asian American" was developed amidst the civil rights and free speech movement, especially during the time of the

[3] Andrew Yueking Lee, "Reading the Bible as an Asian American: Issues in Asian American Biblical Interpretation," in *Ways of Being, Ways of Reading: Asian American Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Mary F. Foskett and Jeffrey Kah-Jin Kuan (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006), 63; Hyun-Chul Paul Kim, "Interpretive Modes of Yin-Yang Dynamics as Asian Hermeneutics," *Biblical Interpretation* 9 (2001), 287–308.

[4] Tat-siong Benny Liew, *What Is Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics? Reading the New Testament* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 26.

[5] Gale A. Yee, "Yin/Yang Is Not Me: An Exploration into an Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics," in Foskett and Kuan, *Ways of Being*, 152–63.

[6] I am not considering historical discussion on the concept of "Asia" in this paper.

[7] For more on Pan-Asianism, see Sven Saaler and Christopher W. A. Szpilman, eds., *Pan-Asianism: A Documentary History, Volume 1: 1850–1920* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011). Eri Hotta provides a historical review on how Pan-Asianism functioned as the military hegemony for the expansion of the Japanese Empire before and during World War II. Eri Hotta, *Pan-Asianism and Japan's War 1931–1945* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

[8] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 101–3, 144; Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of The Earth*, foreword by Homi K. Bhabha, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press 2004), 150–54.

[9] Fanon, *The Wretched of The Earth*, 1–62.

U.S. involvement in the Vietnamese War (1962–1973). Until then, immigrants of Asian origin were considered second-class citizens, as in the concept of the "Yellow Peril." Young Nisei or Sansei activists with traumatic memories of internment camps, such as Yuri Kochiyama and Yuji Ichioka,[10] needed to promote a new racial identity, "Asian American,"[11] to conjoin and unite those whose origins were from the Asian continent. Pan-Asianism was a helpful tool to bond all Asian descendants into one group for the fight against the dominant discriminatory sociocultural system that made them second-class citizens prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Hart-Celler Act of 1965.

Even though the formulation of "Asian Americanism" is deeply connected with the civil rights movement, it is hard to deny that this idea is based on color-based nationalism similar to the Négritude movement of the 1930s (Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire) and black nationalism of the 1960s (Malcom X). However, what color are Asian Americans? Which memories should be shared and circulated among Asian Americans? Tragic events like the Chinese exclusion Act (1882–1943), the Japanese internment camps (1942–1946), the death of Vincent Chin (1982), and the Los Angeles riots (1992) are significant events in the "history of Asian Americans." However, this history should be taught in the classroom, not transmitted and inherited in one's childhood within the home, because later immigrants do not have these collective memories. As Jay Caspian Kang rightly points out, the pattern of experiences and memories of latecomers, especially after the Hart-Celler Act, may be different from the shared struggles of earlier immigrants.

> What is an Asian American? For decades, the label has been defined by stories like mine, and the politics of the "race" or "group" or whatever you want to call it have reflected the upward mobility of the Asians, largely East Asians, who came to the United States after the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act, often referred to as Hart-Celler, after its congressional sponsors, which lifted restrictive quotas on migration and effectively opened up the country to millions of new Americans. The confusion and the vagaries of "Asian American" result, in part, from necessity: What else could you possibly do with a group that includes everyone from well-educated Brahmin doctors from India to impoverished Hmong refugees? How could you tell a unifying story that makes all those immigrants feel as if they're part of some racial category, especially those, like my daughter, who will grow up mixed-race?[12]

[10] Yuji Ichioka's wife, Emma Gee, had a Chinese heritage. She was one of the leading figures in the Asian American movement. For a brief history, see Diane C. Fujino, "Asian American Movement," in *Asian American Society: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Mary Yu Danico and Anthony C. Ocampo (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2014), 74–78.

[11] At first, the two nouns were hyphenated as "Asian-American." Being hyphenated is one of the issues in the Asian American movement. For Wan, hyphenation is identified with in-betweeness. So, being hyphenated has the potential to create a third space for those who have a double identity and who experience double rejection. Sze-Kar Wan, "Betwixt and Between: Toward a Hermeneutics of Hyphenation," in Foskett and Kuan, *Ways of Being*, 137–51 (note that Mary F. Foskett and Jeffrey Kah-Jin Kuan, the editors of *Ways of Being*, adopt "the convention of not using the hyphen" except in the case of Sze-kar Wan; see p. xv). However, as in the case of Gale Yee, Bharati Mukherjee rejects the use of hyphenation and wants to be an "American." Bharati Mukherjee, "American Dreamer," *Mother Jones*, January/February 1997, https://www.motherjones.com/politics/1997/01/american-dreamer/. Benny Liew also rejects the use of a forward slash or a hyphen. Liew, *What Is Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics?*, 23.

[12] Jay Caspian Kang, "The Myth of Asian-American Identity," *New York Times Magazine*, updated October 18, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/05/magazine/asian-american-identity.html.

Kang's last question makes the critical point that Asian Americanism has not gone beyond the civil rights legacy of late-twentieth-century America. It is true that the Asian American movement fought against the external dominant hegemony and power, so it was very beneficial for many latecomers. However, it does not tell us much about what happens inside the Asian American community in terms of differences in stories and class struggles between the early comers and the latecomers.

Representation for Others?

The irony of reading cultural hybridity theories through Asian American eyes is that these theories are strongly focused on the middle-class experience of the "American dream" and the pursuit of and settling for economic stability. It is hard to deny humans' basic economic desire to live stably within the capitalistic economic system. The problem is that these theories make it hard to stand with and support "others," even though they pursue solidarity among various others. For example, autobiographical reading provides valuable insights into hybridization by putting ancient biblical texts and the present narrative of oneself into intertextual dialogue. However, the problem of autobiographical reading based on cultural hybridity is that it sometimes leads us to appropriate the real voices of voiceless others under the name of representation. While we frame ourselves as being liminal, marginalized, othered, alienated, victimized, subjugated, and colonized, the real stories and pictures of the voiceless others are outside our framework. Even though we try to represent the voiceless in reality, is it possible for us to express others' voices and contexts? On this point, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question "Can the subaltern speak?" is still valid and unsolvable in terms of appropriation and representation.[13]

In this vein, the Bhabhaian lens does not clearly explain and represent the perspective of poor and uneducated people in terms of their being Asian American. It is possible to consider latecomers another subset of cultural assimilation and hybridization. However, the reality of being other as an early comer is narrated differently from the experience of immigrants in the context of post-civil rights movements. This creates gaps within the so-called Asian American community regarding class and education.[14]

It is easy to find similar desires when we look at Asian contexts. Even after the end of colonialism, Asian people still accept American and European culture because of their desire for economic development. They follow a realistic and pragmatic approach for better or worse under the monetary hegemony of the U.S. dollar. Within the given system, the mechanism of mimicry is performed not by an individual but at the national level. Cultural hybridization is one of the means of development, not the ultimate end. In this vein, the sociocultural locations of Asians have diverged in terms of ethnicity, nationality, class, gender, and generation.

The Both-Sidedness of Hybridized Culture

[13] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", *Wedge* 7–8 (1985): 120–30.

[14] Concerning the gap in terms of different experiences and memories, Aijaz Ahmad comments: "Between postcoloniality as it exists in a former colony like India, and postcoloniality as the condition of discourse by such critics as Bhabha, there would appear to be a considerable gap." Aijaz Ahmad, "The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality" *Race and Class: A Journal for Black and Third World Liberation* 36, no. 3 (1995): 10.

Whether they are related to Asian or American contexts, stories from various sociocultural locations cannot be subsumed under one umbrella term. When we bring them under the name of "Pan-Asianism," it creates various gaps and other issues, as discussed above. *Hallyu* (Korean Wave) is a good example of cultural hybridization. The Korean entertainment industry has created a third space that mixes Western/-nized and Korean/Asian cultures. Indeed, Korean pop culture is now viewed as representing marginal and liminal voices by Asian and Asian Americans. In contrast, from the perspective of non-Korean consumers (whether Asian or American), *hallyu* could be viewed as a "cultural colonizer" operating against them because it impacts and challenges traditional values and morals. Depending on the context in which *hallyu* is consumed, it is received as either a subversive alternative or a dominant colonizer. This both-sidedness of a hybridized culture raises another question concerning unseen sociocultural thresholds. Can we cross over these thresholds? What is next beyond the Bhabhaian reading?

The contemporary middle-class dream connects with the Hebrew Bible since the biblical texts were written and composed by well-educated elites (especially in terms of literacy) who struggled with cultural assimilation and hybridization in the ancient *realpolitik*. When we interpret biblical texts and their *Sitz im Leben*, the text is a matter of defense and critique. This does not mean that it is necessary to go back to a class binarism between the rich and the poor, as in the prosperity gospel and liberation theology. If we go back to this line of thought, it is easy to be either too uncritical or judgmental of ourselves because the class binarism determines who is good and who is evil. So, it is not helpful to praise or denounce the process and the result of various hybridizations. While many Asians and Asian Americans are baptized in and romanticized by cultural hybridity, it is still necessary to see how each story is narrated differently in each location and how they encounter, conflict with, and melt into each other. The sociocultural realities of the past and the present are more complicated and variegated in terms of both-sidedness rather than we might expect. We are still within the Bhabhaian frame of cultural hybridity, but we are searching for ways of reading our reality that go beyond such romanticism.