

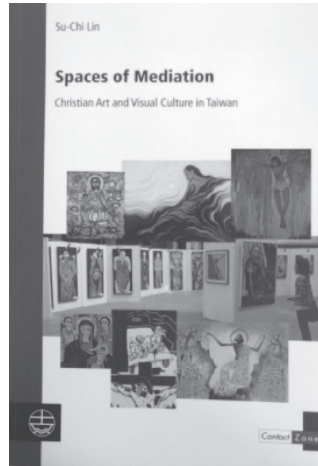
Book Review

by William NG OFM

Su-Chi Lin. *Spaces of Mediation: Christian Art and Visual Culture in Taiwan*. Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2020.

152 pages (paperback).

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The author, Su-Chi Lin, has both a keen interest in the theological research and a personal experience in the praxis aspect of art and inculturation. Thus, this book forms a rich resource exploring how art, theology and spirituality interact with each other, using Asian examples, particularly those from the Taiwanese Protestant church. Lin's book tries to demonstrate how contemporary Christian art can be a result from a mutual conversation of symbols, myths, metaphor, icons and allegory between the artist's Christian faith and their culture. Lin even identifies six mediating tools whereby artists examined have employed to allow faith/culture conversation to occur, thus art becomes spaces for mediation.

To set the frame of discussion, the first chapter describes the nature of Asian Christian Art. The author points out that throughout history Christian art is both old, bearing a traditional message, yet also new, situated in a specific context. The phenomenon of art is also a dialogue: whereby the viewer

experiences the art made by the artist at a personal level. I find the discussion on the ethical concerns of religious art particularly pertinent. The question of “whose beauty the art speaks for” is indeed relevant as the world has long ventured into a post-colonial era; and with globalisation, reinforced by information technology, the discourse on cultures and civilisations is much needed. It is a far cry from merely portraying religious figures with Asian characteristics. Lin writes, “studying Christian art from the contemporary world of Asia helps achieve a better understanding of the multifaceted character of Christian iconography that still speaks to the condition of people today.”

Lin analyses images rigorously from a theological view. This can be seen in the second chapter which correlates art with Christian mission. A rather precious 16th Century woodcut print, as the first illustration in the monograph, aptly starts the discussion on the mutual criticism between faith and cultural traditions. Lin’s image choice has in the centre a Dominican preacher and a Chinese scholar, each against a different background – a “majestic church” of Christianity and a landscape with “graceful lines and shapes” of the Chinese civilisation. By this, Lin introduces how art and theology mutually and critically correlate with each other. Historical examples – book illustrations and posters – from the Presbyterian Church of Taiwan in early 20th Century are given to show how indigenised Christian iconography is firmly rooted in the cultural context.

The rest of the book takes the form art-criticism in which specific artists are studied. Chapter Three discusses the depiction of Christ by three Asian Christian artists: Japanese Sadao

Watanabe's "Good Shepherd", Indian Solomon Raj's "Water of Life" and He Qi's "Christ before Pilate". By comparing and contrasting the various works, Lin concludes how these artists formulate an appropriate and effective form of faith expression, that is suitable to and meaningful for their contexts. Eastern art, symbols and religion are interdependent to disclose the truth, goodness and holiness in God's creation.

The three chapters that follow focus on contemporary Taiwanese Christian artists employ more than traditional western iconography and themes in their works. Lin points out how "Taiwanese Christian art is paralleled with the Asian Renaissance movements in East Asia." Lin reminds the readers of the four successive waves of missions in the Taiwan throughout its history since the 17th Century, through which the gospel has interacted with the Taiwan's context. And to analyse the Taiwanese Christian artists, Lin relies on the work of Shoki Coe who advocates a contextualisation model to replace the indigenisation model in previous missiological frames.

Chapter four emphasises examples of Etan Pavavalung and Cheng Chien-Chang to illustrate how Taiwanese Christian artists' personal Christian faith is represented in culturally contextualised manner. With the colour reproduction of their works, in full colour, various images of these two artists do speak powerfully, confirming the observations made. I have not seen the original and can only hope the printing does justice to the original colour. Certainly, seeing the images face to face, in their full size and the sheer materiality of the paint would be the next best thing.

Lin provides an excellent and intricate commentary of the selected artworks: how the two artists have reinterpreted symbol and myth from the local culture and tradition in connecting with the Gospel in their art-making. Pavavalung, from the Paiwan tribe in Taiwan, has successfully made use of the lily symbol to mediate his own faith and culture, with layers of meanings in religion, politics and even ecology, as seen in his “Verdant Cross”. Cheng has translated the image of God into his own cultural context, blending creation myth in both Taoist and Christian traditions, thus intertwining his own social-historical commitment to Taiwan, by allowing Chinese philosophy and Christianity interact.

The fifth chapter analyses works by two female artists, Wang Jen-Wen and Chou Lan-Huei, whose imagery is hailed as a hermeneutic connection between theological imagination and artistic expressions. While Lin’s analysis is profound, what sparks my interest is the subtext in the discourse. Wang was a theologian foremost by training and a published author of poems, prose and fiction using written Taiwanese. Yet, her attempt in the visual arts was a way for healing to cope with her cancer. Lin points out how her work appropriates faith imagery into her own living reality, expressing a feminist consciousness and longing for God. I may postulate that the healing actually occurred during her migration from an occupation with words (from her training in theology and literary experience) to a pursuit through image-making. In other words, it is an intermodal transfer from word to image, and such transfer can be therapeutic for the individual. Therefore, contextualisation of theology must account for the individual life circumstances, one more layer to a larger socio-cultural context.

The final chapter focuses on the photographic works of a pastor-artist, Stanley Fung. This chapter is necessary as photography as a visual medium is more and more common and accessible by everyone. Two series of portraits are evaluated as expression for theological anthropology. Lin highlights how Fung's photographs are to be read as stories, not just to be seen as images, thus heightening the prophetic dimension of photography, with the didactic aim of evangelisation. It would have been complete if comparison and contrast can be done for two artists as in the previous two chapters.

In the conclusion, Lin notes that art as such as space of interaction has not been smooth in missiological history and can still be controversial among Protestants, with an iconoclastic historical background. Lin points out how the viewers' reception of images is as much part of the inculturation process as the production of the images.

This last point is particularly pertinent. I have invited a colleague to read this book. His first reaction towards art and religion is that of puzzlement. The time, money, and resources needed to produce art are not appreciated and he could not understand the contributions of art in religion. Upon reading the in-depth description of the works, he started to appreciate the various layers of meaning behind each art piece. He points out how the general impression in China (or Asia) today is still marked by the foreignness of Christianity, as reinforced visually by its associated Western art forms, thus making inculturation an important topic in theology. He pointed out that theological formation nowadays has not been enough to equip pastoral

ministers (lay or cleric) to be at least “literate” in the field of art and theology. This is much felt in practical issues such as the design of worship environment.

Indeed, there is a certain general dialectic between artists and non-artists throughout history. And this dialectic is even stronger in any religious context: first as a personal piety for the artist and second when art has an added “purpose” for the religious community – in worship and as a tool for the transmission of faith. This book is a much welcome discussion especially for the Chinese, if not Asian, context. An ecumenical dialogue would be beneficial as aesthetics differ among denominations. Further, dialogue should also encompass other art modalities, music and architecture in particular. No Christian should ever forget the incarnation of the Word of God is a core belief. As incarnation has happened in a particular socio-cultural context and the Christian faith ought to incarnate, the art experience (on the level of both the maker and the perceiver, individually and collectively) as a human phenomenon also needs to incarnate contextually.

(Thanks to John B Lou SDB for his contribution to this review.)