

Unsung Heroes Reclaimed

The educational role & spiritual influence of unsung Asian American political and civic leaders in the Asian American religious community

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Abstract: This paper examines the necessity for Asian American churches to rediscover and reclaim their political and civic heroes in worship and educational faith practices, cultivating a stronger Asian American identity in both the religious & political realms. Asian American churches have historically stood as cornerstones for resistance against political & civic injustices. This paper will address ways in which Asian American faith communities can reclaim the legacy of their own political & social activists to redefine a uniquely Asian American religious identity for today's religio-political arena.

Asian Americans have consistently participated in civic engagement and political activism. During the civil rights era of the 60's and 70's, the Asian American community stood in solidarity with other communities of color in the anti-racism discourse. Unfortunately, many of our community's heroes remain unsung and unrecognized, even within our ethnic religious communities. The purpose of this research interest group paper is to propose a religious education that reclaims Asian American political and civic heroes within the Asian American religious community with the goal to encourage a deeper sense of ethnic identity among Asian Americans, particularly its youth. Religious educators David Ng and Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng have made a mark in this endeavor as religious educators within the Asian American context, never shying away from their cultural background and the ways in which culture and religion are intrinsically intertwined. Both religious educators offer alternative approaches to teaching faith and developing religious identity. Furthermore, both scholars offer a pedagogical approach appropriate for Asian American ministry, particularly ways in which Asian Americans can contribute to the particular educational ministry needs of the Asian American church at large.

Honoring a professor whose teaching career was progressive, inspirational, and sadly too short, The David Ng Resource Center at San Francisco Theological Seminary provides free educational ministry resources for Bay Area local churches. A second-generation Chinese American, David Ng was an active presence in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), publishing and editing denominational curriculum, speaking at conferences, teaching at both Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary and San Francisco Theological Seminary, and being awarded Educator of the Year by the Association of Presbyterian Church Educators in 1991. During his active career, he pastored churches in the San Francisco area and was active in community centers in Chinatown. His death in April of 1997 was unexpected and, as Peter C. Phan commented, "a great loss for the world of Christian education."¹ In *Asian Pacific American Youth Ministry: Planning Helps and Programs*, Ng covers a variety of themes most applicable and practical for

¹ In the preface for *Journeys at the Margin: Toward an Autobiographical Theology in American-Asian Perspective* (ed. by Peter C. Phan and Jung Young Lee), Phan dedicates the book to both professors David Ng and Jung Young Lee, whose death was also sudden.

ministering with Asian American youth.² His topics include identity issues (“What is a Sojourner?” and “Who Am I?”), family expectations, racism, discovering one’s local neighborhoods, and the relationship between faith and culture. Ng believes that Asian American youth “may have a double load to carry on their journey toward self-understanding and personal faith” because of the “cultural differences which place greater demands on Asian Pacific American young people than on many of their non-Asian counterparts.”³ While Ng draws on the social sciences to inform his method for understanding and teaching youth, mostly G. Stanley Hall’s seminal work in adolescence psychology (*Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relation to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education*, 1904) and Erik Erikson’s influential research on identity formation (*Identity: Youth and Crisis*, 1968), Ng asserts that his main resource for methodology is theology. He argues, “. . . psychology, sociology, and other disciplines are to be informed by the understandings of theology as well. Identity formation is informed by theology.”⁴

A colleague of David Ng and former President of the Association of Professors, Practitioners, and Researchers in Religious Education, Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng is known within the Christian education community as a leader and first generation Asian American religious educator. Her pedagogical approach resonates with David Ng. Raised in both Hong Kong and Portugal during the height of World War II, Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng, the second daughter in a family of eight children, is a self-professed mixed product of British colonialism and Western Christian missionary schooling with an irrefutable "Confucian DNA," as she has put it. Her earlier writings focus on Asian culture and its influences on Christian practices while her more recent writings involve multicultural, anti-racist education and pedagogy. Similar to David Ng’s contributions, Wenh-In Ng lifts up the ways in which one’s culture, specifically her Asian culture, can complement and enhance the Christian faith. For Wenh-In Ng, the two—indigenous Asian cultures and Christianity—are harmonious rather than oppositional. For instance, Wenh-In Ng believes it is crucial to “explore our call to bring *all* of who we are into worship—Korean, Japanese, Chinese, or Vietnamese North American as well as Christian, embodying within us the ethos and spirituality, the social and cultural ‘specialness’ of our ancient civilizations.”⁵ When using cultural traditions and practices as her main method for educational ministry, Wenh-In Ng often tells stories that perfectly illustrate situations when Asian cultural practices seemingly clash with traditional Christianity, such as ancestor veneration, lunar calendar celebrations, and rice cakes for communion bread. When addressing specifically the needs of Asian American faith formation, she uses Asian American resources.⁶ Wenh-In Ng’s major sources are Asian

² Donald Ng, ed., *Asian Pacific American Youth Ministry: Planning Helps and Programs* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1988).

³ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁴ David Ng, *Youth in the Community of Disciples* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1984), 42.

⁵ Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng, “The Asian North American Community at Worship: Issues of Indigenization and Contextualization” in *People on the Way: Asian North Americans Discovering Christ, Culture, and Community*. ed. David Ng (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1996), 148.

⁶ For example, she uses theories on racial ethnic identity development, particularly Derald Wing Sue and David Sue’s model for understanding bicultural identity (*Counseling the Culturally Different: Theory and Practice*, 1981), and incorporates Asian American theology developed by forerunners such as Kosuke Koyoma, Kwok Pui Lan, Chung Hyun Kyung, Roy Sano, Fumitaka Masuoka, and Paul Nagano. She references Jung Young Lee’s work on marginality (*Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology*, 1995) as well as Sang Hyun Lee’s discussions on

“religio-philosophical streams” and cultural practices, and her methodology is applying a hermeneutic of suspicion to create a heightened awareness of how an Asian Americans practice faith.⁷ She, therefore, asserts, “interpreting Scripture from an Asian-North American perspective is an integral part of the attempt to construct what are called ‘local theologies’ [using Robert Schreiter’s understanding of contextualizing theologies in *Constructing Local Theologies*].”⁸ Ng has, in her own way, created an Asian American local theology for Christian education.

As Asian American religious educators, therefore, it is important to find ways to reclaim the lives of those in our community that have embodied the struggle for social justice. By reconnecting the lives of these prominent figures to our religious education discourse, we strengthen not only the crucial Asian American and ethnic identity of our young people, but also their Christian identity and formation. Four such figures include Richard Aoki, a controversial Japanese American Black Panther, Susan Ahn Cuddy, the first Asian American woman to serve active military duty, Dr. Sammy Lee, the first Asian American Olympic diver, and Syngman Rhee the former president of the National Council of Churches and moderator of the PC(USA)’s General Assembly.

Richard Aoki is an iconic Asian American figure. A Japanese American and a Black Panther Grand Marshall, Aoki worked to radically reform ideological racism in the United States. He was not in the least the picture of the model minority. His was influential in the rise of three movements: Asian America, Black Power, and the Third World.⁹ His reach extends to higher education as one of the first instructors and coordinators of Berkley’s Asian American Studies program. Through his work Aoki worked to challenge systems of racism in the United States. Aoki’s life and image became the symbol of Afro-Asian solidarity, as well as a positive Asian American masculinity. Today’s Asian American young male experiences gender discrimination that is intricately interlocked with their Asian-ness. Just as Asian American women experience exotification, Asian American men are perceived as boys not men. This popular perception has been well documented in Asian American magazines and blogs such as *Angry Asian Man*¹⁰, which explores the intersection of gender, race, and popular culture. These common misperceptions, paired with the demure and genteel qualities of the Asian American Jesus archetype, leave no room for the development of a whole picture of Asian American masculinity. Aoki’s life is one that exhibited the kind of strength that was not at all quiet but that

marginality and liminality. Other Asian American scholars and their works, such as Ronald Takaki’s history of Asian Americans (*Strangers from a Distant Shore: A History of Asian Americans*, 1989), Ellen Tanouye’s research on generational differences, and David Ng’s contributions to educational ministry, also inform Wenh-In Ng’s understanding of religious education.

⁷Ng, “Asian Sociocultural Values: Oppressive and Liberating Aspects from a Woman’s Perspective” in *People on the Way: Asian North Americans Discovering Christ, Culture, and Community*, 65. Ng identifies four religio-philosophical streams. They are: “indigenous religions (ancient divination and shamanic practices in China, shamanism in Korea, Shintoism in Japan), Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism.”

⁸ Ng, “Pacific-Asian North American Religious Education,” in *Multicultural Religious Education*, ed. Barbara Wilkerson (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1997), 209.

⁹ Diane C. Fujino, *Samurai among Panthers* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), xiii.

¹⁰ <http://www.angryasianman.com/>

was unapologetically bold. He embodied the type of activism that challenged structures and systems in ways that “had teeth”.¹¹

The fact that Asian American women experience multiple marginalities because of race, gender, and often age, requires religious educators to acknowledge their social location and to provide ways for them to experience agency. However, the church often only provides examples of female self-sacrifice, perseverance, and servitude. These types of female images leave a damaging impression on women who already live within a patriarchal context. By including examples of Asian American female activists as a necessary part of religious education, Asian American women can begin to grasp embodiments of strength and change in female forms. Susan Ahn Cuddy is one such example. Cuddy is the first Asian American woman to serve in active military duty. Daughter of “Dosan” or Ahn Chang Ho, a celebrated Korean independence activist and co-author of the Korean national anthem, Cuddy’s path as an activist and boundary breaker was paved with the efforts of her freedom fighter parents. Despite being denied officer training, Cuddy worked in naval intelligence with the goal of Korea’s independence in mind. Furthermore, as a member of the national security agency, Cuddy broke racial and gender barriers. She states when she first reported for duty in D.C., an alert was circulated because she was the only Asian American who had ever received such high-level clearance.¹² She has been awarded numerous national and international awards for courage and activism.

The third example of an unsung Asian American hero is an athlete. Dr. Sammy Lee, a second generation Korean American and diver, became the first Asian American Olympic gold medalist. His journey was wrought with racism in downtown Los Angeles. When customers shouted hateful and racist remarks to Lee’s parents in their small chop suey shop, Lee remembers his father addressing his son with a determined and calm resolution: “We have to take this stuff in order to make a living...become a doctor...a champion diver.”¹³ Lee famously practiced diving into a pool of sand because the community did not welcome him in the swimming pools with his white peers. He recalls his coach as a “bigot”¹⁴, an enigma of a man who simultaneously coached him to gold, but was racist to his core. There are universal truths that one can learn from Lee’s struggle. However, for Asian Americans the lesson is quite visceral. Asian American youth continue to struggle with racism today. Though it may appear to no longer be as blatantly verbal in its attack, it continues to be destructive on their self-esteem and self-worth. The Children of Immigrant Longitudinal Study (CILS) and emerging studies on ethnic identities of Asian Americans show research that confirms the connection between racism, self-esteem, and self-harm behavior among Asian American youth. The tenacious example of Lee who pursued his dream despite the odds stacked against him is a testament for the possibility of Asian American youth to succeed in the face of discrimination and racism, particular while negotiating the direction of one’s own dreams with that of their immigrant parents.

Finally, the last example of an activist in the Asian American community is one who sees no separation between his civic duties and his religious conviction. Syngman Rhee is considered

¹¹ Diane C. Fujino, *Samurai among Panthers* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), xiii.

¹² <http://iamkoream.com/tag/susan-ahn-cuddy/>

¹³ Juan Williams, *My Soul Looks Back in Wonder* (New York, NY: AARP, 2004), 45.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

both a political activist and religious pillar in the Korean American society. Rhee is an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and an advocate for Korea's unification. It was this conviction that played a significant role in his position to serve as moderator to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) General Assembly in 2000. A long time social justice activist who marched with Martin Luther King, Jr., Rhee was instrumental in developing the Asian American Ministry and Mission Center at Union Presbyterian Seminary and grounds his continued activism on models of reconciliation. He famously stated that reconciliation is building a bridge, but in order to do so one must be willing to lie down and touch both sides so that others can cross back and forth.¹⁵ Rhee's message of reconciliation is a powerful one that speaks to what many in the Asian American community have already accomplished. In particular, it affirms what Asian American women, particularly immigrants, have and continue to experience daily. The self-sacrifice that is often a pre-requisite for women within the patriarchal interpretation and experience of Asian American Christianity often goes unrecognized. While Rhee does not condone such sacrifice, he does acknowledge that the lack of freedom for one affects the entire community. Thus, Rhee's message brings attention to the role of each individual, particularly the lying down of *all* people including those with privilege and power, for the sake of reconciliation for everyone.

True to its historic legacy, in recent years the Asian American community has fought fiercely among widespread social justice movements, such as Occupy Wall Street and The Dream Act. Though OWS has been criticized for its too-wide range of grievances and lack of focus, it has also offered different groups platforms to present their issues. Some of the Asian American coalitions that have joined OWS include Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence (CAAAC) and New York Immigration Coalition (NYIC).¹⁶ Both have worked towards voicing the concerns of the larger Asian American community around urgent issues such as immigration and discrimination. The Dream Act, legislation that assists undocumented youth in a path towards citizenship and education, has also become a hot button topic for the Asian American activist community. Groups like the National Korean American Service and Education Consortium (NAKASEC), Korean American Resource Coalition (KARC), and the Asian American Justice Center (AAJC), have joined the movement by highlighting the voices of undocumented youth within their own community. The courage of these youth to declare their undocumented status in order to push forward legislation that could potentially change the lives of many, including those outside the Asian American community, is a testament to the heritage of the larger Asian American movement as well as the history of the Asian American community with immigration legislation.¹⁷

Missing from this activism, however, is the strong voice of the Asian American church. While recognizing that there are some Asian American religious institutions that have been involved from the inception of both the OWS and The Dream Act, one must ask: how many Asian American faith communities have integrated political activism and civic engagement into actual religious education in the church setting? Though the argument against politics in the pulpit can certainly be made, as an ethnic community that has historically been affected by issues

¹⁵ <http://archive.wfn.org/2001/06/msg00267.html>

¹⁶ <http://newamericamedia.org/2011/10/asians-joined-occupy-wall-street-movement.php>

¹⁷ The Hart and Celler Act of 1965 permitted Asian immigrants to enter the United States after decades of exclusion.

of immigration, discrimination, deportation, and education legislation, the Asian American faith community and its religious educators simply cannot afford to be silent partners in the dialogue that directly affects its members. Thus, the goal and hope for religious education within the Asian American context is to provide creative pedagogical strategies that are informed by a specific Asian American socio-religious heritage. It is necessary, therefore, to claim and retell the legacy of social justice that exists within the Asian American history.

Part of this lack of involvement may stem from simple weariness. The immigrant life has been well documented as being full of inescapable macro and micro aggressive racism, discrimination, and overall discomfort and pain.¹⁸ Asian American and Asian ethnic congregations are not only places of worship, but also places where individuals can take respite from racism. There is fear that bringing activism into the church may lead to a church that can no longer remain a place of refuge. Part of counteracting this legitimate concern is to integrate the stories of formative figures from Asian American movements, their lives, causes, and passion, into the already narrative format of Asian American religious education in order to revitalize our weary community. The Asian American church's history is full of activism, from the Korean American church's activism towards a Korea free from colonial rule to Japanese American churches and their struggle to re-enter their communities post-internment through the sharing of cultural education. The "call" for Asian American religious educators is to share and teach these narratives and histories alongside the Christian tradition. Told together these histories offer a more holistic picture of our multiple heritages, instilling pride and self-esteem into a community struggling against a society that often does not even acknowledge injustices towards Asian Americans. We gain strength when we wrestle with our present and hope for our future while retelling stories of our unsung heroes from our collective past. A response to such a specific call, therefore, equips both current and future generations to be religiously and socially engaged in their transformative faith identity.

The Asian American church cannot separate its political or civic history and activism of its people from its identity. It is a vital part of how and why the Asian American church has thrived and, most importantly, why and how it began. As the Asian American church carves out a uniquely Asian American theological identity, it should also reclaim its collective history and the lives of the many Asian American activists who fought to make the right to struggle for such visible identities possible. In doing so, we reclaim a part of our history and gain strength from a place and people that are uniquely ours. Reintegrating Asian American unsung heroes into Asian American religious education provides Asian American youth with familiar faces and common struggles to claim proudly. This connection has the power to develop a stronger sense of self-esteem and a healthy ethnic identity that is vital to their mental and spiritual well-being. It also teaches a unique history that often goes unacknowledged in the education system at large. Thus, reintegrating and reincorporating Asian American civic and political activists into the living narrative of Asian American religious education bridges together its unique and storied past with a commitment towards a justice oriented future.

¹⁸ Tiffany Yip and Sara Douglass, "Ethnic Identity of Asian American Youth: Process, Context, and Outcomes", in *Asian American and Pacific Islander Children and Mental Health*, eds. Frederick T. L. Leong et al. (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011), 82-83.

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