

Report on Biblical Scholarship and Contextual Interpretation of the Bible  
in Hong Kong  
by N.N.H. Tan

This report is an outcome of the ICI Forum for the ISBL in Berlin (2017). The topic was “Fostering Biblical Scholarship” and the panel participants were asked to talk about how our different geographical locations and contexts have influenced our scholarship. I have personally taken the task further in measuring the output of biblical scholarship in Hong Kong. In particular, this report focuses on the contributions of Hong Kong scholars to contextual interpretations of the Bible. I hope this report can serve as a resource and also as a stimulus and encouragement to biblical scholarship from this region. I will start by reporting on the state of biblical scholarship in Hong Kong as at July 2017, followed by a delineation of current approaches to contextual interpretation.

### I. Biblical Scholarship in Hong Kong<sup>1</sup>

Hong Kong has a Theological Education Association made up of a group of seminaries and Bible schools that come together to offer mutual support, share resources and conduct annual meetings for all their faculties and students. There are currently fifteen listed member schools. From these fifteen schools, thirty-five biblical scholars hold doctoral degrees from accredited institutions and teach in a full-time capacity. There are three other reputable and established seminaries and one institution that are not members of this Association, and between them they have four biblical scholars, bringing the total to thirty-nine.

A quick glance at the titles of theses and published works (where available) from these scholars indicates most of their output tends towards exegetical interpretation for theological purposes. Western methods of interpretation can be assumed to underpin this output. There is no work contributing directly to a contextual interpretation of the Bible currently being produced by the scholars of these institutions, except for the Divinity School of Chung Chi College, the CUHK. I refer to Gerald West’s definition of “contextual interpretation” as consideration of the geographical and socio-economic, political and cultural contexts of people who interpret scripture through their experiences, rather than from views determined by the church and traditional western scholarship. Contextual interpretation is a reading that takes the experiences of people seriously and is also about “reading the scriptures *with* the people” rather than merely “*for* the people”.<sup>2</sup> It is about reinterpreting the biblical texts against the grain, against conventional interpretations whose results do not tally with the experiences of the lives of the people. So while there are a couple of publications that deal with Chinese culture theologically, these are not on Chinese culture and biblical interpretation *per se*. And while several others deal with a scriptural text and its implications for Chinese culture –that is not what we are dealing

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<sup>1</sup> I have engaged two helpers, namely Chan Kit Yee and Yu Wing Hang to help me consolidate the final data presented here. They have also searched and made a list of the academic publication done by the biblical scholars in Hong Kong.

<sup>2</sup> Italics are for emphasis, as argued by Gerald West, in *The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2003), 25–26.

with here, for they do not contribute to a reconsideration of the earlier interpretations in light of the Hong Kong culture and context.<sup>3</sup>

## II. Contributions by Archie C. C. Lee and Philip P. Y Chia

The data shows that contributions by Archie C. C. Lee, Philip P.Y. Chia and a piece by Nancy N.H. Tan, do contribute directly to a contextual reinterpretation of the Bible.

### 1. Archie C. C. Lee.

First, Archie C. C. Lee (aka “Li Chichung”) is well-known for his “cross-textual” method of interpretation. Lee has already published many works on this method, which is now identified with his name. Lee started proposing cross-textual biblical interpretation in the early 1990s and has since developed and fine-tuned the approach. His article on the subject can be found in the *Oxford Handbook of Biblical Interpretation* (2012: 125–32). This is probably the most up-to-date and complete version and is thus used here as the main reference for this report.

Lee’s approach is based on exploring the presuppositions and historical development behind the missionary endeavour of translating the Bible. We can look at this on two levels: first the task of translation; and second, the consequences of western colonization. Lee explains that when translating the Bible, translator/s are faced with the challenge of choosing which words to use from the target language. He labels the target culture as “A” and the biblical culture as “B”. It is obvious that translator/s cannot invent new words because the locals will not understand them. In the process of translation, a “platform” is created whereby “A” and “B” meet, resulting in the final product – the translated Bible. Lee argues from the history of Bible translation projects in both China and India, where translator/s constantly employ religio-cultural symbols in “A” to signify the meanings and concepts of “B”. This is called a “cross-fertilization of texts”. Lee also argues that the Bible in its final reception is a text that has absorbed all the religio-cultural symbols whereby each book was composed, transmitted, and canonized. The second level is coming to terms with how western colonization of the east has monopolized interpretation of the Bible and promoted itself as “authoritative”, devaluing and rejecting all other cultures, and imposing the western cultural interpretation of the Bible as “canonical”.

Hence, we find the western mission work of translating the Bible faced a conundrum that was largely self-imposed. While they must devalue the target religions and culture in order to uphold the Bible as the only canon, they also need to use local religio-cultural symbols to communicate the message of the Bible. Unfortunately, most of the time, the earlier emphasis takes priority and the Bible becomes an enemy of the target culture. One crucial example Lee raises is the translation of the ideology

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<sup>3</sup> Wong Fook Kwong, “Chinese Culture and Ecological Theology,” *CGST Journal* 53 (2012): 79–108; “Climate Change: A Theological Reflection,” *CGST Journal* 51 (2011): 131–52. Wong also considers the current social situation of the poor in Hong Kong before reinterpreting the debt laws in the Pentateuch, but does not go further in re-integrating the data in relation to the poor in Hong Kong, for this is not the aim of his paper. In “A Reflection on the Nature and Theological Basis for Poverty and Debt Laws in the Pentateuch,” *Review and Expositor* 111, no. 2 (2014): 187–95. Doi: 10.1 177/0034637314524533

of “*lung*”, which in Chinese culture denotes prosperity and goodness, but which was then mistakenly translated by Morrison as “dragon”, equating it with Leviathan and the dragon that signifies chaos and evil in the Bible. This mistranslation has resulted in Christianity declaring war on the symbolism of the dragon in Chinese culture to this day.

Lee’s approach is a re-affirmation that the Chinese/Asian classical texts are of equal canonical value to the Bible. Regardless of whether they were written or orally transmitted, these texts form the core of the ethical and ethnic values of the peoples in Asia. He argues: “These texts survived in the minds of learned intellectuals; they are embedded in the vernacular expressions of ordinary citizens and preserved in folk festivals and daily practices of the people.” The fact that most of these Chinese/Asian Classical texts are already embedded in the translated Chinese Bible means giving them equal value and reinstating the values of Chinese culture through Bible reading is now a valuable task for readers.

In his later career, Lee supervised eleven doctoral students from Mainland China. Among them, six used the cross-textual method to read the Chinese classical texts alongside the biblical books for their doctoral theses. Their topics included the creation stories, the flood narratives, the psalms and laments and the apocalyptic texts. Almost all have also presented and/or written published essays and articles using this method. Besides those that appear in Lee’s *festschrift*, there are six other published articles to date.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, Lee argues in his earlier works that the “A” context need not necessarily be a “classical” text *per se*, but can be a cultural experience of the community. One example is his reading of the book of Lamentations alongside the laments of the mothers of the Tiananmen Massacre.<sup>5</sup> His work is exemplary for our students as they engage in a more conscious reading of the Bible in relation to Chinese culture, and to events affecting Hong Kong today.

## 2. Philip P. Y. Chia

Chia engages with postcolonial interpretation of the Bible and inevitably wrestles with the powers of imperialism in his interpretations.<sup>6</sup> Regardless of whether he will

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<sup>4</sup>Nancy N.H. Tan and Ying Zhang (eds.), *Crossing Textual Boundaries—A Festschrift in Honor of Professor Archie Chi Chung Lee for His Sixtieth Birthday* (Hong Kong SAR: Divinity School of Chung Chi College, 2010.08).

<sup>5</sup> Archie C. C. Lee, “Mothers Bewailing: Reading Lamentations, in C. V. Stichele, and T. Penner, (eds.), *Her Master’s Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse* (Atlanta: SBL, 2005), pp. 195–210.

<sup>6</sup> Some of his publication include: “Postcolonialization and Recolonization”, *Biblical Interpretation* 7.2 (1999): 174–81; “Local and Global: Biblical Studies in a ‘Runaway World’”, *Sino-Christian Studies: An International Journal of Bible, Theology & Philosophy* 1.1 (2006): 83–106; “The Sun Never Sets on ‘Marx’? (Marx) Colonizing Postcolonial Theory (Said/Spivak/Bhabba)?” *Journal for the Study of New Testament* 30.4 (2008): 481–88. He published four Chinese books with titles related to the Bible and justice in the period 2009–2011. The translated English titles are as follows: *The Open Text: On the Relation Between Biblical Studies and Public Theology* (Hong Kong: Centre for Advanced Biblical Studies and Application; 2009); *Justice: The*

admit it or not, I consider him an activist and a patriot of both his homeland of Malaysia and also the place he has also called home: Hong Kong. His premise is straightforwardly prophetic in nature: i.e., that the Bible is, and has from its origin been, an engagement of the events affecting the people of Israel, the Jews, God-fearers and believers of Jesus Christ of its time. The Bible is a down-to-earth book that struggles with nationhood, identity, confrontation with political powers, and also, most importantly, upholds the moral values of piety, responsibility, justice and righteousness, along with the spiritual dimension that undergirds its viability in addressing human beings where they are.

He is critical of both the colonizing powers that characters in the biblical books resist, and also the dominant voices that silence dissidents. Recently, his works (several unpublished lectures) confront the oppression and injustice of anti-democracy in Hong Kong and the subversion of the local Malaysian Chinese in their struggle to maintain and preserve their distinctive local identity as citizens of Malaysia.

He argues that the Bible should be “an Asian public Bible” – and challenges Christians to read it as part of a public engagement with the events that unfold in the everyday life of all Asians. In particular, since the Bible has been viewed negatively by the Chinese people as an imperialising and foreign document, he recommends that its moral values should be at the forefront of any re-interpretation, so as to make “biblical wisdom” attractive to the Chinese people.

In Chia’s “Biblical Studies in the Rising Asia: An Asian Perspective on the Future of the Biblical Past,” [*Sino-Christian Studies* 12 (2011): 33–65], he lists 10 topics for Bible readers to engage in when making a contextual interpretation. These are: 1. Peace and Conflict in Asia; 2. Covenant and Federalism in Union Politics; 3. Creation and Environment in Social and Global Governance; 4. Globalization and the Global Kingdom of Empire Construction; 5. Commandments and the Rule of Law in a Liberal Democratic System; 6. Communities and Neighbours in Personal, Social, National and Global Ethics; 7. Spirituality and Cultural Values in Social Equality and Justice; 8. Freedom and Responsibility in Civil Society; 9. Knowledge and Power in Science and Technology Advancement; and 10. Filial Piety and Education in Moral Social Structures (2011: 58–63).

He admits these topics require interdisciplinary work, which many Asian scholars are hesitant to undertake. There is no particular “method” that Chia adopts. His approaches are varied and all carry a passionate persuasion that biblical interpretation must engage with the injustices experienced in the events shaping our world today. He continues to proffer and promote hermeneutical principles to engage the scriptures with the lived experiences of his homeland.

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*Hebrew Bible and the World* (Hong Kong: Centre for Advanced Biblical Studies and Application; 2010); *Public Turn: Bible and Public* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong: Centre for Advanced Biblical Studies and Application, 2011); *God Amidst Chaos: Reading Job with a Public Sense* (Hong Kong: Taiwan Baptist Theological Seminary Lecture Series, 2011).

### 3. Nancy N. H. Tan

I have benefited tremendously from my two predecessors mentioned above. Learning from their contributions in the academic world is one thing, but seeing them live out their words has impacted me profoundly. I started working on feminist biblical interpretations only after I joined the Divinity School of CCC. It has taken me some time, and in the last few years, I have taken on a project to read the scriptures with the marginalized, and in particular with the sex working mothers in Hong Kong. I have published an article on reading the story of Solomon and the two prostitutes in 1 Kgs 3:18–25 with the sex workers. That work seeks to reclaim the voices of the sex workers in the story, and to dismantle the prejudice against sex workers that is found in many commentaries and interpretations. Meanwhile, I am consolidating other reading exercises on several biblical texts and hope to publish them in the near future.

### Conclusion

All the works mentioned above take the living experiences of everyday lives seriously and as the foreground to reading the scriptures. These experiences do not get subsumed by the biblical texts, but instead become the highlight, illuminating the interpretation of these texts. At the same time, all these works also take seriously lower textual criticism, historical-critical methods, as well as the other exegetical methods, just as all biblical scholars do. While the western traditional methods of interpretation of the Bible have taught us to appreciate the background and context of the biblical period, at the same time, these methods did not come about “purely” (regardless of whether the sources were from fundamentalist, evangelical or liberal tracks), but were equally loaded with an imperialistic motivation to suppress the non-western perspectives.

As mentioned earlier, West argues that contextual interpretation is not for its own sake, but that it allows the marginalized to make their voices (and experiences) heard through their interpretations. Indeed, I think the purpose is to confront the conventional interpretations that continue to be used by faith communities to marginalize particular groups. Oftentimes, and unbeknownst to scholars and readers, interpretations promote prejudice, hatred and misunderstanding of marginalized groups in our society. In a way, the task of contextual interpretation is to expose the violence that we continue to enact through our interpretations – and which for the most part we take for granted. It is to bring to light this violence and to consciously acknowledge that if we want to claim the biblical texts as redemptive and for all humanity, we need to ask more difficult questions than traditional western interpretations have taught us. It is an approach to reclaim our Asian voices, lives and culture.