



*Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion*

**Singing Bluegrass in a Mother Tongue:  
A Pedagogy for Asian North American Churches**

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**Part of**  
*New Overtures: Asian North American Theology in the 21st Century*  
*(Essays in Honor of Fumitaka Matsuoka),*  
**edited by Eleazar S. Fernandez**

**I. Introduction**

*We are sailing onward, sailing, sailing o'er the foam  
We are talking to the captain as the angry billows hum  
Soon, yes soon, we'll reach the harbor, and we're safely o'er the tide  
We are going onward to the other side.*

From *On the Sea of Life* by Sloan Angel

Bluegrass would appear to be an unusual metaphor for a discussion about Asian North American pedagogy.<sup>1</sup> It is not a genre of music by and about Asian North Americans, nor a popular one among them. Notwithstanding that, I use it in this essay to explore the characteristics of Asian North American pedagogy and its future. I first got to know about bluegrass music through my spouse who is from the mountains of Appalachia, the birthplace of bluegrass. Anyone who has visited the hills of Appalachia, especially central Appalachia, would be moved by its beauty and, at the same time, shocked by its poverty-stricken life. According to ABC news, isolated pockets in central Appalachia have three times the national poverty rate and the shortest life span in the nation.<sup>2</sup> The poverty and life circumstances there are beyond the imagination of many people living in this country. But if one pays attention to music from the area, especially bluegrass gospel, one immediately notices that the music is upbeat; it's about hope for a better tomorrow in God's reign and realm. In the midst of uncertain and unpleasant circumstances, Appalachians sing about perseverance, and I find this a refreshing focus for Asian North American pedagogy. Bluegrass also provides great insights for Asian North American church's pedagogy because, first, bluegrass is a type of music created through a transformation of different soulful musical genres of at least two marginalized groups of people, namely, that of poor white Americans and that of African Americans; second, bluegrass music improvises using

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<sup>1</sup> A major suggestion I make in this paper is that Asian North American church pedagogy should be intercultural in its approach to other racial and ethnic minority groups. A good example of embodied interculturality is bluegrass music. I thus frame discussion about pedagogy for Asian North American churches using bluegrass metaphors. Bluegrass music's ontogeny provides a backdrop for thinking out loud about intercultural pedagogy's merits.

<sup>2</sup> "A Hidden America: Children of the Mountains: Diane Sawyer Reports on America's Children Living in Poverty in Appalachia," 20/20, ABC News aired on February 19, 2009. Available at <http://abcnews.go.com/2020/story?id=6845770&page=1>.

various instruments, each of which sometimes leads. Utilizing the origin, creation, and improvisational style of bluegrass music as metaphors, this essay explores the distinctive features of Asian North American church pedagogy. Then, after analyzing the history and practices of Asian North American communal pedagogy, I explore pedagogical strategies to regenerate and strengthen future generations of those who metaphorically sing bluegrass in their mother tongues.

## II. The Characteristics of Asian North American Church's Pedagogy

*Bluegrass was turning back to the great heritage of older tunes that our ancestors brought into the mountains before the American Revolution.*<sup>3</sup>

Bluegrass has roots in Scottish, English, Welsh, and Irish traditional music. When the early immigrants from that region came to this continent, many of them settled in the hills of Appalachia whose topography eschewed easy transit. Living in isolation in the lonesome hollows of the Appalachians, they remembered Celtic melodies of their motherlands and fashioned their stories of hardship through them, thus producing a vigorous pioneer music of their own.<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, Asian North Americans also kept many of the cultural values that they or their ancestors brought from their motherlands to North America and developed their own unique pedagogy around faith communities: their pedagogy is holistic, communal and ontological in

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<sup>3</sup> Alan Lomax, 'Bluegrass Background: Folk Music with Overdrive,' *Esquire* 52 (Oct. 1959): 108. Quoted from Robert Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown: The Making of the Old Southern Sound* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 62.

<sup>4</sup> Wayne Erbsen, *Rural Roots of Bluegrass: Songs, Stories and History* (Asheville, North Carolina: Native Ground Music, 2003), 13.

terms of nature and methodology.<sup>5</sup> A good education integrates the past, the present, and the future *together* and helps learners develop their own pedagogy. In many senses, Asian North American pedagogy church is structured to help its members uphold past experiences from their motherlands, incorporate them in their new life circumstances at a new place, and thus develop something new for the future. Such an approach to education is by nature holistic, and it is greatly influenced by the education of our motherlands.

Unlike religious education of the white mainline church where religious education is narrowly focused on Christian knowledge and identity formation in classroom contexts, Asian North American religious education practiced in churches has a much broader scope, and takes holistic approaches. In this sense it is kith and kin to education from Appalachia, where one's identity is forged through hardship, but translated through music coupled with communal optimism about a new tomorrow. The church's theology was originally a musical catechesis that accentuated a new tomorrow despite the snarls of industry, the coalmine, or the economy. This entailed a sense of community that gave new oomph to incarnational theology. As John Wesley ventured, "Joy from heaven to earth come down" (see "Love Divine All Love's Excelling") was an ever-present reality. On a similar note, one immediately finds that Asian North American faith communities, especially Christian churches, provided more than Christian education to their

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<sup>5</sup> According to my own research, the current faith education of motherlands, especially Korean religious education, has lost many of these characteristics. However, both Asian North American pedagogy and Asian North American women's pedagogy still hold many of these characteristics. See, Boyung Lee, "A Philosophical Anthropology of the Communal Person: A Postcolonial Feminist Critique of Confucian Communalism and Western Individualism in Korean Protestant Education," Ph.D. Dissertation, Boston College (2004), and Boyung Lee, "Re-Creating Our Mothers' Dishes: Asian and Asian North American Women's Pedagogy," in *Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women's Theology and Religion*, ed. Jung Ha Kim, Seung Ai Yang, Rita Nakashima Brock, and Kwok Pui Lan (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 293-308.

members. The church was a community center where early Asian North Americans immigrants found a stable and relatively safe haven for their hard lives as well as a place of worship, evangelism, and religious instruction.<sup>6</sup> Many Asian North American churches offered English classes for the adults and motherland language classes for children. Church education has been the agent of acculturation and cultural retention. Even after one hundred years of immigration history, one can easily observe that most Korean churches offer Korean language classes for their children on Saturday mornings, as well as English, citizenship test preparation classes, and voting and census education for adults during the week. In other words, the scope of their religious education is beyond explicitly religious content taught in classrooms, and encompasses skills for life and identity formation for Asian North Americans as Christians, coupled with civil education. The wide range and scope of Asian North American pedagogy is very faithful to the meaning of education.

Asian North American pedagogy as holistic pedagogy is based on and utilizes a multidimensional concept of curriculum, one that is esteemed by several educational theorists. This arguably moves beyond my bluegrass metaphor, but imagine if you will, a banjo, mandolin and bass all playing variants of a melody simultaneously and each as the lead. Asian North American education pedagogically frames topics with various methodological emphases. Similarly, noted curriculum theorist Elliott W. Eisner, says that each school offers students three different curricula: the explicit curriculum, one that is the actual content, consciously and intentionally presented as the teachings of the school; the implicit curriculum, one that through

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<sup>6</sup> Wenh-In Ng, "Pacific-Asian North American Religious Education," in *Multicultural Religious Education*, ed. Barbara Wilkerson (Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press, 1997), 193-194.

its environment includes the way teachers teach and interact with students; and the null curriculum, those ideas and subjects in educational programs that are sidestepped. By leaving out options and alternatives, the school narrows students' perspectives and the range of their thoughts and actions. Thus the explicit curriculum, which is often regarded as the entire curriculum, is only one facet of teaching. In fact, Eisner points out that the implicit and the null curricula might have more influence over students than does the explicit curriculum.<sup>7</sup>

Indulge me in a digression by way of illustration: although Asian North Americans have been in the United States and Canada for over two hundred years, there are hardly any published materials including religious education text books and curricula explicitly written by North American authors from Asian North American perspectives. Several years ago, eight Asian North American religious educators from Canada and the United States wrote an anthology on Asian North American religious education – we are still looking for a publisher. Every publisher we have contacted has told us the project is important, but it does not have a market because Asian North Americans do not have one common language, as presumably do African Americans, who may primarily use English (French?), and Latino/a Americans, who may primarily use Spanish (Portuguese?). In sum, the mainline religious education leaders seem to hold onto an unsaid assumption that Asian North American experiences in religious education are pedagogically insightful solely for Asian North Americans, and thus despite our long presence here we still do not have many published resources, which is to say that we can only strum one instrument rather than cultivating ways to sing compellingly with banjo, washboard and whatever else. My point:

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<sup>7</sup> Elliott Eisner, *The Educational Imagination: On the Design and Evaluation of School Program* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1985), 97.

Although there are not many opportunities for explicit curriculum resource development, Asian North Americans have been teaching themselves using implicit and null curricula as major resources, thereby transforming their daily life contexts and activities into holistic classroom and teaching moments. When written texts were available only for their neighbor's education or focused on other's experiences as if they were universal for Asian North Americans, Asian North Americans used their own lived-world experience – e.g., Asian religio-cultural and socio-political traditions, Asian myth, folktales, songs, poems, proverbs, and teachings from different Asian religions – for their own and their children's education.<sup>8</sup> For example, every year a local church located in the China Town of San Francisco hosts cultural nights for the wider community. The events are composed of Chinese dances, music, poetry, storytelling, etc., performed by young people who belong to Chinese language schools and Sunday schools in the area. Although many of the participants are not Christians, every year the church coordinates with the two groups to let the wider community know about their cultural heritages, and to teach their children, whether they are 1<sup>st</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> generation Chinese in America, and thus convey Chinese cultural values and ways of communal living. Similar broad educational opportunities are provided year after year for Asian North Americans through this church's annual bazaar and festivals. For example, a participant in the annual bazaar of the Buena Vista United Methodist church, a Japanese and Pan-Asian congregation located in the San Francisco Bay Area, reports:

It was unspoken that the *mochi* making was the symbolic act of promising to be with each other in the coming year as a church family, to welcome in the *oshogatsu* (New Year) in relationship with each other. As the various stages of *mochi* pounding took place, there

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<sup>8</sup> Kwok Pui Lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2000), 38-50.

would be stories shared about past years and how it had been long ago – without the machinery, purely by hand. Funny incidents would be recalled, and times of extraordinary happenings would be memories brought out and shared with pleasure and pride.<sup>9</sup>

In short, as Maria Harris, feminist Christian religious educator, ventures, everything that a church does – fellowship meetings, informal gatherings, small group meetings, and so on – should be understood as curricula,<sup>10</sup> and in this sense, Asian North Americans have developed much broader and deeper curricula for their own education. In other words, if White congregations' emphasis is that of the explicit curriculum; some congregations demarcate between theory and lived faith, Asian North American churches are attentive to faith education's implicit and null curricula. This segues to my bluegrass metaphor, for the gist of bluegrass music is to sing the Lord's music as though tomorrow is today.

Another distinctive feature of the pedagogy of Asian North American churches is also communal in both its purpose and process, and this also has kinship with bluegrass gospel, which emphasizes personal salvation but typically links God's saving history with collective transformation. Unlike individualism, which values each person's individuality and independence, the value of the individual in communal Asian societies depends on how well a person adopts communal norms and functions to promote social harmony. Attachments, relatedness, connectedness, unity, and dependency among people are much more important than are independence and individuality. *I'd Rather Live by the Side of the Road* comes to mind as a

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<sup>9</sup> Ellen Tanouye, "Festivals: Celebrating Community, Story, and Identity," in *People on the Way: Asian North Americans Discovering, Christ, Culture, and Community*, ed. David Ng (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Judson Press, 1996), 186.

<sup>10</sup> Maria Harris, *Fashion Me a People: Curriculum in the Church* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 63.



statement of faith, where personal mission is conjoined with the commonweal. Similarly, anyone who has paid attention to Korean linguistics can easily find that Koreans rarely use the I-ness words such as “I,” “my,” and “mine.” They instead like to use the word *uri* meaning *we*. Almost everything is called “our [something],” instead of “my [something].” For example, when one refers to one’s wife, one does not say “my wife”; rather one says, “*our* wife.” We-ness language is a source of comfort for Koreans. They are uncomfortable with I-ness language.<sup>11</sup> This We-ness language use is also salient among Korean North Americans including 1.5 and second generations. For example, I noticed several 1.5 generation Korean Americans, who used to be members of my young adult group, switched their I language to We language as soon as they changed their conversation from English to Korean. I asked them whether they noticed their own change, and most of them said, “No,” because using We language while they speak in Korean is very natural.

Although the use of what I call We linguistics is a unique Korean practice, the importance of community is true for most Asian and Asian North American cultures.<sup>12</sup> In their family-centered communities, Asian and Asian North Americans venture that “our family” means all of the I’s melted into one “we.” Here, “we” does not mean the coexistence of “I” and “you” as independent individual units; rather it indicates that “you” and “you,” and “you” and “I” are the same reality: “I and you exist not as separate units but as a unified one. At the moment when two

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<sup>11</sup> Sang Chin Choi and Soo Hyang Choi, “Cheong: The Socio-emotional Grammar of Koreans” (unpublished manuscript, Seoul: Chung Ang University, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> According to Geert Hofstede, who measured the extent of individualism and communalism in 66 countries, most Asian countries like Korea, China, Taiwan, Japan, and Singapore, are comparatively highly communal societies. Geert Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (London: McGraw Hill, 1991).

individuals abandon their own perspective and put themselves in their partner's shoes, they become one, not a separate two."<sup>13</sup> A good example of such communal selfhood is found in Japanese linguistics. The English word "self" is usually translated by the Japanese word *jibun* and vice versa. However, unlike the English word for self, *jibun* connotes "one's share of the shared life space;"<sup>14</sup> that is, oneself is an inseparable part of our selves. When two Japanese people exchange greetings by asking how the other party is, the customary way of saying it is "How is *jibun*?" which literally means, "How is ourselves?"<sup>15</sup> In sum, persons in Asian and Asian North American communal societies can be fully understood only in connection with the larger social whole: "Others are included within the boundaries of the self."<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, in Asian and Asian North American pedagogy, it is critical that communal personhood is respected, and that members feel a sense of belonging. By being with each other they acknowledge a resource of life greater than their own individuality.<sup>17</sup> An outsider may say church bazaars and festivals that seem to be too much work for the modest profits raised are not economically smart plans. However, members of those small Asian North American congregations say it is their churches' cultural and communal identity that allows such projects to

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<sup>13</sup> Soo-Won Lee, "The Cheong Space: A Zone of Non-Exchange in Korean Human Relationships," in *Psychology of the Korean People: Individualism and Collectivism*, ed. Gene Yoon and Sang-Chin Choi (Seoul: Donga Publishing Corporation, 1991), 92-94.

<sup>14</sup> Hazel R. Markus and Shinobu Kitayama, "Culture and the Self: Implications for Cognitions, Emotion, and Motivations," *Psychological Review* 98 (1991): 228.

<sup>15</sup> I thank the Rev. Mitsuho Okado, a Japanese D.Min graduate of Pacific School of Religion, for helping me understand the meaning of Jibun.

<sup>16</sup> Markus and Kitayama, "Culture and the Self," 224-253.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Yoshii, "The Buena Vista Church Bazaar: A Story within a Story," in *People on the Way*, 53.

exist. Every year all generations of folks work together, because the fellowship and bonding through sharing and storytelling strengthen their relationships.<sup>18</sup>

This communal value seems to be one of the driving forces for Asian American college students who join campus evangelical groups. According to sociologist Rebecca Kim, one out of four Evangelical college students at New York City colleges and universities are Asian American; Asian Americans constitute 70 percent of the Harvard Radcliffe Christian Fellowship; Yale's Campus Crusade for Christ is 90 percent Asian, whereas twenty years ago it was 100 percent white; the Asian American membership at Stanford's InterVarsity Christian Fellowship increased by 84 percent from 1989 to 1999, compared to a 31 percent increase in its overall membership.<sup>19</sup> Regarding this phenomenon, Kim reports:

In addition to Bible studies and worship gatherings, campus ministries offer multiple opportunities for social gatherings. They have pizza parties, special banquets, study sessions, trips to amusement parks, sports events, bonfires at the beach, and retreats into the mountains. In campus ministries, students can meet life-long friends and even find one's future spouse. As a staff member of IVCF explains, "This is not just a place of worship; it is a place of community where you develop deep bonds with people."<sup>20</sup>

In other words, whether they grew up as evangelical Christians at home or not, they find a community, a home away from home, in these evangelical campus ministries groups in which they share racial bonding, and similar communal cultural values.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Tanouye, "Festivals," 186.

<sup>19</sup> Rebecca Kim, "Asian Americans for Jesus: Changing the Face of Campus Evangelicalism," SSRC (Feb 06, 2007), 1. Available online at <http://religion.ssrc.org/reforum/Kim.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> Rebecca Kim, "Asian Americans for Jesus," 2.

<sup>21</sup> Rebecca Kim posits that for Asian Americans, campus ministries not only solve the problem of spiritual estrangement, but also shields students from marginalization as ethnic and racial minorities. Rebecca Kim, "Asian Americans for Jesus," 2-3.

Another important feature of the pedagogy of Asian North Americans that is influenced by the cultural values of their motherlands is its ontological nature. In Asia, although formal education and written texts were mostly for elite men for a long time, both elite education and stealth pedagogy of the powerless aimed at the formation of people as its purpose. For example, Confucian education, which greatly shaped both elite and non-elite education of East Asia, aimed at raising moral agents who work for the achievement of universal harmony and moral societies.<sup>22</sup> To be a moral agent an educated man should attain benevolence, the highest virtue of Confucianism, through self-cultivation and study. In other words, the purpose of education is the formation of moral agents rather than the transmission of knowledge – at least in theory.

The ontological nature of the motherlands' education often continues through the Asian North American church's work, particularly in the first generation's efforts to maintain and instill Asian identity in their children. For now, let us set aside whether the way they do this is appropriate or not, which I will discuss later in the essay. Instead, let us focus on how Asian North American churches have done it through their education. First, as stated above where the holistic nature of Asian North American pedagogy was discussed, many Asian North American churches provide English-speaking ministries for the younger generation to retain them within the boundaries of Asian North American churches. Although the church provides English-speaking ministries to promote children's Christian faith formation, the first generation also attempts to play multiple roles through language and culture school programs. The church hopes

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<sup>22</sup> Confucius, *The Analects*, VII 26. Also Tu Wei-Ming, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1985), 23.

to strengthen their children's tie with Asian culture and ethnic language.<sup>23</sup> The second model is a further development of the first. Some Asian North American churches financially support their congregation's 1.5 and 2<sup>nd</sup> second generations in starting their own ministries until they become fully independent churches. Most churches born out of such cooperative efforts become Pan Asian North American churches where Asian North Americans of different Asian national origin constitute membership.<sup>24</sup> Because 1.5 and second generations face different identity issues than those expected by their parents' generation, despite their completely English language based ministries, they wrestle with Asian identity issues as well as Christian faith formation. Borrowing from Derald Wing Sue and David Sue's now classic work on stages of bicultural identity development, members of Pan Asian North Americans are spread from the dissonance stage to the immersion and resistance stage, to the introspection stage, to the integrative and awareness stage.<sup>25</sup> In short, Asian North American faith education has been an important medium through which its members have developed, rejected, reclaimed, and integrated their Asian North American identity. Developing one's identity involves one's entire being and the world around

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<sup>23</sup> Grace Sangok Kim, "Asian North American Youth: A Ministry of Self-Identity and Pastoral Care," in *People on the Way*, 224.

<sup>24</sup> Grace Sangok Kim, "Asian North American Youth," 224.

<sup>25</sup> Derald Wing Sue and David Sue, *Counseling the Culturally Different: Theory and Practice* (New York: Wiley, 1981), 93-117. Sue and Sue list 5 different stages of the bicultural identity formation process: the conformity stage, during which immigrant children and youth abandon their motherland's cultural practices to be like their white peers; the dissonance stage, when older teens are confronted with racism, which brings about confusion, and thus questions about accepted values of the mainstream societies; the immersion and resistance stage, during which people react or even reject Western cultural values, and seek out their Asian ancestral heritage with uncritical eyes; the introspection stage, when people notice both desirable and problematic elements in both the mainstream cultural values and their ancestral heritage, and yet do not know how to integrate them; and the integrative and awareness stage, when people finally are able to integrate both cultures, and form their own identity.

one; so the pedagogy of Asian North Americans is clearly based on epistemological *and* ontological enterprise.

### III. Ongoing Challenges that the Pedagogy Asian North American Churches Face

*“It’s exciting, you know, a lot of people thinks you work against each other, and in one sense of the word you probably do, because if the fiddler’s playing a number and then the banjo comes in and he sells his chorus good, the fiddler knows he’s up against it – he’s going to have to get to work. And the mandolin, he follows to do his part as good as the banjo or better....”<sup>26</sup>*

Bill Monroe, the father of bluegrass – from whose band name, Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys, the name bluegrass originated<sup>27</sup> – describes one of the key features of the music: improvisation. Although there is a main melody, players with different instruments improvise the melody as they are inspired by each other, by the audience and by occasions. Musicians of other genres typically divide their roles as lead instrumentalist or accompanist: one instrument carries the lead while the others provide accompaniment, or all instruments play the melody together. However, in bluegrass each musician takes her or his turn, playing the melody and improvising, while the others perform accompaniment. If we evaluate different musical genres on the basis of their accompaniment styles, bluegrass easily ranks as democratic and equality-based music.

Bluegrass music’s improvisation and accompaniment style provide great insights for challenges faced by Asian North American pedagogy: Gaps between the first and following generations; hierarchical and patriarchal cultural practices; lack of concern for social justice

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<sup>26</sup> Bill Monroe, “My Life in Bluegrass,” interview with Alice Foster, Newport Folk Festival Program, 1969, 17. Quoted from Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown*, 165-167.

<sup>27</sup> James Rooney, “Bossman Bill Monroe,” in *The Bluegrass Reader*, ed. Thomas Goldsmith (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 43-45.

issues, including racism and homophobia; and rather passive relationships with other racial/ethnic minority communities, etc. In my opinion, these challenges are rooted in Asian North American communal values that expect community members to sing the community's tune rather than their own. The rhythm frequently is set by a leader to ensure communal harmony, which sometimes sacrifices the powerless and isolates cultural groups from society at large.

One of the serious and ongoing challenges Asian North American faith communities face is tension between first generation church leaders and 1.5 or second and subsequent generations.<sup>28</sup> Some members of the community, including pastors and religious educators, oversimplify the tension as a communication problem due to language barriers, however the matter is deeper and bigger. As discussed above, Asian communal cultural values require individuals to define themselves as part of the community and to subordinate personal goals to those of the community. Attachments, relatedness, connectedness, oneness, and dependency among people are much more important than independence or individual autonomy. Those who pursue only their own benefit are easily expelled from a community's psyche. In order to create harmony in community life each member is expected to suppress her or his own desires and emotions, and to give heed to others' desires and emotions. However, the values of harmony and community are based on a hierarchical view. The hierarchy of superior and inferior maintains the orderliness and harmony of relationship.<sup>29</sup> The superior partners have the rights and duties of educating the inferior partners, and the inferior partners have obligations but no rights. In these

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<sup>28</sup> Wenh-In Ng, "Pacific-Asian North American Religious Education," 204.

<sup>29</sup> Theresa Kelleher, "Confucianism," in *Women in World Religions*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 138.

hierarchical relationships, the inferior ones are forced to sacrifice for the value of harmony. The superior, older generation is wiser and should be listened to, as they will guide the younger and not-yet wise generation.

First-generation Asian North Americans bring these cultural assumptions and try to impose them on their children and younger generations of church members, but the youths learn that autonomy and independence are virtues through their school education, so tension is inevitable. “Traditional values like respecting older and more senior adults often make it difficult for younger members to be heard, let alone be allowed to make suggestions and decisions on an equal footing.”<sup>30</sup> Especially if the younger people are in the conformity stage of their bicultural identity development, the tension between the groups will not easily be resolved.

The rapid growth of Asian North American evangelical groups on college campuses can be looked at from this cultural gap perspective. According to Rebecca Kim, for example, churched second generation Korean and Chinese Americans are not happy in their parents’ churches. Many find the first generation led immigrant church to be patriarchal, hierarchical, divisive, dry, rigid, and disconnected to their cultural and spiritual needs. Thus, as soon as they leave home for college younger Asian North Americans seek out spaces and opportunities to “do their own thing”: Campus ministries for Asian North American evangelicals are most often organized by the second generation to address their own issues in their own ways under their own leadership.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Wenh-In Ng, “Pacific-Asian North American Religious Education,” 204.

<sup>31</sup> Rebecca Kim, “Asian Americans for Jesus,” 3.



To resolve this tension between generations Asian North American pedagogy needs to rethink and broaden its purpose of education. Although churches work hard to help the younger generation develop identity through education, it is oriented toward conformity to first generation Asian identity and cultural values. The contrast between their own and later generation's identification as Asians and Americans is regarded as the loss of Asia-ness by first generation Asian Americans. And as long as education is based on assumptions and expectations about conformity, the tension will never be resolved. There will be little common ground for genuine and open communications.

Another challenge that Asian North American churches face is the prevailing discrimination against women. Despite growing numbers of Asian North American women leaders in society and business, Asian North American churches have not kept up with women's issues. For example, in the United Methodist Church there are about 130 Korean American ordained clergy women, however the majority of them are serving non-Korean United Methodist churches. Moreover, among those who serve Korean United Methodist congregations, younger clergy women are serving as associate pastors, and senior members are serving small and struggling congregations that they started.<sup>32</sup> The lack of visibility of women clergy in Korean United Methodist churches is not due to their unwillingness to serve Korean American churches, but because of the churches' unwillingness to accept women as their spiritual leaders. The situation of lay women is not much different. Although it is improving, women are typically excluded from church leadership positions and decision-making bodies, so women are still

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<sup>32</sup> An oral report given by Rev. Youngok Park, the President of The Korean United Methodist Clergy Women's Association at its 2007 Annual Meeting, Honolulu, Hawaii, August 8, 2007.

exercising their leadership only in traditional women's areas. For example, many of the oldest Korean American churches from which many Korean American social leaders have come, are still waiting for the day the church elects a woman elder.

Discriminatory attitudes toward women are not limited to the first generation of Asian North American women. Every year hundreds of young Asian North American women visit plastic surgeons for hymen reconstruction before their marriage.<sup>33</sup> As we often hear from media about Islamic society's honor culture in connection with women's virginity, one may assume that young women in plastic surgery clinics are mostly Islamic women. Surprisingly, however, many of them are Korean and Chinese descendants who grew up in the United States or Canada and are about to be married to fellow Asian North American young men. The patriarchal and hierarchical view of their culture of origin puts young women at the bottom of the ladder in the community. In such a culture a women's body is considered the property of male members of the household. Under this system, women's sexuality and chastity belong to her family, and women have to live under severe sexual suppression; losing one's virginity brings shame and humiliation to the the entire family, the back bone of the community.<sup>34</sup> Although such a view toward women's sexuality has greatly changed in motherlands, it is still shaping male and female relationships in Asian North America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Asian North American church pedagogy has a huge task in front of it, for there is hardly

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<sup>33</sup> Lynn Sherr, "Like a Virgin, Young Women Undergo Surgery to 'Restore' Virginity," reported on 20/20, ABC News on June 20, 2003. Available at [www.psurg.com/abcnews-2003-06-20.htm](http://www.psurg.com/abcnews-2003-06-20.htm).

<sup>34</sup> Hyung Kyung Chung, "Han-pu-ri': Doing theology from Korean women's perspective," in *We Dare to Dream: Doing Theology as Asian Women*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Sun Ai Lee Park (Hong Kong: Asian Women's Resource Center for Culture and Theology, 1988), 140.

any curriculum written for and by Asian North Americans, especially in Asian languages, and there are no religious education resources written from a feminist perspective. Moreover, as younger generations' faith formation is more and more often shaped by campus evangelical movements, the future status of Asian North American women in faith communities based on a combination of Asian patriarchal values and evangelical theology, does not present a pleasant picture. Improving the role and status of women in Asian North American communities is a much bigger task than a faith community's religious education alone can address. It is an issue of clergy formation and lay leadership, and a task of Asian North American theological education. How do Asian North American theologians, especially theologians of non-evangelical traditions, connect better with local faith communities? What will be some of the entry points for feminist theology to impact Asian North American clergy formation? How can mainline approaches to campus ministries be connected to 1.5 and second generation Asian North Americans? These are some of the questions that many Asian North American theologians have wrestled with for a long while, and there seem not to be many clear answers yet. If these questions cannot be answered by theologians alone, with whom should we be partnered?

In sum, in Asian North American communities, a community member is expected to sing the community's tune rather than one's own. The rhythm frequently is set by a leader to ensure communal harmony, which sometimes sacrifices the powerless and isolates cultural groups from society at large. Maybe this is a time for us to learn our old song in a new way, much as bluegrass musicians play: every member takes turns leading the melody and improvising while others provide an accompaniment.

#### IV. New and Yet Old Challenges That the Pedagogy of Asian North American Churches Face

*If in the old South, with its pervasive Irish and Scots-Irish settlement, there occurred on the folk level an energetic interchange and fusion of a black-and-white song, it is perhaps because between the two traditions there were strong musical affinities, reinforced by a social system that discriminated against both groups.<sup>35</sup>*

Bluegrass has its roots in the ancient British folk music that was kept for centuries in the hills of Appalachia. However, the hillbilly music could become what is now known as bluegrass only when it was transformed by contact with African American folk traditions, jazz and blues. Poor white Americans of Appalachia and enslaved African Americans found mutual attractions in each other's music, pieces that expressed life's hardship and perseverance, and they influenced each other and developed their own distinctively unique music. Robert Cantwell, American Studies scholar, describes the contact and mutual influences as follows:<sup>36</sup>

*The African love of cross-rhythm found a home, albeit a narrow one, in off-beat accentuation, which was in the gait of Scots song and was a favorite device of Irish fiddlers; African gapped scales and modalities found an echo in those of the Gaelic tradition; folk singers from both parts of the world delight it, in different ways and in different degrees, in the high pitches, a declamatory style, vocal tension and ornament, and improvisation.*

Through intercultural exchanges of music and life stories, both found home at each other's homes, and were transformed.

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<sup>35</sup> Cantwell, *Bluegrass Breakdown*, 120.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

Asian North American church pedagogy cannot be just and compassionate pedagogy in the future unless it works with its neighbors and outgroup members both within and without. As a matter of fact, one of the downsides of Asian North American church's pedagogy being based on communal values, despite its holistic nature, is its lack of openness toward outsiders. One of the salient features of communal cultures is their clear distinction between ingroup and outgroup.<sup>37</sup> Those who have 'we' relations are considered members of the ingroup, and those who do not belong are members of outgroups. Once people are regarded as being within the boundary of 'we,' they incur instant closeness, assume social interdependence, and consequently give more favor to others inside the group.<sup>38</sup> Accordingly, the more networks people share, the smoother business flows. Although the primary purpose of these networks is to promote good social relations, since they are only ingroup-centered networks, these networks often cause conflicts between ingroup and outgroup members in a communal society. They put great emphasis on interpersonal harmony with ingroup members, but their attitudes toward outgroup members are businesslike or even antagonistic.<sup>39</sup> There are two types of outgroup members: within and without, namely, Asian North American sexual minorities, and other racial ethnic minority

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<sup>37</sup> Kyung-Hwan Min and Hai-sook Kim, "Regional Conflict in Korea: A Pathological Case of Collectivism," in Yoon and Choi, *Psychology of the Korean People*, 330-349.

<sup>38</sup> Gyuseog Han and Sug-man Choe, "Effects of Family, Region, and School Network Ties on Interpersonal Intentions and the Analysis of New Activities in Korea," in *Individualism and Collectivism: Theory, Method, and Applications*, ed. Uichol Kim, Harry C. Triandis, Cigdem Kagitcibasi, Sang-Chin Choi, and Gene Yoon (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1994), 213.

<sup>39</sup> Harry C. Triandis, *Collectivism vs. individualism: A reconceptualization*. Unpublished manuscript, University of Illinois, 75-76. Quoted from Seong-Yeul Han & Chang-Yil Ahn, "Collectivism and Individualism in Korea," in Yoon & Choi, *Psychology of the Korean People*, 302.

groups in North America. To be a just and compassionate pedagogy Asian North American religious education must be anti-homophobic and intercultural.

If generational tension and sexism are strongly implicit in the curriculum of holistic, communal and ontological Asian North American church's Pedagogy (explicit curriculum), homophobia is its strong null curriculum.<sup>40</sup> In most Asian North American cultures, sexuality is a taboo subject, one that cannot be discussed in public except in the context of procreation. For example, although Asian North Americans have inseparable ethnic and sexual identities within themselves, they are forced to separate the two publicly, and focus solely on their cultural Asianness.<sup>41</sup> Such invisibility of sexuality contributes to the creation of homophobia in heterosexual-centered Asian North American communities, and marginalizes sexual minorities. Like heterosexual Asian North Americans, sexual minorities are discriminated against due to their Asian race in a racially hierarchical society, including those of LGBTQ communities; however and unlike their counterparts, they face homophobia, too. Thus Asian North American sexual minorities are treated as the "other" by both the racial/ethnic Other and the sexual other.<sup>42</sup>

The separation of sexual identity and ethnic identity, according to Kwok Pui Lan, sometimes leads to greater tolerance for LGBT behaviors – as long as they are kept out of the public eyes.<sup>43</sup> However, if sexuality, especially homosexual identity, becomes a public topic,

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<sup>40</sup> Boyung Lee, "Teaching Justice and Living Peace: Body, Sexuality and Religious Education in Asian American Communities," *Religious Education* 101, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 402-419.

<sup>41</sup> Russell Leong, "Introduction: Home Bodies and Body Politics," in *Asian American Sexualities: Dimensions of the Gay and Lesbian Experience*, ed. Russell Leong (New York: Routledge Press, 1996) 3-5.

<sup>42</sup> Leong, "Introduction," 3.

<sup>43</sup> Kwok Pui Lan, "Gay Activism in Asian and Asian-American Churches," *The Witness* 87: 28.

those who are involved, especially the family, feel shame because they have failed to live up to the norm of the community. As discussed above, in Asian North American cultures that emphasize communal harmony as one of the highest virtues; attachments, relatedness, connectedness, oneness, and interdependency are more important than independence and individuality. Since such values require everyone to be in need of one another, people are vulnerable when facing separation.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, by not bringing up the taboo subject of sexuality and by not making public a family member's homosexuality, Asian North American parents and families try hard to meet perceived social expectations. By being openly LGBTQ, which the community neither accepts nor approves, Asian North American sexual minorities immediately become outgroup members within their own community.

The majority of Asian North American faith communities have chosen either not to speak about it, or to condemn homosexuality within the community. Kwok Pui Lan ventures that the lack of interest and research on sexuality and homosexuality among Asian North American theologians and churches is due to the long-lived influence of 19th century mores and Western missionary theology: "Many of these churches were established by Western missionaries, steeped in the Victorian sexual codes and the cult of female domesticity."<sup>45</sup> Arguably, when Asian cultural values and Victorian sexual codes met in Asian churches and Asian North American churches, it created a rigid atmosphere of sexuality, an attitude still strongly present in

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<sup>44</sup> Jae Un Kim, *The Koreans: Their Mind and Behavior* (Seoul: Kyobo Book Center, 1991), 115.

<sup>45</sup> Kwok Pui Lan, "Religion, Sexuality, and Asian and Asian American Cultures: Embodying the Spirit in Our Communities," paper delivered at the Opening Panel of PANAAWTM (Pacific, Asian, and North American Asian Women in Theology and Ministry)'s 19th Annual Conference. Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California., March 18, 2004.

Asian North American churches. For example, in the United Methodist Church the largest ethnic group besides Caucasians is Korean (about 400 congregations). However, none of these churches participates in the Reconciling Ministries Network, “a national grassroots organization that exists to enable full participation of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities in the life of the United Methodist Church.”<sup>46</sup> In fact, out of over 200 reconciling congregations and campus ministry groups, there are only two Asian American congregations, both of which are located in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Challenging homophobia needs to be an integral part of religious education in Asian North American communities. Without promoting sexual minority’s full humanity and rights, there can be no justice for Asian North Americans. Often in Asian North American justice education, anti-sexism and homophobia are considered less important than the quest against racism. The stereotypical rhetoric is that, although women’s and LGBTQ issues are important, they are not as urgent as racial justice, and thus the operative formula is *urgency vs. importance*. However, if we are serious about justice and peace these issues should be dealt with side by side, not one after the other. Again, without justice for the most marginalized people in the community, there is no complete justice.

One of the ways to deal with sexuality and homosexuality in Asian North American church education is to engage creative teaching materials. I find that using popular media is helpful because of its explicit use of sexual themes, and the distance that it provides in presenting topics around sexuality and homosexuality as other than personal and immediate community

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<sup>46</sup> Reconciling Ministries Network, Mission Statement. Available at [www.rmnetwork.org/whoarewe.php](http://www.rmnetwork.org/whoarewe.php).



issues. Particularly, Margaret Cho's stand-up comedy show, *I'm the One That I Want*, is excellent for Asian-American contexts. Cho, a Korean American woman, was a star in *All American Girl*, a sitcom that featured TV's first Asian American family. In her comedy, Cho addresses sexuality as a part of who she is, and she also talks about why her TV show lasted only one season (ABC 1994-1995): she was not "Asian enough" by ABC TV standards. Some popular media formats are already dealing with ethnic and sexual identity issues in more and more integrated ways, and may give entry points to Asian North American congregations willing to engage the topics without knowing how and where to start.

To contribute to the betterment of society in North America, Asian North American pedagogy needs to be an intercultural pedagogy. Especially, it needs to be a better neighbor of other racial ethnic minority communities. Rita Nakashima Brock, in a private conversation with me, said that the current mode of cultural discourse in theological and religious education assumes that there is one big circle with one center. Once the one main circle of the dominant culture is posited, each of the other groups form small circles around the dominant culture's circle. Most of the time small groups are only talking with the center, so they are not in conversation with any other small groups in their neighborhoods. The result is that small circles compete with each other to be the privileged dialogue partner of the dominant culture's center. Asian North American pedagogy has been the one of those competing circles.

Hyondok Choe, a Korean German philosopher, describes such a model as *multiculturalism*.<sup>47</sup> For Choe, the concept of “multicultural” was introduced to recognize and explain the reality of contemporary society where several different cultures exist as a result of migration and colonization. Compared to a monocultural model in which the dominant group of a society does not recognize the rights of minority cultures or the dominant culture discriminates against those who do not belong to the mainstream, multiculturalism appears to be a step forward. However, Choe argues that if we are really serious about the existence and rights of all, we need to explore ways to live together in peace and solidarity that accentuate the unique contributions of one and all, for “the concept of ‘multicultural’ society is helpless facing the situation of living in parallel (in ghettos, for example) and cannot develop a model for living together.”<sup>48</sup>

The concept of multiculturalism has been the dominant mode in Asian North American pedagogy, too. We have been busy lifting up our own voices, but have not paid much attention to creating new modes of communication with other voices, especially with other racial ethnic minority communities. As we continue to work for the betterment of the world out of our own history and experiences, we also need to be mindful of our neighbors. Asian North American pedagogy needs to ask whether our pedagogy brings the liberation of those who are the most marginalized among and beyond our community. When someone is suffering due to exclusion and oppression while we are pursuing justice for our own community alone, no one can take our

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<sup>47</sup> Hyondok Choe, “Introduction to Intercultural Philosophy: Its Concept and History,” in *Communication and Solidarity in the Era of Globalization: In Quest of Intercultural Philosophy*, ed. Department of Philosophy of Chonnam National University (Gwangju, Korea: Chonnam National University Press, 2006), 5-27.

<sup>48</sup> Choe, “Introduction to Intercultural Philosophy,” 16.

work for world transformation seriously. Therefore, while each community must work out its own critical norm of pedagogy, it is important that we as Christian religious educators hold ourselves accountable to one another, and test our community's norm in public discourse and constant dialogue with other communities.<sup>49</sup> To test whether our pedagogy is creating *good neighborhood*, we must ask an important question posed by Nami Kim, a Korean American feminist theologian: Is our comfort is gained at the cost of somebody else's?<sup>50</sup> As those mountaineers of Appalachia and African Americans sang their own songs, yet learned from each other and created new songs, when we are able to sing together with our neighbors within and without and learn from each other, Asian North American pedagogy will be able to sing a new song for a new time.

## V. Conclusion

*You ask what makes our kind of music successful. I'll tell you. It can be explained in just one word: sincerity. When a hillbilly sings a crazy song, he feels crazy when he sings, 'I Laid My Mother Away,' he sees her a-laying right there in the coffin. To sing like a hillbilly, you have to have lived like a hillbilly. You have to have smelt a lot of mule manure.*

Hank Williams<sup>51</sup>

In this essay I tackle a vast task. Approaches to Asian North American church pedagogy are widely various, in number as massive as the size of the Asian continent. Moreover, the

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<sup>49</sup> Kwok Pui Lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995), 19.

<sup>50</sup> Nami Kim, "My/Our Comfort Not at the Expense of Somebody Else's: Toward a Critical Global Feminist Theology," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 21, no. 2. (November, 2005): 75-94.

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in Erbsen, *Rural Roots of Bluegrass*, 43.

enormous tasks before Asian North American church pedagogy are as numerous as its approaches. However, if as Hank Williams said, we sing our song with sincerity, one day we will be able to sing our old and new songs with harmony and melody; or as Fumitaka Matsuoka sagaciously opines, “We need to seek a way of relating to each other that we do not yet have or that we have long forgotten: a way of speaking about mutual relatability, intelligibility, and interdependence that goes beyond our capacity to the binary, adversarial and oppositional discourse of human relationship.”<sup>52</sup>

In bluegrass gospel all digressions are pathways to the reign of God, so indulge me one detour by way of Robert Kegan. Kegan, a constructive developmental psychologist and an educator, suggests that through an ongoing (“evolutionary” in Kegan’s term) interaction with others and their physical/cognitive/cultural environments, human beings develop an authentic sense of who they are, and construct their truth accordingly. Kegan suggests a three-way meaning-making process: confirmation, contradiction and continuity.<sup>53</sup> Confirmation is when a particular environment corresponds and supports the meaning-making system that people already have. When new experiences, events, and opinions conflict with these world-views, people are challenged to transform their current meaning-making system. Kegan calls this contradiction. When people face contradictory events and contexts, they either emotionally isolate themselves, thus maintaining their existing framework - a process which Kegan deems unhealthy, or else they

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<sup>52</sup> Fumitaka Matsuoka, *Color of Faith: Building Community in a Multiracial Society* (Cleveland, Ohio: United Church Press, 1998), 5.

<sup>53</sup> Roberts Kegan, *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982), 113-132.

incorporate new meaning through which they conjoin both “old” and “new” realities. Kegan refers to this process of incorporation as continuity.

Despite its problems, Asian North American church pedagogy needs to take pride in its own roots and not be afraid of challenge leading to new “wholes” and thus strumming continuous and unfolding future traditions. Between here and there we will sometimes be *On the Sea of Life*, and yet still sing our songs replete with hope for a new tomorrow, for. . . .

*We are sailing onward, sailing, sailing o'er the foam  
We are talking to the captain as the angry billows hum  
Soon, yes soon, we'll reach the harbor and we're safely o'er the tide  
We are going onward to the other side.*