

# THE SPIRIT AND THE TAO OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN ASIA

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Chuang-tsu was a great Taoist philosopher of China in the 3rd century BC. A mystic, he spiced his philosophical discourse with profound witticism and marvellous humour, that could only have come from his keen observation of the natural world, and the human society around him. Here is one of his most-insightful masterpieces that may help illuminate the main concern of this Assembly: Management and Accountability in Theological Education.

Prince Wen Hui’s cook was carving up an ox. Every touch of his hand, every heave of his shoulder, every step of his foot, every thrust of his knee, with the slicing and parting of the flesh, and the zinging of the knife – all were in perfect rhythm, just like the Dance of the Mulberry Grove, or a part in the Ching Shou symphony.

Prince Wen remarked, “How wonderfully you have mastered your art.”

The cook laid down his knife and said, “What your servant really cares for is Tao, which goes beyond mere art. When I first began to cut up oxen, I saw nothing but oxen. After three years of

practising, I no longer saw the ox as a whole. I now work with my spirit, not with my eyes. My senses stop functioning and my spirit takes over. I follow the natural grain, letting the knife find its way through the many hidden openings, taking advantage of what is there, never touching a ligament or tendon, much less a main joint.

“A good cook changes his knife once a year because he cuts, while a mediocre cook has to change his every month because he hacks. I have had this knife of mine for 19 years, and have cut up thousands of oxen with it, and yet the edge is as if it were fresh from the grindstone. There are spaces between the joints. The blade of the knife has no thickness. That which has no thickness has plenty of room to pass through these spaces. Therefore, after 19 years, my blade is as sharp as ever. However when I come to a difficulty, I size up the joint, look carefully, keep my eyes on what I am doing, and work slowly. Then with a very slight movement of the knife, I cut the whole ox wide open. It falls apart like a clod of earth crumbling to the ground. I stand there with the knife in my hand, looking about me with a feeling of accomplishment and delight. Then I wipe the knife clean and put it away.”<sup>1</sup>

“Well done!” said the Prince. “From the words of my cook, I have learned the secret of growth.”

What a feat! What consummation of skill! *Lu huo ch'un ch'in*, in Chinese, literally meaning “the stove fire for concocting the elixir of life begins to give a pure glow”! Chuang-tsu would laugh at us if we envy the cook. A liberated mystic like him would consider envy – any sort of envy – as immaturity of the spirit, hindering the attainment of Tao. Still, the imagery of the act of the body perfected into the art of the spirit commands our admiration. It also invites those of us engaged in theological education, and seeking to improve, if not to perfect, the

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<sup>1</sup> Chuang-tsu, *Inner Chapters*, Gia-Fu Feng, and Jane English trans., London UK: Wildwood House, 1974, p. 55.

art of management and accountability in relation to time and resources, to see if we have something to learn from that imagery.

### **To Break the Status Quo**

The word “art” has come to mean, for us, specific things, such as, painting, music, sculpture, drama, or dance. Theology is, then, not an art; it neither sings, nor dances. And the management of it, from curriculum-making to allocation of faculty housing, is anything but an art; it is a mundane business that can turn into serious contention from time to time. As to accountability, it is more a matter of political sagacity than artistic flair; it is the ability to maintain a balanced budget, and to keep the board, the faculty, and students more or less happy, despite uncertainty and worries. To quote the parody of Hans Hoekendjik, the Dutch missiologist: “Now these three things remain: faith, hope, and love, but the greatest of these is – the status quo.”

The status quo is one of the last things the world, including the Christian church, and theology, can be proud of. On the contrary, the status quo conjures up all sorts of horrible realities and imageries of those realities. The status quo in politics in Asia today carries out a cold-blooded assassination of an opposition leader by the military, in broad daylight, even before he sets foot on the tarmac of the airport at his homecoming. It imprisons rival politicians before a general election is held to ensure the victory of those in power. It holds a nation in a state of perpetual siege, under constant police surveillance. And it keeps citizens captive to the state ideology fabricated by the rulers to justify their insatiable appetite for power.

The status quo in economy means the laissez-faire policy that enables the rich and the powerful to fix the rules of competition, and the conditions of labour. It supports the exploitative commercial and industrial practices imposed on the industrially less-developed nations for the profit of the industrialised nations. It perpetuates the tragic division of the world into the wealthy north and the impoverished south. It creates an inhuman situation, in which the poorest pine away at the starvation level, with 1,240 calories a day, while the richest stuff

themselves with 4,290 calories in one country, and in another, the poor with 940 calories daily, and the rich with 3,150 calories.<sup>2</sup>

The status quo in the military culture, that today dominates superpower politics between East and West, has produced thousands of nuclear warheads that could annihilate our mother earth with a nuclear winter of ultimate horror. It is supported by the belief that the ideological conflicts between the two superpowers are unresolvable, except through superiority in the nuclear technology that now threatens the world with “star wars”. “A cold winter of the soul” is already here,<sup>3</sup> putting into question the value and meaning of life, and the purpose and destiny of creation.

The status quo that perpetuates abuse of political power, economic exploitation, or a nuclear arms race, justified by ideological conflicts, brings devastating results to the quality of human life, and casts a dark shadow over the future of the world. But, thank God, there are movements to counteract political authoritarianism, to redress economic injustice, or to fight the demonic forces of military culture. This prompts us to ask whether church and theology are also bedevilled by their own status quo, and play, willy-nilly, a part in the perpetuation of the status quo that despises human dignity, corrupts human relationships, obscures the meaning of history, and clouds the vision of life. This is a soul-searching question on all levels of the life and work of the church, including theological education. This is also a very personal question that demands an answer from each one of us in the quietness of our soul.

To break the status quo that discredits the church, immobilises theological education, and reduces theology to traditional stereotypes and clichés, what has to be done? To give more moral exhortation? But do we not have enough of it, Sunday after Sunday, from the pulpit? To lay more stress on Christian discipleship? But, has it not always

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<sup>2</sup> The countries referred to are Brazil and India. Cf. Susan George, *How the Other Half Dies: the Real Problems for World Hunger*, London UK: Penguin Books, 1977, pp. 40-41.

<sup>3</sup> John E. Mark, “Look Inside, Look Outside, Nuclear Winter Is Here”, in *International Herald Tribune*, February 25, 1985, p. 6.

been a central part of our theological training? To meditate more deeply on how to imitate Christ? But, have we not done enough to cultivate the cult of imitation? Or to convince ourselves and others that grace cannot be had at the expense of the law? But, is it not the case that, at the end of the day, we realise that grace, dignified with law, and law blessed with grace, still elude us?

It is evident that we need something different from all these familiar approaches to change the stalemate in the church, to overcome stagnation in theology, and to break the status quo of theological education. For those of us engaged in theology, and responsible for theological education in Asia, time is overdue to strike out on a new theological path, to remould the contents of theological education, and to generate new dignity in theological vocation. How do we go about it, then? Perhaps we can learn from Chuang-tsu's cook – the cook who perfected the profession of carving up oxen into an art, and brought beauty, elegance, and dignity into it. If even such a secular profession can be perfected into a divine art, then, why not the vocation of interpreting, proclaiming, and practising the Word of God?

### **Mastering the Art of Doing Theology**

Prince Wen, watching his cook carve up an ox, exclaimed: "How wonderfully you have mastered your art!" How suggestive is the word "art" used by Prince Wen! He did not say, "How wonderfully the cook mastered his profession." It was not a profession, he saw. It did not occur to him to say what a wonderful butcher the cook was. For what he saw was not a butcher, but an artist. Chuang-tsu's description of the cook at work explains it all: "Every touch of his hand, every heave of his shoulder, every step of his food, every thrust of his knee . . . all were in perfect rhythm, just like the Dance of the Mulberry Grove, or a part in the Ching Shou symphony." If this is not art, what is it, then?

We must grasp a deeper meaning of the word "art" here. Art is "creative work, making and doing of things that display form, beauty, and unusual perception".<sup>4</sup> Something that can be called art has to be, in

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<sup>4</sup> See "art", in *Webster's New World Dictionary*, New York NY: The World Publishing Company, 1970.

the first place, creative. Imitation is not art; for it is not creative. It presupposes the creativeness of others, not the imitator himself/herself. How much imitation we have done in our churches, from church order and polity to liturgical formula! And how much imitation we have made in theology, from Bible exegesis to theological curriculum! As to repetition, of course there is no modicum of creativeness required for it. In theology, we have become masters of repetition. We repeat what has been said by others in totally different situations. We repeat those abstruse theological formulations that presuppose entirely foreign contexts. In short, we have imitated and repeated “venerable” traditions of “the fathers and brothers” of the church. (I said fathers and brothers advisedly!). This has stifled our independent thinking. It has deprived us of theological creativeness. We have taken independent thinking for deviation from truth. We have been timid about theological creativeness, as if it will do us mischief, and lead us astray.

Not so with Jesus. He was and remains a most-independent thinker and creative theologian. “You have learned that our forebears were told . . . but what I tell you is this . . .”, he said, over and over, to his tradition-bound religious opponents. They must have been outraged. A tremendously creative power made His ministry entirely different from what people knew. “What is this?”, they said, dumbfounded on the one hand, and excited on the other. “A new kind of teaching! He speaks with authority” (Mark 1:27). Jesus did not imitate what others had done. Nor did He repeat what had been said before. His life and ministry were marked with irrepressible creativity and irresistible originality. Of course, we are not Jesus. But, surely, we can afford to share a little of His creativity, and to be inspired by His originality.

Art, when creative, takes distinctive forms. This is the next point we must consider. Everything has a form. It is by a particular form that things are recognised and identified. But not everything that has form can be called artistic. For a thing to be truly artistic, be it dance, music, a piece of literature, and, in our case, doing theology, it has to have a form that distinguishes itself from other forms. It must have a form that breaks forms. It must be articulated in a form that is freed

from forms. It must become embodied in a form that transcends forms. It must create a form that surpasses forms. It is the form of that cook carving up an ox. Each and every movement of his is in perfect rhythm. It is a form without form. It is a form beyond form.

In contrast, our churches are too formalised, too much encrusted in forms, too much conscious of forms. The burden of the forms inherited from the past, and from elsewhere, is heavy. There is no wonder, no astonishment, no expectation, no surprise. Art is not art when it has none of these qualities. It is mimicking, not arting. Our theology, too, has no distinctive form. It has not acquired a form freed from inherited forms. It has not created a form that is in rhythm with the prophetic form found in the Bible. It has not built a form in tune with the symphony God must have been playing in Asia since the beginning of the creation. Our theology has not yet become a creative art.

Not so with Jesus. His lifestyle was scandalously distinctive. As a rabbi, He dared to be friend of gentiles, and those Jews who made themselves as gentiles, that is, tax collectors and sinners, people excluded from God's salvation by the religious authorities. His form of teaching was startlingly different. He taught everywhere, in the fields, at the marketplaces, as well as in the synagogue. And He taught everyone, children, as well as adults, women, as well as men. And the form of His ministry had no precedent. His was the ministry that empowered the poor and the powerless, comforted the sorrowful, and brought the forgiveness of God to those tormented by sin and illness. Here was a great artist, who created a form that rendered all other forms formless.

Art, if creative and distinctive in form, must be beautiful. Art is not art if it does not exude beauty. Beauty here does not mean sensual beauty. It is beauty that is informed by truth, carries voices from the depths of the human heart, and reflects the light that shines out of God's work of love in creation and in human community. "One thing I seek," says a psalmist, is "to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord!" There is so little of that in our church, and in our theology. Our church has a morbid fear of the wrath of the Lord. Our theology is obsessed with

God's anger. But, perceiving God too much as wrathful reflects a pathological captivity to sin, and leads to legal settlement with God in penance. Sinning even becomes a pervert pleasure. But God is more beautiful than wrathful. God's beauty is the beauty of love. It is the beauty of justice. It is also the beauty of freedom. It is this love, justice, and freedom, in all its beauty, that Jesus imparted to that woman who anointed His head with costly oil, and wet His feet with her tears, when he said to her: "Your faith has saved you; go in peace" (Luke 7:50).

Art, creative, distinctive in form, and beautiful, has to have unusual perception. Without it, no creative art can be born. Lacking it, art will have no distinctive form. And devoid of it, art gets divorced from beauty. It becomes banal, routine, superficial, and corrupt. It is not art any more. But, when unusual perception is applied to what you do, you become an artist. If ox carving in Chuang-tsu's story could become an art, then why not the doing of theology? If that cook could train himself to be an artist, then why not us theologians? The key question is whether we have developed the power of unusual perception, and brought it to bear on our vocation – preparing lectures, teaching in the classroom, making budgets, or improving seminary facilities.

Jesus was endowed with power of unusual perception. That power enabled Him to link God's love with birds of the air and lilies in the field. It made Him most decisive about priorities: refraining from any action on the Sabbath, as prescribed in the law, or healing a sick person, despite the law? It gave Him the insight to know that the poor, and not the rich, the powerless, and not the powerful, those who suffer and shed tears, and not those who laugh at the expense of others, are the bearers of God's kingdom. How unusual His power of perception into the reality of things seen and unseen! With that power, Jesus saw through the hypocrisy and corruption practised by the religious leaders of His day. "Alas for you, lawyers and Pharisees, hypocrites!", Jesus was reported to have addressed the religious leaders, held by people in fear and awe. "You clean the outside of cup and dish, which you filled inside by robbery and self-indulgence" (Matt 23:25). That power of unusual perception exposed the evil parts of human nature, disclosed



the dark secrets behind religious piety, and revealed as lies the traditions taught as truth. Jesus' messianic ministry is unthinkable without this power of unusual perception. If we are to be part of Jesus' messianic ministry, do we not also have to be equipped with power of unusual perception?

Management of theological education can be made into an art, manifesting creativeness. To be creative takes courage. It questions, from time to time, the familiar patterns that have exhausted their usefulness. To be creative demands openness. It opens us to new ways and possibilities, such as using a word processor instead of a manual typewriter, switching from abacus to computer. But openness requires us not to become enslaved to those gadgets of this technological age, but to be above them. After all, the machine is made for human beings, not human beings for the machine. Unless the use of modern technology, in managing theological education, becomes a human art, we are just part of the world that dehumanises humanity with its mindless manipulation of the human mind and spirit through ever-expanding technological devices.

Our theological effort and training, too, have to become artistic in content and in style. Essential to this is the cultivation of power of unusual perception in our own study, in the classroom, and in the life we live in a particular community. We must compel ourselves to develop a critical attitude towards theological systems bequeathed to us from the past, from that of Augustine to those of Barth and Bultmann. We must keep our theological mind alert and clear in relation to what is happening around us, be it militarisation of space, or genetic engineering. And, above all, we should become theologically sensitive and creative towards the cultural, religious, and historical world of Asia with which we share our life and destiny.

Then, it will not be too much to expect that, one day, someone may be moved to say to us: "How wonderfully you have mastered the art of management of theological education and theological training!" Most of what we do will be more or less in perfect rhythm, just like the Dance of the Mulberry Grove, or a part of the Ching Chou symphony.

There will be little waste of our time, energy, and other resources. The gifts entrusted to each one of us by God will develop and flourish, too.

### **The Spirit Takes Over**

But, to create art, to be artistic in what we are and do in Christian discipleship and theological education, is not our final aim. Nor was it the final aim of Prince Wen's cook. Hearing Prince Wen's praise, he replied: "What your servant really cares for is Tao, which goes beyond art." The Tao of ox carving! Did Prince Wen understand what it meant? I wonder. Impressed by the way the cook carved an ox, he exclaimed that it was an art. But, perhaps he did not see Tao beyond the art. He did not realise that the cook's heart, mind, and soul was on Tao, that is the source of truth, Tao that is the origin of life, Tao that is the goal of creation. When one cares for such Tao, what one does goes beyond art. When one serves such Tao, one becomes free from short-sighted gain. And when one is accountable towards it, one knows how to set priorities for one's life and work. Tao is the transcendent power present in the mundane realities of this world. Constrained by it, the cook ceases to be a mere cook, carrying out his daily routine. Inspired by it, he finds his job turning into a vocation. Compelled by it, he discovers even such a menial task as ox-carving becomes an act of meditation, a service of a deeply-religious nature, and a self-discipline, without which no enlightenment can be attained. In this cook, we are confronted with an enlightened person, whose vocation is to serve Tao, and whose purpose in life is to manifest Tao through his vocation. He says to Prince Wen: "When I first began to cut up oxen, I saw nothing but oxen. After three years of practising, I no longer saw the ox as a whole. I now work with my spirit, not with my eyes. My senses stop functioning, and my spirit takes over."

This is a very revealing statement. Enlightenment may be awesome in its lofty ideal, and abysmal in its impact, but it all begins, in the case of Chuang-tsu's cook, with a most this-worldly practice of ox-carving. How many of us can say a similar sort of thing in relation to our theological efforts, management of theological education, and accountability in our theological vocation? In our theological efforts, there is persistence in dualism – heaven and earth do not meet in our theological cogitation; biblical disciplines and theological

systematisation are miles apart, one from the other; ethicists get, at most, a polite nod from systematic theologians; and practical theology includes everything under the sun that finds no entry into other theological disciplines. The fact of the matter is that heaven and earth meet in Jesus, the Word-become-flesh, that the biblical and theological disciplines are twin sisters, that ethical issues challenge and demand change in traditional formulations of the Christian faith, and that those things tucked away into practical theology, such as, preaching, liturgy, church polity, counselling, and so on, have to be theological interactions between God and humanity, within a volatile human community. Out theological enlightenment has to take seriously the earth, ethical concerns, and those “practical” matters that regulate, condition, and shape our life in the community called church, and in a wider human community.

And what about management of theological education, from entrance examinations to faculty sessions, from fund-raising to board meetings, from campus life to field work? Have we not resigned ourselves to them, as necessary evils that take much of our time and energy? Have they not become excuses for using the same lecture notes year after year? Have they not come to be designated as “administration”, with which most of us have formed a love-and-hate relationship? And, as we all know by experience, the term “administration” is anything but a neutral word. It means power – power that both builds and destroys. It signifies authority – authority that is self-affirming, by affirming others, and authority that is authoritarian, by rejecting others. It comes with certain privileges – privileges that are shared, and privileges that are self-centred. Administration, like the engine of a car, has to be the source of energy in the advancement of the academic pursuit of a theological community, and the deepening of the spiritual life of the faculty and students. But it can turn into a storm centre that devours the creative energy of the seminary community.

As to accountability to human and material resources, have we not been more diffusive than concentrated about them? Do we not often lack the imagination, the will, and the power to design and carry out plans that would avoid needless duplications, and strengthen the

witness and ministry of the church in the world that increasingly overwhelms the church with its enormous human and material resources? Adverse effects of this on our theological enterprise are obvious. Survival of our institution becomes our overriding concern. It takes us away from in-depth theological efforts. It can blunt the cutting edge of our theological witness, directed both to the church and to the world. It may even restrict academic freedom, and mute the prophetic voice in deference to “administrative concerns”. In my view, a hard and critical look at our accountability to the limited resources of theological education is urgently called for now, on both the national, and the regional, level. Development of theology, pertinent to Asia, and challenging to the churches in the rest of the world in the coming decade, has to begin with such an examination.

There is another kind of accountability I would like to stress here. It is our theological accountability towards the histories, cultures, and religions of Asia. These histories are ours. These cultures are ours. These religions are also ours – ours in the sense that they are integral parts of the cultures and histories that constitute our Asianness. But, as Christians and theologians, we have been less accountable towards these histories, cultures, and religions than towards the histories and cultures of the West, which Christianity helped to shape over many centuries. Our non-accountability towards those things that are our very own is due, first, to our aversion to them, taught us by missionary theology and practice. It is, then, fostered by lack of positive treatment of them in the theological writings of our Western theological teachers, from whom we learned how to do theology. But, then comes the realisation that we cannot simply wish them away on the strength of the faith and theology formulated in totally different cultural and historical settings. It is then that courses, such as comparative religions, and history of our own countries, are hastily added to the increasingly crowded theological curriculum. We apply comparative method to the objects of our study, with the assumption that no fundamental rethinking of Christianity, and what it represents, will be required.

But, such assumption is called into question today. The reason is simple. Theological explorations into the cultures, religions, and histories of Asia will force us to read the Bible from different

perspectives, and lead us to new insights. Those explorations will deepen and broaden our experience of God the creator. They will liberate us from Christological delimitation on the historicity of Jesus, and enable us to encounter Jesus as the Christ in the suffering humanity of Asia. They will also set us free from our presumption to keep the Spirit within the captivity of the church and its history. They may make us more careful in asserting that the church, as we know it, is the only sphere where God's saving love is available. And they are bound to make room in our mission theology and practice for other people – persons who are in the struggle with us to fight injustice, resist oppression, counteract demonic powers of destruction, and find fulfilment of life and destiny in the Power that loves, heals, renews, and gives eternal life.

What a formidable accountability! And what a challenging accountability! It is formidable because, in many ways, we have to do our theology *de novo*, but exciting because there will be fresh awareness of God's redeeming presence in Asia, and new discoveries of theological truths, which awareness of God's presence brings to us. It is my belief that history beckons us *now* to a theological turning point in Asia – a turning point that brings about a reformation of faith and theology. This is precisely what the Reformation in 16th-century Europe was about. "During the four centuries, from the deaths of Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure in 1274 to the births of Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frederick Handel in 1685," observes Pelikan, the American historian of Christian doctrine, at the outset of his book *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)*, "Western Christianity experienced fundamental and far-reaching changes in the interpretation – indeed, in the very definition – of church and dogma. Most of the changes were connected, in one way or another, with the Reformation of the 16th century. . . ." <sup>5</sup> An observation such as this provokes us and challenges us.

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<sup>5</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, vol 4, "The Christian Tradition, a History of the Development of Doctrine", in *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)*, Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1985, p. 1.

If there had to be a theological reformation in the 16th century in the very heart of “Christian” Europe, why should there be no theological reformation in Asia today, where the Christian faith has been taught and practised in almost total neglect, ignorance, and even rejection of the histories, cultures, and religions of Asia? To put it the other way round: how could there be no theological reformation in Asia, or to use Pelikan’s words, how could there be no “fundamental and far-reaching changes in the interpretation – indeed, in the very definition – of church and dogma”, when Asian Christians and theologians begin to wrestle with their theological accountability towards the histories, cultures, and religions of Asia? Surely, this is an awesome, and yet exciting, accountability from which those of us engaged in doing theology today in Asia cannot shy away any more. And when we realise that this is what we owe to the future generations of Christians and theologians in Asia, and, perhaps, even to those in other parts of the world, that accountability becomes our calling, our vocation, our responsibility at this time in history, when God seems intent on making radical rearrangements of historical, cultural, and religious forces in the world. The doing of theology in the historical *Kairos* such as this is no longer just a matter of the brain, or an effort of the body. It is a matter of the spirit – the spiritual power to perceive, to discern, and to penetrate the works, the ways, and the thoughts of God, in and through the life and history of men, women, and children, with whom we share a common destiny. Chuang-tsu’s cook was right when he said this about his ox carving: “I now work with my spirit, not with my eyes . . . my spirit takes over.”

### **The Tao of Theological Education**

The spirit takes over! This must be the secret of theological education, its management and accountability, from endless committee meetings to a theological reformation. But this is not the end of the journey. As a matter of fact, this should be the beginning of it. Theological education, with all its complexities and accountabilities, should be a matter of the spirit, at the beginning, and all the way through. The Tao of theological education is the Tao of the spirits, the Tao of coming to grips with the spiritual power, with which one fights the principalities and powers in heaven, and on earth, in human community, and in us all as individual human persons.

Here again, the cook in Chuang-tsu's story has some illuminating things to say. He refers to the blade of his knife, the tool of his profession, saying that it "has no thickness". Then he goes on to make a most revealing remark: "That which has no thickness has plenty of room to pass through the spaces" between the joints of the ox he carves. What are we to make of the remark?

That which has no thickness has plenty of room to pass through the spaces between an ox's joints! This is not a profound theory. Nor is it a tentative hypothesis. It is a fact based on actual experience. The cook can prove it. In fact, he showed Prince Wen the knife he had been using for 19 years, the edge of which was "as if it were fresh from the grindstone". This is all the more amazing because, according to him, "a good cook changes his knife one a year because he cuts, while a mediocre cook has to change his every month because he hacks". Their knives are too thick. They have to cut and hack, making a mess of the ox they carve, and destroying their knives. But Chuang-tsu's cook neither cuts nor hacks. His knife has no thickness. It finds space in the ox's joints, where there is no space, and passes through it. Then an incredible thing happens. The ox simply "falls apart like a clod of earth crumbling to the ground". The picture is so vivid and dynamic that it moves us. There is no waste of time and energy. No injustice is done to his profession. He transforms the occupation of ox-carving into the Tao of ox-carving. "I stand there," he says, "with the knife in my hand, looking about me with a feeling of accomplishment and delight." How many of us are blessed with this feeling of inner composure, and this sense of fulfilment in our efforts of theological education?

The trouble with most of us is that our theological knife is too thick. It cuts and hacks, but seldom passes through its object without much resistance. It is so thick that it cannot find or create space where there is no space. Our theological knife, the tool of our vocation, is thick with the ideas, concepts, and systems that have accumulated for centuries. In our theological classroom, little effort has been made to understand the internal cultural and socio-political dynamics that played no small part in their formation. We have not been successful in passing through the joints of the theological corpus we carve, revealing its internal structure. In my view, a real appreciation of the enormous

body of theological learning will not be gained until we are able to open it up and take a close look at its internal structure, built as much on cultural realities, and philosophical speculations, as on the faith it professes.

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We will not, then, apply, without much theological discretion, traditional concepts and norms to things Asian. We must test our theological knife, divested of difficult theological jargon, with our own past, present, and future that make Asia – Asia born out of God’s creating love, and sustained by God’s saving love. We may then be surprised that our theological knife finds theological space in the life and history of people in Asia – the discovery that used to be beyond our theological imagination. To our even greater surprise, we may realise that our theological knife creates theological space in a space completely controlled and dominated by a militant ideology, and an autocratic political system. Expanding that theological space becomes a vocation of many Christians and theologians. In short, our urgent theological task in Asia today is to find and create theological space in the life of men, women, and children in Asia – the life shaped and conditioned by their cultural heritages, religious beliefs, and historical upheavals, the life inseparable from immense sufferings brought about by natural calamities, and demonic socio-political forces.

This, I believe, is our theological mandate today, and in the decades to come. Needless to say, the management and accountability of theological education, in terms of time, energy, and resources, have to be determined by it. In fulfilment of that mandate, we need to ask ourselves, as individual institutions, and as a regional body, what kind of faculty we should be building in the coming years. How should we create a theological training programme that would give a solid grounding to the students in the development of creative theological imagination? How should we redesign our theological curriculum predicated on that mandate? What would be the challenges that mandate poses for the mission and ministry of the church?



These questions are not exhaustive, but they are some root-questions. They inspire our theological mind to dare a leap from the stereotyped past to the bewildering present, and to an unknown future. They challenge our seminary community to explore new ways of interpreting the gospel. They force us to think through the historical implications of some basic propositions of the Christian faith. They enable us to rekindle our theological vision from time to time, and sustain our theological school as a dynamic searching community in the service of God's truths for the church, and in the world. And it is questions such as these, derived from that theological mandate, that will restore to us the vocational integrity of the theological profession, and enable the meaning and purpose of theological education to be renewed and revitalised. Management and accountability of theological education will no longer consist merely of tedious routines, in which personal ambitions and misguided interests clash with each other. Theological education will become an art. No, more than an art. It becomes the Tao that commands the best of ourselves, the best of our theological community, and the best of our churches, to give witness to it.

Doing theology, in its diverse and rich dimensions, brought under the operation called theological education, is a matter of the spirit. It is an act prompted by the Spirit of God. It is in turn a response of our spirit to the prompting of God's Spirit. The doing of theology that becomes incarnated in theological education is, then, the confession of our faith, the confessing of that faith through our seminary community, and through our church. It is an act of confession, giving witness to God's Tao in Asia, as well as in the whole of creation, in the life and history of the nations and peoples of Asia, as well as in the life and history of the whole human community. If this is how we do theology, and carry out theological education in Asia, then our sisters and brothers in the Christian faith, and other faiths, may be moved to say to us, just as Prince Wen was moved to say to his cook: "From what you are doing in theology and theological education, we have learned the secret of God's Tao with the life and destiny of humanity". This must be our highest goal, deepest commitment, and noblest vision, of doing theology, and engaging ourselves in theological education here in Asia, today and tomorrow.

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