HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies
ISSN: (Online) 2072-8050, (Print) 0259-9422

A critical engagement between Asian feminist theology and liberation theology: The impossibility of doing academic theology from the margins

Author:
Levi Checketts[1,2]

Affiliations:
[1]Department of Religion and Philosophy, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Hong Kong Baptist University, Kowloon, Hong Kong

[2]Centre for Applied Ethics, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Hong Kong Baptist University, Kowloon, Hong Kong

Corresponding author:
Levi Checketts,
checketts@hkbu.edu.hk

Dates:
Received: 26 July 2025
Accepted: 09 Sept. 2025
Published: 10 Dec. 2025

How to cite this article:
Checketts, L., 2025, 'A critical engagement between Asian feminist theology and liberation theology: The impossibility of doing academic theology from the margins', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 81(1), a10958. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v81i1.10958

Liberation theologies seek to uplift the voices of the marginalised. However, as demonstrated by the case of Minjung theology, no single approach is capable of lifting up all voices. Thus, it is important to listen to new voices. Recent theological work from Southeast Asia lifts up important insights from under-represented groups in theology: migrant domestic workers, LGBTQ religious believers and Chinese sex workers.

Contribution: These new voices show our own inability to properly hear and convey the perspectives of the 'voiceless' but emphasise the need to enter the chaos of others.

Keywords: Asian theology; feminist theology; liberation theology; LGBTQ; migrant domestic workers; sex workers.

Introduction

The late 20th century marks a turning point for mainstream theology to change from Eurocentric and ahistorical to a more global and historically conscious endeavour. As the Church began to reconcile with its own history of partnering with oppressive power (e.g. the Nazis, see: Metz 1984), theologians and church leaders gave greater attention to the rights and needs of marginalised populations. In the 1960s, parallel movements between African Americans and Latino peasants led to the development of 'liberation theology' as a theology of struggle of oppressed peoples against unjust systems. The increasing importance of Latin American liberation theology's 'option for the poor' in Catholicism, which gained magisterial blessing in *Solicitudo Rei Socialis* in 1987, demonstrated clearly the need for new voices in theology. As Groody (2007:11) notes, despite the significant changes to global politics following the Cold War, the insights of liberation theology have only gained in importance in the decades following.

In time, new liberation theologies developed across the world in new local contexts, as the 'third world' began to articulate its own theological perspective against hegemonic voices from the 'first world' (the 'second world' being nominally atheist). But despite liberation theology spreading from El Salvador to Kenya to Taiwan and beyond, the pressing issues of the poor remain relevant today.

Liberation theology remains vexed with a problem: its call for an end to oppression and domination is now widely accepted, but oppression and domination remain. Thus, as Chen (2022:4) provocatively challenges, liberation theologies seem to have failed their task. Where is the liberation in a world where wealth gaps, the number of refugees and migrants and autocratic regimes all increase? Gutierrez (1973:10) reminds us in *A Theology of Liberation* that liberation theology has an eschatological focus; the Kingdom of God is always ahead and never fully present. Sobrino (2008:14) notes that the Western notion of 'development' is not the goal of liberation theology, which strives for the human-rights-focused 'Civilisation of Poverty' against the 'Civilisation of Wealth'. If the goal were only development, South Korea and Taiwan would no longer have any need for liberation theology following their economic advancement. Thus, the broader allegation that liberation theologies have failed must be contextualised by the eschatological 'already but not yet' orientation.

Like all contextual theologies, liberation theology requires attention to specific cases, not universalistic generalities. This article highlights some Asian contextual theological insights, as this is my own geographical context and a reference point still less familiar to the global Church. I hope that the contributions sketched here will engage readers' theological imaginations anew.

The thinkers I present are not explicitly 'liberation theologians' but Asian feminist theologians, who grapple with the meaning of this identity. Their work, however, showcases voices from the margins of Asian societies, including foreign domestic helpers, LGBTQ religious believers in Southeast Asia and Hong Kong sex workers, giving some shape to the often amalgamated 'voiceless' or 'faceless' poor that a too-general liberation theology often lifts up. From a Western theological standpoint, these voices are far less well known than other marginalised voices. As unfamiliar voices, they remain displaced from central discourse and remind us, as Sobrino (2008:23) does, that the temptation to essentialise the poor as a monolithic community defies both their individual dignity and the complexities of poverty. As long as the Eschaton – when all injustice is done away in God's eternal reign – is not fully realised, there will always be injustice. As Jesus enigmatically states to Judas, 'The poor you always have with you'. Taken with all aspirational and righteous concern one might have, this is an indication that we must ever be attentive to the margins, knowing it is only possible for God to fully upend systems (and systematic theologies) that perpetuate injustice.

The position that I advance today is that liberation theology's task is to pursue an eternally evasive horizon: it is impossible to articulate the perspective of the absolutely most marginalised from within academic theology because of the way power flows, but the radical nature of the Gospel requires us to try. Here is a paradox, but so is all of the Christian life in which we sinners try to follow the path of Christ. I begin in a backward fashion, starting from the general liberationist position of the need for non-dominant views. Following this, I lift up salutary efforts at new liberation theology in Asia, taking special interest in the work of Mary Mee-Yin Yuen, Sharon Bong and Nancy Nam Hoon Tan. I then examine the impossibility of these theological positions and conclude with an encouragement for scholars to continue the efforts of these and all liberation theologians.

Theology from the margins

Hong Kong-born theologian Kwok Pui-Lan articulates the moral responsibility of being a Christian and a woman in a non-Christian society. Rather than supporting a paternalistic theology, feminists should recognise the danger of hegemonic voices and uplift the voices of non-Christians in their communities. Kwok (2007)writes:

> We need to spell out more clearly a theology of the neighbour, such that people of various religious, class and racial backgrounds can learn to live together and negotiate their differences in productive ways. (p. 151)

In a context like Hong Kong, this includes lower-class Daoists, migrant Muslims and mainland atheists. Kwok emphasises a resistance to the 'messianic imperialism lying at the heart of the American ideology of Empire', a resistance that recognises that the patriarchal image of warrior Jesus is inseparable from racist colonialism (Chen 2022:150; Kwok 2007:151). Thus, feminist theologians need to be attentive to the marginalised voices in their communities, including non-Christians, the poor and sexually marginalised.

Kwok's insights have a long theological heritage to them. Latin American liberation theologians give voice to what becomes the dominant theme of all liberation theologies: the preferential option of the poor (and later, marginalised). This position prizes not the perspectives of the dominant class but rather the underclasses. While first-generation liberation theologians prioritised Latino peasants, other theologians took the insight of a God who suffers to mean *any* who suffer are on the side of God. Black liberation theology, Asian, African, feminist and LGBTQ liberation theologies further developed the ideas of these pioneering theologies. But most, if not all, liberation theologies have shortcomings. While the work of Latin American liberationists was fundamental for creating liberation theology, Althaus-Reid (2000:23) points out that it is still tainted by the legacy of the patriarchal Catholic Church, largely articulated by ordained male clergy, and focused on the rural peasantry. Althaus-Reid thus notes that Gutierrez's cohort remains ignorant of urban poor, women and especially sexual minorities. Thus, she champions an 'indecent' theology, which prizes the perspectives of urban, sexually marginalised poor.

Even this isn't adequate. Taiwanese liberation theologian Chen (2022:105) critiques Althaus-Reid as establishing 'homosexuality' as a new hegemonic hermeneutical framework in place of heterosexuality. Chen argues Althaus-Reid essentialises queer sex as what is most marginalised, an error that repeats the problems Althaus-Reid herself critiques because it creates a new centre. Chen therefore highlights the perennial problem of liberation theology: the impasse between working on the margins *and* prioritising a particular voice. The 'preferential option for the poor' is an inherently paradoxical formulation. But even if Chen is right that all liberation theologies have 'failed', this is only true because all liberation theologies *must* fail in an absolute sense. The bi-directional nature of power means that as one group is given more status, some other(s) is deprived of theirs. Power flows inevitably mean populations will be left at the margins. More importantly, *all* theologies fail because God is ineffable, so theology is never adequate to its task. Every contextual theology, however, helps decentre the dominant narrative of mainstream theology and helps the believer avoid the temptation to fix their gaze upon theology instead of God.

Asian liberation theologies thus contribute important voices that destabilise our theological orientation and demand our moral response. In contrast to Latin American or black liberation theologies, all branches of Asian liberation theology, with the sole exception of Filipino liberation theology, are rooted in social contexts where Christianity is itself already a minority religion. Differences in culture, language, economic situation and politics also disrupt the generic 'Asian theology' framework, and attending to the

differences is critical. Hong Kong theologians, for example, grapple with a British colonial heritage and recent return to China with a rather high Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita. While Indian liberation theologians also face a British colonial legacy, their context entails lifting up the voices of the Dalits, whose outcaste status is incomparable to other populations. Thus, Asian liberation theologies with their diverse concerns and contexts, help to destabilise any temptation to universalise the task of liberation (for further reading, see Wielenga 2007). To illustrate just one example of this process, examining the development of Korean theology helps to illustrate why new voices are always in need.

Korean liberation theology: From Minjung to Han and beyond

Though it began in the 1960s, during the 1970s–1980s, Minjung theology gained momentum across South Korea. Minjung is about 'the peasants, the urban poor, and the factory workers' (Ko 1987:210). As Korea went through its process of development, fraught with problems of totalitarian strong-man dictators, American neo-colonialism and a rapidly changing culture, Christians needed an authentic voice to express the concerns of the people and help the country keep its soul. Minjung theology helped the socio-economic underclasses of Korea to express their eschatological hope and had a real-world impact in the democratic transformation of Korea, in the push for reunification with North Korea (Han & Kim 2006:235–255) and in incorporating migrant workers into the concept of Minjung (Kang 2014:5–28).

However, by the early 1990s, Korean feminist theology had begun to develop and was critical of Minjung theology as representing primarily an androcentric perspective (Cho 2014:237). First-wave feminist theologians were insistent that the claim to represent 'the people' maintained a deeply patriarchal view of who counted as 'the people', and Korean women were relegated to second-class status despite the demand for the representation of lower classes. Korean feminist theology, in turn, emphasised things like suffering [*Han*] (Chung 1988:27–36), the authentic expression of the shaman [*mudang*] (Lee 2011:362) and the need for a de-Confucianism as much as decolonialism (Kang 2004:168–169). Korean feminist theology has remained relevant in Western theology in its own right. For example, *Han* is a concept some white feminist theologians have adapted into their theology, including Ruether (2012:31) in her pioneering eco-feminist theology.

More recent feminist theologians, however, have claimed that early Korean feminists themselves represented a generally bourgeois-institutional model of theology, often neglecting what insights Minjung theology itself contributed, namely a need to focus on the socio-economically underprivileged. Thus, more recent Korean feminist theologians highlight the concerns of other under-represented populations, such as the needs of migrants, the undereducated and the working class, which received little attention among first-generation Korean feminists (Cho 2014:245). Thus, a neo-feminist counter-theology to the feminist counter-theology to the Minjung counter-theology to traditional Western theology was born. And yet there remain many gaps within Korean theology for those un(der)-represented, such as LGBTQ persons, the elderly, neurodivergent and so forth.

The case of Korean theology highlights the process of praxis in liberation theology and the need for continuing reflection and listening. As we attend to voices that are not our own, and especially those voices not present in the halls of power, our theological imagination expands. We are able to see Christ in concrete others, not abstract 'marginalised' but real persons who share our humanity but not our stories. The process of listening to the plight of the Minjung, of engaging with the cultural ethos of Han or of considering the position of the elderly in an ageing society requires us to step out of our comfortable centres and 'enter the chaos' of others (Keenan 2016:277).

For liberation theology to maintain its liberative edge and not become domesticated, it must ever attend to the voices of the margins. I consider just three recent expressions, all from Asian feminist theologians in East and Southeast Asian urban contexts. By no means are these exhaustive accounts, nor even perhaps paradigmatic but rather representative studies of marginalised communities. The concrete voices they raise are likely unfamiliar to most readers, culturally and socially marginalised within the global margins, but these are voices that should be heard. And while each contributes tremendously to the tapestry of theological voices, they also showcase areas that are not yet considered, margins still unrecognised by the centre because of how entrenched the hegemonic view of the centre is.

Asian marginalised voices

In this section, I outline three contemporary theologians whose work, I think, highlights important developments in Asian theology, and perspectives non-Asian theologians ought to let challenge their own biases and predilections. It is important to note that, while none of these thinkers frame their work *as* liberation theology, they all prioritise the liberation theological approach of moving to the margins and hearing the voices of the 'voiceless', most of them explicitly citing liberation theological principles such as the preferential option for the poor.

Migrant women in Hong Kong

Firstly, Mary Mee-Yin Yuen, a Hong Kong-based Catholic ethicist, has written a great deal about migrant women in Hong Kong. Since the 1997 handover of Hong Kong from Britain to China, the city has seen an increase in its immigrant population. In the 10-year period from 2011 to 2021, the 'number of ethnic minorities in Hong Kong increased significantly by 37.3%', the majority of whom are Filipinos

and South Asians (Census and Statistics Department 2022). Some immigrant women Yuen worked with are women from the Chinese mainland looking for new opportunities in Hong Kong, others are Filipina or Indonesian domestic helpers sending money back to their families and others still are Hong Kong permanent residents originally from the Indian subcontinent. Yuen's work thus focuses on what it means to not only be a woman in a patriarchal society, but also the plight of those perceived as culturally unwelcome others in postcolonial Hong Kong, in what Yuen refers to as a 'semi-ethnocracy' replete with a racial hierarchy left over from British colonisation. 'Racial inferiority in Hong Kong is not merely varying degrees of disdain for Others', writes Yuen, 'it is the product of a system of differential exclusion of resident people from political power' (Yuen 2020:17).

Yuen gives attention to the differences that mark women occupying lower levels in this ethnic hierarchy. Although she has written on the ethics of hospitality for all of these different ethnic groups, for the sake of focus, I only highlight her study of Filipina domestic helpers. Of the seven and a half million people who live in Hong Kong, about 350 000 are foreign domestic helpers, of whom nearly 210 000 are Filipina (Hong Kong Immigration Department 2024). These women make up the largest non-Chinese ethnic group of Hong Kong, yet have an unstable migration status, dependent entirely upon their employers for their stay with no path to permanent residency. Separated from their own families, including children, parents and spouses, these women are entrusted with the care of middle- and upper-class Hong Kong families. Yuen notes that popular opinions towards these women are that they are 'ungrateful' and untrustworthy, and they are discriminated against by police and extorted by third-party intermediaries purportedly offering them immigration and employment aid. They experience many forms of abuse, including 'verbal abuse, physical assault (such as slaps, punches, kicks in the back or having a hot iron placed on their arm), sexual harassment, and even rape' (Yuen 2014:745). One need not spend much time in Hong Kong to see how these women are treated as second-class humans, often by the very families they are entrusted to care for.

Still, Yuen notes, the helpers are not mere victims but find strength through solidarity. They support and aid each other, experiencing joy and camaraderie despite their situation, a reminder of their irreducible dignity. A person walking through the Central District in Hong Kong on a Sunday (helpers' rest day) will witness this in macro: women sharing meals, singing karaoke or dancing, trading goods, comforting each other, grooming each other or even just sleeping, comforted in the company of their fellow sisters (Yuen 2014:746). These women also have their own thriving religious communities and contribute to the ministry of several English-language masses across the Hong Kong Diocese. Yuen challenges Hong Kong Christians to look beyond labels like 'domestic helper' to see the individual dignity of each woman who comes to Hong Kong separated from siblings, parents and sometimes even spouses and children. The example of pastoral hospitality set up by the Diocesan Pastoral Centre for Filipinos offers examples where the permanent residents of Hong Kong show solidarity with their migrant sisters (Yuen 2022:62–62). But, Yuen notes, the examples of the domestic helpers themselves teach us about justice, compassion, hospitality and solidarity, key virtues for the well-being and survival of the helpers (Yuen 2014:747–752, Yuen 2020:ch. 6).

LGBTQ religious believers in Malaysia and Singapore

Secondly, Sharon Bong has long worked at the intersection of feminism, queer studies and Southeast Asian postcolonialism within religious spheres. Bong's work is extensive on this front, moving from pan-Asian feminist studies to feminist critiques of magisterial Catholic teaching to analysis of various social scientific studies of LGBTQ religious believers in the Southeast Asia and beyond. What ties all of her work together is her commitment to the sexually and culturally marginalised. As a Southeast Asian woman, she recognises the way structures of power marginalise those whose identities do not align with the dominant narrative of the predominantly white, masculine and heterosexual Catholic Magisterium.

Bong has contributed perhaps most substantially to social scientific research of LGBTQ religious persons in Malaysia and Singapore. In contrast to (many) Western societies, these countries still not only ban same-sex marriage but also maintain remnants of anti-Sodomy laws (Bong 2020:3). Being gay or lesbian in these countries comes with a steep price and the possibility of legal punishment, religious ostracisation and social exclusion. Gay and lesbian religious persons thus struggle with how to integrate their identity and behaviour in these societies. Bong notes that transgender women in these countries are more likely to engage in work as sex workers because of discrimination, where they experience greater abuse and pressure, including violence and gang-rape (Bong 2020:4). This precarity and pressure lead to the need for 'becoming' queer in Southeast Asian religious circles, a narrative process of integrating one's various identities (queer people, Asian people, postcolonial, religious persons) into a coherent, healthy sense of self (Bong 2020:10–32).

Because of the confluence of religions in the region – Buddhism, Islam and Christianity all have a strong cultural presence in Malaysia and Singapore – Bong's research is deeply interreligious. In one study, Bong (2011:648–665) focuses on the resistance or resilience of religious families to members coming out as gay or lesbian. She notes that many LGBTQ religious persons inherently reinforce their native heteronormative matrices to 'please' their communities, both religious and familial (Bong 2011:652). This includes remaining single or staying in a heterosexual marriage to keep peace, avoiding queer self-expression or harbouring guilt for one's sexual identity. Growing up in a religious

environment where LGBTQ identity is portrayed as sinful or disordered has a harmful effect on LGBTQ persons; their task of integrating spirituality and sexual identity is fraught with inherent tension (2020:18). On the other hand, she notes that when such persons have 'resilient' families who can accept their sexual identity, the gay or lesbian child is better able to integrate their sexuality with their relationship with the divine (Bong 2011:655). Bong's (2011:661) insight is not only crucial for general queer theology, but insofar as she writes from a Malaysian perspective, she locates her theology in a context that is *not* specifically Christian. Depending on the degree of acquiescence of one's family and religious community to the dominant religious or cultural sexual norms (e.g. 'compulsory heterosexuality' indicated across Muslim, Buddhist, Daoist and Christian communities), LGBTQ religious believers in this region experience their religious beliefs sometimes as oppressive (resistant) and other times as liberative (resilient) to their sexual identities. In some cases, their religious communities help them to synthesise seemingly at-odds components of their identities, allowing for a deeper interconnection between LGBTQ believers, religious community, family and broader society. In other cases, the religious community may harbour beliefs and attitudes that function to stigmatise and alienate LGBTQ believers from their sexual identity, creating a disjuncture in the different aspects of their personality. Postcolonial feminist theologies then offer a great opportunity, both for Christianity to challenge the dominant modes of thought in the region and to provide support for the sexually marginalised.

Hong Kong sex workers

Finally, Nancy Nam Hoon Tan, a Hong Kong native theologian, conducted a Bible study with Hong Kong sex workers reading passages related to prostitution. Hong Kong has a long and complex history of prostitution, tied to British colonialism and persisting even after the 1997 handover. Sexual conservativism and patriarchy, as persistent in Chinese Confucian cultures as it is in Western Christian ones, treat sex workers as pariahs. Thus, Tan begins her work by situating the challenges sex workers navigate between a discriminatory criminal justice system, social ostracisation and violent clientele. Jei Jei Jai, the organisation Tan worked with, was founded in 2008 after four sex workers were brutally murdered in March of the same year, with the intention of protecting the interests of and advocating for sex workers in Hong Kong. Several other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) like Action for REACH OUT, Zi Teng, Teen's Key and Midnight Blue similarly promote the rights and interests of sex workers, including transgender and gay sex workers (Midnight Blue) or women and girls under 25 (Teen's Key).

The sex workers Tan worked with were ethnically Chinese – some from mainland China and others native to Hong Kong – and were, for the most part, ignorant of Christianity prior to this study. Thus, they read Bible passages with long histories of normative interpretation through a fresh perspective. The 'wisdom' of Solomon demonstrated through his judgement on two prostitutes in 1 Kings 3:16–28, for example, has historically been read as evidence of the callousness of sex workers and the genius of the king. Tan's (2021:60) sex workers, however, read it as the foolhardiness of a violent autarch and two women who try to appeal to the mercy of his caprice. Nothing is proven by the two women's responses, the sex workers suggest, other than that one believed Solomon to be truly as cruel as he claimed to be and the other believed him to be less so. The first woman believed the king to be unreasonable if he was willing to murder an infant and so maintained her composure to avoid his wrath. The second woman could not contain her grief and was willing to risk his anger.

Another reading focused on the message of the prophet Hosea, whose wife Gomer, a prostitute, is read as a metaphor of Israel's infidelity to God. Traditionally, the passage is read as a sexually promiscuous wife and her long-suffering husband, whom she mistreats. However, the sex workers object to this interpretation: the self-righteous, unemployed prophet condemns his wife, whose sexual labour alone is feeding their children (Tan 2021:80-81). The sex workers, many of whom are mothers and often married or divorced, vindicate Gomer, whose desire to feed her family – including children given hateful names by their father – trumps the suicidal fidelity Hosea seems to demand of her. The meaning of Gomer is reframed in this reading as a mother who suffers her husband's abuse for the sake of her children.

In examining the life experiences and hermeneutic lens of Hong Kong sex workers, Tan gives humanity to an underclass of labourers whose (often resigned) decision to have sex for money is taboo in even the most progressive theological circles. Chinese biblical commentaries waste no ink to emphasise that the passages discussed emphasise the sinfulness of the women, passersby gawk and leer at these women and the sex workers themselves note that, in their experience, most Hong Kong Christians could never believe that the sex workers themselves or their clients could believe in Christ (Tan 2021:47). So well established is the Christian attitude against sex workers that the entire point of Tan's book is to challenge (Hong Kong) Christianity's support of rape culture and denial of the rights of sex workers to be free from violence.

These three Asian women give voice to neglected and under-represented groups in the Church. Some are marginalised based on their employment. Some are marginalised based on their sex. Some are marginalised by migration status. All are marginalised by legal structures. One can read their studies in a sort of conversation. Yuen uses a theological-ethical framework to consider the role of virtue-formation and social justice in considering ethnically discriminated migrant women; Bong uses sociology, gender studies and queer theology to consider the experiences, religious identity and family acceptance of LGBTQ persons; Tan uses biblical studies and reader-response to articulate a reading of troubling Bible passages from the perspectives of sex workers. These three, various, non-exhaustive approaches to

faith are expounded from specific perspectives that do not fit neatly together. Rather than, for example, Gutierrez's efforts to articulate *a* theology for liberation, they contribute theological reflections that challenge the temptation to articulate a homogenous theology of the oppressed. My effort in highlighting these studies is not to make any case for a monolithic new theological paradigm; rather, it is to challenge efforts to do this by illustrating liberative studies that resist obvious systematisation. Most of all, these theologians remind us that 'the poor' must not remain a holy abstraction. The so-called 'voicelessness' of the poor and marginalised needs to be challenged with specific accounts from the perspectives of various non-absolutist accounts of the poor. Moreover, as Althaus-Reid reminds us, we should not let the poor be sanitised as pious icons: humanity is as fully present in the domestic work of a Catholic helper in a Central Hong Kong flat as in the sex work of an atheist prostitute in a Mongkok brothel.

The problem of interpretation

Yuen, Bong and Tan do not consider their work to be 'liberation' the way that liberation theologians typically do. What is lacking, for example, is a theological articulation of liberation, an account of the way that these marginalised can be 'liberated' through theology. It is my contention that this is not a shortcoming – it is, in fact, one of the great strengths of their work. By attending to these voices, articulating important insights from them and letting the accounts speak for themselves, these theologians avoid one of the greatest temptations liberation theologians often fall to, that is, the temptation to *be* the voice of the voiceless. What they do, then, is provide the 'theological traffic' for greater engagement (Althaus-Reid 2005:105). I contend that the ways these voices are lifted up help us recognise some current and persistent impasses in liberation theologies.

The legacy of Korean theology reminds us that no one voice can speak for the others. Liberation theology has struggled (and continues to struggle now) with how to articulate the voices of the marginalised. Beyond simply engaging in interviews or first-person accounts, theologians try to contextualise the lives and experiences of others. Unfortunately, academic theologians *must* frame and articulate the perspectives they glean from their interlocutors in a way that other *academics* can understand. A process of interpretation – sometimes literally – does violence to the raw content expressed by subjects of liberation theology. Derrida (2007:200) reminds us in *des Tours de Babel* that all acts of translation are acts of violence, requiring translators to take full responsibility for their acts of translation. Every act of translation, whether Spanish or Cantonese to English or from colloquialisms to academese, involves loss of meaning. As Althaus-Reid (2005:102) notes, if one reads the accounts of cartoneros's dreams on *Liquidacion.org* in the translated English rather than listening to the audio recordings in the Barrio, they lose a great deal of the raw context of these people.

Liberation theologians have long acted as translators for the marginalised. The clichéd 'voiceless' of Latin American liberation theology never lacked for spokespersons in the liberation theology movement. But despite the intention or attention entailed in the works of Gutierrez, Sobrino, Ellacuria, the Boffs, Segundo and others, they still essentialise the poor. As Spivak (2010:27) provocatively quipped, 'The ventriloquism of the subaltern is the left intellectual's stock-in-trade'. Somehow, the poor of Latin America always speak the theological truths that coincide with the work of liberation theologians! But Althaus-Reid (2000:22) wryly notes that the 'poor' whose voices Catholic, European-educated, clerical, liberation theologians uplifted were a certain filtered expression of the poor, typically rural Catholic peasantry following a traditional pious life. These were not the poor she experienced in the streets of Buenos Aires, a wretched, sexually marginalised poor who remained either co-opted (and thus marginalised) in the Catholic option for the poor or neglected all together. And yet, as Chen notes, even Althaus-Reid's position has its own blind spots. Thus, at least three challenges emerge in all acts of translation and must be taken seriously if we are not to commit (too much) violence, namely to let the marginalised speak, to hear their speech and to take responsibility for one's violence in interpreting this speech. And, in doing so, we must still accept that this violence entails that there is no possibility for faithful representation of the Other.

The first challenge is the challenge Spivak herself raises: letting the subaltern speak. The 'voicelessness' of the poor must be replaced by a voicedness. This does not mean advocacy (speaking on their behalf); it means genuine speech from the marginalised. Methodologically, liberation theology accepts this need: the task of praxis requires listening to the voices of the poor and letting their voices challenge and change our theology. However, even the methodological praxis of liberation theology belies this: to start from a given theological orientation, even if one is open to re-interpretation, is to already selectively hear. Thus, the problem Spivak notes – the subalterns are said to speak the same concerns as us. The disparate interests of a hegemonically subordinated group are forced into a single strand, usually centred around the interest of some well-meaning intellectual. None of this is malevolent; our genuine concern for the marginalised is a concern articulated by our understanding of their context. Thus, we often, in the words of Guiterrez (2007), 'pretend to be – as is said many times with goodwill that we are all aware of – "the voice of the voiceless"' (p. 31).

New voices, especially voices from the marginalised, are therefore necessary to challenge and correct our interpretations. Thus, Korean feminists correct the patriarchal bias of Minjung theologians who wanted to raise 'the people' (which did not seem to include any women); queer Latinxs challenge the heteronormativity of liberation theology (which has a poor representation of any sexual minorities) and so forth. In recent years, as demonstrated by the previous section, we recognise even more margins not yet been given much attention.

We thus add to this list the important spirituality and solidarity of Filipina domestic helpers, the resilience of LGBTQ religious couples in Malaysia and Singapore and the biblical interpretation of Chinese sex workers. And we ask which voices remain obscured? Tan's work with Chinese sex workers, for example, did not include male and transgender or foreign-born sex workers, whose perspectives would add further nuance to the study.

Most challenging on this front is recognising that to have one (new) voice heard *is* to remove it from the margins. While liberation theology may have been a fringe movement 50 years ago, the theologically conservative Pope John Paul II domesticated (or attempted to) the tradition in *Solicitudo Rei Socialis*, thus moving the 'margins' to the centre. It seems that when a marginalised perspective is heard and accepted, therefore, it moves towards the centre. This is not to claim that transgender sex workers in Buenos Aires will today or in the future be considered 'safe' theological perspectives, but it is to note that the true margins remain unacceptable to hegemonic culture *as* hegemonic and that institutional approval of one's position entails a loss of marginalised representation, that is to say, a shift in one's classed position and subsequently also class consciousness. The marginalised, *as* marginalised, always remain outside social approval. Those who ascend into ranks accepted by the hegemony (understood in terms of socio-economic, racial, sexual, religious or otherwise) do so at a 'loss' of their critical edge as they become domesticated.

The second challenge, indicated already in the first, is the task of 'hearing' the voices of the marginalised in a non-coercive way. Early republican Irish poor seeking aid from the Archbishop of Dublin employed certain rhetorical strategies to win over the affections of the head of the Irish Catholic Church. Each family seeking aid had to write a letter to the Archbishop pleading their case. But the way the poor portrayed themselves to His Eminence is not necessarily the way the poor understood themselves or their own interests; it was how they presented their interests in the form of the interests of the hegemonic power, that is, they adopted the perspective of the hegemonic, legitimated voice of the Church (Earner-Byrne 2017:89). We must be careful in listening to the voices of the marginalised to neither co-opt them into our own projects (the 'ventriloquism' Spivak warns us of) nor to ignore the way language, social conventions and pre-existing institutions structure the way we speak to each other and advocate for ourselves.

In this vein, Tan's work with sex workers comes nearest to a genuinely non-assuming listening. The Chinese sex workers lack the cultural Christian background that pervades the West. Althaus-Reid's sexually marginalised live in a deeply Catholic society, which affects the way they consider theologians (even those genuinely interested in their stories). Tan's sex workers read the Bible free of most moral and theological assumptions (excepting assumptions about what Christians are and how they behave towards sex workers), meaning they lack the sense that there are certain things they should or should not say in reflecting on what they read. But Christianity has had tremendous influence on the structure of Hong Kong society, including the prominence of the social hygiene movement, which has further added the stigma of contagion and uncleanliness to the already sexually marginalised women. Nonetheless, Tan highlights an important model for liberation theology: listening to the marginalised in a way that doesn't entice or encourage them to give safe answers.

A final challenge remains in the impassable violence of interpretation. Even if we are able to truly attend to the voices at the margins in a way that is non-coercive, we once again must articulate these voices in the university discourse of academic theology. As the 'queen of the sciences', theology has been the most dogmatic and most hegemonic of disciplines in the hegemonic institution of the university. The fact that Gutierrez spent the last two decades of his life at the University of Notre Dame, a school where more students come from the top 1% economically than the bottom 50% (New York Times 2017),[1] should be unthinkable for someone immersed in the lives of the Latin American poor. Even his students who work in the poorer parts of South Bend or go on service trips to Latin America will never know what it means to be the poor whose perspective Gutierrez wants to take priority in theology. The structure of academic theology functions within a hegemonic system of value, and, taught at universities and seminaries, it will always be located within the halls of power. As such, it is never fully possible to do marginalised theology within the disciplinary setting. The intellectually humble theologian must keep this in mind as they do their utmost to upset the established order.

Every academically recognised theology of liberation has to take on the form of hegemonic academic theology, as every academic theologian undergoes the classifying training entailed in formal education. Yuen, Bong and Tan write from their own experience and with their own concerns at heart. None of this is to dismiss their genuine concern: Yuen and Tan have a genuine concern and interest in the plights of the women they worked with; Bong stands in solidarity with her subjects. But what we read is still articulated through the language of academic theology (as is this article), not written from the perspective or pen of the persons who are the subject of these theologies and certainly not written primarily *for* the marginalised. It is our concepts, our expertise, our (class-tied) training, which informs the articulation and our need to censor, which frames it in digestible and professional content. Tragically, we lack the ability to capture in our own words (because they are *our* words) the raw experience of those whose voices need to be heard; more tragically still, our readers are often even further removed from these settings and need to be given a framework for understanding. Call it

1.NB: Notre Dame is far from an outlier in this case and does offer need-blind admissions to all students, both domestic and, recently, international. However, to the best of my knowledge, Notre Dame does not make strong efforts to actively recruit students from low-income backgrounds. There are numerous US Catholic institutions that do so, such as the school where I began my teaching career, the unfortunately now defunct Holy Names University in Oakland, California.

a necessary evil: to convey the experience of the most wretched in an academic setting requires cutting and dicing the voices of those whom we would like to have speak on their own.

We might add to this violence of interpretation the very non-metaphorical problem of linguistic translation. Many branches of liberation theology start from non-anglophone perspectives. While Latin American liberation theology is often articulated in its own linguistic setting to begin with, Asian liberation theologies are often translated from Korean, Chinese, Vietnamese, Tagalog, Indonesian and other languages to be given mainstream validation. The colonial power structure firmly remains: English is the language of academic legitimation today as Latin was 100s of years ago. Thus, even the process of writing theology participates in a master-dialectic, one in which the global colonial legacy of English is reinscribed as dominant again and again (Lynch 2014:211–231). And this is an unfortunate necessity because of the global networks of solidarity and the global church. If a Taiwanese liberation theologian like Chen wishes to learn about or speak to Korean, Filipino, Vietnamese and Indonesian theologians, he and they must be communicating in a common, that is to say hegemonic, tongue. The alternative is to have a narrow liberation theology articulated for a narrow audience that remains ultimately a marginalised one.

The paradox remains then: the more authentic the voice of the marginalised (in their language, by their pen, in their unfiltered words), the more they remain in the margins; the greater (potential for) change, the less marginal a position must be. The tendency of mainstream theology supports positions germane to mainstream sensibilities; the plight of those marginalised by that society will only be accepted in tributary or domesticated forms.

Conclusion

A perpetually receding praxis

Liberation theology (in all its forms) is, without exaggeration, the single most significant development of theology of the past century. The recognition that there are no universal perspectives and the goal of adopting the perspectives of the worst off is a vital contribution to a discipline that has foundered on the bulk of its own rigidity for over a 1000 years. A theology that no longer takes for its references the assumptions of Western European university-educated clergy is necessary for a truly catholic Church. The multiplicity of liberation theologies in the past decades happily illustrates this, including pioneering work by theologians mentioned above and waves of global theologies, uplifting (some) voices of those 8 billion human persons who share our *imago Dei*, whom we will never see. Against all of this, magisterial theology remains resistant, emphasising in its rigidity the need for marginalised voices to breathe life into the faith. Liberation theology needs, as well, to remain marginalised if it is to have any liberative potential.

An important reminder for liberation theologies in academic settings, then, is that they are ultimately engaged in a process of impossibility. Chen considers this a failure of liberation theologies: they have never truly achieved liberation. But the eschatological orientation of liberation theology reminds us that true liberation only comes from God. The fallenness of dominating social orders means that the world we live in is marred by sin; that joy and peace are the exceptions and not the norm; that salvation is a life-long journey and not a singular moment. No liberation theology will today or tomorrow 'fix' the social order because the very structures of sin are structures of domination and oppression, and God alone is capable of removing our sins.

Thus, liberation theologies should, like the work of Yuen, Bong and Tan, uplift particular perspectives of the marginalised while simultaneously noting that we will always leave a margin. The fact of our own inability to fully hear the marginalised, attend to the interests of the voiceless and resist the channels of power reminds us that we too are fallen and in need of God. Thus, liberation theology is, and must be, the most truly Christian theology: to recognise our own shortcomings before God and our neighbours regardless of our strivings and to perpetually seek God's forgiveness and transformation in spite of our failings.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge the Centre for Applied Ethics, Asian Association for Practical Theology. A preprint version of this work was previously published on Academia.edu, viewable at https://www.academia.edu/129746072/A_critical_engagement_between_Asian_Feminist_Theology_and_Liberation_Theology_the_impossibility_of_doing_theology_from_the_margins.

Competing interests

The author declares that no financial or personal relationships inappropriately influenced the writing of this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Levi M. Checketts: Conceptualisation, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This work was supported by a Start-Up Research Grant (No. RC 165558) provided by Hong Kong Baptist University.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

References

Althaus-Reid, M., 2000, *Indecent theology: Theological perversions in sex, gender and politics*, Routledge, London.

Althaus-Reid, M., 2005, 'Becoming queens: Bending gender and poverty on the websites of the excluded', *Concilium* 2005(1), 99–108. https://doi.org/10.18356/3f4f7065-en

Bong, S., 2011, 'Negotiating resistance/resilience through the nexus of spirituality-sexuality of same-sex partnerships in Malaysia and Singapore', *Marriage and Family Review* 47(8), 648–665. https://doi.org/10.1080/01494929.2011.619305

Bong, S., 2020, *Becoming queer and religious in Malaysia and Singapore*, Bloomsbury Academic, London.

Census and Statistics Department Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2022, *2021 population census: Thematic report: Ethnic minorities*. Hong Kong, Census and Statistic Department.

Chen, Y., 2022, *Toward a micro-political theology: A dialogue between Michel Foucault and liberation theologies*, Pickwick Publications, Eugene, OR.

Cho, M., 2014, 'Stirring up deep waters: Korean feminist theologies today', *Theology Today* 71(2), 233–245. https://doi.org/10.1177/0040573614529788

Chung, H., 1988, '"Han-pu-ri": Doing theology from Korean women's perspective', *Ecumenical Review* 40(1), 27–36. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6623.1988.tb01515.x

Derrida, J., 2007, 'Des tours de Babel', in P. Kamuf & E. Rottenberg (eds.), *Psyche I*, pp. 191–225, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA.

Earner-Byrne, L., 2017, *Letters of the Catholic poor: Poverty in independent Ireland, 1920–1940*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Groody, D., 2007, 'Introduction', in D. Groody (ed.), *The option for the poor in Christian theology*, pp. 1–15, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame.

Gutierrez, G., 1973, *A theology of liberation: History, politics and salvation*, transl. C. Inda & J. Eagleson, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, NY.

Gutierrez, G., 2007, 'Memory and prophecy', in D. Groody (ed.), *The option for the poor in Christian theology*, pp. 17–39, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame.

Han, G. & Kim, A., 2006, 'The Korean Christian movement towards reunification of the two Koreas: A review in retrospect', *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 6(3), 235–255. https://doi.org/10.1080/14742250600877141

Hong Kong Immigration Department, 2024, *Statistics on the number of foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong*, viewed 25 July 2025, from https://www.immd.gov.hk/opendata/eng/law-and-security/visas/statistics_FDH.csv.

Kang, N., 2004, 'Confucian familism, and its social/religious embodiment in Christianity: Reconsidering the family discourse from a feminist perspective', *Asia Journal of Theology* 18(1), 168–189.

Kang, W., 2014, 'Some tasks of Minjung Theology in the age of globalization', *Madang* 22, 5–28. https://doi.org/10.26590/madang..22.201412.5

Keenan, J., 2016, 'The scandal of mercy', *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 138(3/4), 277–288.

Ko, J., 1987, 'Minjung theology and liberation theology', *Theological Studies* [神學研究] 28, 199–227.

Kwok, P., 2007, 'Feminist theology and the new imperialism', *Political Theology* 8(2), 151–155. https://doi.org/10.1558/poth.v8i2.141

Lee, U., 2011, *Theology of Korean women's living creature spirituality: Embodying religion, women, and politics*, Moshineun Saramdeul, Seoul.

Lynch, T., 2014, 'Making the quarter turn: Liberation theology after Lacan', in C. Davis, M. Pound & C. Locket (eds.), *Theology after Lacan: The passion for the real*, pp. 211–231, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Metz, J.B., 1984, 'Facing the Jews: Christian theology after Auschwitz', *Concilium* 1984(5), 26–33.

Ruether, R., 2012, 'Ecofeminism – The challenge to theology', *Deportate, Esuli, Profughe* 20, 22–33.

Sobrino, J., 2008, *No salvation outside the poor: Prophetic-utopian essays*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, NY.

Spivak, G., 2010, *Can the subaltern speak? Reflections on an idea*, R.C. Morris (ed.), Columbia University Press, New York, NY.

Tan, N., 2021, *Resisting rape culture: The Hebrew Bible and Hong Kong sex workers*, Routledge, London.

The New York Times, 2017, *Economic diversity and student outcomes at Notre Dame*, viewed 25 July 2025, from https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/notre-dame.

Wielenga, B., 2007, 'Liberation theology in Asia', in C. Rowland (ed.), *The Cambridge companion to liberation theology*, 2nd edn., pp. 55–78, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Yuen, M., 2014, 'Extending hospitality to women migrant workers in Hong Kong', *Asian Horizons* 8(4), 738–751.

Yuen, M., 2020, *Solidarity and reciprocity with migrants in Asia: Catholic and Confucian ethics in dialogue*, Palgrave MacMillan, Cham.

Yuen, M., 2022, 'Chinese women's role under development and displacement: From exclusion to enhancing capability and moral agency', in M. Yuen & R. Wolfe (eds.), *Displacement and disqualification: Asian feminist theological perspectives*, pp. 47–65, Claretian Communications Foundations, Quezon City.