18 Asian Female Theologians You Should Know About (Plus Others For You To Explore)

By Graham Hill and Jessie Giyou Kim

Some of the most creative and important theology being done today is being done by Asian female theologians. These Asian female theologians live in Asia and also among the diaspora (in North America, Europe, Australia, etc.). Many of them do classic and contextual theological work. But they are also often practitioner-theologians, pastor-theologians, or activist-theologians.

Asian women make up more than a quarter of the world’s population. But when you ask pastors, theological students, or even theologians to name Asian female theologians, they are often at a loss. Many can’t name any (or at best they can name only a few).
But the global movement of Asian women doing theology is growing and diverse. And it is becoming increasingly prominent and influential. Kwok Pui-lan talks about the diversity and importance of Asian female theologians, this way:

“More than half of the world’s population live in Asia, a multicultural and multireligious continent that has undergone tremendous transformation during the past several decades. From Japan to Indonesia, and from the Philippines to Central Asia, people live in different socio-political realities and divergent cultural worlds. Divided into at least seven linguistic zones, Asia is also the birthplace of the major historical religions of humankind.” Kwok Pui-lan goes on to say,

“Asian women comprise more than a quarter of the world’s population. They live on a fascinating multilingual, multireligious, and multiracial continent” and in diaspora all over the world. Asian cultures have “diverse eating habits, ways of life, and social and cultural realities.” Asian female theological voices are shaped by “immense cultural and religious diversity,” and are “pluralistic and multivocal, woven out of many separate strands.”

As we learn from Asian female theologians, it is important to remember that their voices are diverse and many. As Rita Nakashima Brock says, “We differ as much from each other in culture and language as we do from white, Eurocentric feminism,” or from white male authors.

Unfortunately, the ignorance about Asian female theologians and their writings is widespread and persistent. It is due time for this to change. The local and global church needs the voices and contributions of Asian women. These Asian female voices enrich our theology, revitalize our churches, and renew the world.

For this reason, we have decided to feature 18 Asian female theologians you should know about. We have chosen these 18 because they have been influential in our personal lives and how we think about and practice our faith and theology. And at the end of this article we offer 114 more Asian female theologians whose work we are growing to admire and enjoy.

(Note: This is a series we are running profiling female theologians — see our other article in this series, “18 Latin American Female Theologians You Should Know About”).

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18 Asian (and Asian American) Female Theologians You Should Know About

Here are the 18 Asian female theologians that everyone should know about and read.

Aruna Gnanadason

Aruna Gnanadason was formerly the Executive Director for Planning and Integration in the General Secretariat of the World Council of Churches. She was Coordinator of the Justice Peace and Creation Team and of the Women’s Programme of the World Council of Churches before taking up that position. She has a doctorate in ministry from the San Francisco Theological Seminary, and three honorary doctorates. Aruna comes from India and belongs to the Church of South India.


Chung Hyun Kyung

Chung Hyun Kyung is Associate Professor of Ecumenical Theology at Union Theological Seminary. She writes about feminist and eco-feminist theologies, Third World spiritualities, Christ-Buddhist dialogues, mysticism and social movements, and the contributions and uniqueness of Asian Christian theologies.

In Struggle to Be in the Sun Again, Chung Hyun Kyung writes the following about being an Asian female theologian: “Doing theology is a personal and a political activity. As a Korean woman, I do theology in search of what it means to be fully human in my struggle for wholeness and in my people’s concrete historical fight for freedom” (1990: 1). In an interview with Zion’s Herald, she challenges the Western dominance of Third World theologies and perspectives: “I think in order to really heal the world we need the ‘wisdom of darkness.’ This can be the Third World, dark people, women, or our ‘shadows,’… all the things we do not want to confront within ourselves, so we project them onto others and call them terrorists. So, I think that we need ‘endarkenment’ for a while, not enlightenment, to heal the world.”

**Elizabeth “Lisa” Yao-Hwa Sung**

Elizabeth (Lisa) Sung is a Protestant systematic theologian serving as a visiting Professor of Theology at University of Saint Mary of the Lake / Mundelein Seminary. Prior to that she was Associate Professor in the Department of Biblical and Systematic Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. She has received fellowships from the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning and the Carl F. Henry Center for Theological Understanding. She is a member of the American Academy of Religion and the Evangelical Theological Society. Dr Sung also teaches in the course “Global Theologies”, offered by seminaries within the Roman Catholic, mainline Protestant, and evangelical Protestant traditions.


**Grace Ji-Sun Kim**

Grace Ji-Sun Kim is an Associate Professor of Theology at Earlham School of Religion. Englewood Review of Books listed *Intersectional Theology* (co-written with Susan Shaw) as one of the Best Theology Books of 2018. *Healing Our Broken Humanity* (co-written with Graham Hill) was included in Englewood Review of Books list of Best Books of 2018. Grace Ji-Sun Kim is a member of the Board of Directors for the American Academy of Religion’s (AAR) “Research Grants Jury Committee” and was co-chair of AAR’s steering committee, “Women of Color Scholarship, Teaching and Activism Group.” She sits on the editorial board for the Journal for Religion and Popular Culture and
is a referee for 3 journals, including the *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion*. She is an Advisory Board Member for the Center for Reconciliation at Duke Divinity School.


**Grace Yia-Hei Kao**

Grace Yia-Hei Kao is Professor of Ethics at Claremont School of Theology. She serves as the co-director of the Center for Sexuality, Gender and Religion (CSGR), and serves on the steering committees of the Animals and Religion Group (ARG), and the Women of Color Scholarship, Teaching, and Activism Group (WOCSTAG) of the American Academy of Religion. She is on the Board of Advisors of the Pacific, Asian, and North American Asian Women in Theology and Ministry (PANAAWTM), and serves on the editorial boards of the *Journal of Religious Ethics* (JRE), the *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* (JSCE), and the *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion* (JRER).


**Havilah Dharamraj**

Havilah Dharamraj is a Langham Scholar, and serves as Academic Dean and Professor of Old Testament at South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies (SAIACS) in Bangalore, India. Her academic degrees are in biochemistry and theology, and she has a PhD from the University of Durham, UK.

Havilah Dharamraj’s research centers on Old Testament biblical and theological studies, and innovation in theological education and ministry training. Her publications include *Altogether Lovely: A Thematic and Intertextual Reading of the Song of Songs* (*South Asian Theology*) (2018), *South Asia Bible Commentary: A One-Volume Commentary on the Whole Bible* (ed.) (2015), *Challenging Tradition*:
Henriette Marianne Katoppo

Henriette Marianne Katoppo was an Indonesian feminist theologian and novelist, whose novels and theological works received international acclaim. She was a pioneer in Asian feminist theology, and used Asian stories and myths to interpret theology; presenting God as a mother and Mary as the complete woman. Fluent in a dozen Asian and European languages, she spearheaded Asian feminist theology in the 1970s – at a time when Asian theologies and Asian feminist theologies were mostly unknown in the West. Her novels captured the imagination of Indonesian society, and her novel Raumanen won first prize at the Jakarta Arts Council Novel Competition.


Julie C. Ma

Julie C. Ma is Associate Professor of Missions and Intercultural Studies at Oral Roberts University. She has also taught at the Asia Pacific Theological Seminary in the Philippines, and at the Oxford Center Mission Studies in Oxford, UK. She has authored and edited numerous books, often with her husband Wonsuk Ma. She served as the president of the Asia Pentecostal Society from 2014–2015.

Spirit in Mission” (2015), and “The Role of Christian Women in the Global South” (2014).

Kathy Khang

Kathy Khang is a writer, speaker, theologian, and activist, who has spent more than 20 years in parachurch ministries, mostly focusing on college students and also training Christian organizations and church leaders. She writes about the intersections between faith, culture, and gender. Kathy Khang’s books and articles explore the ways the church can engage in the ministry of reconciliation, and in amplifying the voices of those who are silenced because of their ethnicity or gender, and in genuine social change.


Kwok Pui-lan

Kwok Pui-lan is the Distinguished Visiting professor of Theology at Candler School of Theology, and is the former William F. Cole Professor of Christian Theology and Spirituality at Episcopal Divinity School. She has taught theology at major universities and seminaries all over the world, including the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Auburn Theological Seminary, Union Theological Seminary, and Yale Divinity School.

Kwok Pui-lan researches and writes about Asian and feminist theologies, postcolonial theology, biblical hermeneutics, ecotheology, Asian Christologies, and the theological perspectives, spiritual experiences, and biblical interpretations of Asian women and marginalized peoples. Integrating postcolonial and feminist theologies in order to do justice to the experiences of the women of the Third World (Majority World), Kwok Pui-lan explores the theological intersections between gender, race, class, culture, poverty, colonialism, sexuality, religion, the arts, story, and liturgy.

M. Sydney Park


Melba Padilla Maggay

Melba Padilla Maggay lives in the Philippines. She’s a writer, theologian, political activist, sociologist, and highly respected Christian leader. She’s the founder and director of the Institute for Studies in Asian Church and Culture (ISACC), based in Quezon City in the Philippines. Melba Padilla Maggay gained international prominence and acclaim through her writings, through her social and political leadership, and through her work to transform broken communities. She was instrumental in organizing the Protestant presence at the EDSA barricades during the February People Power Uprising in the Philippines in 1986. Melba founded ISACC, which has a vision “to see the gospel of Christ so rooted in Asian cultures that they are engaged by its values and empowered to become societies of justice and righteousness. Our mission is to creatively witness to the Lordship of Jesus in all of life by penetrating cultures with the values of the Kingdom and engaging the powers towards social transformation.” ISACC is a research and training organization that offers courses and training, and that also engages in political advocacy and community transformation programs.

Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro

Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro is a professor of theology in the Divinity School of Silliman University in Dumaguete City, Negros Oriental, the Philippines. She is also the Director of the Justice and Peace Center at that university. Her research and writing focuses on Asian feminist theology and Christologies that are adequate for Asian women. For Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro, Western Christologies are insufficient for Asian women, who need to discover and talk and theologize about Jesus out of their own experience, hopes, understandings, and languages. In her book *The Jesus of Asian Women*, Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro shows how South Korean feminist theologies and Christologies give rich insight into ecotheology and creation care, how Filipina Christologies offer new insights into liberation theologies, and how Hong Kong and postcolonial feminist theologies help us see Jesus in fresh ways. Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro concludes with the following. “Overall, the Jesus of Asian women is the Asian Christ who accompanies them in their daily struggles for liberation from all forms of oppression and suffering. This Christ seeks to engage with religions, cultures, and indigenous spiritualities to make life flourish for every living being.” (194).

Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro shows how Christian ethics must have a transformational role. This is especially the case when Christian ethics address the marginalized women of Asia. She shows how Asian women are developing indigenous Christologies and associated ethical practices. These can have a transforming effect on women in India, Korea, the Philippines, and Hong Kong. For example, Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro writes of the plight of many young girls in the Philippines. Cartels traffic these girls for sex with foreign tourists. The legal and policing systems that should protect these girls ignore and abuse them. She writes how Filipino women’s voices are rising. They are seeking justice.

Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro shows how Filipino women are exploring the person and work of Jesus afresh. They are meeting Jesus, the Wounded Healer, as wounded healers. In *The Jesus of Asian Women* she writes, “Filipino women must face the challenge to keep going, to embody Christ in accompanying the people in their journey out of the bondage of evil. Her prophetic ministry, her dances, her songs and rituals, must provide healing and inspiration to the wounded spirits out there.” (157).

**Namsoon Kang**

Namsoon Kang is Professor of Theology and Religion at Brite Divinity School, having formerly served on the Faculty of Divinity at Cambridge University in the United Kingdom and the Methodist Theological University in South Korea. She is president of the World Conference of Associations of Theological Institutions (WOCATI) and on the global faculty for the Global Ecumenical Theological Institute. Namsoon Kang’s writings focus on apophatic theology/philosophy, deconstruction, postmodernism, ecumenism, postcolonialism, gender studies, diaspora theology, human rights and justice, hospitality, and postcolonial mission.


**Nikki Toyama-Szeto**

Nikki Toyama-Szeto is Executive Director of Evangelicals for Social Action (ESA), having previously served with International Justice Mission, the Urbana Conference, and InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. She speaks and trains leaders globally—past engagements include speaking for Tearfund (Nepal), Centro Esdras (Guatemala), Christian Community Development Association (USA), and Billy Graham Center (USA). Nikki Toyama-Szeto has served on the Third Lausanne Congress (2010), and on the boards of Interserve USA, Missio Alliance, and Casa Chiralagua. She serves as a “Leading Voice” for Missio Alliance, and her ministry was profiled in Christianity Today’s, “Who’s Next?” and Rejuvenate Magazine’s “40 under 40”. Her insights about peace, theology, and justice are rooted in ministry among the poor and
marginalized peoples in Nairobi, Cairo, Bangkok, and major cities in the United States.


**Rita Nakashima Brock**

Rita Nakashima Brock is Senior Vice President of Volunteers of America Moral Injury programs. She was formerly the Founding Co-Director of the Soul Repair Center at Brite Divinity School, and a theology professor for twenty years. Previously, she directed the Fellowship Program at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, a prominent advanced research institute, and from 2001-2002, she was a Fellow at the Harvard Divinity School Center for Values in Public Life.

Rita Nakashima Brock writes about spirituality and moral injury, theologies of war and peace, theologies of peace and suffering, postcolonial and feminist theologies, human sexuality and liberation, and ecotheology and creation care. She was the first Asian American woman to earn a doctorate in Theology (Claremont Graduate University, 1988) and to serve on the Board of Directors of the American Academy of Religion.

Sarah Shin

Sarah Shin is the Associate National Director of Evangelism at InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF). She is an acclaimed speaker and trainer, whose writing and speaking focus on ethnicity, evangelism, and the arts. She is especially passionate about helping Christian integrate evangelism with ethnic reconciliation, justice, beauty, and technology. She explores how our brokenness around ethnicity can be healed and restored. Sarah Shin’s book *Beyond Colorblind* also helps Christians develop cross-cultural skills, manage cross-cultural conflict, pursue reconciliation and justice, and share the gospel as ethnicity-aware Christians.


Wonhee Anne Joh

Wonhee Anne Joh is Professor of Theology and Culture at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. She researches and writes about constructive theology, transpacific Asian American studies/theologies, empire and post/decolonial studies, war, migration, militarism, carcerality, race, gender, sexuality, cold war, trauma studies, affect theory, global anti-colonial movements, and emergent political theologies. Wonhee Anne Joh’s book *Heart of the Cross* is critically acclaimed. “Utilizing the Korean concept of *jeong*, Joh constructs a theology that is feminist, political and love-centered, while acknowledging the cross as source of pain and suffering. Joh’s innovative vision is a call for political love that is stronger than powers of oppression.” (From the book’s description). The book constructs a Christology rooted in Wonhee Anne Joh’s Asian/Korean American experience, and in dialogue with post-colonial, liberationist, feminist, psychoanalytical, and post-structuralist theories.

Listening and Learning from More Than Half of the Church

Women make up more than half of the church. Asian women make up more than a quarter of the church’s population. It is time for us all to listen to women’s voices, honor their contributions, follow their examples of reconciliation and ministry and activism, and learn from their theological writing and thoughts. As Juliany González Nieves says, “It is time that we get to know the faces and hear the voices of the women doing theology across the globe.”

114 More Asian (and Asian American) Female Theologians You Should Know About

We chose the 18 Asian female theologians featured in this article not because they are necessarily more important than other Asian female theologians, but rather because these 18 have been influential in our personal spiritual formation, in our lives, and in our theology. But as we’ve continued to read the writings of Asian women, we’ve grown to value and enjoy many more.

Here are 114 more Asian female theologians that we are currently reading and who are becoming increasingly important in our lives and how we approach our theology, witness, reconciliation, worship, and discipleship. These are 114 more Asian female theologians we think you should know about and read. We also offer some examples of their books or articles.

Please note two things:

1. The books and articles we provide are representative works, and not exhaustive lists for each theologian.

2. This is not an exhaustive list of Asian and Asian American female theologians. This is a work-in-progress, and we will continue to update this list over the coming months and years. Please feel free to email us with other female theologians you think we should add to this list – info@theglobalchurchproject.com

We hope that you, like us, will grow to love and value the work of Asian female theologians and activists. If you think we should add an Asian (or Asian American, or Asian American feminist) female theologian, biblical scholar, or theologian-activist to this list, please let us know!


Bo Karen Lee – Sacrifice and Delight in the Mystical Theologies of Anna Maria van Schurman and Madame Jeanne Guyon (2016).

Boyung Lee – Transforming Congregations through Community: Faith Formation from the Seminary to the Church (2013).


Chandra Talpade Mohanty – Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity (2003), and Feminism and War: Confronting U.S. Imperialism (ed.) (2008). Mohanty is not a theologian, but her acclaimed work offers excellent insight into postcolonial transnationalist Asian feminist theory.
Chee-Chiew Lee – *The Blessing of Abraham, the Spirit, and Justification in Galatians: Their Relationship and Significance for Understanding Paul’s Theology* (2013).


Dwi Maria Handayani – “Female Evangelical Scholars in Indonesia: A Crisis or Opportunity?” (2017), and “Proverbs as Theology” (2018).


Jenny Hwang Yang – Welcoming the Stranger: Justice, Compassion & Truth in the Immigration Debate (2018), and “Americans, Immigration and the Call to "Welcome the Stranger" (2018).


Norma P. Dollaga – “Not a Solution to the Drug Problem” (2017), and “God of Struggling People (A Psalm)” (2014), and “A Deadly Typhoon Strikes the Philippines- and it’s not Typhoon Pablo” (2012).

Narola Imchen – Weaving New Patterns of Ministry for Women in North East India (2004), and Remembering Our Fore Mothers: The Influence of the American Baptist Women Missionaries in North East India (2003).


Sharon Jacob – Reading Mary Alongside Indian Surrogate Mothers: Violent Love, Oppressive Liberation, and Infancy Narratives (2015).


**Further Reading and Resources**

Juliany González Nieves “18 Latin American Female Theologians You Should Know About” and “Caribbean Christian Theology: A Bibliography.”

https://theglobalchurchproject.com/18-latin-american-female-theologians-know/

**About the Authors**

Jessie Giyou Kim is studying a Bachelor of Theology degree through the Australian College of Theology. She was born in Seoul, South Korea, and moved to China at age 15. Jessie has served in mission in China, Australia, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Her areas of interest include mission, pastoral care, and caring for people. She is pursuing ordination for pastoral ministry with the Baptist Churches of Australia in order to become a pastor and missionary. Jessie grew up in various parts of Asia, and is fluent in Chinese, Korean, and English. A global citizen and a passionate disciple of Jesus, Jessie writes and translates theology posts in English, Korean, and Chinese, and edits and produces videos and podcasts on global theology and World Christianity.

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