

[Working Paper] When Creativity Meets Theology: I-To Loh and the Invention of the Yellow Spiritual



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Chia-An (Victor) Tung is a proud Siraya, one of the aboriginal clans on the island of Taiwan. He earned his Master of Sacred Music degree from Emmanuel College at the University of Toronto in May 2023 and is currently pursuing his Doctor of Ministry at Emmanuel College. Victor serves as church musician at the Toronto Chinese Baptist Church and is also actively involved with the Better Homeland Worship Choir in Toronto. His research focuses on the diasporic choir as an ethnographic study, exploring how singing and liturgical practices shape their understanding of “the better homeland.”

The hymn “Watch the Bush of Thorns”¹ (1985) is a unique and creative, powerful work by Dr. I-To Loh. In authorship and audience, it is soundly Taiwanese. Loh’s hymn strikes me as both a poetic and a religious experience, rich in creativity. It verifies the assertion that “creativity is a contextually embedded phenomenon. It involves a person or group of people who operate within a context. This context (with its physical and social facets) has many levels, ranging from family, school, work/organizational settings to local community, regional, national, or transnational ones” (Lubart, Glăveanu, de Vries, Camargo, and Martin Storme 2019, 421). Glăveanu (2019) also states that “creativity appears as a process of repositioning ourselves—symbolically and/or physically—in relation to the world and acting on it from this new position” (173).

In this paper, I outline and analyze “Watch the Bush of Thorns” as an example of the creative art shaping Christian faith within the Taiwanese identity. This hymn is worth analyzing as an artifact, not only because it is rich in Taiwanese expression and ritual but also because it blends creativity, and theological interpretation through contextualization. My analysis will start with a discussion of origins, ethos, and purpose before exploring where creativity meets theology and context.

Creativity: Origins and Motif

In the 1960s, while Loh was still a student at the Tainan Theological Seminary, he began writing hymns under the guidance of Canadian missionary Isabel Taylor (1909–1992). According to Keith R. Sawyer (2006), “every successful creative career starts with a long period of training and preparation. A composer won’t create a brilliant symphony without first absorbing a huge amount of information about prior styles and genres” (217). Loh was interested in the rich harmonies from the Romantic era, found especially in the minor tonalities that allow room for variation, which he noticed had a familiar “East Asian flavor.” Loh’s education consisted of Western musical training and theology, with his roots in his East Asian identity. These ingredients led to his ability to create hymns and form the base of his creativity and its theological interpretation.

In 1961, Loh received a request from Taylor to translate *Passion Play*, written in 1954 by Marilou Taggart for an African American congregation. While Loh attempted a literal translation of the opening hymn, “Jesus Walked That Lonesome Valley,” into Taiwanese, he encountered a new possibility: Instead of translating word for word, why

¹ <https://youtu.be/N-G-jxQC8nI?feature=shared>; <https://youtu.be/dxthH0xpxM0?feature=shared>

not be creative, innovative, and derive an offshoot “Yellow spiritual” inspired by the Black original?² He began to review local music known spiritually to move the people of Taiwan. He also considered creative approaches by which to connect Western hymns and local music. The music Loh experienced in his youth from all over Taiwan became the themes for his initial attempts to compose local hymns with theological interpretation. As a result, Loh began to compose hymns incorporating “Kaau-tiau-a, (哭調仔),”³ a poignant folk tune from Taiwanese opera (歌仔戲). Kaau-tiau-a (“Wailing Song”; see Lim 2008, 33, 94) is traditionally used in emotional scenes to express deep sorrow or longing. By integrating this melody, Loh gave his hymns a distinctly Taiwanese emotional resonance, bridging the spiritual with the cultural. Loh took pride in his Taiwanese identity. He also expressed a great hope for freedom, sharing the warmth of solidarity with other Taiwanese who suffer political persecution. He and countless others were affected by the Formosa Incident (Meilidao Incident) coinciding with the time of martial law under Kuomintang (KMT) rule over Taiwan.

Creativity in Suffering

“Watch the Bush of Thorns” presents a symbolic image of the thorn being burned by fire but not destroyed, when God called Moses (Exodus 3:2). The lyrics were written by Chun-Ming Kao (高俊明). Its theological interpretation is underlined by the fact Kao was convicted as a prisoner of conscience and jailed during the Formosa Incident in 1979. Kao’s time in prison was analogous to a light entering a dark corner where no light had previously been seen. He believed that his incarceration was God’s will. Akin to Oscar Wilde writing “The Ballad of Reading Gaol,” the prison became Kao’s monastery, where his creative capacity flourished. In 1982, he composed “Watch the Bush of Thorns” to encourage churches toward a liberating hope in times of political pressure. This poem expresses a theological blend of the spirit of “perseverance for good” and the Presbyterian Church of Taiwan (PCT), imbued with hope that the stronger their faith becomes, the thorns will sprout and blossom again once the fire has passed.

Kao’s poems also speak to an audience that is no stranger to adversity; the texts fortify them. It reflects Wuthnow’s observation: “Art is capable of bringing into sharper relief emotion associated with the most profound experience of human lives” (2001, 23). The poems become a therapy and spiritual support. In addition, this art form encourages people to try to connect with God in new ways.

Creativity in Imagination, and Its Theological Interpretations

Loh drew theological inspiration from Kao’s poetry. Inspiration is at the center of the imagination. Imagination positions someone to place themselves within this dramatic narrative. Imagination develops and fuels the individual artist to create something new. Sawyer’s concept of an *individualist definition of creativity* tells us, “Creativity is new. The most basic requirement of a creative thought or action is that it must be novel or original. Creativity is a combination. All thoughts and concepts are combinations of existing thoughts and concepts. The mind is an immense web of symbolic material; most of it has been previously mastered. . . . Creativity involves a combination of two or more thoughts or concepts that have never been combined before by that individual” (Sawyer 2006, 7). The poet and musician’s energy, rhythm, and lyrics blend to achieve “spiritual connection” (Wuthnow 2001, 15).

² Loh coined the term “Yellow spiritual” to denote a new hymn inspired by Black spirituals. Just as Black spirituals express the sorrows and hopes of African Americans, Yellow spirituals reflect the unique struggles and aspirations of the Taiwanese people, imbued with their cultural and historical context.

³ <https://youtu.be/IEafCRoRPPg?feature=shared>

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Watch the Bush of Thorns

1. Watch the bush of thorns being licked by fierce flame — the
 2. Watch the burn - ing bush, by God's will kept whole: when
 3. Watch the suf - fering thorns: though burn - ing still a - live — if
 4. Cou - rage fill our hearts as Je - sus Christ's friends! With

Refrain

bush is not con - sumed, but still stays the same. When
 Chris - tians face hard trial, love's power nerves their soul.
 per - se - cu - tion strikes, then Christ's Church re - vives!
 him in test of fire, our faith finds true strength.

fire and heat sub - side, seed growth soon re - sumes; the

Perfect 5th.
E: Leading Tone

and brings forth new blooms.

Exodus 3:2

Lyrics: Chun-ming Kao, Taiwan
 Music: CHIH-PHIE, Based on Taiwanese wailing song motif; I-to Loh, Taiwan

Figure 1. "Watch the Bush of Thorns" (I-To Loh 2013, 252).

Loh decided to craft a creative theology and collaborative artwork. To achieve this in the hymn, he used the "Kaau-tiau-a" melody. "Kaau" in the Taiwanese language means "cry." The "Kaau-tiau-a" is an important melodic tune and repertoire within Taiwanese opera. It is used mostly in sad scenes. It refers to grief in the context of death and sadness in general. Crying displays an emotion, a culture, and an art form. Loh uses the motif of "Kaau-tiau-a" to depict an image of Jesus's spirit bearing the sins of the world. This lament encourages sympathy and resonates with the hymn's audience. Imagination enables us to converse with the spiritual, and it connects us to this truth we all share. Kelley Mayo (2009) suggests that the ability to imagine enables humans to hope, tell stories, and heal (67). Thus, the lament hymn "Watch the Bush of Thorns" not only cries out in sorrow but also provides hope for the suffering, urging them not to be afraid.

Loh's use of "Kaau-tiau-a" brings creative theological meaning and empathetic mediation. For example, the use of the seventh (leading) note in the descending motion of the opening interval of perfect fifth (E and A) and the ascending interval of fifth (E and B) represents the hope for the upcoming "spring" season, with the Resurrection of Jesus (see figure 1). Loh's idea is to use simple counterpoint harmonies and Chinese flute accompaniment to show the poem's vitality as a source of contextual theology in shaping Taiwanese artistic sublimity. The idea of this hymn pertains to "tone painting" in the imagination and its manifestation of the flowering of new life. This also reflects the spiritual connection of opening the imagination to have an encounter with God.

The Creativity Within the Process of the Critical Review

“Kaa-tiau-a” and its music are not easily accepted by church congregations. When the congregation members have no deep theological training and lack cultural self-identification, they may misunderstand the deeper meaning when singing this hymn. In particular, some new church members and more conservative members may associate the singing of “kaau-tiau-a” with the superstitions and curses found in Taiwanese funeral culture. Therefore, when Loh published this hymn, many dismissed the unorthodox composition skills of this Yellow spiritual. The result produced a split inside the church into various factions based on their reception of Loh’s notion of a Yellow spiritual.

The tune of “kaau-tiau-a” is often heard in television media and other cultural performance venues. Times have now changed, however, and the “kaau-tiau-a” has gradually fallen into decline. Although the melody is included in the hymnal (*Seng-Si*, 2009) of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan, it is rarely used in liturgical services. In addition, the spiritual melody as a process is not easy to master and can be a challenge. For example, musically untrained congregations often fail to catch the pitch, and even though the lyrics are deeply theological, the difficulty and complexity of the main melody may obscure the meaning of the hymn. Hence, the meaning of “Watch the Bush of Thorns” cannot become deeply accepted into people’s hearts.

Most churches in Taiwan use piano. However, Loh’s idea was to use traditional Chinese instruments to accompany this hymn. Many rural churches lack a regular pianist, not to mention finding someone to play the Chinese flute or erhu. Small churches and some rural, indigenous churches lack resources. In consequence, no one promotes new spiritual hymns, and the congregation receives no education in singing them.

With a theological education and a background in ethnomusicology, Loh brings a unique perspective on the discipline of music composition. Having been dean of a seminary and chair of a church music department, he had significant authority. The music and its social power can thus be seen in the new hymnal published by the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan in 2009. As the editor of this anthology, Loh selected his favorite contributions. Among the 650 hymns in the book, Loh’s own compositions account for forty of the melodies and twenty-four of the lyrics. Some church members criticize the hymnal for being evidence of Loh’s nepotism, control, and egocentrism. Because of this, some Presbyterian churches do not accept this 2009 edition of the hymnal; rather, they continue using the older 1964 edition, whose hymn selection is characterized by the traditional, conventional, and conforming. It contains familiar sources from the West, edited by the missionary Isabel Taylor.

Conclusion

The invention of the Yellow spiritual, rich in theology, derives from creative innovation. Creativity is a form of broad-minded thinking that results in nonconformity. It requires drawing connections between aspects of artists’ experiences and their lives. I-To Loh’s creativity emerges from his background and his abiding Christian faith. His father, a Presbyterian pastor, often took him to the mountains to meet and visit with the aboriginal people. This was where he came to know aboriginal tunes for composing new music. Loh was also influenced by the Western music of a Canadian missionary and learned piano and harmonic practices.

Music teaches us not only to listen to the sound itself, but also to remember who we are artistically. Loh’s Yellow spiritual “Watch the Bush of Thorns” is an example of creativity meeting theology and content; it also demonstrates a passion to create an innovation from a Black spiritual contextualized into a Yellow spiritual. Because this hymn is inextricably linked to creativity and theology, we also look forward to continuing to study the insights of other hymns so that we do not miss out on God’s treasure of faith. Innovation often invites resistance and rejection within church

congregation circles. But the artistic mind can overcome the limitations of a particular culture and hence address new challenges without sacrificing self-identity. Loh's initiative in creating "Watch the Bush of Thorns" evidences the spiritual connection and interplay of creativity and theology.

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