**Celebrating Gale A. Yee: A Pioneer Asian American Feminist Biblical Scholar**

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I have had the privilege of teaching with Gale at the Episcopal Divinity School for 18 years. We share many fond memories of working at the school, attending events and conferences, and sharing meals at our favorite restaurants at Harvard Square and Boston’s Chinatown. Since I do not drive, Gale has served as my chauffeur to many places and she can tell you how bad I am in navigating traffic. That was before we had GPS. Gale is the oldest of 12 children and she is used to be the big sister and in command. I am like her younger sister and benefit from her generosity.

My office was on the third floor and hers on the first floor. She would be at her office before eight o’clock, and whenever I had questions, I would go straight to her office to ask her. She is my most reliable colleague, who would reply to emails promptly and finish her work on time. This is because she is highly organized and plans her work ahead of time. Unlike many of us who scramble to meet deadlines, she would prepare her public speeches months ahead. She is every editor’s dream contributor for she would be the first one to submit her essay with little revisions needed.

Gale has grown up in the slums of Blackstone Ranger territory in Chicago. She was fascinated by Maxine Hong Kingston’s famous novel *The Woman Warrior*, because the protagonist is Chinese, like her![[1]](#endnote-1) She even wrote an article comparing the female assassin Jael in Judges 4 with Fu Mulan, the woman warrior who inspires Kingston’s novel.[[2]](#endnote-2) Mulan knows martial arts and disguises as a man to compete in a man’s world. Gale had many years of karate and kung fu and has a green belt. As a senior woman of color biblical scholar, Gale has slashed many dragons and become a feisty woman warrior in the guild and profession. Several years ago, I told Gale that the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) should nominate her to be the president. It was ridiculous that no woman of color has served as president in SBL’s almost 140 years of history. Gale’s Asian and Asian American colleagues were overjoyed when she became SBL’s president, and we held a party to honor her as the first Asian American and first woman of color to become the president last Friday.

As colleagues who have spoken before me have testified, Gale’s scholarship and mentoring have impacted many scholars of different races and ethnicities. Through many years, I was the grateful recipient of many books and articles she has published. In addition, Gale reads broadly in Asian American studies and constantly sends me references for books and articles that I should read, even after her retirement. As I work on postcolonial criticism, our interests overlap, and I benefit from her ideological and materialist interpretation of the Bible. She said, “I have become convinced in my feminist investigations of the Bible over the years that the study of gender must include race, class, and colonial status as categories of analysis.”[[3]](#endnote-3) Gale demonstrates this commitment in her interpretation of the creation stories in Genesis. While many feminist scholars have commented on the gender relations in the texts, Gale points out in her book *Poor Banished Children of Eve* that we need to take into consideration economic relations and material conditions that are shaping the stories.[[4]](#endnote-4)

I have learned a great deal from *Poor* *Banished Children of Eve*, because it uses a vigorous ideological criticism that integrates gender, class, race, and colonialism. It examines the portrayal of wicked women in the Hebrew Bible and demonstrates how women serve as conduits in the power play between men. The “wicked women” function as “sexual metaphors” and “symbolic alibis” for the contests of male elites who wield political, economic, and social power. Her book suggests that postcolonial criticism must look at how the symbolization of women and the deployment of gender in the text relate to class interests, modes of production, concentration of state power, and colonial domination.

Gale is also a pioneer in Asian American feminist biblical interpretation. In 1994 she was a panelist in a session devoted to “The Impact of National Histories on the Politics of Identity” in the Women and Religion section of the American Academy of Religion.[[5]](#endnote-5) She said that at that occasion, she came out and named herself an Asian American feminist biblical scholar. Gale’s work has helped me understand the differences between Asian and Asian American biblical criticism. As a third-generation Chinese American, her identity formation and worldview are very different from those who have grown up in Asia. Because of racism, her family had deliberately not taught her Chinese. Sometime ago, when she wanted to go to China and learned some words in Mandarin, she would often miss the subtleties of the tones. She has grown up among African American and Puerto-Rican slum-dwellers in Chicago and not among Chinese Americans. Her essay “Yin/Yang Is Not Me: An Exploration into an Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics” points to the danger of using stereotypes to describe Asian American experience and the need to attend to heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity.[[6]](#endnote-6) She argues that Asian biblical hermeneutics is not based on some Orientalized or essentialized past or cultural heritage but is done by an American of Asian descent who adopts a stance of Asian American advocacy and is concerned about the welfare of the Asian American community.

To celebrate Gale’s many accomplishments, I have asked some of her former students and colleagues to share tributes to her. Gale is not only a meticulous scholar; she is also a demanding teacher. She routinely taught courses in Hebrew Bible as well as feminist theory, because she directed the Feminist Liberation Theology Program at EDS. In her Introduction to Hebrew Bible course, she assigned a lot of readings and required as many as seven short papers. While the students might complain of the heavy workload, they said the course had been nothing less than transformative and eye-opening. When students did not do well, she was direct and did not mince words in her comments. A student Lynne Jacobson recalled:

My very first paper handed in came back to me—not with a grade, exactly, but with some far more articulate and to the point one-word comment. Dr. Yee had written “Groan!”  At the time I was shocked at her candor. By the time I’d completed that initial course with her, I’d come to deeply appreciate her sense of humor and willingness to engage her students in such a direct manner.  Her lectures and descriptions were always very careful and concise, making her a joy to follow and from whom to learn all of that new and challenging material. Against all odds, I have developed an interest in studying the Hebrew Bible thanks to Dr. Yee and her contagious curiosity and her ability to seek out the unspoken stories and relationships between people and their God. How Dr. Yee regarded her students is not unlike her approach to teaching; always asking important questions and listening deeply to the answers—even if the response from time to time incites an encouraging “Groan!”

Gale embodies what she teaches and serves as a role model for her students. Her student Hilary Greer wrote,

What had the greatest impact on me was how Gale always strove to embody what she taught. The lenses through which she looks at the Bible are the lenses she applies to looking at the world—and even to examining herself. Gale’s willingness to bring feminist, postcolonial criticism alive in her life—to ask what she might still have to learn, how she might even unwittingly be part of injustice, and what she could do to heal those broken places in the world—was the greatest lesson she ever taught me. Gale taught me the value of being REAL.

Gale’s teaching had great impact on racial and ethnic minority students and international students. African American student Chuck Wynder Jr. wrote about the impact of Gale’s teaching:

I learned the importance of understanding the social, political and economic context of the Bible and its writers. She helped me to learn to look behind the text, read against the text, and find ways to see the hidden in the text. The lessons I learned from Prof. Yee inform my preaching, writing, and praxis in my church-wide and congregational ministries. Her impact on me extended beyond the classroom as she pushed me and encouraged me to finish my degree program when my mother died two months before I graduated. And, then showed up two years later at my ordination. And, in all of this embodied the lifelong impact a professor has on the life of her student.

Rose Wu from Hong Kong came to EDS to study feminist liberation theology. She said Gale provided a warm and safe place for students to share their stories and reminded them that they should be open for critical questions and challenges. Another student Ban Htang from Myanmar has taken a course on “Feminist Theories and Theologizing” with Gale and said:

Prof. Gale Yee’s pedagogy and scholarship have a huge impact on me as an international student and woman of color. Gale Yee challenged me, who came from a very conservative Christian background from Burma, to see and imagine the identity of women and their experiences beyond the social and cultural construction. One of the most important learnings from Gale Yee is that she always asks me “what is your voice?” She taught me to find my constructive voice and women’s resistance in recorded history because she believes that women are agents of historical movement and change.

Gale has taught for one year at the Chung Chi College in the Chinese University of Hong Kong and introduced to her students new ways of interpreting the Bible. Clara Tsang had already read her work before meeting her and was delighted to have her as a teacher. She wrote:

Since I read an article from *Biblical Interpretation* written by Gale A. Yee, I was so inspired by the method she used and it became my methodology that I used to write my own graduate thesis on the interpretation of the marriage metaphor in Hosea. I was glad that I had a chance to attend Yee’s lectures before I graduated from Chung Chi College CUHK, and she opened my eyes to let me know that there were so many different methodologies and dimensions to study the Old Testament, and I enjoyed very much to have library section with Yee that she showed how to use the library for Old Testament Study.

In addition to students who have benefited from Gale’s classroom teaching, Asian and Asian American emerging biblical scholars look up to her as their role model. Hyun Woo Kim, a doctoral student at Emory University, said Gale’s work has opened new possibilities for him:

Dr. Yee’s contextual reading of the Bible has shown me ways in which I can fully engage with a biblical text. For her, *where we read mattered*. This lesson has enabled me to rediscover my voice, myself, and my life as fruitful resources of reading the Bible. Just as Prof. Yee’s reading of the Bible with her genuine reflection on her life has provided me, a non-European reader, with many insights and guidelines, I wish to do the same for others. Yes, Dr. Yee is my role model.

Gale has mentored and supported many Asian American biblical scholars through the years. Liz Lai Ling Ngan said Gale was the first Chinese American woman biblical scholar that she had met. She experienced Gale as always gracious, warm, and welcoming. Ngan said, “She is more than a friend and a sister. She is my mentor and I continue to learn from her. She is also the only Chinese American biblical scholar, whether female or male, who can really dance. She’s got the moves.”

Gale is associated with different associations and networks, and she is particularly committed to two among them. Sze-Kar Wan of Southern Methodist University spoke of her many contributions to the Ethnic Chinese Biblical Colloquium (ECBC). Gale was one of the founding members and the second president of the ECBC. She also took part in the first and fourth International Congress of Ethnic Chinese Biblical Scholars in 2004 and 2014, during the latter of which she delivered the opening plenary and received a *Qianbei* (Respected Elder) award. Jeffrey Kuan of Claremont School of Theology said, “Her generosity of time and spirit, her humor, her critical feedback on our research and writing, made ECBC a unique place and organization for ethnic Chinese biblical scholars.” John Yieh, a professor at Virginia Theological Seminary, coedited with Gale *Honouring the Past, Looking to the Future*, a book by ethnic Chinese biblical scholars.[[7]](#endnote-7) He said, “It is in the friendly and critical discussions of [ECBC] that many of her ideas for articles and books are balloon-tried and many of her hermeneutical ideas and interpretive methods are tested. We are proud to call her our *dajie* (big sister).”

Gale is also very dedicated to the group Pacific, Asian, and North American Asian Women in Theology and Ministry (PANAAWTM). Gale first attended its meeting in 1998 and since then has become a faculty advisor and mentor and helped to organize several of its annual meetings. I remember she once organized an annual meeting at EDS and there was a pregnant student who arrived early. Gale took great care of her and even invited her to rest in her own apartment. The student was overwhelmed by her generosity and told the group that she had not expected to be so well-treated by such a prominent professor.

Jung Ha Kim, chair of the PANAAWTM board, wrote, “Being a Biblical scholar, [Gale’s] work in the PANAAWTM context is also very precise, methodical and meticulous.  She puts in her prompt and honest work and expects others to do the same, and thereby setting a high standard for communicating and collaborating across differences in ethnicity, language, generation, and disciplines. For years, she was in charge of conducting the publication workshop for students and younger colleagues alike at annual conferences and her mentoring still continues to this day.” Gale has also offered workshops on how to apply for doctoral programs at PANAAWTM. Some of the students who took these workshops have graduated from their doctoral studies and become advisors in PANAAWTM. Many others have benefited from the doctoral seminars in which Gale shared survival skills and tips to navigate doctoral studies. Jin Young Choi, associate professor at Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School, recalled,

I have attended the annual conferences of PANAAWTM over a decade. I rarely had female teachers, particularly teachers of color, in my entire theological education, while earning four Master’s degrees and a doctorate in Bible both in South Korea and the US. Especially in the US context it was hard to find female biblical scholars of Asian descent, who could be my potential mentors. It was the fourth year of my PhD study when I benefited from Dr. Yee’s mentoring at a PANAATWM meeting. Dr. Yee’s persona has been like Chinese woman warrior, Fa Mulan. Although she has been a woman warrior or a matriarch of Asian American women students in Bible and Theology, she is never intimidating. She is a genuine dancing queen whose life embodies freedom, grace, resilience and humor. I am blessed to have her as my mentor who is willing to support me in every step of my journey as a scholar and theological educator.

Gale is the editor or co-editor of many volumes. Some of the contributors in these volumes are non-native English speakers. Gale assumes a mentoring role in editing and shepherding the manuscripts for publication. I have sometimes heard Gale complain that some of the authors were late for their submissions and some chapters needed much editing. But she never gives up and hangs up her hat. She would do it again and again. It is not for the money, I know, as biblical studies books are not bestsellers. It is out of devotion to scholarship and to nurturing the next generation of scholars. Widely admired by her colleagues, she received the prestigious “Krister Stendhal Medal” from the Graduate Theological Foundation in 2015 and the “Mentor Award” by the Status of Women in the Profession Committee of the SBL in 2016. As Jung Ha Kim says, “Gale continues to be the elder sister in a family called PANAAWYM. And we are immensely proud of her and celebrate all her accomplishments shamelessly, unlike ‘typical’ Asians and Asian Americans.”

**Notes**

1. Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Gale A. Yee, “The Woman Warrior Revisited: Jael, Fu Mulan, and American Orientalism,” in *Joshua and Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Gale A. Yee (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 175-90. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Gale A. Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Women as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 59-79. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Gale A. Yee, “Inculturation and Diversity in the Politics of National History,” *Journal of Asian and Asian American Theology* 2 (1997): 108-12. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Gale A. Yee, “Yin/Yang Is Not Me: An Exploration into an Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics,” in *Ways of Being, Ways of Reading: Asian-American Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Mary F. Foskett and Jeffrey Kuan (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2006): 152-63. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Gale A. Yee and John Y. H. Yieh, eds. *Honouring the Past, Looking to the Future: Essays from the 2014 International Congress of Ethnic Chinese Biblical Scholars* (Hong Kong: Divinity School of Chung Chi College, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)