Faculty Research in Asian Seminaries

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Abstract: *Asian seminaries lag behind their western colleagues in scholarly output through research, writing, and publication. This article explores multiple factors that contribute to the challenge of developing a research culture among Asian seminaries, including the mission, academic systems, and resources within the school. Increasing scholarly output serves the mission of the school and provides opportunities for increased partnerships in service to the church.*

Introduction

In the U.S., "colleges and universities increasingly have focused on faculty research as a way to increase their institutional profiles and prestige. Over the last quarter of the twentieth century, many higher education institutions saw their missions expand to encompass graduate education and research endeavors" (Hamrick 2003, 791–92). While churches have faulted Western seminaries for placing too much emphasis on scholarship, to the point that for some people seminary is considered to be spiritual cemetery, Asian seminaries are often characterized by their lack of research.

Faculty research in Asian seminaries is critical for the development of contextual theological reflection and credibility. Therefore, the main questions addressed in this paper are: What makes it difficult for Asian seminaries' faculty to do research, writing, and publishing? What needs to change and how can those changes take place?[1]

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[1] The main ideas for this paper came from a class presentation in the Higher Education Administration class at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Spring 2015, which was a collaborative work with another then PhD student, James Park. I owe him a lot of good ideas in this writing.

Some Preliminary Considerations ⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯

Theological Education in Asia

Asia cannot be conceived of as a monolithic entity. The continent has incredible diversity, not only geographically (including East Asia, South East Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East), but also socio-culturally and theologically, with influences from major world religions whose origins are on this continent (such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism if considered a religion). To a certain extent, those diverse backgrounds influence the variation of values and practices of education and theological education, which also affect faculty roles in theological education. However, the lack of a research culture remains common in most Asian seminaries.

It is hard to find comprehensive statistics about seminaries and theological colleges in Asia. But data from regional networks of theological education institutions in Asia can be helpful. More than 300 seminaries from 35 countries in Asia are accredited or associate members of ATA (Asian Theological Association), an expressly evangelical entity, with about half of those schools located in India. Approximately one hundred institutions and schools affiliate with the network of ATESEA (Association for Theological Education in South East Asia). Some seminaries register to both ATA and ATESEA. Also, another fifty accredited theological schools are registered within the network of SSC (Senate of Serampore College) in South Asia (Wongchar 2010). Additional seminaries in the Middle East and some other countries are not part of these regional accrediting bodies. While the exact number is difficult to determine, hundreds of schools in Asia have the backing of one or more of these networks.

Defining Research

Research is usually "associated with conducting empirical studies, whether confirmatory or exploratory, but in some academic disciplines research also encompasses highly theoretical work" (Hamrick 2003, 791).

Ernest Boyer (1990) helped us understand a broader picture of scholarship through his seminal work Scholarship Reconsidered. According to him, research is not limited to discovery of new knowledge and is not necessarily apart from teaching activities. There are four types of faculty scholarship:

> (1) discovery, consisting of original studies and creative works...; (2) integration, consisting of interdisciplinary inquiries, synthetic writing that connects information from multiple sources, and interpretive work that critiques existing research and suggests alternative explanations; (3)

application, consisting of creative uses of theoretical knowledge to solve problems...; (4) teaching, which is what research faculty do to instruct their classes, as well as their inquiries into the effectiveness of their instruction" (Lawrence 2003, 784).

Research is therefore a specific engagement in the broader work of scholarship with output in both writing and teaching.

The Role of Faculty in Higher Education Institutions

Faculty members in higher education institutions generally fall into three categories: "(1) research, which is the discovery or creation of knowledge through systematic inquiry; (2) teaching, which is the transmission of knowledge through class instruction and other learning-focused activities; and (3) service, meaning service to others through application of one's special field of knowledge" (Favero 2003, 786). Thus, the faculty role is commonly conceptualized as a tripartite role of research, teaching, and service (Hendrickson et al. 2013, 312).[2]

These faculty roles are necessarily closely related to the general functions of colleges and universities "to promote inquiry and advance the sum of human knowledge, to provide general instruction to the students, and to develop experts for various branches of the public service" (Hamrick 2003, 790). Through each of these roles, faculty members "generate and disseminate knowledge to peers, students, and external audiences" (Hamrick 2003, 790). The balance of these roles differs widely across institutions and is influenced by various factors which will be explored further in this paper.

The Emergence of a Research Culture in Higher Education

Originally, universities were not research oriented. "Universities, since their origins in medieval Europe, have always been concerned with the transmission, preservation, and interpretation of knowledge" but not primarily with "the creation of new knowledge" (Altbach and Balan 2007, 4). The pursuit of research emerged later. In the 19th century, "a research tradition was emerging in Germany that emphasized scientific rationality and the pursuit of knowledge through experimentation" (Lawrence 2003, 783).

Wilhelm von Humboldt revolutionized German universities when the University of Berlin was established in 1818 as a pioneer of modern research university.

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[2] Hendrickson et al. (2013, 313) add a fourth role, that of "boundary spanners" both within the institution and as a bridge between their institutions and their external environments. But this new category is not common and may be considered under the traditional three categories.

New German universities followed Humboldt's idea by harnessing science and scholarship together and thus contributed to the emergence of the modern research university. Half a century later, the United States and later on Japan quickly adopted the German model. According to Altbach and Balan (2007, 4), "Variations of the German, American, and Japanese research university concepts largely characterize today's research universities." However, unlike in Germany and North America, the strong research culture in Japanese universities did not have a significant impact on Asian seminaries. The fact that Christianity in Japan has not gained a wide following might be a reasonable explanation of why this is the case.

The Importance of Faculty Research

The question of the importance of the research role of faculty has been raised from time to time. For example, Sasse, Schwering, and Dochterman (2008) argue that the present shift to a Knowledge Age means that the traditional faculty role needs to be reexamined. They argue that the faculty focus should move from "upstream" to "downstream" (44) in the relationship between research and students. These authors take an example of a pharmaceutical company that decided to migrate "downstream towards the delivery end or customer focused part of the value chain since this has the most value right now" (44). They suggest that "fewer resources (e.g., faculty time) are needed to pursue academic research and relatively more resources spent on supporting faculty in creating positive learning experiences and engaging in scholarly inquiry related to those efforts" (44).

While this notion sounds more compelling from the business perspective, some serious problems emerge when implementing the concepts for faculty members who are charged to be a steward of the discipline.[3] First, the pragmatic value-added approach may fit well within the business setting but not necessarily the educational setting, where returns on investment are measured differently than in the for-profit world. Second, this is not something new at all; for many years most pharmaceutical companies in third-world countries have practiced this approach because of its profitability and because lack of resources dictate less attention on research and a greater focus on distribution. Without the painful work of research by pharmaceutical companies in some countries (subsidized by larger profit margins), there would be no new antibiotics, which are desperately needed with the emergence of new bacteria, nor the newer and more effective medicines that we have now. Someone must do the work and bear the high cost of advancing the knowledge base and developing new applications from that research.

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[3] Even though this term is originally used for doctoral education (Walker et al. 2008), it fittingly applies to all faculty members.

Third, the faculty should not be limited to being "delivery agents" of what other people produced (books, thoughts, etc.), not limited to only participating at the "downstream" dissemination of ideas. In accordance with the higher education institutions' mission, the teaching role of faculty members should not require the neglect of the research role.

Research is indispensable, and even crucial, for Asian Christianity. One of the main reasons is related with the issue of contextualization. With some exceptions, such as Orthodox Christianity, Asian churches have imported wholesale the thoughts and practices of Western churches. Without serious efforts to do their own theological reflection, Christianity in Asia will largely live with a Western Christian mindset, concern, and practices. Hence, many Christians risk living as strangers to their non-Christian neighbors, not because they live biblically, but because they live culturally inappropriately. Contextual theological reflection and education is a serious challenge to be answered by Asian and Majority World theologians and theological educators (Kim 2008; Ho 2010). Seminary faculties are among those who have the privilege of having more theological training to develop contextual theological reflections on a more theoretical level. Therefore, research and scholarship to develop contextual theological reflection are both privileges and tasks for Asian seminary faculties, to inspire and help pastors and church members in doing further contextual theological reflection in their daily Christian lives.

In addition to the issue of contextualization, James Park's research also highlights the issue of credibility. According to his observation, Asian students perceive the faculty in Asia as pastors but the faculty in the U.S. as scholars (Park 2017, 97). This brings further implications such as: 1) Many Asian theological students, particularly graduate students, choose to study in the U.S. or U.K., where they will be able to learn from the primary sources who wrote their textbooks; 2) Asian churches tend to accept theologies and church ministries from the West without critical reflection. They perceive that what is produced in Asia is "second best" to the cutting edge work produced in the U.S.

Affirmations and Challenges from a Biblical Perspective

Scripture offers principles that help us to assess the importance of research from a biblical perspective:

1. The danger of being "simple" (Prov 1: 22, 32). There are four primary characters in the book of Proverbs: the wise, the fool, the simple, and the mocker. While the fools and the mockers clearly oppose God's way, the simple have their own problem with their ignorance and uncommitted

attitude to embrace wisdom. They can be easily misled. Closely related with that is that they can easily have "zeal without knowledge" (Rm 10:1–3). This is also true with those who want to focus on "just doing ministry" at the practical level. They usually end up being influenced by any theological framework or philosophy of ministry predominant at the moment, varying from local trends or imported from influential scholars or pastors in the West.

2. A strong appeal in the Bible to search for wisdom (e.g., Prov 1–9). "Get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding" (Prov 4:7). Searching for wisdom (Heb. hokma) may be very costly, but it is worth it. Research does not guarantee wisdom, but it may help lead to deeper understandings and follows the pattern of investment in its acquisition.

3. Wisdom is highly contextual. That is why research is needed for a fresh perspective. The church needs theological reflection in every cultural context and in every generation. Indeed, contextual theological reflection and practice are biblical in nature. From generation to generation, God's people in the Old Testament through to New Testament times need to keep rethinking how to live faithfully in various socio-cultural, religious, and political situations. Though they worship the same God, they need to do their homework by reflecting theologically within their own contexts to understand how the same God can work in a unique way in their own time. Contextualization, according to Shoki Coe (1976), a Taiwanese theologian who served as a director of the Theological Education Fund of the World Council of Churches in the early 1970s, is a way of incarnation. "As the catholicity of the gospel is given through the Word becoming flesh, so our task should be through our responsive contextualization, taking our own concrete, local contexts seriously" (Coe 1976, 23, quoted in Ho 2010, 124).

Factors Influencing Faculty Research and Role Emphasis

Austin (1994) identifies five cultural environments that significantly influence faculty members in their work: (1) the culture of the academic profession; (2) the culture of the academy as an organization; (3) the culture of the discipline; (4) the culture of the institution type; and (5) the culture of a particular department (Hendrickson et al. 2013, 311–12).

Hendrickson et al. (2013) highlight two factors influencing the conceptualization of faculty roles: institutional mission and academic culture. We will explore the two elements further.

Institutional Mission

The term "mission" here refers to "the purpose, philosophy, and educational aspirations of a college or a university" (Hendrickson et al. 2013, 9). The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, a widely used taxonomy of higher education institutions in the U.S., divides colleges and universities into various categories: (1) Research universities, which offer baccalaureate and graduate degrees and prioritize faculty scholarship; (2) Doctorate-granting universities, which offer the PhD degree but award fewer research grants; (3) Comprehensive universities and colleges, which offer baccalaureate and master's degrees and tend to emphasize undergraduate education; (4) Liberal arts colleges, which focus primarily, if not exclusively, on undergraduate education; (5) Two-year-community, junior, and technical colleges, which offer certificates and associate degrees (Lawrence 2003, 783).
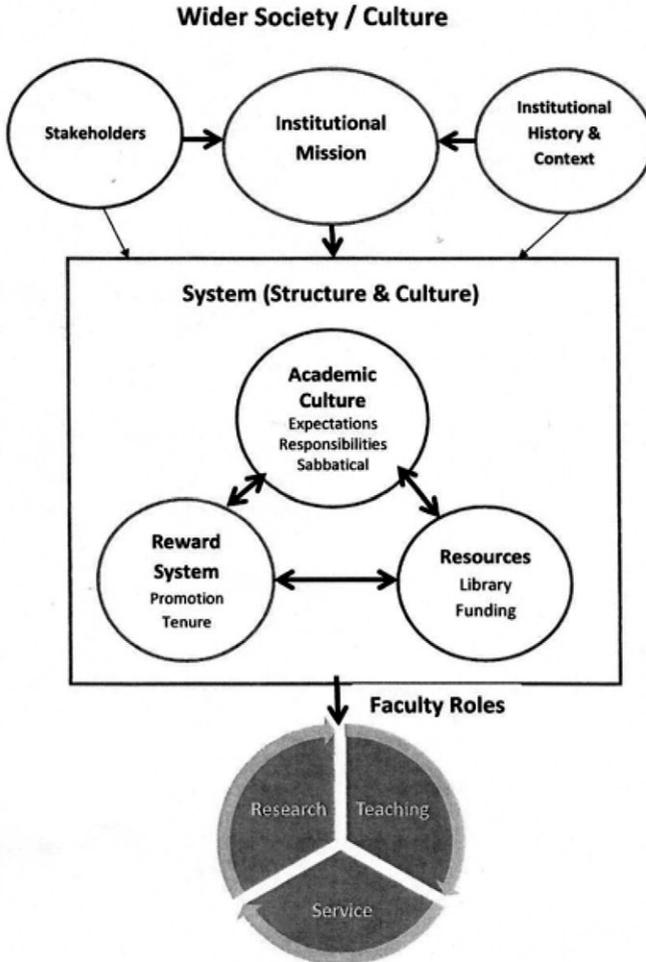
The institutional mission influences its faculty members in defining their roles of research, teaching, and service. Studies indicate that at research universities the main emphasis of faculty is on the research role. This is supported by the availability of resources and the faculty reward system in favor of research. In contrast, at other institutions whose mission focuses on undergraduate teaching and learning (such as liberal arts colleges and community colleges), greater emphasis is placed on the teaching role (Hendrickson et al. 2013, 314; Lawrence 2003, 785; Hamrick 2003, 791).

Academic disciplines

The understanding of the faculty role varies across academic disciplines. The differences affect their scholarly performance, including their research focus, assumptions, methodology, funding, and productivity (Hendrickson et al. 2013, 313; Lawrence 2003, 783). However, academic disciplines do not create different emphases between research and teaching as significant as the institutional mission does.

Factors Influencing Faculty Research in a Seminary

Having explored factors that affect faculty research in higher education institutions in general, we shall now focus more on faculty research in a theological education context. Below is a model that hopefully will be helpful for this purpose.[4]

Wider Society / Culture

Stakeholders

Institutional Mission

Institutional History & Context

System (Structure & Culture)

Academic Culture
Expectations
Responsibilities
Sabbatical

Reward System
Promotion
Tenure

Resources
Library
Funding

Faculty Roles

Research   Teaching

Service

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[4] This diagram was originally created by the author in collaboration with another PhD student, James Park, for a joint class presentation in the Higher Education Administration class at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in March 2015

— **Institutional System (Structure and Culture) Influencing Faculty Research**

The institutional system, which is mainly shaped by its mission, influences faculty roles. "The employing institution affects responsibilities, opportunities and rewards available to faculty. In particular, the type of institution in which a faculty member is employed affects his or her relationship to the discipline and its culture, how the new faculty member is socialized, what work is viewed as important and what standards of excellence are used." (Hendrickson et al. 2013, 312), referencing Austin (1994, 50). This means that faculty research performance in a theological education institution is largely influenced by the respective institutional structure and culture.

There are three components of the system that influence faculty research culture and productivity:

1. Academic culture

    Almost all contemporary universities worldwide are based on Western models, either imposed by colonial rulers in the past or adopted voluntarily to catch up with scientific development in the West. However, the research function in universities in many parts of the world is often not as well developed (Altbach and Balan 2007, 4). This is also true with the present higher education in Asia, with exceptions in some countries such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore (Altbach and Umakoshi, 2004).

    To a certain extent, the broader context of a weak research culture in Asia is reflected in the culture of research in seminaries in Asia. Allan Harkness, in *Tending the Seedbeds: Educational Perspectives on Theological Education in Asia*, identifies four main categories of theological education in Asia:

    • "Theological studies in a (usually) secular university. The studies are open to anyone for serious inquiry, similar to any other course of studies in the humanities or social sciences" (2010, 8).

    • "Theological education in a theological college, seminary, or divinity school. These institutions exist primarily to train people for some form of leadership in churches or church agencies" (2010, 8).

    • "Institutions established primarily to equip laypersons for ministry and mission. These are situated in a wide range of both church and non-church settings. They may be a Bible school or college, some form of lay training institution, or an extension/distance learning program" (2010, 9).

    • "'Non-campus attendance' theological education" (2010, 9).

Harkness observes that "Protestant theological education in Asia tends to be in the second and third settings above" (2010, 9). This means that teaching and training, not research, are the main concern of most theological education in Asia.

Graduate education is crucial to prepare qualified researchers. The fact that doctoral education and doctoral degree holders are still limited in Asian seminaries[5] may contribute to the weak research culture among faculty members. But this may not be the main issue. Another significant issue is that most Asian faculty members do not have time for research and writing. The main expectation for faculty members is in their teaching role. Perhaps closely related with that is the expectation toward their pastoral role in helping their students as future pastors. Second in the priority list would be the expectation to serve the church either with their teaching ministry or by holding leadership roles in church or other ministry organizations. Research is the least expected output from faculty members, as a reflection of academic culture in broader society.

Within this academic culture, Asian faculty members will be typically assigned many more responsibilities related to teaching and service, and they do not have sufficient time for their research role in their routine activities. Further, due to limited human and financial resources, their workload often exceeds those of professors in the West (Hunter 2012, 49). Many faculty members therefore have low expectations for publication (Starcher 2004). The sabbatical system in Asian seminaries is also not as generous as in the West. This again limits the opportunity for Asian faculty seminaries to do research and writing.

2. Reward System

    In research universities, faculty rewards "often are based on faculty members' contribution to their disciplines through publishing articles and books, presenting research findings, giving performances and exhibits, or disseminating their work to external audiences in other ways" (Hamrick 2003, 791). This is not the case in most Asian seminary settings, in which expectations toward faculty members are often focused primarily on their teaching role and perhaps an administrative role in the school leadership. "Performance evaluations and tenure are not as closely tied to publication as they are in the West" (Hunter 2012, 49).

    Therefore, to encourage faculty members in fulfilling their research role, it would be important to allocate a significant proportion of the research role into the performance evaluation system, including in promotion and tenure.

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[5] See, for example, data highlighting theological education in different parts of Asia presented by the authors collected in section 20, "Theological Education in Asia," of Dietrich Werner et al., eds., Handbook of Theological Education in World Christianity (2010).

3. Resources

One of the challenges for Asian scholars who return from their doctoral study in the West is to find a conducive research environment (including a library, laboratory, and funding for their research in general higher education institutions). As a result, their research productivity tends to be low when they return to their home country. An empirical study of faculty members in South Korea, Hong Kong, and Malaysia who are foreign doctoral degree holders provides evidence of this situation (Shin et al. 2014).

There are two types of resources which can significantly influence research productivity in a seminary context: libraries and funding. An adequate library is a crucial issue when we talk about research in Asian seminaries. Keeping up with new books and having access to academic journals, currently predominantly produced by Western publishers, are not affordable for most Majority World seminaries. Even institutions conducting doctoral programs in Asia often send their students for three to six months to Western universities at a certain stage of their dissertation research in order to give them access to larger library holdings and engage a more globally diverse intellectual community (Hunter 2016, 54). This need indicates the insufficiency of the libraries in many Asian seminaries to support the development of a research culture.

Partnership among seminaries can be seen as an answer to this situation. In South Asia, there are advanced research centers such as SATHRI (South Asia Theological Research Institute) and SAIACS (South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies). Both are located in India, with SAIACS hosting the Center for South Asian Research (CSAR) as a resource for writing sabbaticals to promote more publication from within the region. Trinity Theological College Singapore is another example in South East Asia where researchers from neighboring countries can gain better library access. Developing research centers in various regions or countries with sufficient library access would be crucial hardware to develop a research culture among Asian seminary faculties.

Another issue related to research productivity is funding. In a society where a research culture is well appreciated such as in the West, faculty members may enjoy relatively generous funding for their research, both from their own institution and from external resources. This is not the case for Asian seminaries' faculty members. Since a research culture is not so common, getting funding for research projects would be a significant challenge to overcome. For example, even when the sabbatical leave opportunity has been secured, conducting the field research or doing literature research and writing in an adequate research center or library will require a significant amount of funding. Therefore, to encourage a research culture among faculty members, a

good research funding system also needs to be developed, in partnership with churches and Christian organizations, local and abroad.

——————————————————————— **Factors Influencing Institutional Mission**

There are three main components that influence the purpose, philosophy, and aspirations of a theological seminary: 1) The stakeholders (churches, board members, leadership, and perhaps donors). Their expectations of a seminary (whether this is to be a research center, or teaching institution, or something else) will directly and indirectly shape the system. 2) Institutional history is also important. A seminary structure may be changed overnight. However, considerable time and energy are required to change its academic culture that has been rooted in its long history. 3) The current context, particularly the academic culture of the wider society, also has significant influence. As an educational institution, a seminary also feels pressure from this influence, whether through government policies, common practices in higher education institutions, or the broader availability of resources to support faculty research (such as funding and library networks outside the seminary). These components may influence the faculty research directly through shaping the institutional mission or indirectly through the culture they created that influence the academic culture within the seminary. It may be hard to influence the academic culture in the wider society, particularly in many places where Christians are a minority. What might be much more strategic for developing faculty research in Asian seminaries is helping the stakeholders to see the crucial role of research in Asian Christianity and Asian seminaries. We cannot change the past, but we can create the future.

——————————————————————————————— **Concluding Remarks**

Faculty research performance in Asian seminaries is influenced largely by the institutional mission of the respective institution. This institutional mission shapes the institutional system, which influences the faculty research culture by determining the academic culture, reward system, and availability of resources. On the other hand, this institutional mission is also influenced by its stakeholders, institutional history, and the present context, particularly the academic culture in the wider society.

Research, together with teaching and service, is an important role for seminary faculty members. To be able to promote a research culture among Asian faculty members, Asian seminaries need to review and reshape their institutional system, so that their academic culture, reward system, and resources will enable faculty members to overcome significant hindrances, such as time constraints, library access, and funding, in pursuing research productivity.

Partnership is an important aspect to overcome the limitations of human resources and other resources. Therefore, partnership among local seminaries and local churches is needed to develop a viable support structure for research, including doctoral programs to equip future teaching faculties and advanced research centers. Partnership among seminaries and churches within the same region represents another form of cooperation that would be beneficial, particularly for countries with fewer resources. Finally, partnership between Asian seminaries and Western seminaries would be another helpful possibility at the present time, so that resources for research can be shared for the benefit of both parties.

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