

**Tree of Life:
An Interreligious Dialogue through the Modern Art**

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Luo Song-en, *The Tale of Tree of Life*, 2019.
Ink, watercolor, gesso, charcoal, paper, 75.5 x 95.5 cm

An ink-and-water color painting with the title *The Tale of Tree of Life* has been displayed near the entrance of an exhibition *Tree and Lamentation (Der Lebensbaum und ein Klagelied)*, Oct. 22-Dec. 31, 2019) held in a seminary in Taiwan. Luo Song-en, a Taiwanese Protestant artist and independent curator, is known for making art as his spiritual practice. This work makes quite a statement about an interreligious dialogue between Christianity and Zen Buddhism.

Luo depicted the tree in the shape of a huge cross against a dark background. It evokes the Christian interpretation of the lost and found of humanity through the cycle of sin and grace. As one recalls in the book of Genesis, God planted two trees in the Garden of Eden: one was the tree of life and the other one was the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:9). The two trees were interconnected in the fate of humanity. As the story was told, the first human beings ate the fruit from the wrong trees, were banished from the paradise, and were waiting in hope of redemption. Christians take the cross as the symbol for the ancient tree of life that can brought out life from death. This interpretation is seen in the artist's work.

Looking closely at the center of the work, the tree of life and tree of the knowledge of good and evil are intertwined together; yet each of them has its own colors and symbols. According to the artist, the tree of good and evil on the left hand side is white without colors, and the outside of the ark of Noah and the serpent are the corresponding symbols of the theme. The serpent's lie brought evil to the world, and the story of the great flood, which the whole world was submerged outside of the ark, was the climax of that evil and destruction. In contrast, the

image of tree of life on the right hand side is colorful with fruits of abundance, and its corresponding symbols are a dove that holds the young leaves after the flood –the sign of new life – and a peacock that symbolizes eternity. The juxtaposition of the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, of course, is not Luo’s innovation. In Luo’s words, “In the beginning of my making *The Tale of Tree of Life*, I simply developed the work from the subject matter of the tree of life initiated by the artists in the period of Reformation.” The didactic purpose of *The Tale of Tree of Life* is obvious for its association with the theme of fall of humanity popular in the Northern Renaissance, such as Dürer’s *Adam and Eve*. The subject matter clearly reflects Luo’s research interest on the historical development of early modern art in Germany where the artist studied art history for six years.

However, the work can surprise us if we take a close look at its dark background. Luo added several flowing lines to allude to a dry landscape garden with a hidden cross inspired by Mirei Shigemori (1896-1975), the landscape architect of Daitoku-ji, the temple of Great Virtue. The image seems to come from the insight of Luo’s trip to Kyoto, Japan. We see that an Eastern garden for meditation replaced the paradise of Eden. By doing so, it allowed the viewer to connect a Christian worldview with Zen Buddhist contemplation. The rock garden was depicted as a river, a symbol of life waiting to be discovered. Luo said, “The intersection of these two visual activities is rough and direct, however, the unexpected collage is open to thoughts and experiences for the next step as well as more new possibilities.”

For Luo, the modern characteristics of Christian art lies not on its value of beauty, but more on its unexpected challenges to the viewer, such as the understanding of the true meaning of nature in East and West. Perhaps, the challenge that *The Tale of Tree of Life* offers is urge us to see the divine in all things. A broader meaning of calling for new possibilities offered by Luo’s work of modern Christian art is to be open to new understanding of our faith and changes in our life’s pathway.