

The Center for Asian American Christianity and the Future of Theological Education

DAVID C. CHAO AND JOSHUA E. LIVINGSTON

The Center for Asian American Christianity (CAAC) functions within Princeton Theological Seminary's academic ecosystem as a generative ecotone in North American theological education. Created, hosted, and sustained by the Seminary, the CAAC brings into conversation longstanding denominational traditions and the lived theologies of global, diasporic Christian communities. In doing so, it exemplifies and advances Princeton Seminary's commitment to contextually grounded scholarship, public engagement, and the flourishing of diverse theological communities, enriching the Seminary's broader mission and institutional life.

This positioning represents strategic rather than accidental placement. The CAAC responds to what Ted Smith (2023) and David C. Chao (2024) both name as a fundamental challenge facing contemporary Christianity: denominational forms continue to carry institutional momentum even as their capacity to sustain spiritual engagement has weakened. Smith shows how these systems can harden into patterns that inadvertently narrow the church's imagination, while Chao demonstrates that their theological categories and styles of reasoning

often reflect Anglo-European histories that do not travel well into the worlds shaped by migration and diaspora. Denominations arose out of an Anglo-European Christendom context, where ethnic and regional differences were represented through confessional and doctrinal differentiation (Niebuhr 1929). Their inherited structures and doctrinal grammars do not always readily accommodate the increasingly diverse Christian communities that have emerged through global migration. In that widening gap, centers like the CAAC become innovative spaces for interpreting these transitions and for cultivating forms of theological life that meet the church as it exists today.

The CAAC treats this moment as an invitation to bring the seminary's intellectual resources into sustained conversation with the lived experiences of Asian North American Christians. By attending to communities and questions that are often on the margins of North American theological education, the Center operates as an ecotone that enriches both seminary life and the wider communities it serves. In this institutional setting, the CAAC advances an audience-centered approach to theological education that complements established degree programs and traditional scholarly publishing. Rather than beginning with established content and hoping readers will follow, the Center begins with the concrete needs of its community of more than five thousand Asian North American Christians and develops resources responsive to those needs. In so doing, the CAAC embodies Princeton Seminary's broader commitment to work that is attentive to material contexts, engaged with the world beyond the campus, and rooted in the diverse realities of the church today.

Drawing on John Hwang's philosophy of public scholarship, the CAAC operates in an ecotone where academic rigor encounters community engagement, where established theological frameworks meet diasporic spiritual practices, and where institutional authority works together with the specific needs of spiritual and congregational formation. In this way, the Center is positioned not as the hero of its own narrative, but as a guide supporting Asian North American Christians navigating an increasingly complex cultural and religious landscape.¹

Transformation of the Denominational Ecosystem

The CAAC's approach is a significant case study for many institutions and demographics working in theological education and

lifelong learning, but it requires attending to the scale and depth of the transformations reshaping North American Christianity itself. Both Smith and Chao, from different angles, press on a similar point: over time, denominationalism can take on the character of an institutional logic that, in certain settings, narrows the church's capacity for engagement and renewal. What began as a vehicle for shared mission and theological coherence has, in some instances, developed patterns of self-preservation that prioritize continuity and stability. These patterns do not define every denominational body, nor do they negate the genuine goods denominations have sustained. Yet they can make it more difficult for communities situated along racial, economic, and cultural margins to find ready recognition and support. The challenge before us, then, is not simply a story of denominational decline, but a careful examination of how inherited structures organize Christian life in ways that may, at times, limit the very forms of vitality they seek to cultivate.

Ted Smith traces how theological education in the United States moved from serving a colonial social order to functioning as the professional school of a denominational network. Under the older "Standing Order" (Smith 2023, 2), church and state were so closely aligned that separate seminaries were largely unnecessary. Once disestablishment unraveled that arrangement, seminaries were reorganized to form clergy for a new associational world of congregations, benevolent societies, and denominations. In this setting, theology supplied the language through which these institutions understood their work as participation in God's redemptive ordering of the nation. The professional model that emerged trained ministers not simply in doctrine but in the management of religious organizations whose vitality was tied to the imagination of a white Protestant America. Even as that social imaginary has thinned under conditions of neoliberal individualization and declining denominational loyalty, the institutional form persists. Seminaries continue to inhabit structures built to sustain denominational systems, and theology remains entangled in the reproduction of those forms.

Smith's description of "undead" denominational structures (2023, 138–39) names this tension: institutions that endure even as the social conditions that once animated them have shifted. The professional model continues to organize authority, credentialing, and theological reasoning in ways that presume denominational maintenance as a central task. In this account, theology risks functioning as a technology of institutional preservation. It

can be drawn into instrumental logics in which doctrinal clarity and ecclesial formation come to be valued in part for the ways they sustain inherited systems.

Chao widens the frame. The professional denominational ecology Smith analyzes rests upon an older grammar that predates the American seminary. From the Protestant Reformation onward, confessional differentiation bound claims to catholic truth to particular regional, ethnic, and national projects. The 1517 Project did more than generate theological debate; it institutionalized a habit of marking Christian identity through doctrinal boundary-making. Confessions were not merely clarifications of belief. They helped secure civilizational coherence within emerging nation-states. In that setting, catholicity was claimed in universal terms while simultaneously tethered to specific ethnic and political formations (Chao 2024).

American denominationalism inherits this habit. The doctrinal vocabularies that seminaries prize did not arise in abstraction from social life. They were forged within Christendom contexts where Christian identity and national belonging were tightly intertwined. When transplanted to the United States, these confessional habits continued to align theological distinctions with racialized and regional identities. The modernist–fundamentalist controversies and subsequent culture wars did not create this dynamic *ex nihilo*. They carried forward a pattern in which doctrinal differentiation signaled competing visions for Christian society (Chao 2024, 401–9).

Yet the conditions that once stabilized this alignment no longer hold. Migration has reconfigured the ecclesial landscape. The same confessional and evangelical grammars now circulate within communities shaped by caste oppression, postcolonial nationalism, and transpacific displacement. Asian congregations in North America navigating racialization inhabit the inherited doctrinal tradition under markedly different social conditions. In these settings, shared confessions are pressed toward different ends. They function as resources for dignity, community formation, and endurance in minority status. The propositional content of doctrine may remain stable, but its inferential life shifts as it is taken up within new racial and political worlds (Chao 2024, 410–17; Chao 2026).

This does not mean that Asian or Asian American churches stand outside the older triad of denominations, seminaries, and congregations. They often inhabit those architectures and remain constrained by their racial and economic hierarchies. At the same

time, their practices expose the contingency of the Christendom inheritance. They reveal how precarious it is to assume that denominational systems safeguard Christian truth in any straightforward way. The same doctrinal grammar that once helped stabilize a white Protestant national imaginary now circulates within communities whose social location unsettles that imaginary.

Placed alongside Smith's diagnosis of institutional persistence, Chao's account of migratory doctrinal use reframes the present moment. The denominational ecosystem is being reshaped not only by institutional decline but also by the global redistribution of Christianity itself (Chao 2024, 409–18). Catholicity can no longer be imagined primarily as the extension of a Euro-American confessional system. It must be understood as the Spirit's work of gathering a genuinely global communion whose local embodiments do not map neatly onto inherited denominational boundaries (Chao 2026).

In this light, theological education should be described with greater historical and social attentiveness. Seminaries that once took shape within a denominational order tied to a particular racial and national settlement now find themselves situated within a far more complex ecclesial ecology—one marked by migration, religious plurality, and asymmetries of power that cannot be ignored. Centers such as the CAAC inhabit this altered terrain. Their work unfolds at the intersection of inherited confessional grammars and the lived realities of communities whose histories do not neatly align with the denominational structures that once stabilized theological identity. The task is to discern how shared confessions are embodied across differing social locations and to cultivate habits of interpretation that take those locations seriously. In that process, theological education becomes attentive to forms of Christian life that extend beyond the Christendom assumptions that once gave denominationalism its coherence, even as it continues to receive and work within that inheritance.

The ecotone, then, names the overlapping terrain where inherited confessional forms and migratory embodiments of faith encounter one another. Within that terrain, theology becomes a disciplined practice of catholic discernment, attentive to how doctrine travels, how it is reinhabited, and how it might be received anew in a church no longer bounded by the social world that first gave denominationalism its coherence (Chao 2026).

Migration and the Creation of Structural Holes

The decline of denominational authority coincides with Christianity's fundamental reconfiguration in US society, especially after 1965 through migration (Hong 2024). This transformation has created structural holes—gaps in social networks where strategic actors can create competitive advantage by bridging disconnected groups and facilitating information flow (Burt 2009, 2–3, 14). People positioned at these gaps gain a distinct advantage because they access nonredundant information, broker relationships, and synthesize perspectives that others cannot see (Burt 2004, 349–54). Global migration has unsettled inherited Christendom imaginaries by foregrounding the historically polycentric and migratory dynamics through which Christian communities have taken shape across cultural and political boundaries (Hanciles 2021, 1–3, 410–12). This transformation reflects the dynamic and manifold nature of global Christianity, shaped by ongoing transnational migration and cross-cultural-fertilization. Traditional Christendom models assumed stable geographical and cultural boundaries providing foundations for consistent doctrinal and institutional development. Migration disrupts these assumptions by creating new forms of Christian community that transcend traditional boundaries while creating new challenges for theological understanding.

This intersection of geographic and theological realities within Asian North America is precisely the space the CAAC addresses. Migration has remapped the Christian landscape, creating structural holes where established institutions and inherited denominational frameworks no longer connect well with the lived experiences of diasporic communities. These gaps are openings where new forms of theological imagination and community life can take root. From its vantage point within Princeton Seminary, the CAAC recognizes the fertility of these emerging spaces, developing forms of theological engagement that arise from the material conditions of Asian North American Christian life.

The CAAC as Theological Ecotone

Within the evolving ecology of theological education, the CAAC operates as an ecotone in the wider North American theological landscape by deepening connections between the Seminary's scholarly resources and

the lived theologies of Asian North American Christian communities. From its place within the Seminary, the Center convenes interactions across cultural and institutional boundaries, facilitates the exchange of knowledge and resources, and advances innovations that serve all participants. John Hwang's analysis of the Protestant Reformation provides important historical context for understanding the CAAC's strategic positioning. Hwang observes that Martin Luther succeeded where earlier reformers like Jan Hus failed not because of different theological content—both challenged papal authority, criticized indulgences, and affirmed the primacy of biblical authority—but because Luther possessed a decisive technological advantage. The printing press enabled “Luther’s disciples to out print and out replicate their Catholic counterparts about five to one,” demonstrating that effective distribution, rather than content alone, determines theological influence (Hwang 2022). Hwang argues that contemporary Christianity faces an even more significant technological disruption: “[T]he internet as well as the mobile phone, the supercomputers that are in your pockets have ushered in the greatest disruption in communication since the printing press” (2022).

This historical parallel suggests that the challenge facing traditional theological institutions concerns distribution as much as content. Like Hus before Luther, contemporary seminaries confront the possibility of diminishing public resonance not because their scholarship lacks depth or rigor, but because their modes of circulation have not always kept pace with changing technological and communicative conditions. The CAAC approaches this moment as an opportunity for strategic recalibration. As an ecotone occupying a structural gap, the Center expands channels of access to diverse perspectives and resources, fosters conversations and partnerships that enrich both academic and public life, and, with institutional support, exercises the adaptability and creativity needed to extend Princeton Seminary's mission into emerging spaces of theological formation.

This institutional location provides sustained access to the cultural and theological diversity of Asian North American Christianity and brings that richness into wider conversation across North American theological education. By connecting these resources with the seminary's scholarly traditions, the Center fosters mutual learning and collaborative inquiry. Beyond facilitation, it contributes substantively to cross-cultural engagement, serving as a leading contributor to theological resources responsive to the migrational realities of Asian North American Christians, while reflecting the academic and scholarly

depth and sophistication for which Princeton Theological Seminary is known. In this way, the CAAC embodies the Seminary's commitment to widening access to theological learning, strengthening the connections between scholarship and ministry practice, and fostering a vibrant community of learners shaped by Princeton's distinctive academic and hybrid educational environment.

The CAAC's most significant technological innovation lies in adopting a distribution-first approach to theological education. Rather than beginning with traditional academic products—books, journal articles, formal degree programs—and seeking audiences, the CAAC inverts this model. Traditional theological education operates on what Hwang (2022) termed the “Field of Dreams fallacy,” assuming quality scholarship will naturally draw audiences through established channels. Rather, the CAAC's audience-centered approach is not only about expanding the range and distribution of content; it also invites a fresh way of thinking about how theological education can take shape in a digital age. The CAAC begins with its audience of over five thousand Asian North American Christians, engaging their concrete spiritual needs, pressing concerns, and preferred engagement modes, then creates content specifically designed to serve those identified needs. This approach recognizes that contemporary audiences increasingly bypass traditional institutional structures in favor of personalized voices and community-centered resources.

The Center's sophisticated multi-platform strategy offers layered engagement, providing multiple entry points and commitment levels designed to meet diverse needs within the Asian North American Christian community. At the most accessible level, email newsletters and short blog posts provide quick, digestible theological insights absorbable during brief moments in busy lives. For those seeking deeper engagement, podcasts and webinars ranging from thirty to ninety minutes offer nuanced conversations on racial justice, mental health, discipleship, and leadership development. At the highest commitment level, day-long and multi-day conferences create immersive spaces for collective theological reflection and community formation.

This tiered approach honors contemporary life realities while maintaining intellectual rigor and spiritual depth. By meeting learners where they are—both literally and figuratively—the CAAC has created pathways for theological formation serving diasporic communities' actual needs. The Center understands its role as walking alongside Asian North American Christians, helping them navigate their own

paths of faith and leadership within increasingly complex social and religious landscapes.

Innovation Through Alternative Forms of Theological Formation

The CAAC's focus on three core areas—intergenerational family life, social history of migration and racialization, and an overall frame of biblical theology—grows out of sustained attention to the pressures and questions shaping Asian North American Christian life. These priorities reflect the cultural and theological needs that ministry leaders and congregations regularly navigate. They are not abstract categories but lived realities that call for theological resources attentive to the social histories, cultural contexts, and spiritual commitments of transpacific Asian Christian communities.

This approach represents an alternative model of theological formation—one that moves away from institutional prestige and denominational endorsement and relies more on substantive engagement with community needs and demonstrable impact on spiritual formation. As Hwang (2022) notes, contemporary audiences increasingly bypass traditional institutional structures favoring relevant topics and community-centered resources. The CAAC embraces this shift, building credibility through consistent delivery of valuable content and responsiveness to community feedback.

This authority grows out of the Center's sustained engagement with the concrete spiritual needs of Asian North American Christians. Through inter-institutional collaboration, the CAAC's annual gatherings, including the Mental Health Conferences (<https://ourflourishing.org/>) and the Asian American "Our Stories, Our Faith" Conferences (<https://ourstoriesourfaith.org/>), reflect this posture by creating spaces for dialogue, worship, and shared theological reflection. These gatherings bring together a wide range of voices across ethnic, generational, and denominational lines, inviting participants to learn from one another and to discern together what faithful Christian life looks like in their communities.

The Center's commitment to making scholarly insights accessible in multiple languages and contexts extends its reach beyond traditional academic boundaries. By partnering with denominational networks, parachurch ministries, and other faith-based organizations, the CAAC

seeks to extend its theological resources to practitioners, leaders, and scholars who might never otherwise engage traditional academic institutions. This represents fundamental shifts from viewing theological education as the accreditation of a professional managerial class to understanding it as an ongoing process of community empowerment and spiritual formation—both forms of lifelong learning.

Implications for Post-Denominational Theological Education

Across theological education, academic leaders increasingly acknowledge a structural realignment. Artificial intelligence, digital delivery, and changing labor markets have weakened the default authority of traditional credentials while prospective learners signal preference for certificates, non-degree pathways, and hybrid formats that integrate with existing employment. For long-established institutions, this realignment presses beyond programmatic expansion and into questions of institutional identity. Residential degree programs—particularly the MDiv and the PhD—remain central to the seminary's vocation and require sustained intellectual and financial investment. At the same time, the growth of non-degree pathways, certificate programs, and hybrid forms of formation reflects genuine shifts in how Christian leaders seek theological education. These developments call for more than the addition of new offerings. They invite careful attention to staffing, governance, and budgeting so that newer forms of lifelong learning are integrated into the institution's mission rather than layered on top of it in ways that strain existing commitments. What emerges is not a simple choice between models, nor a zero-sum competition for resources. The more apt image is ecological. Residential and non-degree formations increasingly inhabit the same institutional terrain. When thoughtfully cultivated, they can deepen and inform one another, generating new forms of theological life at their intersection.

This dual temporality has operational consequences. Faculty fatigue intensifies when expanded degree offerings are layered with expectations to serve non-degree audiences, prompting leadership to model scenarios, cost out instructional capacity, and map the true price of growth in hybrid programs. In this environment, centers like the CAAC function as prototyping labs: they extend scholarly rigor to communities that cannot access traditional pathways, practice public

scholarship, and translate ethnography and oral history into constructive theology without surrendering depth. They also suggest concrete curricular bridges—such as travel courses tethered to place-based public-scholarship projects—that convert audience-facing work into credit-bearing formation. In ecological terms, the CAAC demonstrates how institutional mission can be amplified through edge-effect abundance, where residential formation and public scholarship meet and generate new theological life.

Moreover, the CAAC's approach offers insights extending far beyond Asian North American Christianity. The Center's emphasis on contextual theology, community-centered content creation, and multi-platform distribution provides a framework adaptable by other institutions seeking to serve diverse populations in increasingly complex religious landscapes. By demonstrating how theological education can honor both intellectual depth and cultural specificity, the CAAC has created a model that could help revitalize theological education more broadly.

The ecological metaphor proves particularly useful for understanding these implications. Just as natural ecotones often serve as harbingers of environmental change, the CAAC's innovations may indicate broader transformations occurring within theological education. The Center's emphasis on digital distribution, community engagement, and contextual relevance reflects adaptations other institutions may need to embrace as traditional denominational structures continue declining and new forms of Christian community continue emerging.

Cultivating Theological Biodiversity

The CAAC represents more than an innovative program within a mainline seminary. It offers a glimpse of how theological education can take new shape in a moment when inherited structures no longer map neatly onto many of the lived realities of Christian communities in the United States. By locating itself in the structural gap between academic theology and diasporic Christian life, the Center has created a lifelong learning ecotone where established boundaries loosen and new forms of theological imagination can emerge.

The CAAC's audience-centered posture, its commitment to community-shaped content, and its readiness to experiment with modes of engagement show how institutions can inhabit this ecotone with purpose. By facilitating vibrant intersections between church, society,

and academy, the CAAC has shown how theological education can become a site of discovery and innovation, fostering the theological biodiversity essential for Christianity's continued witness and impact.

These developments unfold within broader transformations in American Christianity, where the waning of denominational authority has introduced both instability and new openings. The future of theological education will not be determined simply by preserving inherited structures, especially when those structures no longer align easily with the lived realities of many Christian communities. Nor will it be secured by abandoning those inheritances altogether. What seems increasingly necessary is the cultivation of spaces in which the breadth of global Christianity can be received with intellectual honesty, theological curiosity, and pastoral care.

The CAAC's work offers one example of how institutions might inhabit this transitional moment. When seminaries understand themselves as facilitators of encounter across ecclesial and cultural worlds, they often discover renewed purpose. By nurturing theological biodiversity—through adaptive forms of teaching, sustained community engagement, and cross-cultural theological reflection—the CAAC serves Asian North American Christians while also sketching a possible trajectory for theological education within a landscape no longer organized primarily by denominational allegiance.

References

- Burt, Ronald S. 2004. "Structural Holes and Good Ideas." *American Journal of Sociology* 110 (2): 349–99. <https://doi.org/10.1086/421787>.
- Burt, Ronald S. 2009. *Structural Holes: The Social Structure of Competition*. Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674029095>.
- Chao, David C. 2024. "The 1517 Project and World Christianity: Migration and the Uses of Doctrine." *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 48 (3): 399–426. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23969393241248438>.
- Chao, David C. 2026. "Artificial Theological Intelligence: Doctrinal Adequacy, Contextual Disambiguation, and Catholicity." *Modern Theology*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.70076>.
- Hanciles, Jehu J. 2021. *Migration and the Making of Global Christianity*. Eerdmans.
- Hong, Jane. 2024. "How Post-1965 Asian Migration Changed US Protestant Christianity." *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 48 (3): 326–32. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23969393241238710>.
- Hwang, John. 2022. "Public Scholarship for Academics and Centers," lecture delivered at Princeton Theological Seminary luncheon, Princeton, New Jersey, March 25.
- Niebuhr, H. Richard 1929. *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*. Henry Holt.
- Smith, Ted A. 2023. *The End of Theological Education*. Theological Education Between the Times. Eerdmans.
- Van Driel, Edwin Chr. 2015. "Rethinking Seminary." Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, March 27. <https://www.pts.edu/blog/rethinking-seminary/>.

Notes

- 1 This chapter is written in grateful memory of John Hwang (†2023), a trusted colleague, collaborator, and friend, whose vision decisively shaped the Center for Asian American Christianity's commitment to public scholarship.