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Title: The Virgin Mary with the Face of Gwan-eum: Theological Reflection on Choi Jong-tae's Artworks

Abstract

The article discusses the religious artworks of the Korean Catholic Sculptor Choi Jong-tae (1932-). Choi's artistic roots in the beauty of Korean Buddhist art led him to infuse Korean Buddhism's artistic elements into his Christian artworks, particularly Marian statues. Through this artistic inculturation, I contend that Choi's Marian statues have the face of bodhisattva Gwan-eum, positioning Mary not only *in* the Korean church but also *of* the Korean church. Additionally, the fact that two statues of Gwan-eum made by Choi were enshrined in Korean Buddhist temples, Gilsangsa and Bongseonsa, demonstrates that his art not merely crosses religious boundaries but also strives to establish interreligious dialogue and harmony in Korea.

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The Virgin Mary with the Face of Gwan-eum

I. Introduction

In the courtyard of Hyehwa-dong Catholic church in Jongno-gu, Seoul, stands a statue of the Virgin Mary, her hands clasped together (Fig. 1). With a round face and tranquil, closed eyes, the statue's design is simple, devoid of vibrant colors, yet exudes a serene and peaceful aura. Similarly, in the nearby Gilsangsa Buddhist temple, about two kilometers away from the Hyehwa-dong church, stands a statue of bodhisattva Gwan-eum (Sanskrit *Avalokiteśvara*, Chinese *Guan-yin*, and Japanese *Kannon*). Notably, this Gwan-eum statue shares a strikingly similar facial resemblance with the Virgin Mary statue in the Hyehwa-dong Church. This Gwan-eum's eyes are also shut, with lines drawn to convey a deep sense of contemplation or prayer (Fig. 2). Both these remarkable sculptures are the artworks of Choi Jong-tae, a Korean Catholic sculptor. These parallel visages beckon us to explore a series of intriguing questions: Why did the Catholic sculptor craft a Buddhist statue? More importantly, what led him to fashion these two distinct religious statues with such comparable faces? Were these shared facial features a product of artistic technique, or did they carry a deeper religious and theological significance?



Fig. 1 The Virgin Mary at Hyehwa-dong Catholic church, Seoul. Photo by Mideum Hong



Fig. 2 The Gwan-eum at Gilsangsa Temple, Seoul. Photo by Mideum Hong



Over the past five decades, one of the main priorities for Asian Christianity has been not only to exist as a church within Asia but also to be fully immersed and recognized as a religion that belongs to the local Asian context. Peter Phan proposes a threefold model for examining the relationship between Asia and Christianity in the discussion about Christianity's identity in Asia, which I believe provides valuable insights into the evolution of Korean Catholicism and its relationship with the Marian image. The first model, "Asian Christian," urges Christian converts in Asia to abandon their cultures and follow the Western way of life. The second model, "Christian Asian," attempts to accommodate Christianity into a particular local context, yet often results in superficial accommodation without genuine integration or enrichment between Christianity and Asian culture. Phan refers to this model as "Christianity in Asian garb." As a new approach to being Church in Asia, he suggests the third model, "Asian-Christian/Christian-Asian," in which both Asian and Christian identities are equally valued and embraced, without the need to relinquish either of those identities. This model makes "Christianity a religion not only *in* but *of* Asia."¹ To be "*of* Asia" means that the church in Asia is "fully and wholly inculturated," that is, genuinely a part of the region, fully adopting and embodying the culture of Asia. This goes beyond merely physical location and involves adopting the values and perspectives of the local context, shaping the church's identity and way of existing.²

I argue that Choi Jong-tae's sculptures of Mary fall under the Asian-Christian/Christian-Asian model, positioning Mary not only *in* the Korean church but also *of* the Korean church. Instead of merely accommodating her image into a Korean context through the use of traditional Korean attire or altering her appearance to resemble that of a Korean woman, Choi's intention was to encompass both Korean and Christian identities within his artworks of the Virgin Mary. The question then becomes: How does he manage to encapsulate these dual identities within his Marian sculptures? Choi's artistic vision is deeply rooted in his aspiration to convey the beauty of Korean art, which he believes finds its pinnacle expression in Korean Buddhist art flourishing between the sixth and eighth centuries CE. Inspired by this ancient Korean Buddhist art, Choi discovers the aesthetic identity of Korea and identifies the visages of Koreans in the countenances of the Buddhist statues from that era. Choi translates the magnificence of Korean Buddhist sculptures into his renditions of the Virgin Mary, thereby giving rise to his Marian sculptures as an artistic embodiment of inculturation.

Guided by Korean Buddhist artistic influences, Choi expertly fashions Marian statues, yet his creative journey extends beyond them. He undertook the creation of two statues of Gwan-eum, one situated at Gilsangsa temple in 2000 and the other at Bongseonsa temple in

¹ Peter C. Phan, *Asian Christianities: History, Theology, Practice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), 20–35.

² Phan, 5.

2017. Notably, both Gwan-eum statues exhibit similar facial expressions, prompting comparisons with Choi's Marian statues. Yet, I assert that it is Choi's Marian statues that reflect the countenance of the bodhisattva Gwan-eum, not the other way around. Choi's earnest pursuit to integrate his life, faith, and artistic values into his artworks yielded Marian statues resembling the visage of the bodhisattva Gwan-eum. Moreover, the fact that two statues of Gwan-eum made by Choi were enshrined in Buddhist temples demonstrates that his art goes beyond the realm of church art to forge harmonious connections with neighboring religious traditions. In other words, Choi's Marian statues were born under the influence of Korean Buddhist art and represent the artistic form of inculturation. Furthermore, by producing Buddhist statues, Choi's inculturation seeks interreligious dialogue and harmony with Buddhism. I believe that Choi's work exemplifies how inculturation can promote interreligious harmony, and that his statues of the Virgin Mary and Gwan-eum point the way forward for Christian art and theology in Korea.

In my analysis of Choi Jong-tae's religious artworks, I aim to investigate two key questions. Firstly, I intend to unravel the motivations underlying his presentation of Christian art forms through the lens of inculturation. In other words, what does the concept of inculturation signify in Choi's perspective? Secondly, I seek to discern how his understanding of inculturation influenced his artworks of crossing religious boundaries. To contextualize the historical backdrop for addressing these questions, I begin with a historical overview of Korean Catholicism with a focus on the formation and development of Marian devotion in Korea. I am especially interested in how the imagery of the Virgin Mary has evolved through the lens of Phan's threefold models. This historical foundation aids in elucidating the rationale behind my assertion that Choi Jong-tae's Marian statues can be encompassed within the framework of the Asian-Christian/Christian-Asian paradigm—a perspective that situates Mary not solely within the Korean church but as an integral element thereof. I conclude by reflecting on Choi's theological concepts as they are manifested through his Gwan-eum statues, and I explore how his artworks can be interpreted within the context of a Korean-Christian/Christian-Korean model.

II. Threefold Historical Analysis of Korean Catholicism

The Korean Catholic Church was born in 1784 after Yi Seung-hun (1756-1801) returned from Beijing, where he was baptized as Peter by the French missionary Jean-Joseph de Grammont (1736-1812). From the beginning, devotion to the Virgin Mary was deeply rooted in the faith of Korean Catholics, who considered her not only a faithful hearer of the word of God but also the one chosen by God to be the mother of Jesus.³ The interrogation records of the 1801 Shin

³ The early Korean Catholics' understanding of the Virgin Mary was mainly through catechisms. In *The Essentials of the Lord's Teaching* (*Jugyoyoji* 主教要旨), Jeong Augustine Yak-jong (1760-1801) explains the details of how Mary conceived Jesus as a virgin, according to the gospel narrative of Luke 1:26-38. Jeong emphasizes her purity, modesty, and devotion to God, and explains that she was chosen by God to be the mother of Jesus. He also

Yu persecution, *Sahakjingui* 邪學懲義, offers a glimpse into the early Marian devotion that was practiced among Korean Catholics.⁴ The record notes that following the execution of the Catholics, the authorities burned the “strange paintings and wicked books” that had been confiscated from them.⁵ Among them, more than ten books were related to the rosary, the biography, or the virtues of the Virgin Mary. Additionally, during the search of Yoon Heon’s and Kim Hee-in’s homes, three painted scrolls were found, with one of the scrolls in each home depicting the image of a woman, believed to be the Virgin Mary.⁶ Although it is impossible to determine what the iconography of the Virgin Mary was like because there are no extant paintings, this record proves that even before French missionaries entered Joseon Korea in 1836, paintings and rosaries had already spread among the faith community.

The arrival of French missionaries in 1836 marked a turning point in the Korean Church’s Marian devotion.⁷ Firstly, Bishop Laurent-Joseph-Marius Imbert (1797-1839), who entered Joseon in 1837, sent a letter to the Propaganda Fide on December 1, 1838, requesting that the Virgin Mary of the Immaculate Conception be made the patroness of Joseon Korea. On August 22, 1841, Pope Gregory XVI granted this request for a new patroness but allowed St. Joseph, already the patron of the Beijing diocese, to remain as a co-patron.⁸ French priests introduced spirituality and devotional practice which were spreading in their native country, not only by organizing devotional groups but also by distributing devotional books and various

stresses that Mary was born without original sin and kept her virginity. Although this passage is the only mention of Mary in his catechism, Jeong’s writing played a significant role in enhancing the doctrinal understanding of Mary and cultivating a strong devotion to her among Korean Catholics. Yak-jong Jeong, *Jugyo Yoji [The Essentials of the Lord’s Teaching]*, ed. Jae-hyun Kim, trans. Debernieri Torrey (Seoul, Korea: KIATS Press, 2012), 84–85.

⁴ Shortly after the establishment of the faith community in Joseon Korea, the government banned Catholicism and persecuted its followers from 1785 to 1866, labeling it as “evil learning” (*Sahak* 邪學). The government conducted several persecutions throughout this period, including the Sin Hae Persecution in 1791, the Ul Myo Incident in 1795, the Sin Yu Persecution in 1801, the Ul Hae Persecution in 1815, the Jeong Hae Persecution in 1827, the Gi Hae Persecution in 1839, the Byeong O Persecution in 1846, the Kyeong Sin Persecution in 1860, and the Byeong In Persecution in 1866. However, these were just the major persecutions, and the government’s oppression of Catholicism continued relentlessly for almost a century. Jai-Keun Choi, *The Origin of the Roman Catholic Church in Korea: An Examination of Popular and Governmental Responses to Catholic Missions in the Late Chosŏn Dynasty* (Cheltenham, PA: Hermit Kingdom Press, 2006).

⁵ “妖畫邪書燒火記辛酉五月二十二日九罪人死法後燒大其側” Kwang Cho, trans., *Yeogju Sahak Jingui [Translation & Commentaries on the Records of Interrogation on the Catholic Persecutions of 1801]*, vol. 2 (Seoul: Korean Martyrs Exaltation Committee, 2001), 318.

⁶ “妖畫簇子三紙本一女像” Cho, 2:312, 316.

⁷ In 1831, Pope Gregory XVI established a vicariate for Joseon Korea and appointed Barthélemy Bruguière (1792-1835) as the first Apostolic Vicar of Korea. Bishop Brugier’s passion for the mission led to its acceptance in 1833 by the Society of Foreign Missions of Paris (MEP). However, he was unable to enter Korea due to the severe persecution and died in China in October 1835. The first MEP priest to arrive in Korea was Pierre Philibert Maubant (1803-1839) in January 1836, followed by J. H. Chastan (1803-1839) in January 1837, and the second bishop Laurent-Joseph-Marius Imbert (1797-1839) in December 1837. Unfortunately, during the Gi Hae persecution in early 1839, they were martyred along with other important figures, including Jeong Paul Ha-sang (1795-1839), the son of Jeong Yak-jong. IKCH (Institute of Korean Church History), *Hanguk Cheonju Gyohoesa 2 [Korean Catholic History 2]* (Seoul: Institute of Korean Church History, 2010), 203–80; IKCH (Institute of Korean Church History), *Hanguk Cheonju Gyohoesa 3 [Korean Catholic History 3]* (Seoul: Institute of Korean Church History, 2010), 15–33.

⁸ IKCH (Institute of Korean Church History), *Hanguk Cheonju Gyohoesa 2 [Korean Catholic History 2]*, 320–23.

sacred objects to inspire Marian devotion among Korean Catholics.⁹ Cho Hyeon-beom shows that Bishop Siméon-François Berneux (1814-1866), the fourth apostolic vicar, requested for about nine years, from 1856 to 1865, a large number of rosaries, devotional medals, and paintings of the Virgin from Paris or Hong Kong, and newly entering priests brought with them. Moreover, in a letter to his parents, Bishop Marie-Nicolas-Antoine Daveluy (1818-1866), the fifth apostolic vicar, asked them to send many statuettes, medals, and crucifixes because “the Joseon people are very passionate about sacred objects.”¹⁰ This intense desire for religious artifacts often blessed by the clergy was likely due to the fact that Korean Catholics wanted to be protected from the threat of persecution.

With the Treaty of France and Korea in 1886, many missionaries entered the country, leading to a rise in the activity of devotional organizations and the construction of churches in various areas. Many churches were dedicated to Mary as their patron, installing the images of “Our Lady of Grace” and “Our Lady of Lourdes,” which eventually became the representative Marian images in the Korean church.¹¹ In addition, as both the independence from Japanese colonization and the formation of the Republic of Korea occurred on the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, on August 15, 1945 and 1948 respectively, the belief in the help of the Virgin Mary arose, promoting the construction of space dedicated to her. Many churches built the Virgin Mary’s Garden installing statues of Mary, with a preference for idealized European images of Mary such as Our Lady of Lourdes, Our Lady of Grace, and Our Lady of Fatima. These images became the most well-known depictions of Mary to Korean Catholics.¹²

For about a century, the leading role of the French Catholic missionaries had a significant impact on shaping the Korean Catholics’ devotion to Mary. Their introduction of French spirituality and devotional practices strengthened the perception that Christianity is a Western religion, and the Virgin Mary is a woman from the Western world. According to Phan, this identification of Christianity with the West aligns with the Asian Christian model, making native converts more European/Christian than Asian.¹³ The French missionaries in Korea were no exception to this trend. They held the view that Korean religious culture was inferior to Western modern civilization and Christianity, and they criticized folk beliefs, Buddhism, and ancestral rituals as superstitious practices. They sought to implant Christian culture in the Korean Catholics and made a distinction between “Catholics and believers” and “Koreans and non-believers.” The latter were considered superstitious and under an inferior religious

⁹ Andrew J. Finch, “French Catholic Spirituality and the Nineteenth-Century Korean Church,” *Journal of Korean Religions* 6, no. 1 (April 2015): 225–56.

¹⁰ Hyeon-Beom Cho, “Peulangseu Seongyosadeul-Gwa Hanguk Cheonjugyoho-Eui Seongmosinsim [French Missionaries and Devotion to Blessed Mother],” *Kyohoesahak [Research Journal of Catholic Church History]* 3 (2006): 249–52.

¹¹ Meong-hee Lee, “Hanguk-Ui Geundae Seongmo Seonghwa Yeongu [A Study of Holy Pictures of Our Lady in Modern Korea]” (PhD Dissertation, Seoul, Korea, Myong Ji University, 2015), 77.

¹² Lee, 95–99.

¹³ Phan, *Asian Christianities*, 21–24.

culture, while the Korean believers were seen as more open-minded and conscientious than non-believers.¹⁴ This attitude continued until the 1960s when the Catholic Church began to adopt a more tolerant stance towards traditional cultures, customs, and beliefs of missionary communities under the influence of the Second Vatican Council.

However, not all foreign missionaries' activities can be classified under the Asian Christian model, and some efforts of inculturation existed even before the Second Vatican Council. The Sisters of St. Paul of Chartres, who arrived in Korea in 1888, painted the Virgin in traditional Korean *hanbok* clothing, indicating their intention to depict her in a Korean style. However, their depiction was limited to a European woman wearing a hanbok. In contrast, the French Father André Bouton (1914-1980), who conducted artistic missionary work in Korea through church murals for a decade beginning in 1964, produced mural paintings that incorporated Korean religious and cultural sensibilities, with figures of Jesus, Mary, and the saints appearing Korean but with somewhat stereotyped slanty, almond-shaped eyes.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Bouton's works empowered and legitimized later painters, such as Father Cho Kwang-ho, laying the groundwork for the inculturation of Korean sacred art. Similarly, Korean artists, such as Jang Woo-sung and Kim Ki-chang, attempted to depict Mary and Jesus as Korean figures, setting the stage for the inculturation of church art that respected Korean sensibilities. However, even though these works attempted to express a Korean aesthetic by including Korean elements, they still fall under the Christian Asian model, which prioritizes Christian identity over Asian identity.

Phan explains that the Christian Asian model, based on the Jesuit method of adaptation or accommodation, presents the potential for an inculturated Christianity that respects Asian cultures and religions. Although this accommodative method allows for a stronger Asian identity among Christians, this model still prioritizes Christian identity over Asian identity, as Asian cultures and religions are only respected insofar as they do not conflict with Christian beliefs and values. Phan considers the Christian Asian model to be a "mere adaptation or accommodation," despite its innovation and relative progressiveness compared to the Asian Christian model.¹⁶ In the same vein, foreign missionaries and Korean artists made efforts to create images of Mary that reflected Korean aesthetics, by incorporating Korean elements into their works. These efforts brought a new perspective to Korean Christians who were used to seeing only European images of the Virgin. However, it is still debatable whether the images of Mary in hanbok truly represent an inculturated image.

¹⁴ Sang-keun Bang, "Gaehwagi Peulangseu Seongyosadeul-ui Jeongchag-Gwa Hanguk InsiK [Settlement of French Missionaries during the Enlightenment Period in Korea and Their Perception of the Country]," *Dongyanghak [The Oriental Studies]* 68 (2017): 175–98; Hyeon-Beom Cho, "19 Segi Joseon-Ui Jonggyo Munhwa-Leul Balaboneun Cheonjugyo Seongyosa-Ui Siseon [A French Missionary's Eye Toward the Religio-Cultural Tradition of Korea in the 19th Century]," *Yeoksa Minsokhak [The Journal of Korean Historical-Folklife]* 18 (2004): 226–47.

¹⁵ Lee, "Hanguk-Ui Geundae Seongmo Seonghwa Yeongu [A Study of Holy Pictures of Our Lady in Modern Korea]," 81–82, 87.

¹⁶ Phan, *Asian Christianities*, 24–29.

The Virgin Mary with the Face of Gwan-eum

While “Mary in Korean garb” was a step in the direction of inculturation, it does not necessarily mean that it fully achieved the goal.

The concept of inculturation is not just about external adaptations, but more fundamentally about the reciprocal relationship between Christianity and local cultures, which are often bound up with religion. This requires that Christianity in any context where it is inserted carries out an interreligious dialogue.¹⁷ The Asian-Christian/Christian Asian model, as Phan puts it, emphasizes Christianity be a religion not only *in* but *of* Asia, without relinquishing identities of Christianess or Asianness. In order to be culturally and religiously Christian and Asian, Christianity in Asia carries out its dialogue not only with cultures but also with religions.¹⁸ Choi Jong-tae’s works of Marian statues influenced by Korean Buddhist art and the making of statues of the bodhisattva Gwan-eum are an example of this model, as they represent an indigenous response in a local context and cross religious boundaries between Christianity and Buddhism. The following sections examine how his work resulted in a form of inculturation sparked by Korean Buddhist art and explore the interreligious meaning of making Buddhist statues for the Catholic sculptor.

III. Choi’s Artistic Inculturation through the Beauty of Korean Buddhist Art

Choi Jong-tae, born in Daejeon, Korea in 1932, embarked on his journey as a sculptor upon graduating from the Department of Sculpture at Seoul National University in 1958. His initial focus revolved around exploring the essence of purity and clarity in countenance, as evident in his sculptures of girls and women. Through the use of simple lines and shapes, Choi sought to convey their expressions. In 1973, at the age of forty-one, he made his entry into the realm of church art by crafting the “Commemoration Sculpture for Martyrs” at Jeoldusan Martyrs’ Shrine. Among the diverse array of Christian artworks that he created, including crucifixes, the Stations of the Cross, and a statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, his unwavering dedication shone through in his depictions of the Virgin Mary. His Marian statues are now found in various Catholic churches and institutions across the nation.

Choi is recognized as the leading sculptor of Catholic art in Korea who incorporates indigenous elements with his aspiration for a distinctive “Korean form of Christian art.”¹⁹ Even prior to his foray into religious art, he had engaged deeply with the notion of the “artistic form of Korea.” In the mid-20th century, Korea was inundated with Western artistic influences. Yet, Choi held steadfast to the belief that art mirrors the spirit and that a lack of material

¹⁷ Peter C. Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 7.

¹⁸ Phan, *Asian Christianities*, 29–35.

¹⁹ Jong-Tae Choi, “Tochakhwa Gwajeong-e Isseoseo-ui Hanguk Geuliseudogyo Misul [Korean Christian Art in the Process of Inculturation],” *Hanguk Munhwa Sinhakhoe Nonmunjib [The Society for Korean Cultural Theology]* 8 (2005): 72.

advancement doesn't equate to intellectual backwardness. He was resolute in his quest to develop a "Korean form" that would inherit Korea's traditional spirit.²⁰ He articulates,

My journey followed both East Asian and Korean paths. As a man living in this world, I sought to express my inner voice through my own songs, even if they weren't perfect. I felt that Western forms didn't fully capture my voice, so I turned to the familiar forms of Korean, East and West Asia. Around 1965, I began to distance myself from my Western education, delving into these alternative sources of influences.²¹

It is noteworthy that his pursuit of the "artistic form of Korea" stems from Korean Buddhist art, which not only flourished on the Korean peninsula in the sixth to eighth centuries but also stands as a cornerstone in Korean art history. Buddhist art was brought to Korea along with Buddhism during the late fourth century, and after 200 years, from the sixth to eighth centuries, Korean Buddhist art reached its peak in the country's sculptural history.²² The Buddhist iconography and artistic styles that were introduced into the Korean peninsula had already been Sinicized, reflecting the aesthetic taste of the Chinese people. Similarly, Korean Buddhist art began to be shaped by the Korean aesthetic sense and eventually developed its own unique style, making the active use of granite as a sculptural material from the end of the sixth century.²³ Unlike sandstone and limestone, which were widely used in India and China, granite was the only material available in Korea for producing Buddhist sculptures. Due to the coarse-grained and hard nature of granite, Korean Buddhist sculpture had to be simplified, making it less obsessed with reproduction and more inclined toward conceptualization and abstraction.²⁴ This paradoxically turned into the form of naturalness and restraint that coexists with nature, not against it.

Choi's sculptures reflect this style, characterized by understated lines and simplified shapes that capture the inherent nature and appearance of the subject. He readily acknowledges the influence of Korean Buddhist sculptures, notably the Gilt-bronze Pensive Maitreya Bodhisattva Statue (hereafter referred to as the Pensive Maitreya Statue) and the sculptures within the Seokguram Grotto.²⁵ A pivotal moment in his artistic trajectory occurred during his worldly travels in 1971, which rekindled his appreciation for Korean forms.

²⁰ Jong-Tae Choi, *Sandaneun Geot Geulindaneun Geot [Living and Drawing]* (Seoul, Korea: Pauline, 2011), 91–95.

²¹ My translation from Korean. Choi, 42.

²² Buddhism was introduced to the Korean peninsula from the latter half of the fourth to the early fifth centuries CE when three kingdoms—Goguryeo (37 BCE–668 CE) in the north, Baekje (18 BCE–660 CE) in the southwest, and Silla (57 BCE–935 CE) in the southeast—competed for dominance. The royal courts of the three kingdoms accepted Buddhism as a new ideology for centralized governmental power.

²³ Woobang Kang, *Korean Buddhist Sculpture: Art and Truth*, trans. Yoonjung Cho (Chicago, IL: Art Media Resources and Youlhwadang Publisher, 2005), 11–20; Etinne Hauttekeete, "Chinese Roots of Korean Buddhism: The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism," in *The Smile of Buddha: 1600 Years of Buddhist Art in Korea*, ed. Jan Van Alphen (Brussels: Bozarbooks, 2008), 35–47.

²⁴ Dong Seok Kwak, "Development and Characteristics of Buddhist Sculpture in Korea," in *The Smile of Buddha: 1600 Years of Buddhist Art in Korea*, ed. Jan Van Alphen (Brussels: Bozarbooks, 2008), 75–87; Juhung Rhi, "Hanguk Bulgyo Misul-Ui Mihakjeok Uimi-Wa Munhwajeok Teukjing [Aesthetic Meaning and Cultural Characteristics of Korean Buddhist Art]," *Cheolhak Sasang [Philosophical Thought]* 11 (December 2000): 21–50.

²⁵ Choi, *Sandaneun Geot Geulindaneun Geot [Living and Drawing]*, 54, 116.

Following an extensive three-month exploration of traditional and contemporary sculptures worldwide, he rushed to the National Museum of Korea upon his return, eager to encounter the Pensive Maitreya Statue once again. The subsequent day, he ventured to the Seokguram Grotto. These encounters with the sculptures solidified his conviction that such artistry remained unparalleled. According to him, Korean Buddhist sculpture is the “perfect form of beauty,” seamlessly amalgamating profound Buddhist concepts with the aesthetic intrinsic of Korean culture.²⁶

Choi attributes the Pensive Maitreya Statue with guiding his early artistic path, and he regards the bodhisattvas standing on the rear wall of the Seokguram Grotto as possessing the most exquisite countenance he has ever witnessed.²⁷ The Pensive Maitreya Statue, capturing the contemplative demeanor of the bodhisattva Maitreya and originating from the Three Kingdoms period, profoundly impacted Choi's work. This influence is apparent in the recurrent portrayal of women with contemplative expressions in his sculptures. Analogous to the Pensive Maitreya Statue, Choi's “Thinking Woman” sculpture gently represents the serenity and contemplative spirit's allure. His distinctive style eventually became manifested in his statues of the Virgin Mary. Through an unwavering commitment to simplicity and sublimity, Choi's Marian statues radiate an enlightened, transcendent spirit, resonating with the sacred presence of the compassionate and merciful Virgin Mary, akin to the Pensive Maitreya Statue. Throughout Choi's works, the simplicity and restraint inherent in Korean Buddhist sculpture intertwine as a consistent thread. His statues of the Virgin Mary manifest sublime beauty through their unpretentious simplicity. In essence, Choi's amalgamation of Korean aesthetic principles into Christian art strives to birth religious sculptures that evoke a primordial Korean sentiment, deeply intertwined with the “Korean form” stemming from Korean Buddhist sculpture.²⁸

During the early stage of his journey into church sculpture, Choi's religious artworks encountered resistance from many Korean Catholics who were accustomed to conventional Western imagery. In the 1970s, when he began producing religious statues, the Korean Catholic Church predominantly imported Catholic iconography from Europe, especially France, fostering a Westernized perception of the Virgin Mary. Choi recalls instances where his Marian statue met with criticism within church circles, as they diverged from the Western depiction of the Virgin Mary's countenance that parishioners were accustomed to. He notes that this perception has been ingrained since the introduction of Catholicism to Korea.²⁹ Furthermore, one of his Marian statues inexplicably vanished from a church, its whereabouts

²⁶ Choi, 102.

²⁷ Jong-Tae Choi, *Na-ui Misul, Areumdaum-Eul Hyanghan Sasaek: Choi Jong-Tae Yesul Iyagi [My Art, My Contemplation on Beauty: Story of Choi Jong-Tae Art]* (Seoul: Yeolhwadang, 2007), 13–16.

²⁸ Choi, *Sandaneun Geot Geulindaneun Geot [Living and Drawing]*, 136.

²⁹ Choi, 106–7.

remaining a mystery to this day.³⁰ Nonetheless, Choi's determination remained unwavering; he endeavored to capture the Virgin Mary with a distinctly Korean visage.

Choi believes that religious art can contain "true life" only through inculturation, which he argues is a return to the origin of life and truth.³¹ True beauty, according to him, serves as a conduit for the divine voice, and inculturation endows iconography with vitality, enabling it to embody authentic beauty as art. Without the life granted by inculturation, no statue can exude beauty or channel the divine voice. For the statue of the Virgin Mary crafted by Korean artist Choi Jong-tae to embody the divine beauty, it must take on a Korean form. To be the Virgin *of* the Korean church, it must inherently reflect Korean aesthetics. This, in Choi's perspective, constitutes the path to "inculturation that suits us."³² Drawing parallels to the development of Korean Buddhist art, which, although introduced as a foreign tradition, melded with Korean aesthetics to become an integral part of Korean artistic expression, Choi asserts that Catholicism, as a foreign faith in Korea, possesses the potential to evolve into a form of Korean Christian art that aligns with Korean aesthetics. He poses the question, "What have we cultivated over the course of the past 200 years of Korean Christian history?"³³ Choi's inculturated artworks of Marian statue were firmly rooted in Korean Buddhist art. That is why he began sculpting Marian statues with the face of the Bodhisattva Gwan-eum even before crafting the statue of Gwan-eum at the Buddhist temple Gilsangsa.

IV. Beyond Inculturation to Universal Truth

Although Choi Jong-tae's artwork has been rooted in Korean Buddhist art, it wasn't until he was over 60 years old that he created a Buddhist statue. In 2000, he erected for the first time his Gwan-eum statue at Gilsangsa Temple in Seoul. It is crucial to understand what motivated him to make a Buddhist statue and its theological meaning to him. Furthermore, it is necessary to examine how the creation of the Gwan-eum statue was connected to his efforts of inculturation of Marian statues.

In 1956, two years before being baptized as a Catholic, Choi spent four months studying Buddhism at Taegosa Temple (now Jogyesa Temple) where he read the *Diamond Sutra* and the *Heart Sutra*. The reading of the Buddhist scriptures sparked him to develop his own artistic theory that art, religion, and life are inseparable, and the form that artists created embodies a deep relationship with their spirit.³⁴ Even after being baptized as Joseph and becoming a Catholic, Choi's interest in Buddhism remained unchanged. Creating a Gwan-eum statue was his long-standing desire, but it required the appropriate person and place to accept it. During an interfaith exchange with Cardinal Stephen Kim Sou-hwan, the Venerable

³⁰ From a personal interview with Choi Jong-tae on August 5, 2023

³¹ Choi, *Sandaneun Geot Geulindaneun Geot [Living and Drawing]*, 109.

³² Choi, 108–9.

³³ Choi, "Tochakhwa [Korean Christian Art in the Process of Inculturation]," 73.

³⁴ Choi, *Sandaneun Geot Geulindaneun Geot [Living and Drawing]*, 219.

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Beopjeong heard about Choi's desire to create a Gwan-eum statue and asked him to create one for Gilsangsa Temple, as a symbol of religious harmony and reconciliation. Prior to the making of the statue, Choi sought permission from Cardinal Kim, who readily granted it, and shared a history that Catholics in Nagasaki, Japan, had prayed in front of a bodhisattva Kannon statue to escape persecution from the Edo Shogunate.³⁵ Once he embarked on crafting it, Choi's Gwan-eum statue was completed in just three hours. It was the image he had always envisioned for many years. The statue of Gwan-eum features a coronet, a jar of purified water held in the left arm, and the palm of the right hand facing forward, symbolizing the desire to save the world from suffering. The coronet is reminiscent of the Pensive Bodhisattva Statue, which wears a three-mountain crown with three semicircles on her head. However, while the Pensive Bodhisattva Statue has a smiling expression, Choi's Gwan-eum has a somewhat melancholic expression, similar to his statue of the Virgin Mary. The depiction of a jar of purified water held in Gwan-eum's arms is comparable to the Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus.

Choi Jong-tae's Gwan-eum gained attention as the "Gwan-eum statue resembling the Virgin Mary." This is likely due to Choi being a Catholic sculptor who has created statues of the Virgin Mary. As previously mentioned, Choi's artistic theory posits that art cannot be separated from religion and life. Thus, his artwork must consider the religious culture manifested in Korean life, and he strives to create beauty that reflects religious life. Consequently, his art is not merely an external adaptation of Korean Buddhist art, but rather an expression of faith, reflecting Christianity and Buddhism's profound interaction. In other words, his inculturation efforts aim to foster harmony between religions. Pointing to the religious and cultural fact that Buddhism and Confucianism were deeply rooted in Korean culture before the arrival of Christianity, Choi maintains that new Christian culture can, and must, coexist with Buddhist and Confucian culture.³⁶

Furthermore, Choi asserts that the reconciliation of Christian culture with Buddhist and Confucian cultures transcends inculturation and leads to universal truth, a realm of universality that is embodied through living in the spirit of Christ. The spirit of Christ embodies love and unity, but a work of art without the spirit of Christianity lacks genuine beauty, only having form.³⁷ He claims,

Christian art can take shape when the Christian faith is lived out as life, moving beyond imitation to inculturation, and beyond inculturation to the search for universal truth. Art mirrors life and ideals, and faith is meant to take shape as a tangible form of art, a reflection of how deeply religion is integrated into life. Just as the Christian faith is

³⁵ Maria Reis-Habito, "Maria-Kannon: The Mother of God in Buddhist Guise," *Marian Studies* 47, no. 1 (1996): 50–64; Junhyoung Michael Shin, "Avalokiteśvara's Manifestation as the Virgin Mary: The Jesuit Adaptation and the Visual Conflation in Japanese Catholicism after 1614," *Church History* 80, no. 1 (March 2011): 1–39; Mideum Hong, "Encounter between Christianity and Asia in World Christianity: Marian Inculturation in Japan and India," *The Journal of World Christianity* 12, no. 2 (2022): 187–211.

³⁶ Choi, "Tochakhwa [Korean Christian Art in the Process of Inculturation]," 80.

³⁷ Choi, 81–82.

expressed through sculptural art in Korea, Christian art in a particular country will be a manifestation of the faith of that country.³⁸

I contend that Choi Jong-tae's Gwan-eum statue represents the ultimate realization of his artistic philosophy. While his Marian statue exemplifies the process of inculturation, his Gwan-eum transcends this process to reach universal truths. Choi believes that despite the existence of separate countries and religions on earth, there are no boundaries in heaven, and the truth of religion is one. Similarly, the beauty embodied in art is limitless. According to Choi, if the truth of religion and the beauty of art are one, why draw boundaries just because the religion's name is different? Thus, for Choi, Gwan-eum and Mary are not essentially different in what they symbolize. Both represent eternal mothers who embrace the world's difficulties, embodying great love, compassion, clarity, purity, nobility, majesty, gentleness, and tenderness.³⁹ Choi argues that Gwan-eum is connected to the Virgin Mary because both the Buddhist path to "see the nature" (見性) and the Christian kingdom of God lie within the same realm. He emphasizes that art and religion are merely paths to reach truth and sanctity.

Choi's statue of Gwan-eum was a natural progression from his statue of the Virgin Mary, which was already rooted in Korean Buddhist art. Thus, his work's ability to transcend religious boundaries was predestined. However, it is essential to note that Choi's inculturation goes beyond merely creating a Korean version of an icon; it is a theology that values the religious heart of indigenous cultures and seeks to promote dialogue and reconciliation. His life, characterized by following the spirit of Christ, extends beyond religious boundaries and is reflected in his art, such as the "Gwan-eum statue resembling the Virgin." The resemblance between the two religious statues is not critical; what matters is that both Gwan-eum and Mary represent the Mother of Eternal Love. The two faces of Gwan-eum and Mary, formed by Choi Jong-tae, both contain their sublime spirit.

V. Conclusion

In pursuit of encapsulating the splendor of Korea within his artistic creations, Choi Jong-tae embarked on a journey that led him to recognize the quintessence of Korean aesthetics in the realm of Buddhist art. Even in his earliest religious sculptures, Choi's expressions already resonated with an interfaith harmony that transcended religious boundaries. By meticulously crafting inculturated forms of Marian statues, Choi revolutionized the landscape of religious art within a realm dominated by European influences. His endeavor in inculturation extended beyond the realm of visually striking Marian statues bearing resemblances to Gwan-eum. Rather, Choi's vision encompassed a profound understanding of Korean culture and spirituality, transcending external adaptations to actively dissolve the partitions between

³⁸ Choi, 83.

³⁹ For the comparison between Mary and Gwan-eum, see Maria Reis-Habito, "The Bodhisattva Guanyin and the Virgin Mary," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 13 (1993): 61–69.

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religions through harmonious integration. In this light, Choi's religious sculptures can be seen as emblematic of a dual identity—a Christian-Korean/Korean-Christian model that harmoniously embraces both aspects without compromising either Korean or Christian identity.

The installation of Choi's Gwan-eum statue at Gilsangsa Temple in 2000 marked a significant turning point. Following this event, an interview with Choi revealed his reservations about creating another Gwan-eum statue, stemming from concerns about its reception in other temple settings.⁴⁰ It wasn't until 2017 that Choi ultimately realized his vision with the installation of his second Gwan-eum statue at Bongseonsa Temple in Namyang-ju, Gyeonggi-do (Fig. 3). This iteration of the Gwan-eum statue exudes a subtle smile, setting it apart from its predecessors at Gilsangsa and the Virgin Mary statue at Hyehwa-dong Church. In a personal interview with Choi Jong-tae, I ventured to inquire about the significance of the smile adorning the Gwan-eum statue at Bongseonsa. In response, Choi acknowledged the presence of the serene smile, attributing it to a heightened inner tranquility compared to the time of crafting the Gwan-eum statue at Gilsangsa.

Further probing revealed that Choi Jong-tae's creative prowess remained unbounded. When queried about the potential for more Gwan-eum statues, Choi affirmed that subsequent iterations could feature an even brighter smile reminiscent of the Pensive Maitreya Statue. This insight underscores Choi's unwavering commitment to his art's transformative potential in erasing religious divides in Korea. As Choi's pioneering art breaks down these barriers, an air of anticipation surrounds the prospect of his third and fourth Gwan-eum statues, each holding the promise of further enriching the dialogue between religious traditions.

In Korea, characterized by diverse faiths and cultures, Choi Jong-tae's artistic journey serves as a beacon of hope, demonstrating that artistic expression can be a unifying force. By crafting sculptures that blur the lines between Christianity and Buddhism, and by embracing the essence of Korean culture and spirituality, Choi dismantles the walls that often divide religions. His statues do more than merely coexist in a shared space; they thrive in a harmonious coalescence that honors both identities. As we witness the evolution of Choi's work and await the emergence of new sculptures, we are reminded that the power of art lies not only in its aesthetic appeal but also in its capacity to foster understanding, respect, and unity among disparate beliefs.

⁴⁰ Eun-hyeong Kim, "Gwaneum-Ui Miso-Neun Seongmo-Leul Dalmatda [Gwan-Eum's Smile Resembles the Virgin Mary]," *Hankyoreh* 21, June 1, 2000, <http://legacy.h21.hani.co.kr/h21/data/L000522/1pbc5m03.html>.



Fig. 3 The Gwan-eum at Bongseonsa Temple, Namyang-ju. Photo by Mideum Hon

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