

The Four Little Dragons, the Great Dragon, and the Phoenixes

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The following essay was originally delivered at a conference of Jesuits in Eastern Asia, held in Taipei in December of last year. It is printed here with minor revisions by the author. In the light of recent events in China, and on-going battle with religious minorities there, the call it makes for new models of interreligious encounter strikes a particularly acute note.

My little piece on “Religion and Culture in the Four Little Dragons” (in *Ching Feng*) was started during the FABC-CCA Consultation on Dialogue held in Singapore, 1987, and was completed afterwards. It gave me satisfaction to know that the article was read by the planners of this Consultation on Interreligious Dialogue, and I would like to thank you for inviting me to carry forward the theme and include the Great Dragon too. I not only let the Great Dragon join in but invite the phoenixes also – and I shall explain as we go along why I provide a place of honor for the royal female creatures. Allow me to paint four pictures for your consideration.

1. *Without taking sides on the sociological debate whether Confucianism contributes to economic success, let us simply heed the phenomenon that the Four Little Dragons have demonstrated remarkable economic growth such that they cannot be simply treated like some of the other countries in Asia as poor in a general sense.*

As you recall, according to Max Weber, the interlocking of Confucianism and Chinese traditional social structure does not lend itself to the development of capitalism. But certain revisionist Weberians take issue with Weber, contending that Confucianism is not only this-worldly enough but is conducive to rationalization, so that a Confucian society

has the conditions for economic development. Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and South Korea, all having Confucian elements in their cultures, are said to be show-cases of that thesis.

Personally, I cannot get excited about this debate. Whether it is Max Weber or the revisionists, Confucianism is referred to too vaguely, and even if it can be defined satisfactorily, the argument, pro or con, is reductionist. There are many more complex factors to account for economic growth. If Confucianism is a significant factor in the economic performance of Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and South Korea, how does one explain, in cultural terms, the even greater success story of Japan after the 1950's?

The point I want to emphasize here is simply that for those of us who are interested in interreligious dialogue it is necessary to take due cognizance of economic realities in the societies in which we work. In the case of East Asia countries apart from mainland China – namely, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and South Korea – economic activities are very lively indeed (and in the case of Japan, even more so). Economic performances affect life in those countries greatly, for better or for worse; the economic dynamics may have certain cultural roots but in turn they have a bearing on cultural and religious life. An interreligious dialogue that is carried on without recognizing the interplay of economic forces and cultural and religious traditions is too far removed from the real life of the people.

I have great respect for Aloysius Pieris and his Christian-Buddhist dialogue work in the context of his native Sri Lanka and in the neighboring countries in the Indian sub-continent. Because poverty is a real issue in those places, he thinks that where Christians and Buddhists take side with the materially poor and at the same time speak of spiritual poverty, the two religious groups have significant things to say to each other – and to all others who are in the same context.

But if we simply transfer Pieris's ideas to the more prosperous Four Little Dragons, we pull them out of context. For although there are poor and exploited people in those countries, just about everyone talks about, and looks for, wealth, and the governments speak the language of wealth for the nation. Even many Buddhist monks in Hong Kong and Taiwan are well off, and the folk in the Christian churches have spare money to give. Whether or not Confucianism (and Puritanism, à la Max Weber!) are contributing factors to capitalistic growth, surely Confucian ethics and Christian theology can provide food for thought in critical understanding of the implications of the acquisition of wealth in contemporary

Chinese societies and the ethical problems involved in the use and distribution of wealth.

Thus a Christian-Confucian dialogue on capitalism and economic prosperity in the East Asian setting would be just as relevant as a Christian-Buddhist dialogue on poverty and renunciation in the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. In turn, a discussion (not a debate) among Pieris and others on Christian-Buddhist concerns and Christian-Confucian dialogue on economic development and the issues coming out of an East Asian setting would yield enlightening results for the whole Asian region. I am not so much making a concrete proposal here as I am illustrating the point that interfaith dialogue takes on greater relevance if it takes cognizance of the reality of economic forces at work in the given context.

2. *While the Four Little Dragons are indeed lively creatures in economic terms, they are erratic in their performances, and politically they are by no means tamed animals.*

In my first point I spoke of “the economic success of the Four Little Dragons uncritically. The journalists who like to publicize the phrase “Four Little Dragons,” linking it up with the outward prosperity of the countries represented, are not likely to make critical economic and sociological analysis.

In my previous article on “Religion and Culture in the Four Little Dragons,” I noted that economic growth in those countries may look good in terms of GNP and per capita income, but fair distribution of wealth is something else. The ups-and-downs of the economies are another matter again. Hong Kong society, which I know best, is certainly not without its poverty and exploitation. When its workers are laid off by industries which close down abruptly, they know only too well what it is not to be adequately protected, and how the economy is not as stable as the business people and the pro-Establishment politicians like to claim. The stock-market crash on “Black Friday” in 1988 for a moment got the people thinking that it would be a repetition of the Wall Street crash in 1929. The business sections of the newspapers are apt to describe the real estate market in the most favorable terms when the property value is going imp and up, but of course the language is that spoken by the property investors, while the lower-income groups are finding it harder and harder to purchase a little apartment which they can call their own.

While in Seoul last week, I was on the campus of Korea University where I picked up the students' paper, *Granite Tower* (November 15, 1988), and found there a report entitled "The Money Game of the Rich in Korea." The report, written by a professor of business administration, opens:

Korea hails now an unexpectedly high trade surplus. The trade surplus this year is expected to record \$13 billion which constitutes some 20% of the total money supply. Unfortunately for the Korean economy, the mounting trade surplus makes the general public losers. Most of the people complain that they are by no means beneficiaries of the trade surplus. . . . A bitter fact is that the benefits of the trade surplus are mostly taken by the big businesses. And the public picks up only a severe inflation as a reward.

The report ends:

In sum, the Korean economy is about to embark on a distribution dilemma on the trade surplus which turns into an evil that bursts the inflationary and speculative bubbles. The seeds of the calamity have been planted by the concentrated business ownership which provides a basic mechanism that helps the trade surplus monopolized by the business owners. Therefore, national efforts are called for to make the ownership structure decentralized in a democratic way as soon as possible.

In Hong Kong and South Korea the rich and the powerful join hands. Colonial Hong Kong has never had a democratic government, and in spite of the promise of a "high degree of self-government" in the Special Administrative Region to come under the People's Republic of China by 1997, the draft Basic Law that has just been released clearly shows that the form of government for Hong King will still be mainly in the hands of the wealthy and the elite, making it next to impossible to have a general election. Hong Kong will not have a dictator or tyrant ruling with an iron hand; rather, it will be ruled by velvet gloves worn by the establishment.

The South Korean regime under Chun Doo-Hwan was a prototype of collaboration among the rich and powerful, as recent revelations of rampant corruption make plain. Roh Tae-Woo is more clever as a politician, but skeptics in Korea tell me that the present government is not much better than the previous one.

I do not know enough about the political scene in Taiwan. What I do know is what I learn from the newspapers and television. While it is

heartening to hear of a certain relaxation of the one-party rule, it puzzles me when I see scenes in the law-making chamber with members of the opposition party shouting and grabbing microphones by force and being man-handled by the police to remove them (the reporting varies, according to the reporter's point of view).

As for Singapore, it is common knowledge that the leadership does not tolerate opposing points of view despite the democratic form of the parliament. We know for a fact that an ecumenical Christian body was recently forced to move out of Singapore on account of alleged political leanings.

In my former article on the Four Little Dragons, I noted that while the governments in those countries recognize the plurality of religions, even giving them equal rights, they do not want organized religions to be critical of them. The religions are acceptable only if they support the status quo. There is no need to repeat this point except to remark that where this is the case, inter religious dialogue in a formalized setting can at best be confined to a discussion on abstract doctrines and a polite exchange of ideas.

Are you satisfied with this form of interreligious meeting? I have plenty of experience of this, since in Hong Kong I had a part to play (along with representatives of other religions) over a period often years in establishing good relations among six religions (Buddhism, Catholicism, Confucianism, Islam, Protestantism, and Taoism) to the point of holding meetings to exchange ideas for the sake of mutual understanding as a socially acceptable form of interreligious activity. The religious leaders were prepared to speak to social issues and community problems, without criticizing any particular persons or structures.

During the time of the drafting of the Basic Law for Hong Kong after 1997, religious representatives have been on the Drafting Committee as well as on the Consultative Committee. Through these representatives, the several religious groups did speak out clearly on religious freedom and the rights of religious bodies to organize educational and social service organizations. But when it comes to the areas of human rights in an expanded sense and a greater degree of democratization, the institutionalized religions have not made their views known, and the religious representatives are either silent or helpless. If there are prophetic voices coming from religious circles, they are those of individual clerics and lay persons or small groups who are not afraid to dissent. These people are mainly Catholics and Protestants, and they can carry on a dialogue among themselves, but the other religions refrain from joining in. If re-

ligious men and women withdraw from political and economic realities, interreligious dialogue lacks contemporary relevance. I was told in South Korea not only Christian theologians but Buddhist thinkers have recently been drawn into the *minjung* movement, and that the ensuing interreligious encounter, while rare, can be dynamic.

3. *The Great Dragon is waking up now, and though he is as unwieldy as ever and is somewhat weak from recent maladies and is undernourished, he is respected as well as feared by the Four Little Dragons, even as he is willing to recognize their blood relationship and/or cultural ties with him.*

Hong Kong, closest to mainland China, was the first of the Four Little Dragons to resume normal contact with the Great Dragon. Hong Kong had been the site of an influx of refugees ever since the Communist takeover in 1949. The border closed during the period of the Cultural Revolution, 1966-1976. After the fall of the Gang of Four in 1976, the flow of traffic between the two places has resumed, to the point now that many people from the mainland want to come to Hong Kong, but restriction is placed on their entry mainly because the tiny place is already overcrowded, while a great number of Hong Kong people travel to China for business, sight-seeing, and cultural exchange, and to visit relatives (or to sweep their ancestors' graves on special days).

Travel from Singapore to China was for a long time restricted to older people but the restrictions on younger ones are relaxed now and business with China is slowly developing. Between Taiwan and the mainland, a dramatic change has taken place, with Taiwanese visitors by the thousands now visiting their ancestors' homeland every week (usually via Hong Kong). Sports events and cultural exchanges involving Taiwan and China are possible, though still in a limited degree. Even South Korea has lifted its strict ban on travel to and business with China.

All this may suffice to make the point that people from the Four Little Dragons do acknowledge their blood and cultural (in the case of Korea, only cultural) kinship with the Great Dragon, and that economic connections are likewise important for the great and the small alike.

The Great Dragon has lost his overbearing manner; he has publicly disclaimed any ambitions of hegemony. He did want to stand up tall and straight when communism took over the land, but the task of rebuilding the nation has not been at all simple.

Though a self-styled master strategist in dealing with contradictions, Mao Tze-tung was himself a bundle of contradictions and the communist regime he founded was full of its own contradictions. It names the people as the real masters of the nation, but the people are not really treated as grown-ups who can decide for themselves what is good for them. It calls for modernizations, but old traditions keep coming back, and in some ways it reverts to old feudal China. It is supposed to have done away with the evils of capitalism, but the temptations of capitalistic success are back, and the greediness and corruption that are bred are said to be worse than what prevails in capitalist societies. If socialism has validity, it has yet to prove itself in China. While the People's Republic has eliminated the glaring discrepancy between "the haves" and "the have-nots," it is still a poor country by world standards. The people you meet every day on the streets and in the shops and factories fare less well than their counterparts in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and South Korea. The elderly Dragon on the mainland cannot but be more humble in receiving the younger and richer ones from abroad.

Indeed voices crying for reform are heard from mainland China. They are sometimes silenced, but there are brave voices among them that keep on shouting. Depending on who is in control, reform is realized here and there. If China is really serious about reform and modernization, critical understanding of experiences and endeavors from abroad is better than a closed-door policy. The Chinese communities outside China do not have a lot of fresh ideas apart from those prompted by greater contact with other parts of the world, but in terms of capital and modern management and communication, they can serve as stimuli.

The religious communities in communist China, once suppressed, now enjoy the freedom of religious observances, though within prescribed limits. They are also "consulted" for community problems, along with other civic groups. The religions are hardly in a position to play a prophetic role. They would be doing all right if they could keep the integrity of their faith without yielding to the powers and principalities. One noteworthy action the several religious groups performed together was to remove the clause, "the freedom to propagate atheism," from the *Constitution of the People's Republic*. It appears that the calling of the religions in a state unsympathetic to religious beliefs is to know how to exist without succumbing to pressure on the one hand and without inviting unnecessary suffering on the other. If outside religious bodies wish

to relate to the religious communities in China, it is not for them to pass judgment without understanding the circumstances. I have repeatedly found it to be a mutually rewarding experience for church people in China and those from outside to listen to each other empathetically.

As a matter of fact, some of the religious communities in China show remarkable vitality. The Protestants in particular have increased many fold under adverse circumstances. There is no question that a spiritual power greater than mere human is at work in their midst. The spiritual power is a source of comfort, strength, and sanctification. It humbles us who are in much more comfortable circumstances to see the power manifest in the Christian believers.

Can the same power overflow to make a difference in the world at large? This brings me to my final picture.

4. *Taking the hint from the fable of the phoenix which, having burned itself in a nest of twigs, gives birth to new life from the ashes, what the Great Dragon and the Little Dragons need is renewal of their cultures as though new phoenixes will rise up again from ruins, more resplendent than ever.*

The fable is of Egyptian or Arabic origin and the phoenix is a fabulous, male bird. The Chinese do not have the same fable but they do have phoenix as a royal bird, which is female, named feng-wang, often a companion to the dragon. If the dragon is a symbol for the emperor, the phoenix is that for the empress.

If the Chinese emperor was an example of male chauvinism *par excellence*, the dragon is the full embodiment of masculine energy. The emperor wielded absolute power, and the dragon – with its awesome and even ferocious mien – is a fitting symbol of his authority. To this day, the political leadership of the power structure in China have predominantly masculine characteristics. That is likewise true of the Four Little Dragons countries.

Economic activities in China and in the four smaller places with Chinese connections are also masculine – aggressive, rational, unimaginative, hard-driving. There is little room for the more humane qualities in the business office or the factory.

The Four Little Dragons as well as the Great Dragon need their phoenixes (feminine gender in the Chinese context). Actually Chinese culture always has a place for the *yin* (feminine, shade, lunar) characteristics.

Chinese art, poetry, ethics, philosophy, and religion are always a blending of the *yin* and the *yang*. At his best, the dragon in artistic design is magnificent and full of vitality, whereas the phoenix is graceful and resplendent. Taiwan has a fair repository of traditional Chinese culture and considerable potential for creativity, especially in literature and painting. Korea has inherited much from China in the way of art, philosophy, and classical literature, while maintaining her own native genius. Hong Kong has the shallowest Chinese cultural roots, but its advantage is that it is an open society, and whoever has a receptive mind has much to learn through exposure to the West.

Hong Kong is the symbol of a city open to the sea, the envy of younger intellectuals in China who want to leave the backward hinterland covered with yellow sand and sail abroad on the deep blue sea or fly through the blue sky to learn from abroad. These intellectuals are actually very concerned about the destiny of China as a civilization, and think that the way of the future is to introduce the ideas of great thinkers from other parts of the world to stimulate thinking among the Chinese.

One of the young intellectuals I know, Lui Xiao-feng, has devoted himself to editing series of translations called *Chinese and World Cultures*. The list of titles in the series is impressive, and the names of those that make up its editorial committee are clear proof of China's young talent. Lui Xiao-feng himself is a most interesting representative. Having studied foreign languages in Chengdu and philosophy in Beijing University, he is fairly well-grounded in Chinese literature and philosophy and is widely read in comparative literature and philosophy (his thesis was a comparative study of Chinese poetry with a Taoist tinge and German Neo-Romantic poetry). He was converted to the Christian faith upon reading the nihilistic existentialism of Sartre and Camus and the theistic existentialism of Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard. Only thirty-three years old, he sees his life's work to be the introduction of world-class thinkers, including Christian writers, to the Chinese intelligentsia. He believes that the future of China lies in the renewal of culture. Immediately after this meeting in Taiwan, I shall have a dialogue with him at Shenzhen University, where Lui teaches comparative literature, on "Yellow, Blue, Gray, and Green Cultures" (meaning respectively, traditional Chinese culture, openness to the world, distress and gloom, hope and renewal).

I mention Lui Xiao-feng here to bring out the point that dialogue between ecumenical Christianity and Chinese culture in the setting of the

modern world marks an important agenda for the future of China as a civilization. Liu and his colleagues are deeply concerned about the future of China – and the world too.

Another young intellectual, Yuan Chiming, spoke in a television interview of the struggle of the present-day intelligentsia in China for progress against reactionary tendencies, with the result that they are enduring great suffering. His hope is that out of the suffering, greatness will come. Mr. Yuan may or may not be a Christian, but even as he may have appreciation for Prometheus' suffering (he is more hopeful about the future than Prometheus bound), it would not be difficult for him, and others like him, to understand the message of the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 53), who "has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows," but who "was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his Stripes we are healed." Indeed, the Chinese through the centuries have known sorrow and suffering, but they are a people not easily dejected and through it all come out more long-suffering and patient than ever, their hope unscathed. This belongs to the oldest Chinese wisdom, distilled from centuries of experience.

Of course, the endurance of suffering alone is not enough; there must be change and growth. And metanoia or change of heart is an essential part of Christian faith – and not only a change in the individual's heart but in that of the whole race and culture as well. If repentance and sorrow for the wrongdoings of the past belong to the process of metanoia, then it must be said that this is less familiar to the Chinese people. The Chinese sages have advised examining oneself and feeling sorry for wrongdoings and mistakes, but in Chinese culture one feels much less a sense of fundamental wrongness in the human heart or the human race ("original sin" in the Christian sense), and consequently does not find the Christian understanding of confession of sin before a forgiving God.

Wang Yi-fan, an evangelical-minded Protestant teacher from China, said in a Christian-Confucian conference held in Hong Kong last year that, whereas the Chinese in their recent past have known a great deal of suffering, nowhere in the entire treasury of their literature is there to be found a book like St. Augustine's *Confessions*, in which the author addresses himself to God for his past wrongdoings and the evils of the world. Mr. Wang then referred to the latest works of the contemporary writer, Bachin, who openly confesses the evils of the Cultural Revolution and his timidity in the face of such evils. Wang said that some of Bachin's latest essays come close to a national confession, but I think that Bachin still falls short of coming into the presence of the forgiving

God. Be that as it may, it would be of great value for Christians to engage in dialogue with authors like Bachin on questions of human nature, culture, and divine grace.

I myself would do anything to promote dialogue between Christian thinkers and Chinese literary and philosophical figures. There lies a frontier of the renewal of China. Then a resplendent phoenix will rise from the ashes on China's soil.

And the dragon? With the risen phoenix by his side, the dragon will be rejuvenated. But, if I may be permitted to indulge myself further in the metaphor, I think that the dragon, while being rejuvenated, also needs to be shorn of his wild and unruly characteristics. This came clear to me during a conversation with a Korean friend, Dr. Pyan Hwan-Sun, president of the Methodist Theological Seminary in Seoul. We were talking about "the theology of the dragon" (he was born in the year of the dragon). He told me about the stained-glass window in the Catholic Cathedral in Kyoto, Japan. Originally the design on the stained-glass window had been a dragon cut down by the sword of St. George. But the Japanese Christians found it hard to accept the dragon being killed, and in any case the image was too bloody for their tastes. So the artist had to come up with another design. St. George and the dragon are still locked in combat, but only the tail of the dragon is being cut off. I remarked to Dr. Pyun that, in the same way, I would like to see the extra fangs and the ugly scales cut away and the dragon's ferocity exorcised, to make it look more civilized and humane. This is what I want to see happen in Chinese culture: that it becomes more humane and civilized through exorcism and surgery.

"In Korean culture," Dr. Pyun commented, "we, too, have the legend of a bad dragon becoming a good dragon through the mercy of a Buddhist monk." "And nowadays, through the mercy of Christ?" I asked. "Perhaps," he replied. Sitting there in the living room with Dr. Pyun and his wife, a crucifix hanging on the wall, I promised to send them from Hong Kong a pair of cushion covers depicting a dragon and a phoenix, as a gift from my wife.

As I was making to leave, a comment was made regarding the publicly televised confession of ex-President Chun Doo-Hwan in the precincts of a Buddhist temple. After nine painful months of self-examination, he repented of his former wrongdoings and, with his wife beside him, stated his willingness to give up their house and to return several million dollars to the state. "Isn't *that* an act of exorcising for an ex-dragon?"

Are the Christians in Korea ready to forgive him?" I asked. That he made his confession in a Buddhist setting I find most interesting. Even as I am writing these words, I am reminded of the line in the commentary on the first hexagram Ch'ien of the I-Ching, which states that there comes a moment when the arrogant dragon will have cause to repent.

Indeed, not only the Great Dragon but the Four Little Dragons need to be exorcised from their unruliness, aggressiveness, and cruelty – through the cross if they will, but perhaps also through some other impetus from their native cultures. Only then will the phoenixes rise up from the ashes to live together in felicity for ten thousand years and more.

If this is only Asian, and East Asian at that, then let us add:

The wolf and the lamb shall
feed together,
the lion shall eat straw
like the ox;
and dust shall be
the serpent's food. (Isaiah 65:25)