

# Doing Theology with the Economy and Cultural Resources in Asia

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Having been so closely involved in PTCA, it is indeed both my pleasure and privilege to share with you some thoughts on “Doing Theology with the Economy and Cultural Resources in Asia.”

Previously, our energy and time were spent on finding Asian resources and maximising their use, like folk-tales, people’s symbols/images, and the people’s movements to relate the Gospel to the everyday life of Asians.<sup>1</sup> Now that Asia has picked up speed and progress in the area of economic development, more and more people are beginning to look at our booming economy and cultures more seriously. After all, cultures have a lot to do with our life-style, so it is not a surprise that when our wallets fatten-up there is more space for cultures. Conversely, I believe cultures have a lot to do with efforts to better ourselves.

So, very briefly, we shall touch on the booming economy in our region and, secondly, to see how our cultural resources could be used in our theologising.

## 1. Asia’s booming economy

Not a day passes by without us reading something of the booming economy in Asia. Naturally, it is only too obvious that not all Asian countries are making impressive economic strides. Nonetheless, even the so-called ‘poorest of the poor’ countries like Myanmar and Bangladesh are endeavouring to haul themselves into the booming orbit in Asia.

China ‘to become biggest economic power by 2030’ so screams a headline. Dr. Justin Lin Yifu, a member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, Beijing’s top advisory body, has affirmed that

If China’s high annual economic growth rate can be called the first miracle, and the development of its five coastal provinces can be marvelled at as the second, then China is going to make the third economic miracle by emerging as the strongest economic power in the world in the year 2030.

ASEAN is perceived as falling behind China and India in the race for investments, ie, there is a documented trend showcasing investments are moving away from S E Asia towards China and India.

Not to be shadowed by its neighbouring giants, tinny-weeny Singapore endeavours to realize its Vision 2030: Singaporeans to be as rich as Americans. It has implemented an economic plan showcasing the blueprint for progress of the next three decades. All things going on well, its economy may expand at an annual rate of 5% over the next three decades. Even in a low-growth scenario, the economy may grow at 4% a year, though at this lower rate, Singapore will not be able to attain the income level of the Group of Seven (G-7). A spokesperson for the Economic Planning Committee has remarked: "We have done quite well competing in the Second League. The next step is to make it to the Top League. Our competitors are already doing that. Unless we do the same, we shall be left behind."

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has forecast a high rate growth for Asia: 7.2% for Asia against 1.8% for the world for 1994. The anticipated growth rate was realised. So, apparently, again all things going well, Asia's growth rate may outpace the world's. This forecast will have to consider negative factors like unchecked population growth, urban poverty, environmental deterioration/abuse, and the spectre of an uncontrolled AIDS epidemic among Asia's billions.

In 1994, there was a concern over a weak world recovery resulting from efforts by Germany and America to reduce their indebtedness and the failure of Japanese consumer demand to respond to fiscal stimulus. However, the concern was not as serious as anticipated in the light of small but steady progress in the economy of the three concerned countries.

Asia needs to count the cost of the good life. Yes, indeed, there is a high price for the 'progress' tag. Only the simple-minded will conclude that a high cost of living buys a high quality of life. The yuppies, the working mums, the retirees, and the teenagers are wrong when they equate earning with spending power. Knowing where they live is a key to gauging the cost of living in the fast lane.<sup>2</sup>

The price (\$S120,000) of a cosy three-bedroom house in the scenic suburbs of Kuala Lumpur or Manila can only purchase a car park space in Hong Kong or Tokyo. But the car that is so inexpensive to park in Kuala Lumpur costs four times more to buy there than in Tokyo where consumers can afford a new car every two years (a new Toyota Corolla costs \$34,584 in Kuala Lumpur but \$8,190 in Tokyo). It is cheaper to give birth to a baby in Taipei than in Manila. A standard microwave oven is twice as expensive in Hong Kong as in Bangkok.

Anomalies in the cost of living are common in Asia. To say that the Japanese earn hard and pay harder and that everything is inexpensive in the Philippines is way off the mark.

A civil servant in Hong Kong, with a starting salary of \$24,000 a year, could buy a new Toyota Corolla (price of \$20,640) in 11 months if he saved every cent of his salary. His Manila counterpart, with a starting salary of \$200 per month would

have to wait for 11 years to buy that piece of the pie in the sky at an unreachable \$26,270 price tag, following the same savings plan.

Generally speaking, Tokyo is Asia's highest-priced city, followed by Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taipei. But, as stated earlier, the economic configuration surprisingly works out differently. That \$8,190 new Toyota Corolla in Tokyo costs a bomb in Singapore, retailing at \$56,560. Even prior to owning the car the buyer needs to purchase a Certificate of Entitlement (\$29,000 for a 1.6 litre engine). One has to fork out \$85,560 to own that dream.

Theologically, what can we say?

What is the price of life? In terms of dollars and cents (for the sake of making a point knowing fully well that lives are priceless), most Taiwanese men don't think it is extravagant to spend \$40 for 12 roses which will last for only a few days. A candlelit dinner for two at an upmarket restaurant in Hong Kong, Tokyo, and Taipei would leave a Romeo \$150 poorer, not to mention that bunch of flowers costing \$80 which will burn a small hole in his wallet. To present an executive image a Singapore lad is prepared to fork out \$300 on clothes. If a \$30 haircut improves your image, there is nothing hairy or scary about the price. That Singaporean chap is more fortunate than his Taiwanese counterpart who has to splurge more than \$360 for a suit. Then what about Asian women?

They face similar problems. Delivery and gynaecology fees at a private hospital for a normal birth costs \$600 in Malaysia and \$8,000 in Hong Kong. First-time mothers cringe at the high cost involved in setting up the nursery, buying diapers, and paying for the paediatrician's visits.

When the babies grow up into teenagers accustomed to affluence there is an expensive lifestyle to maintain. Generally speaking, Asia's middle-class young feel free and easy with money— easy come, easy go. They frequent fast food outlets. They have more than enough to spend on snacks at the school canteen, movies, bowling or rollerblading, and designer clothes.

What is happening to us in the midst of all this?

Is raking in more money more easily making us more glad?

If happiness brings about longevity, then apparently the answer to the above question is in the negative. In spite of impressive advances in medical research, the people enjoying longevity are not found in great numbers in the developing countries. On the contrary, Bama county can claim to have centenarians in droves. Square foot for square foot, it will be difficult to find another place where centenarians abound.

Mrs Wang Yun Zhe vaguely remembers 94-year old Deng Xiao Peng trying to ferment the communist-led rebellion. 'Deng Xia Ping?' she remarked, "I remember hearing about him in the late 20's. I know he was here but I never met him. I don't know what happened to him after that." Mrs Wang is 107-years old. Her fellow villager, Mr. Luo Ma Zhen, is said to be 128 years old. He cannot prove his age since there is no documentary proof of his birth, but there are records of his 78-year old grandson's birthday.

But where is this Bama county? Actually, it is in a remote area in Guangxi province, southwest China, bordering northeast Vietnam. Not a few people live up to over 120 in Bama, but they do so as poor peasants living in poverty on top of a mountain.

“My advice is this: Work hard, be happy, eat maize everyday and plenty of fresh greens,” affirmed Mrs. Wang Yun Zhe. That, coupled with pure air, gentle climate, clean water, and absence of pollutants is believed to be the cause of longevity. It also helps not to have financial worry. Most Bama villagers earn less than US\$400 a year. They eat what they grow: beans and maize. Very few eat any meat. Its famous longevity wine based on the ancient recipes of the locals is brewed from 30 wild herbs. For an extra lethal kick, it is rumoured that China’s Olympic team enjoy a special wine made from local vipers. Strangely enough, these Bama villagers seem to epitomise a familiar saying: “Contentment is wanting what we have.”

Now that we have briefly dealt with Asia’s booming economy, let us now try to see how we can do theology with the economy and cultural resources of Asia.

## 2. Doing Theology with Asia’s economy

In a strange way, doing theology with Asia’s booming economy is likened to the experiences of the Early Church when it began as a ‘sect’ within Judaism, so to speak, and then eventually became the religion of the Roman Empire. From rags to riches, figuratively speaking. From extremely limited resources to almost unlimited resources.

It should not come as a surprise to those who know that almost all Asian churches started off with the working class and/or ‘untouchables’, depending on the region of Asia one is thinking of. Generally speaking, in China, for example, the early converts were mostly the coolies. In India, conversions took place with the Dalits. In Singapore, the rickshaw pullers, trishaw riders, and road-sweepers were the pillars of the church. Now, the descendants of these working class people have achieved some measure of material success, flaunting a Rolex King (oh! how Indians, Indonesians, and Chinese love gold), Mercedes, and golf club memberships. From coolies to towkays, a Chinese word to describe the rich people.<sup>3</sup>

A coolie turned towkay, logically speaking, should know how to treat people nicely. After all, the coolie days were full of long hours of back-breaking work. A person who has gone through such an ordeal should be able to empathise with people who have to slog all day long and all night long. But we know better, don’t we?

Under three things the earth trembles;  
 under four it cannot bear up:  
 a slave when he becomes king,  
 and a fool when he is filled with food;  
 an unloved woman when she gets a husband,  
 and a maid when she succeeds her mistress. Proverbs 30:21-13

The slave turned king should logically know how to treat his subjects well. The maid turned mistress should instinctively know how to treat the servants kindly. Not necessarily so.

Mobile phones, McDonalds and middle-class revolution signifies the arrival of The New Rich in Asia. Coolies are now affluent enough to frequent expensive country clubs. The march from kitchen to keyboard sees nicely made-up women in designer clothes cooking up new wealth.

Practitioners of theology are challenged to seize a historical occasion to do theology with the new Asians and not just the New rich in Asia. That is to say, after many, many monsoons Asia is beginning to emerge as a continent making inroads in the world of commerce. In the process, there are the New Rich as well as many others who are not that rich. So, let us very briefly silhouette the features of The New Asians. Who are they?<sup>4</sup>

The frustrated commuters in Bangkok, Manila, and Jakarta symbolise some of these new Asians. White-coated Malaysian or Taiwanese computer programmers and hoards of diners at McDonalds with their mobile phones paint a picture of the new Asians. The former frugal Asians seem to have turned overnight into rich and some not so rich consumers who buy and buy and buy as if there is no tomorrow. Even Asian teenagers are not spared the temptation of outrageous consumerism. A recent local report harps on "Teens give in to 'buy, buy, buy' temptations." "I like to spend and I can't do anything about it. It's like a voice in my head telling me 'you must buy ... you must buy'." (Catherine Yeo, 16) Another teenager, Goh Kiah Ling, 15, said: "When my parents complain, I just keep quiet. Things are much more expensive now so you can't help but to spend money." Most teenagers admit that they spend on things they do not really need.

Another image of the new Asians speaks of them as the economic dynamists of the 21st century who can revitalise the world economy and who are the antidote to the march of welfarism, the directionless modern youth, the disintegration of society and its values, the escalating costs of labour, the power unions who are perceived to serve the union leaders more than the ordinary union members, and special interest groups.

These new Asians are seen to champion millennia-old cultural wealth, meritocracy, the rights of citizenship and private property. Many of them are not that rich, but they want nothing of the previous poverty which used to haunt them.

After years of indoctrination by subtle and not so subtle hidden persuaders from the West on western notions of beauty (fair complexion is superior to dark complexion, round eyes are more beautiful than slit-shaped eyes, big boobs are more sexy than small ones), the new Asians are beginning to assert their notion of beauty. Asian beauties need not ape their western counterparts. In a population advertisement, one sadly sees how much western influence has affected the thinking of Asians, not necessarily for the better. I refer to the advertisement which sings the glory of hairlessness in parts of the human body. I quote:

True feminine loveliness doesn't allow for unwanted facial or body hair. A dark 'shadow' above the upper lip can devastate an otherwise perfect complexion. Even a hint of under-arm hair can absolutely destroy the look of refinement. And hairs showing on a woman's legs are a veritable no-no in any situation.

Like most Asians, I am not particularly hairy. So, one may find it difficult to understand why I should take great exception to the 'Fresh Clean Hair-Free Elegance' stance. Surely, such a stance will flatter Asians who are not particularly known to have real hairy legs like westerners, generally speaking.

The reason for my objection is simple. Once again, I see a western perspective of beauty being imposed on Asians. Are hairy legs automatically ugly? Who says hairy legs are ugly in the first place? Last but not least, many Asians eventually and unconsciously accept such a concept of beauty due to indoctrination (brain-washing?) brought about by such advertisements, to the point that they may agree for no good reasons, to boot.

In this new era, how do we do theology?

To begin with, we must grapple with the fact that these new Asians have a sense of pride and dignity that was not that pronounced previously. 'Beggars are no choosers' was what we used to hear quite often from our colonial masters. Now that the new Asians choose not to beg but to buy (and they have the means to do so), our approach must take into account a change in mindset and financial security. Of course, in terms of sharing the Gospel with them it matters not a bit if the people we approach are rich or poor. My point is simple: we must know the people we approach.

For the first time many Asians feel proud to be Asians. The way we approach these people will affect their reaction to our approach. A condescending approach will put them off, eg, a 'rice Christian' approach will surely put them off. This does not mean that there are no poor Asians around. Far from that. What is emphasised here is that as far as these new rich are concerned we need a fresh approach. There are several components in this new approach.<sup>5</sup>

**2.1.** With this new sense of pride in things/values Asian, it has become unacceptable to have an uncritical attitude towards things/values western. Heretofore, in some circles in Asia there were/are people who accepted lock, stock, and barrel all things/values western. In their eyes, there was nothing wrong or undesirable in these ideas/actions western. After all, are not all these ideas/actions underpinned by Christian influences?

**2.2.** Discerning Asian Christians have noticed that the western penchant on individualism is not necessarily biblical in origin. Actually, this western stance is more western philosophy than biblical teaching. Kant and Heidegger can be taken as contemporary western philosophers whose teaching on individualism has influenced much of western thinking.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast, the Asian view on individuals hinges on interpersonal relationships. People are always regarded as people-in-relation to others. This explains partially

why the family holds such an important part in our psyche. The community is important. Individuals just do not demand freedom without any constraint. Freedom is always viewed as freedom in relation to and with others.

Actually, the Biblical teaching on people is more akin to the Asian stance rather than to the raw emphasis on individuals. Adam is always regarded in connection with Ben-Adam. If there is Adam, there is also Ben-Adam.

### **3. Doing theology with cultural resources in Asia**

As you can see, there are overlapping areas when it comes to doing theology with Asia's booming economy and cultural resources in Asia, eg, the new wealth commands some respect which was previously absent. The new wealth also raises questions like "how are Asia's engines of growth driven by cultural factors? Are there certain cultural traits like a high rate of saving which contribute to and bring about the new wealth?" So a new ball game has come into being.

**3. 1.** The first challenge to emerge is what can "doing theology with cultural resources in Asia" do to help the new urban poor in Asia.<sup>7</sup>

Hoads of people are over-crowding Asian cities at an alarming rate. The rural poor have decided that the Asian cities are the places to get rich. By bus or train or ox-cart or by foot they have made their way to Asian cities' glittering lights like moths are attracted to lights.

Housing is not easy to come by in Asia's cities. Neither is it cheap. So, it is not unusual to see the new urban poor crowding into crammed cubicles that they call their new homes.

Their presence poses a direct challenge to Asian cultures and practitioners of theology. What is there in Asian cultures that can ameliorate their crammed life-style? What can doers of theology do to cushion the cruel blows of life's harsh realities?

Generally speaking, Asian cultures see a natural, inevitable correlation between people's conduct and the general well-being of the community. "If we don't do our share and act responsibly, it will hurt society. If the society collapses, we won't survive either." This organic relationship between the individual and the community is not a weakness. Neither is the concern about the collective as over against ourselves due to an undeveloped sense of self that cannot stand alone or be autonomous.

'Harmony' or *wa* in Japanese comes about upon the achievement of individual peace of mind. In the process, it does not mean sacrificing the self for the institution or community. Embracing both individuals and their group, this conception of harmony is driven by family values.

The family plays an essential role in most Asian societies. Hence, many Asian countries call for family values to be maintained. It is not that Asians are less individualistic or egotistical than Westerners. Asians assume a priori the equilibrium between individuals and the larger community. We live in a social context.

Asian theological educators have this cultural backdrop in tandem with the Gospel's imperative to take care of others (Matthew 25:34-46). As such, there should be sufficient grace and gumption to handle the increasingly difficult problem of the urban poor.

**3.2.** "Environment degradation and poverty are strongly intertwined, resulting in a vicious cycle in which poverty causes environmental stress that, in turn, perpetuates poverty," claimed the United Nations Environment Programme in a book published to mark Earth Day today.<sup>8</sup>

It is a well known fact that Asian cultures treat nature kindly. Harmony between people and nature has always been Asia's strong point. I cite an example or two.

A delicacy in Japan is a small fish that is supposed to be good for one's health. So, it is in great demand in early spring. But then, middle of spring it is forbidden to catch such fish, to ensure the species have a chance to survive.

The Malays in SE Asia use every part of the coconut tree, to avoid waste. The coconuts give refreshing coconut water, copra, coconut oil. The husks are used to produce broom-sticks or are used as fuel. The leaves are used for many purposes. The trunks are used as pillars to support a house. There is a symbiotic networking between trees and people.

The Chinese teach their young almost literally from the cradle that people and nature must harmonise with each other.

Asian theological educators have this type of cultural imbibing and the biblical teaching to till the land and keep it (Genesis 2:15). Surely, this is a jump-start in our efforts to arrest the damage that so many of us are doing to our environment. Ecology is surely a theological issue that commands priority.

**3.3.** Much has been said and done on women issues and concerns. So, I would just very briefly touch on it.

Cultures in Asia are generally very guilty of downgrading and degrading women, so much so that all over Asia there are proverbs unthinkingly and cruelly repeated daily which perpetuate the oppression of women.<sup>9</sup>

Women's hearts are the most poisonous thing in the universe.

No talents are virtuous for women.

If there are too many women in the house, it is doomed.

Once you bring in a wife, you are in for trouble.

The wisdom of women is (only) in front of a stove.

One can afford to lose a wife but not a bullock.

Sad to say, the Bible comes short of treating women and men equally. Being basically patriarchal in authorship, it is not a surprise that it discriminates against women.

Asian theological educators have much homework to do to bring about equality and justice so that an authentic human community of women, men, and children will emerge. This is not an easy task as basically, both our Asian cultures and the



Bible are so patriarchal in emphasis.<sup>10</sup>

**3.4.** There is always a tendency among people of all faiths and races to devalue others. This is aggravated by the penchant to look inwards towards ourselves. The classical term *incurvatus in se* is indeed very applicable to our situation. Precisely because we are so curved into ourselves we turn a blind eye to others. In the process, others are forgotten, despised, or persecuted — devalued in short. Hence, the challenge to one and all to uphold the dignity of all people is one not to be conveniently circumvented.

One common tendency to de-value people is seen in the way almost all over the world women are being de-humanised, especially in the workforce.

Women in the workforce contribute greatly to our global economy, but many do so at grave disadvantages to themselves. This datum has been documented by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) which is the world's largest trade union international representing 127 million workers in 194 affiliated organisations in 136 countries and territories. Thirty percent of its members are women.

Women comprise nearly half of the world's workforce (45% of women aged 15 to 64 are working or are seeking work). Sad to say, they face unfavourable working conditions.

'Whether it is the growing body of women in Africa who now sell soap in markets because their jobs as teachers were axed, women from Eastern Europe selling themselves on the streets of Western Europe, women forced to take contraceptive pills in factories of the free trade zones in Latin America, or trained chemists from the Philippines working as servants in Hong Kong, the story is the same,' said ICFTU.

In Europe, a recent survey showed that 59% of women workers provided half or more of their family income. In France and Germany, more than one woman worker in three bring in the total family income. In spite of all this, women find themselves discriminated in terms of salary, job prospects, and promotion opportunities. In the European Union, 85% of part time jobs are held by women. In countries like the United Kingdom, women part time workers only earn 75% of equivalent full time workers.

Recently, many educated women from Russia, Hungary, and Poland whose job opportunities disappeared in the new free market economies, were tricked into prostitution in Western Europe. They were promised well-paying jobs in offices or restaurants, but ended up working in peep shows. Filipino women were tricked into working as prostitutes in Japan after having been promised that they would be well paid as artists.<sup>11</sup> This brings me to my next point.

In Asia, things are no better, as many may have guessed. Export processing zones are major growth areas in Asia. Women who make up 80% of the workforce in these places form a large pool of cheap labour.

So, we see a serious trend which, if not put to an immediate halt, will body

forth in devastating consequences.

The feminisation of poverty de-values both women, men, and children.<sup>12</sup>

Doers of theology in Asia (and elsewhere in the world, if I may be allowed to say), need to come together to work on this growing evil. No one can subscribe to the de-valuing of women who hold up half the sky.

## Notes

1. The ATESEA Occasional Papers have deliberately endeavoured to publish monographs aimed at relating the Gospel to Asian givens. Listed below are several titles on this concern.

a. *Doing Theology with People's Movements in Asia*

b. *Doing Theology with Cultures of Asia*

c. *Doing Theology with People's Symbols & Images*

d. *Doing Theology with the Festivals & Customs of Asia*

2. Several books are useful in enabling us better to understand the rapid changes taking place in Asia. I mention two of them.

Gerald Tan, *ASEAN Economic Development and Cooperation*, Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1996

Tommy T B Koh, *The United States and East Asia: Conflict and Cooperation*, Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1995

I acknowledge my debt to *Asia Magazine* for data cited. As indicated by *Asia Magazine* itself, all the figures quoted are in US dollars.

3. It may surprise many China-watchers to see the new rich Chinese flaunting foreign currencies in night clubs, hotels, and golf clubs in China. Such 'from coolies to towkays' can also be easily seen patronising 5-star hotels in Hong Kong.

The same can also be said of the new rich Malays in Malaysia, the new rich in Indonesia, the new rich in Vietnam, and the new rich in Cambodia.

4. Richard Robison & David S G Goodman, (eds), *The New Rich in Asia*, London & New York: Routledge, 1996

The above book usefully paints an objective picture of the new rich in Asia.

5. Mahathir Mohamad & Shintaro Ishihara, *The Voice of Asia: Two Leaders Discuss The Coming Century*, Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd, 1995

The above book gives useful descriptions of ways and means many Asians analyse and understand what is taking place in Asia.

6. As far back as in 1979 I had endeavoured to call attention to the danger of understanding people merely as individuals. 'No man is an island' perspective of society got short-changed when westerners over-emphasised individual rights over against and to the detriment of the community's well-being. Yeow Choo Lak, *Minister As Theological Educator*, Singapore: TTC, 1979, re-printed in 1982: 34-45.

7. The world is moving to the city. In the 1940s, at least 70% of the population in China was agrarian. It will not be too long before at least 70% of the population in China is urbanised. For more details, see ATESEA Occasional Papers, No.7 *Challenges and Opportunities in*

*Theological Education in Asia*, Singapore: ATESEA, 1988: 14-17.

8. It seems very strange that westerners who have been exploiting natural resources in Asia for centuries should now express concern at the ways the natural resources in Asia are being exploited. It was fine when they were the exploiters, apparently.

9. It is indeed very tragic that proverbs ridiculing women and their status are being taught to children in Asia. For samples of such damaging proverbs, see Yeow Choo Lak, *Sunny Island*, Singapore: ATESEA, 1990: 281-284.

Unfortunately and generally speaking, Asian cultures are anti-women. To aggravate matters, not a few Asians turn to the Bible to support their cultural bias against women. See following note for details.

10. Genesis 1:27 speaks of 'male and female he created them,' but in Genesis 2:21-22 we read '... and while he slept took one of his ribs... and the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man he made into woman....'

With this type of great patriarchal bias, it should not come across as a surprise to find out that the Bible blames the woman for the Fall. The serpent (more subtle than any other wild creature that the Lord God had made, Genesis 3:1) knew who was the 'weaker' person to seduce, so Eve was the one to be tempted. She fell for it.

In the course of the Jewish history, the patriarchal bias bloomed into and was in turn sustained by cultural norms. In the process, very unfortunately and tragically, women got devalued - at least by half!

For example: '... If a woman conceives, and bears a MALE child, then she shall be unclean SEVEN days... Then she shall continue for THIRTY-THREE days in the blood of her purifying...

'...But if she bears a FEMALE child, then she shall be unclean TWO WEEKS... she shall continue in the blood of her purifying for SIXTY-SIX days.' Leviticus 12:1-5

Spiritual giants like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel command the respect of many, but sadly they are mere midgets (please pardon 'violent' language here) when it comes to upholding an authentic human community of women, men, and children. Just look at their attitude towards women.

Brought up in this type of cultural milieu, it surprises no one that St Paul could write:

A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. If the husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the lord. 1 Corinthians 7:39 There is nothing the other way round, ie, a husband is to bound to his wife as long as she lives.

Let a woman learn in silence with submissiveness. 1 Timothy 2:11 At least, Paul allowed women access to some education, though they have to learn in silence. Authority? Yes, what about teaching and authority?

I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent. 1 Timothy 2:12 No wonder women have been heard to say: we don't want to go to heaven if Paul is there!

Peter is no better: Likewise you wives, be submissive to your husbands. 1 Peter 3:1 He is another authority on women's clothes and fashions. Let not yours be the outward adorning with braiding of hair, decoration of gold, and wearing of robes. 1 Peter 3:3 To boot, a woman is of the weaker sex. 1 Peter 3:7

To their credit many Christian women have continued to put up with this litany of woes and have not done a Marcion on the Bible. I would have expected many of them to vote with their feet and walk out of church, don't you think so?

11. I need to add that exploitation of people is not confined to women. Men, too, are often the victims.

Several years ago, I received a phone call from Manila from a woman who told me that her husband knew me since he was my fellow student in California. On that basis, she was phoning me to ask for my help.

Apparently, her brother was the band-master of a singing group performing in Kuala Lumpur. According to her, her brother's band members were not paid their salary. Since their visa to stay on in Kuala Lumpur was expiring, their agent had sent them to Singapore to perform in Singapore for a while. Hence, since I was in Singapore I was asked to give a helping hand.

On the day of the band's departure from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur, the said woman phoned me to warn the band-members not to consult the lawyer in the Philippines Embassy in charge of Filipino workers' welfare in Kuala Lumpur since she was the one who was in cahoots with agents in Kuala Lumpur exploiting Filipinos working in Kuala Lumpur. Very unfortunately, by the time I got the message the band-members had already left by bus to Kuala Lumpur.

If adults are so blatantly exploited, one can imagine how vulnerable children are to such evil exploitation. This is another story into which others will look.

12. It is of no credit to anyone that feminisation of poverty continues unabated in spite of efforts to alert people to such a tragic trend. See Yeow Choo Lak, *Time for action: Theological Education for Asia Today*, Singapore: ATESEA, 1988: 6-7.

The feminisation of poverty does not stop at mid-stream of lift, so to speak. It continues into old age.

Early this month (June 1, 1996) Singapore became the first country in the world to practise the Maintenance of Parents Act. Who would have expected that in this Asian country, not one, not five, but eleven elderly people turned up to approach the tribunal set up to administer the Act for redress? What is even more disturbing than the double digit is the fact that there were elderly women who turned up at the queue.

I know that in many Asian countries we practise what is popularly known as the *eng-kai* allowance. Children who start working after they have left school would normally give a portion of their salary to their parents. It is so widely practised that it is known as *eng-kai*. No questions asked. Only beasts do not do that, and saying that is insulting the beasts.

It is difficult to translate the word *eng-kai*. The *eng-kai* allowance is compulsory but without the element of compulsion because filial piety is present. It is necessary but necessity is absent because love is present.

'You didn't ask me to be born' so sang Miss Saigon. Her son also could have affirmed 'I didn't ask you to give birth to me.' It is in this matrix that the *eng-kai* allowance is given by children to their parents. In the seriousness of our quieter moments, we scream in protest when we see eleven elderly people suing their children for basic maintenance. What has gone so wrong in our society brought up on fables of the 24 acts of filial piety?

In our community where losing face publicly is tantamount to complete humiliation, something very, very desperate must have driven these eleven souls to publicise their dilemma. 'Between starvation and shame, there is little advantage in choosing to die rather than wash dirty

family linen in public,' so wrote a columnist of discernment. So, have we been living in a fool's paradise believing that Asian family values have served as bulwark against the erosion of all that is precious to us?

To see elderly women turning up at the tribunal using a *tongkat* (walking stick) or in a wheelchair is the last straw that broke the camel's back. And then, there is another warning staring at us. Things do not bode well for us if the recent report from Tokyo was accurate.

A survey of high school students in Japan, China, and the American made by the Japan Youth Research Institute found only 16% of Japanese students will take care of their aged parents, whatever it takes. In contrast, 66% of the Chinese and 46% of the American students surveyed affirmed they would.

The survey is no cast-iron proof that the Japanese students are less filial than the Chinese or the American students. Nonetheless, the survey raises sand.

It is a well-known fact that women live longer than men. Among other things, the feminisation of poverty will hit women at a time when they are most vulnerable.

'Evil prospers when righteous people keep silent'. This is one reason why we need embarrassingly to scream from the rooftop before it is too late.