



Newsletter – May 2010

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Irrational Fears.

In the early 2000s (naughties) I led a team of engineers to DeYang 德阳- a mid-sized industrial town in Si Chuan Province, China. We met the designers and engineers of a large engineering conglomerate, and worked together on a project. As usual we brought gifts and after 2 days and many hours of clarification and coordinating meetings, before we left, they reciprocated with a good dinner and gifts.

We were presented with replicas of bronze figurines, copies of that which were recently excavated from a recently discovered archeological site call “San Xing Dui” 三星堆 (Three Star Heap/barrow). The discoveries unearthed included some very fine artistic bronze age sculptures and artifacts, carbon dated back to 12th-11th centuries B.C. The Chinese in that region of this vast country was very proud of this latest archeological site. It was considered to be equal in importance, to the Terra-cotta warriors of Xian. When we brought these sculptures back to Singapore in their expensive brocaded boxes no one wanted them, not my boss, not for our office “trophy cupboard”, nor would any of the staff wanted to take them home. The figurines, though looking nothing worse than a slightly distorted Academy Award Oscar, did not look pleasant to our Singaporean eyes.

Similarly, in Singapore, the Church of the Holy Cross in Clementi had to take down the central statue of Christ on the cross, and replace it with another which looks.... well, less tortured. The parishioners just did not like the original one and when a new priest with similar cultural prejudices was appointed to the parish, the replacement took place, discreetly.

Zhong Kui is a Chinese legendary character whose portrait many scholars and rich Chinese families would hang near the entrances of their front doors. He was reputed to be so ugly and fierce looking that on his death, he was designated a minor god to protect householders from petty ghosts. That his countenance was supposed to be able to scare away ghosts and evil spirits have challenged generations of artists to let their imaginations run wild to depict him as ugly as possible. Many western educated Singaporean Chinese look on these depictions as abominations and will never hang one of these anywhere in their homes, let alone near their front doors.



At a prominent spot, near the staircase in my house, I have a figurine, made of modeling clay, of Jesus emerging out of a Cross with the words “Christ is Risen”. I molded it myself and sprayed the whole thing in antique bronze paint, except for a loincloth which I made from the same white modeling clay and left it unpainted. Christian friends love it, but a non-Christian relative who saw it

was rather perturbed. Regardless, it remains in pride of place in my house. I also had a number of large Chinese calligraphy works hanging on the walls of my study, and in particular, a large paper-cut of a red-faced Kwan Yi 关羽 with the character “Xin” 信– meaning, “worthy of trust”. If I were to tell an “Ang Mo” that the word is Xin he would hear it as “sin” and think it blasphemous.

I am telling all these life anecdotes to repudiate some superstitions currently circulating among Catholics that strange looking icons or art objects a family may have around the house, are usually repositories of evil spirits. They were exhorted to “throw them away”.

It is good to clean house once in a while, especially to clear the house of meaningless clutter, acquired through impulsive purchases or unsolicited gifts of cheap bad art, made for tourists. It is good to throw out petty possessions that would distract you from loving God and your neighbors. However, to throw out things due to an unreasoned superstitious fear, mistaking inanimate objects as the root causes of one’s problems is only mindlessly barking up the wrong tree.

PL was an old friend, an ex-colleague. In the mid 80s, when economic times were bad. PL’s engineering business was not doing well. He wanted me to join him in the business, by putting in some capital and contributing my market and business knowhow. After a pleasant lunch we went to his office/and workshop. I have been there before, and had helped him, ex-gratia, on specific business matters. Just as we were going up the stairs to his office he pointed out to a small altar he had there, saying... “I had this altar behind there” pointing vaguely to a spot inside the workshop, “I was losing money. Recently I moved it out, here in front, and now my business is a lot better”. There and then I decided that I will not partner him in business. I said to myself, “this guy is totally clueless why he was losing money and now clueless why he is making money”. I politely declined his offer to participate in his business.

I have also heard about this man who was having a lot of problems at work and at home. After listening to a preacher going on about how “the dragon is the symbol of the devil”, and swayed by the shrill, persistent hectoring, he went home and threw away all the “dragon” urn flower pots and plants in his garden. These clay/porcelain urns were used to store and import “century eggs” from China, and in Singapore, had, for many decades been recycled into a 2nd life use as large flower pots.

Do you think all his problems went away?

In the Chinese cultural tradition, the dragon ranked as the top animal. The dragons were attributed with the power to regulate water, rain, the sea. Water was the life blood for an agricultural society. The dragon was, (still is) regarded as benevolent and revered. The emperor ruled from the dragon throne, dressed in dragon robes, was the son of heaven, and respected as long as he is benevolent to his people. When the son of heaven loses the heavenly mandate to rule, dragon he might be, he could/should be deposed, righteously.

It was in Europe during the medieval times that the dragon was maligned to be a symbol of the devil. Even then medieval artists portrayed this legendary creature as a short-bodied, kangaroo like animal with scales but with a long neck, wings, and, spouting fire. In looks it is quite a different creature from the long, writhing, serpentine, Chinese dragon. Irrationally, those who claim that the dragon is a symbol of the devil, and advocated destruction of all artifacts with the image of a Chinese dragon never mentioned the “Quilin” another similar, fierce looking/ugly 4-legged mythical animal. They

were similarly silent and un-opinionated about the Komodo dragons, dinosaurs, and crocodiles. They never advocated the destruction of books, or artifacts depicting these legendary and real creatures.

For a clear unsentimental factual account of the “dragon” I would recommend readers to go to Wikipedia, and look up “Dragon- legendary creatures.”

Psychiatrist in mental health hospitals will be able tell you many cases of patients who needed medical help, but was denied it by family members, who superstitiously believed that the mental illness was the result of magic spells, or hexes, cast on the patient. While the family made their fruitless rounds consulting “charlatans” by different names in different cultures, the patient’ condition deteriorated, suffered unnecessarily and sometimes irremediably.

Once, when I was a child and visiting my maternal grand-parents home in Choon Guan Street, on a Chinese seventh month festival, the family was making offerings to the ghosts, setting offering tables first at the back door, and then at front of the house. A maid who was indentured to the family claimed that she saw a small group of well-dressed people, men, women and children, walked past, down the back lane when she was lighting up incense. After she placed the incense sticks into the urn, she looked up and they were gone. Her story caused a flurry of speculations, and palpable fear in the family.

As a curious kid I pestered my mother over this. I remembered what my mother told me that day. “If your “Li Yun” (利运 – luck/fortune) is high you will not see such things. Her (the maid’s) *li yun* is low, so she saw them”. She taught me, and I grew up believing that a good education and vitality of character lift a person’s “li yun”, and make him rise above these superstitions.

When I became a Christian, I quickly learned that being a child of God I must wonder, learn, and try to understand the universe He created, and to participate in making “His Kingdom come” ie. make the world a better place for all. I grew to be confident in His love, and with His blessing daily I need nothing else. Nothing, bar none, can touch me.

You are a Christian. Believe in the boundless Love of God.

Ask for, and revel in His blessings.

a personal view....by mark

Reflections:

In the CFSM, parents and members are taught the 3-step method - See, Judge, Act, to arrive at a Christian response to all of life’s situations.

Step 1, See = Observe, eyes and minds open, be sensitized, always conscious, always seek out the facts, clarify, look beyond the surface, seek reality, and understand the background, the causes.

Step 2. Judge = Review it. Test it. Is it just? Is it in accord with the teachings of Christ? Does it, will it bring about a better world for all?