

James H. Kroeger, with Eugene F. Thalman and Jason K. Dy, *Once Upon a Time in Asia: Stories of Harmony and Peace* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006; reprinted, Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Publications & Jesuit Communications, 2006), paperback, x pp. + 165 pp., ISBN: 971-0305-41-4, US\$ 15.00.

*Once Upon a Time in Asia* is an anthology of stories from different parts of Asia. As the subtitle of the book puts it, these stories are compiled based on the themes of “harmony and peace.” The table of contents indicates the themes of stories. “In the Beginning” (1-11) are creation myths from different countries in Asia. “Living in Asia” (13-35) talks about the various stories of people from those who dream of utopia and blissful life to those who are marginalized and sick of AIDS virus. There is also a good collection of tales on “The Importance of Family” (37-49) which are about the kinship among Chinese people as well as Bangladeshis, Filipinos and Cambodians, kids and adults alike. The anecdotes on the theme “Caring for One Another in Community” (51-70) represent the inhabitants of Asia in terms of community life, generous hospitality, solid camaraderie and shared aims. The collection on why “Culture Matters” (73-92) reflects on the richness of the sundry way of life and unique customs of the Asian population. An interesting anthology of “Wisdom from the Orient” (95-125) insightfully instructs about everyday life and honorable manner where the journey of life is contemplated by Asian sages. There is a subject on a monotheistic view of God: “One God—Many Faith Traditions” (127-137) that confronts the pluralistic religious traditions of the natives of Asia. “Seeds of God in Asian Soil” (139-161) are accounts considered that the assurance inside a person gives birth to external manifestations of religious faith.

The choices of stories that were included in the collection are wide. They have morals and insights that are heuristic. The primary benefit to the reader of this volume is an understanding of how stories shape the lives of the people in Asia. These narratives invite the reader to be creative in deriving meanings and appropriating lessons they carry for daily life. One of the interesting features of the book is the variety of ethnic sources of the different stories. The “List of Stories” or the functional index at the end of this volume is very helpful because the list provides not only the alphabetical arrangement of the titles of the stories brought together with their page locations but also the country of their origin is indicated inside parenthesis. A quick browse of the list reveals a variety. The huge Chinese heritage is well represented. The Hindus in India and Nepal have stories to contribute. Buddhist Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam and Burma have their rich tradition retold anecdotally. The Christian Philippines, Muslim Indonesia, Turkey and Bangladesh, as well as Japan and Korea have ancient tales about what is divine and human. Even little East Timor

and Israel's Hebrew Proverbs, the Mongolia of Genghis Khan, multi-racial and comparative religions in Malaysia and the hospitality of the natives of Marshall Islands contributed to enrich the purpose of the volume.

This kind of book does not only give a perspective of Asian ways of thinking through the rich resources of a diverse group of people coming from different ancient ethnicities, world religions and wide traditions but also brings with it the contemplative mind and harmonious spirit of Asians. People in this part of the world are generally contextual in logic as well as relationship oriented in accomplishing the task on hand. The types of material gathered in this compilation were from word of mouth traditions and literary sources. They include wise sayings and ancient literature. They are also in mythological, legendary, poetic and fictional forms. True experiences and devout prayers were also chronicled beautifully and arranged to fit into appropriate themes. It has been said that nobody can criticize stories because they are not meant to claim or assert facts of history or sociology. Rather, stories instruct and provide the necessary meditation about relationships in life and everyday human existence. (ix)

The creation accounts included in the books are most interesting. The theme of these creation accounts includes the explanation of the myths on why things in the world follow patterns of existence. The Samal creation myth (3-5) explains the reason why Nur Muhammad, who came from Allah's light, became a man that was the one who animated Adam, who was made by God using soil and grinded rice. God promised Nur Muhammad that if he would get inside Adam, He would meet him five times everyday during prayer. This folk story explains the reason why Muslims pray five times a day. The Indian folklore (6) about creation features the reason why the peacock flutters its wings when the rain and sunshine are together. It is because Prince Peacock and Princess Sun used to be married but Peacock decided to go down to earth to be with a golden lady which was only a mustard field. When Peacock tried to fly back to his wife Sun, he could not fly back, and thus peacocks flap their wings when there is both rain and sunshine at the same time. The Burmese tale about the reason why the cock crows three times in the morning is due to the myth that when the sun and the moon were gone, the creatures asked the cocks to crow three times until they come out again. (7-8). A Filipino story explains why mosquitoes buzz around the ear hole. It is because mosquitoes are still looking for the King Crab who hid inside a hole (9-10). And the final creation story from East Timor explains the terrain of the country because a crocodile fulfilled his promise to a boy that when he dies he will turn into a beautiful island. (11)

In the section "Culture Matters" there is a Christian story from Taiwan where the Chinese devotion to the dead family members are

important. When Tio Bi Le became a Catholic she stated: “My father isn’t opposed [to my new faith] but my mother says I will be a hungry ghost after I die because no one will put out food for me. But I told my mother, ‘Don’t worry, I listened to the Catholic teaching very carefully, and for Christians there is an everlasting banquet after death. I won’t be a hungry ghost.’” (74) The Islamic story “Between Friends” is one of the most insightful stories. The story talks about three men in a village who all got sick. Abdul was a blacksmith, dishonest and drunk. Ali was a devout farmer, God-fearing, and a good person. Karim was the village imam who lived a holy life. After three days Abdul got healed. Then, in three months time Ali was also healed. However, Karim even after years of prayers died as a leper. Ali asked God, “Why Allah?” God’s voice spoke to Ali and told him that he healed the drunk Abdul after his prayers for three days because that is the only level of his faith, good enough for three days. God continued telling Ali that he healed him after his prayers for three months because beyond three months he would have no longer faith. But the imam whose faith is complete does not need healing to trust Allah. Whether Karim would be healed or not, he knows the heart of God and his faith grows no matter what happens to him. (159-161)

The above stories I summarized are simple representatives of the meaningful narratives gathered in this volume. This book is for general readership. Christians and people from other religious traditions would identify themselves in the moral of the stories in the book. Christianity is well represented and interreligious as well as intertextuality among the different religious texts may be perceived as implied in the pages of this anthology. Asian Pentecostals will benefit from these Asian stories because they tell us Asians who we are, the way we think and the rich heritage we have for reflection and appropriation of our faith. Until we reflect seriously the shape of our Asian mindset we would not really contextualize and appropriate Pentecostalism as part of our daily existence in our part of the world.

R. G. dela Cruz