

AN INTERVIEW WITH SR. JOANNA CHAN

translated by Pandora Khor

During this past September the Repertory Theatre of Hong Kong presented the Empress Dowager, a three act historical drama based on the life of Ci Xi, the Western Empress, who ruled China from behind the throne for the last four decades of the Qing Dynasty. All ten performances were sold out and the play was received with much praise from all sectors of the community. Woven into the story line is the theme of confrontation, China's confrontation with the West, as China sought to maintain her national and cultural integrity as well as her internal unity during the tumultuous closing decades of the last century.

The director and playwright of the Empress Dowager is Sister Joanna Chan. Born and raised in Hong Kong, she is now a Maryknoll Sister serving as Co-ordinator of the Maryknoll History Project as well as continuing her work in Transfiguration Church, Chinatown, New York, where she is in charge of youth services. Sister is a graduate of Tuk Ching Girls Middle School, Chung Chi College of Chinese University and has received her MA, M.Ed and D.Ed in communications from Columbia University in New York. She is also the founder of The Four Seas Players of Chinatown, which is the largest Chinese community theatre company in the United States. Sister returned to Hong Kong in response to an invitation by the Urban Council to present her play, adapted from The Works of Kao Yang, and was kind enough to grant us an interview.



Sr. Joanna Chan

TRIPOD: Sister Joanna, how do you see your work in dramatic arts relating to your life as a religious?

SISTER JOANNA: Both are people centered. I have prayed over this, especially before setting off for Hong Kong this time. I am not concerned with monetary gain or possible success but rather with getting in touch with people in this way, with the hope that we might grow together in wisdom and mutual love. Personally, I make a distinction between a religious person and a pious person. I hope I am a religious person in the sense of a person who reflects on things and strives actively to promote a relation between God and others, God and self. I also think that all Christians, irrespective of profession or vocation must make a passage through darkness before he or she can be truly empathetic with those who walk in darkness...is not this the doctrine of the Word made flesh, that Christ should walk our path first so as to give us courage to move towards the light? For these reasons, I have never felt any contradiction between my life as a religious and my work with people in the field of drama. If one brings a respect for the work that one does, enjoys working with others and strives to be thoughtful of the needs of others, then, drama can have just as much meaning as other forms of service.

TRIPOD: In the Empress Dowager, what message did you hope to communicate beyond the actual story?

SISTER JOANNA: Having lived overseas for so many years, I, as well as my compatriots, have often asked the question: How much of our Chinese heritage are we still in possession of...what identity do we now have as Chinese? This question is one I sought to find a response to in writing the play. The Empress Dowager is for me more than just the story of a simple Manchu girl who rose to great power in the Imperial Court. It is the story of a nation, proud and self-sufficient, searching for a place in the modern world. This journey continues to the present day. It is a struggle full of contradictions, triumphs and humiliations, indignation mixed with simple curiosity. Most of all, it is the story of every Chinese who searches to find his identity in this modern world.

TRIPOD: What are your impressions of Hong Kong on your return this time?

SISTER JOANNA: Well this is my third trip home after my assignment to the States. I find that Hong Kong is developing rapidly in many

ways, not only materially but in her vision and outlook. As a Hong Kongite, this makes me very proud of her. While the transformation of Hong Kong from a refugee center in the 50's to one of the world's leading cities is something of which her people can be proud, I would also add that the progress has not been only material. I have met so many people here of great personal depth who strive earnestly after the spiritual in their daily lives. Even given the present uncertainty of the future, the question of 1997, I see from a spiritual perspective the possibilities of growth. Such growth and maturity comes only from walking a difficult path. Hong Kong has been fortunate to have had thirty years of relative stability ... something quite rare in the world today ... one has to think only of our fellow countrymen across the border. The question of 1997, however, forces us to reflect on ourselves, what do we really possess, what will tomorrow bring? Fortunately, the people of Hong Kong possess the traditional Chinese qualities of patience and diligence; they also have amazing adaptability, a quality essential for the special kind of society that is Hong Kong. I feel confident that with such qualities the people of Hong Kong will be able to meet any difficulties that may lay in store in the future.

TRIPOD: What do you think of the Church in Hong Kong?

SISTER JOANNA: The press of work has made it impossible for me to spend the kind of time I would have liked to have spent with Church leaders, but on my recent trip I have come in contact with many people who have been directly or indirectly influenced by the Church here. Many have received their education in Catholic schools and while they have not become Christians, I have found them to be people of high principles and they have won my admiration. To use an example near at hand, among the people of the Repertory Theatre, with whom I have spent nearly all of my time, there are those who are Christians and others who have received a Christian education in our schools. The amount of generous effort these people have expended in concern for each other has helped to establish a special kind of harmony and boosted the morale of the whole group. When I look at them, I am convinced that the Church is doing a great deal and fulfilling her potential here.