

At a cultural crossroads

Stephen Lo has been in the Philippines for over 20 years. His is a wealth of experience that is unfolding day after day, especially in contact with people of other religions.

BY ORESTE PALIOTTI

LO KIN SANG, OR STEPHEN, WAS THE first member of his family who embraced Christianity at the age of 12. He was born in 1943 in Kaiping, which was then a small provincial center in southeastern China. Now, Kaiping is a city with one million inhabitants. Its privileged position near the meeting of three rivers has helped it to develop into a commercial crossroads.

I met Stephen in Rome at the *Università Urbaniana's* Department of Missionary Formation, where he was invited to teach a course on traditional religions in Asia and Oceania. An expert on Shamanism, a religious phenomenon common to different cultures, he told me more about his life, starting from his youth in Hong Kong. "My dad was a bookkeeper," Stephen recalled, "but his true passion in life was reading. He spent his free moments reading Confucius, Lao Tze, and—even before being baptized—the Gospels and the letters of St. Paul. By doing this, he acquired a wide knowledge of moral teachings which he then put into practice in his life." He passed on to Stephen his passion for learning.

"In 1968," he continued, "I had the opportunity to meet Marilen Holzhauser,



GIUSEPPE D'ISTEFANO

one of Chiara Lubich's first companions, who had come from the Philippines to visit some people in Hong Kong. Until then I had not really deepened my Christian faith, nor was clear as to what the incarnation of Christ really meant for me. I thought it was enough to belong to some Catholic association and do good works. I was 25 at that time."

That simple meeting with one of the Focolare pioneers was the first decisive encounter Stephen had with persons who have made a clear-cut choice to base their lifestyle on the Gospel. "In the ideal of unity of the Focolare, I saw the chance to pursue a dream I had had in my heart for many years: to help my brothers and sisters of Confucian, Buddhist or Taoist belief learn about Christianity."

As the first Chinese *focolarino*,¹ he spent an intense decade, together with others, in building up the Focolare community in Hong Kong. Then, in December 1981, Stephen had the joy of spending some time with Chiara herself during her first trip to Asia.

While visiting the Philippines in January 1982, Chiara recognized that the little town of the Focolare for Asia, Mariapolis Pace (*Peace*) in Tagaytay, was the ideal place for a school to form Focolare members in dialogue with the great oriental religions. She was well aware that John Paul II had seen in the Philippines, with its predominantly Christian population, a spiritual source from which to draw so as to bear witness to Christ all over Asia.

The school of dialogue opened its doors in February 1983, and Bishop A. Rodrigues Da Costa, now bishop emeritus of Macao, became its president. Other bishops who are friends of the Focolare are among its professors.



Above: Mariapolis Pace (*Peace*), the Focolare little town located in Tagaytay, Philippines, overlooking Lake Tal (top). Right: Traditional wedding among the Lumad, a tribal people in Mindanao, friendly now with Stephen Lo (below left).

Since the beginning, Stephen has been entrusted with course planning and organization, together with Kres Gabijan, a Filipino focolarina. They also teach some of the courses themselves. In fact, besides his degree in natural sciences and a specialization in education, Stephen obtained a degree in oriental religions from the University of Santo Tomas in Manila, where



Paul wrote, I tried to enter this new culture without any preconceived ideas. In detaching myself, in a way, from my Chinese framework, I was free to appreciate the Filipino way of life and ... value it.

"I'm truly happy to live with people I now consider brothers and sisters. Their typical family-oriented values and their amazing hospitality towards others have really enriched me."

Our interview returned to the School of Oriental Religions. "Up until now," Stephen explained, "we have offered over 80 courses on Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Shamanism and Confucianism. The basic doctrinal aspects of every religion are deepened, while we emphasize affinities with or differences from Christianity. Another important element we encourage is the exchange of life experiences among believers of different religions.

"Every course includes seminars held in a three-to-four year span. In fact, the lessons and related question-and-answer sessions—recorded on video and translated—are repeated not only in other places in the Philippines, but also in Korea, Japan, China and Thailand."

This rather innovative and original initiative is characterized by a "dialogue of life" and tries to avoid lessons which are solely academic. This allows the courses to be accessible also to persons of all ages regardless of their cultural preparation.

And what does this experience mean to Stephen? "The charism of unity has helped me to discover much spiritual wealth outside the boundaries of Christianity. At the same time, however, I have realized even more how the most sublime ethical principles present in other cultures are present and valued in the teachings of Jesus—as St. Paul says referring to God's plan 'to sum up all things in Christ' (Eph 1:10).

"On the other hand some of those same principles could contribute to shake up in a positive way societies with ancient Christian traditions, which at times seem almost deaf to the original Gospel message. In my opinion, it is not enough to be convinced that the whole truth is already revealed in Jesus: we Christians can also benefit from other peoples' insights to re-awaken the understanding of our own faith." ■

1) Member of the small core community of the Focolare Movement.



Chiara was later conferred with an honorary doctorate in Theology, in 1997.

Stephen has been in Tagaytay, Philippines for the past 20 years, living in the midst of a people whose way of thinking, customs and beliefs are very different from his Chinese upbringing. It must not have been easy for someone like him to adapt to this new culture. "It is true," he con-

firmed, smiling. "Among other things, the Chinese have a very ancient history, while the written history of the Philippines goes back only 500 years, with the arrival of the Spaniards. When I realized that this could be a temptation for me to feel superior, and an obstacle to building relationships, I decided on a radical step. Mindful of Jesus' attitude, 'He emptied himself,' as