

INNER FREEDOM AND OUTER CONSTRAINT: REFLECTIONS IN THE ASIAN CONTEXT

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In this presentation, I would like to share about freedom and constraint in an Asian context. Both outer and inner freedom are imperative for leading a life of dignity, as the human person is holistic, needing material, spiritual, and social rights for human development. Our church's social teaching advises us that apart from the right to worship God according to one's conscience, other rights such as the right to express, to form associations, to take an active part in public life, and to make contributions to the common welfare of one's fellow citizens are basic rights and essential to the freedom of citizens. People are entitled to the legal protection of these rights and freedom.¹ In fact, freedom is constitutive of humans' moral agency.

I will start with the constraints of freedom of Asian peoples today. Asia indeed is marked by great diversity, in terms of religious, cultural, socio-economic, and social situations, which are resources of doing theology in Asia.² I will focus on East Asia, especially Hong Kong, in this presentation. Since outer constraint may lead to inside struggle which affects the inner freedom of a person, I will first delineate both outer and inner constraints through some recent events and narratives. I suggest that expanding inner freedom becomes more important when facing strong outer constraint, which creates fears and uncertainties and threatens freedom.

OUTER CONSTRAINT

In Asia, although most countries have been decolonized since the 1940s or 1950s, some places are still under authoritarian or highly suppressive rule, thus, lacking authentic freedom. People in these places are unable to enjoy personal freedom and civil liberties of various kinds. These outer constraints are imposed on people due to their religious belief, political viewpoint, ethnicity, or cultural background, leading to domination, discrimination, or suppression. As observed by some Asian scholars and pastors, there are "rising situations where freedom of expression and especially freedom of the press are being suppressed. Ethical principles, respect for just laws, and

¹ John XIII, *Pacem in Terris* (April 11, 1963), § 14, 23, 26, 27, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem.html.

² Office of Theological Concerns of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, "Methodology: Asian Christian Theology," *FABC Papers*, no. 96.

principles of subsidiarity are being manipulated and even not upheld where legitimate opposition is undermined by the use of power and corruption.”³

According to the report, *Freedom in the World 2023: Marking 50 Years in the Struggle for Democracy*,⁴ some Asian countries have overcome decades of dictatorship to establish resilient democracies, driven by prodemocracy movements, as well as small improvements in judicial independence, anticorruption efforts, and freedom of movement. However, authoritarian forces elsewhere continue to push back against domestic calls for liberty and justice. The report identified several Asian countries and places which had the worst aggregate scores, that is, the most serious violators of political rights and civil liberties, including North Korea, China (Tibet and Hong Kong included), and Myanmar. Those who dare to criticize the government are subjected to severe penalties or even the sacrifice their lives.

For example, Myanmar has been in turmoil since the military overthrew the previous elected government on February 1, 2021, and detained many top officials, including ousted civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi. The political, economic, and social freedoms that had begun to blossom in 2011, after more than fifty years of military rule, were abruptly interrupted by the military coup, which gave rise to unrest and a deep social crisis.⁵ Moving to Northeast Asia, with a lack of religious freedom and other freedoms in communist-ruled North Korea, at the end of April, some Christians were arrested on charges of promoting an underground prayer service. In similar incidents in the past, those arrested were sent to re-education labor camps. In mainland China, generally speaking, people’s civil liberties and the right to political participation are very limited. In terms of freedom of religion, more regulations on religious affairs have been implemented since 2021, with measures for the administration of religious personnel, religious education, and internet religious information services.

For Hong Kong, the place I come from, I would like to share a bit more about the situation. Since the change of sovereignty from Britain to the Chinese government in 1997, Hong Kong has been adopting the governance model of “One Country, Two Systems,” so that Hong Kong would maintain its own laws, courts, economic system, and freedoms, which are different from those of communist China. But there was a drastic change in the past few years. In July 2020, after the 2019 anti-extradition bill saga⁶ and the social movement in which the original goal was to strive for personal freedom, the National Security Law was implemented by the Beijing government, criminalizing the four acts of secession, subversion, terrorism, and collusion with

³ FABC 50 General Conference Core Group, “FABC 50 General Conference Guide Document,” *FABC paper 165* (November 29, 2020), 13, <https://fabc.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/FABC-Papers-165.pdf>.

⁴ Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2023: Marking 50 Years in the Struggle for Democracy* (March 9, 2023), <https://freedomhouse.org/article/new-report-freedom-asia-pacific-region-improved-slightly-2022> (accessed 5 April 2023).

⁵ Conference of Catholic Bishops of Myanmar (CBCM), “Country Reports FABC 50 General Conference: Myanmar,” *FABC Papers 172*, 44-46. <https://fabc.org/document/fabc-papers-172/>; “Myanmar: Mandalay Church calls on Catholics to pray for peace,” *Vatican News*, January 14, 2022, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2022-01/churches-myanmar-mandalay-prayer-catholics-peace.html>.

⁶ For details, please refer to Mary Yuen, “Practicing Democracy: Upholding Human Rights and the Right to Participation in Hong Kong,” *Asian Horizons* 11, no.4 (2020): 858-873.

foreign and external forces to jeopardize national security. It marks the most significant change to Hong Kong's law and political system.

Many people think that the enactment of this law is a serious attack on civil liberties and democracy, whereas the government argues that only a very small number of people would be affected. However, the reality is the following: a number of civil organizations were dispersed; one of the largest local newspapers and other news media were forced to close down; many commentators and political cartoonists were censored and warned; NGOs are warned or threatened not to organize or join public rallies or processions relating to women's rights, labor issues, the June Fourth Tiananmen Incident, or religious activities.

More sadly, some scholars, journalists, members of the Legislative Council, social activists, labor unionists, and many young people who joined the 2019 protests were arrested and detained one by one. Our cardinal, Joseph Zen, was arrested for supporting a humanitarian fund for helping people arrested in the protests. It is estimated that about 10,000 arrests (with arrestees ranging in age from 12 to 83) and 2,500 prosecutions are linked to the 2019 protest. Some have been detained without trial for over one or two years.

Moreover, teachers and civil servants are required to declare that they will uphold the Basic Law, the mini-constitution of Hong Kong, and bear allegiance to the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region government. As a result, in the past two years, many people decided to migrate to another place with their children. In the past two years, about 150,000 Hong Kong people moved to Britain under the British National (Overseas) visa scheme.⁷

INNER STRUGGLE AND INNER FREEDOM

Apart from these outer constraints with the National Security Law, many people are not sure whether they will violate the law when expressing opinions. Hong Kong playwright Candace Chong's experiences illustrate this phenomenon. As a famous Hong Kong playwright who received numerous awards, Chong was invited by a theatre group some years ago to write a script called *May 35th*, to be performed during the thirtieth anniversary of the June Fourth Tiananmen Incident in 2019. Now, after several years, the play would no longer be able to be performed in Hong Kong anymore as it may violate the National Security Law. In the past year, intending to write something about what happened in the past few years, Chong expressed her inner struggle, which is shared by many Hong Kong people, in an interview,

I have been constantly self-censoring when writing in the past year. I can't be myself. I can't fully express myself. There is a red line that I don't know what should I write? Ideas are very delicate or fragile. As a playwright, I have to consider whether people may

⁷ Laura Westbook, "105,000 Hongkongers start new lives in UK since BNO visa scheme began 2 years ago," *South China Morning Post*, 23 February 2023.

misunderstand my original intention if I use certain wordings. My script may affect the whole team.⁸

Despite this difficulty, Chong finally wrote a comedy called *Show Me Your Love*, with ten small stories and twenty characters who are ordinary people, performed by two of the most well-known stand-up comedians, as a gift to Hong Kong people. This play has been performed with great success. Chong said,

I came more and more to believe in the goodwill I saw among ordinary people. Many people left the city but those remain in Hong Kong are ordinary people. I saw kindness in their hearts. For example, journalists who unwillingly changed careers, lawyers who are very serious about their cases, people who often visit prisoners, and teachers who work hard to teach students with more and more censorship. For these Hong Kong people, I really appreciate them.⁹

I would like to add that the church in Hong Kong is also trying to do something to help those in need after the social turmoil, such as sponsoring the youth in jail who want to study, looking for study and work opportunities for those released from prison, and strengthening the faith and inner freedom of the faithful, especially the youth, through faith formation.

Chong wanted to give comfort and encouragement to Hong Kong people through her play, building connections between people who left and stayed in Hong Kong.

With Chong's experience, Filipino Sister Mary John Manazan's "Easter kind of spirituality," which emphasizes the feast rather than the fast, came to my mind.¹⁰ This is a kind of feminist spirituality that is empowering, liberating, integral, healing, and so on. It starts by reflecting on personal and social experiences, so that women's personal and social consciousness can be revealed.¹¹ It would be useful for strengthening inner spiritual freedom and links with social life, not only for Asian women, but for all experiencing impasse and uncertainty.¹² Through Christ's liberation, the oppressed can have a new self-understanding, accepting themselves, obtaining internal liberation, breaking through external and internal shackles. As a result, they can regain their freedom from external intimidation, pain and hatred. This

⁸ "Interview with Candace Chong, The Best Gift at the Worst Time," *Ming Pao Daily*, April 2, 2023, translation from Chinese by author.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Sr. Mary John Manazan, a Filipino Benedictine sister, is active in social and women's rights movement as well as gender and women's studies education. Sr. Mary John is a Zen spirituality practitioner committed to contemplative activism. See Solidarity Philippines Australia Network, "Feminism and Spirituality Like a Breath of Fresh Air! A Filipino Benedictine Sister Speaks of Total Liberation," *KASAMA* 12 No. 2 (1998), <https://cpcabrisbane.org/Kasama/1998/V12n2/Maryjohn.htm> (accessed 5 March 2023).

¹¹ Mary John Manazan, "Theological Perspectives of a Religious Woman Today—Four Trends of the Emerging Spirituality," in *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 347.

¹² Mary John Manazan, *Challenges to the Inner Room* (Manila: St. Scholastica's College, 1998), 97-98.

spirituality pays attention to a person's breathing, not only practicing concentration, but also entrusting the whole person to the Lord at present, willing to commit to God, and participating in the action of liberation. This kind of contemplation allows people to have the space to purify and empty themselves, and lets people see clearly that everyone is valuable and precious, thus, everyone must be respected.¹³ I heard from a friend that some prisoners also practice meditation and praying, among Christians or Buddhists. They said that this practice can give them strength and help them make connections to the outside world.

FREEDOM AND HOPE

Another example is the story of Hong Kong director K.W. Chow who is well-known for his social concern depicted in his films and his identity as a devoted Christian. During the 2019-2020 protest, he made a documentary called "Revolution of Our Times," interviewing a number of young protesters. It was shown in some international film festivals and overseas but never screened in Hong Kong as it is probably unable to pass the 2021 new film censorship law.¹⁴ In a number of interviews, he said that he had an inner struggle and understood the risk of making this documentary, but his faith and conscience urged him to do what he thought is right. He wanted to keep a record of what had happened in Hong Kong during the social unrest and why the youth joined the protest. In order to protect other members of his team, Chow is willing to be the only spokesperson of this documentary and the names of his crew are hidden.

I am impressed by what Chow said in some interviews, depicting his inner freedom in spite of the outer constraint. He said,

I believe that what I pursue is right according to God. If what I do is right and I have to suffer, I am willing to accept it, and there is no need to be afraid of it. For me, only by staying in Hong Kong can I have freedom without fear. On the contrary, if I go to another place because of fear, my heart is still full of fear. This is true freedom, true peace to me. Someone has said, danger is real; but fear is a choice. I try not to let fear affect my life.¹⁵

In the face of various challenges, based on his faith, Chow decided to stay in Hong Kong with his family and continue to produce movies. He also tries to bring his movies to the overseas Chinese communities, hoping to draw more attention on the Hong Kong situation.

This reminds me the image of "plants flourishing through cracks," suggested by Bishop Stephen Chow, the bishop of Hong Kong. As a Jesuit, rooted in the key idea of

¹³ Mananzan, *Challenges to the Inner Room*, 13-14.

¹⁴ This law gives the chief secretary the power to revoke a film's license if it is found to "endorse, support, glorify, encourage and incite activities that might endanger national security."

¹⁵ "How to Become a Hong Kong Film Director: Interview with K.W. Chow," *Goomoon Podcast*, ep. 168, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B7ktVRoaW7k> (accessed 5 March 2023), translation from Cantonese by author.

Ignatian spirituality that emphasizes finding God in everything, he offered a reflection in the face of the shrinking of spaces of freedom in Hong Kong a year ago. Employing the image of flowers, shrubs, and even trees that have germinated from cracks, he highlighted that these plants have demonstrated that nothing can prevent life from flourishing, adding beauty and hope to our world. The tougher the condition, the more resilient life will be. From this, he claims that “God’s love and light are found in all things, even in the cracks.”¹⁶ He said,

Accepting the changing context as reality does not mean endorsing it. But learning to discern new possibilities with a creative mindset amid tensions from the changing context is the way forward. And the future still holds its promises beyond our understanding.¹⁷

Bishop Chow emphasizes that allowing ourselves the inner space to discern is essential and beneficial in the long run. He also points out on another occasion that although we are living in an anxious and messy world dominated by an entrenched political mentality, “our future generations need to have hope. We must make it possible for each other to have hope for a better future.”¹⁸

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Under authoritarian rule, many kinds of outer freedom in the world are eroded. Outer constraints and threats often cause fear and anxiety. In spite of this, we can still keep the freedom of thought and conscience that no one can take away from us. We have to clear our mind, setting our eyes on God and strengthening our inner self and inner freedom so that we can maintain hope. Such freedom can motivate us to take appropriate actions at the right time after discernment. We need to cultivate and strengthen our inner freedom by developing a holistic and integral kind of spirituality and faith formation, so that we can see God even in cracks and not lose our ability to make sound ethical judgments due to worries and fears.

Contemplation and prayer in action can help us strengthen our relationship with God and overcome our fears. Borrowing from Thomas Merton’s point of view, Henri Nouwen said that we are called to be contemplatives, to peel off the blindfolds of illusions that prevent us from seeing God. We are called to observe with open eyes, to be awake, alert, and focused.¹⁹ Apart from spending some quiet time with the Lord to clear our minds and see the outside world, we have to engage in contemplation in our secular life, observing the world through the eyes of faith, and understand and treat people with compassion and empathy. As our relationship with God grows closer, the

¹⁶ Stephen Sau-yan Chow, “Reflections: Flourishing through Cracks,” *Sunday Examiner*, June 2, 2022, <https://www.examiner.org.hk/2022/06/02/reflections-from-the-bishop-flourishing-through-cracks/features> (accessed 5 March 2023).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ “Easter message from Bishop Stephen Chow 2023: Dare to Have Hope,” *Sunday Examiner*, April 6, 2023.

¹⁹ Henri Nouwen, *The Road to Peace*, ed. John Dear (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 196.

act of love takes place. Love-oriented spiritual freedom involves our concrete day-to-day lives. Inner freedom makes us more hopeful to respond to God's love in charity, caring for the disadvantaged in society, and also taking care of our own spiritual need. Moreover, we need a community of mutual support in order to nurture our spirituality and encourage us in practicing faith.

Finally, I would like to conclude with the message of a Hong Kong song, called "The Stella Moments of Humankind,"²⁰ sung by a young singer. The song brings out the idea that the light that shines in the dark night actually belongs to all ordinary people, not just a few key leaders. And each one of us can contribute something, bringing light and hope in the darkest of times.

²⁰ This song is inspired by the book *Decisive Moments in History*, written by the Austrian writer Stefan Zweig, published in 1927.