



THE "AMOY MISSION": LESSONS AND REFLECTIONS



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The "Amoy Mission" began on February 24, 1842 on the island called Gulangyu 鼓浪嶼 (mission records: Kulongsu) in the province of Fujian, China. The term "Amoy" was used by the missionaries to refer to what is now known as the city of Xiamen 廈門市 and to the dialect spoken in that locality as well as in the South Fujian/Minnan (south of the River Min) region. Missionaries who worked in this locality were sent from the Dutch Reformed Church in America, the London Mission Society and the English Presbyterian Mission.

Christians and Christian workers exhibit a powerful testimony if they can work together for the glory of God and the expansion of His kingdom. This is what happened in Gulangyu and Xiamen when these three mission bodies worked together instead of against each other.

One of the best books dealing with this mission work in detail is *The Reformed Church in China 1842-1951*, written by Gerald F. De Jong.¹ I will draw from the second and third chapters of this book to highlight what the missionaries did in Xiamen, then bring out lessons from their methodologies and accomplishments, as well as compare, relate and apply these lessons to the setting of the Filipino-Chinese churches of the Philippines.

The first missionary to enter and initiate the mission in Gulangyu was Dr. David Abeel III (1804-1846).² He had a deep passion for China. On January 1,

1842 he wrote: "The prospect of soon having access to 400,000,000 of souls, or even to any considerable part of this number, ought to stimulate every true believer in Jesus, to awake to righteousness, to put on strength, and to come up to the Lord's help against the mighty. How great is the work here to be accomplished!"³ But before Xiamen opened in 1842 as a treaty port, he could only set foot in Macau, survey potential mission fields in Southeast Asia, learn the Hokkien dialect in Indonesia and prepare himself for the mission in Thailand.

One does not have to be strong and able-bodied in order to serve God. Even as Abeel was constantly of weak constitution, he had great passion for China and exerted all efforts to prepare himself for mission work, full of faith in God's steadfast guidance and unfailing love. If we only have passion for God and His world, but never act on such passion, nothing much will happen no matter how strong and able we are. Even before the Treaty of Nanking was signed on August 29, 1842, Abeel had already arrived in Xiamen on February 24, 1842. One of the necessary skills for mission work is speaking the native language. Abeel prepared himself by learning Hokkien while waiting for the doors of China to open.

When Abeel finally entered Xiamen, he rented a small house in Gulangyu near the water's edge. His co-workers were Dr. William Jones Boone, Sr., Dr.

William H. Cumming and Dr. James C. Hepburn. He spent much time traveling to different places to observe and preach the Gospel, in the distribution of religious literature, and to engage in personal religious conversations when he could not preach to a crowd.⁴ Half a year after his arrival, the number of Sunday listeners averaged nearly fifty. By January 1844, the ministry had expanded to Xiamen. About a year later, a hospital was set up in a nearby building. Abeel had to leave the mission field on December 19, 1844, on account of deteriorating health.⁵ Although he did not see one new believer when he left, his ground work led to churches and hospitals and schools being established in Gulangyu and Xiamen, and for women entering the mission field.⁶

During the sixties and seventies, Christians (myself included) in the Philippines had heard about Bibles being smuggled into China and the persecution of Christians in China, and our hearts yearned for the doors of China to re-open. All we could do was support the Christian Church inside China by praying and giving funds for mission work. Now the doors are wide open and Mainland Chinese are pouring into the Philippines – are we doing enough to share the Good News to them? Many churches/Christians are helping such ministries, but a few are hesitant. They prefer to continue giving money to churches or groups working in China, but are reluctant to personally get involved here. Both means are important

and must be simultaneously undertaken, and many other avenues should be explored.

Other missionaries followed Abeel. Elihu Doty (1809- 1864) produced the *Anglo Chinese Manual of the Amoy Dialect*. William John Pohlman (1812 –1849) raised funds to build the first church in Xiamen; John Van Nest Talmage (1819-1892) spent forty years preaching, teaching in seminary, writing, translating parts of the Bible. When he arrived in Amoy there were no churches, no schools, no Christian homes, no hospitals, and only three converts. When he left there were 2,000 converts, seventeen churches, and as many pastors under Presbyterian order alone, a theological seminary, a training school for women and boys' and girls' schools and hospitals scattered throughout that district. Carstairs Douglas (1830-1877) served for 22 years and published the *Chinese-English Dictionary of the Vernacular or Spoken Language of Amoy*.

Missionaries are not perfect, but they are more heroic than today's silver screen heroes who have super-powers. They are driven by a deep love for God and a fiery passion to bring the Good News to lands opposite from their world. Many of them die in the mission field and sacrifice their own lives and that of their family members. For the people of Xiamen (and the whole of China), missionaries spent their lives, making the most of every hour and minute, of every opportunity and of all their resources. May we continue to look to these heroes-in-Christ for inspiration, emulation and exemplification in our Christian walk and service.

Praise God for the spiritual contributions of these missionaries! Moreover, their mental labor elevated the intellectual and social life of the people of South Fujian, especially the female sector. After the missionaries learned the Amoy dialect, they created the Romanization system wherein Roman letters represented the sound of Chinese words. As Talmage wrote,

“. . . by the plan thus adopted, if we can only furnish the requisite number of books, the means of learning to read will be within the reach of almost every individual.”⁷ Not only did they provide formal training through the Amoy Girls' School and a Middle School for boys, they also conducted language classes for young and old. Women in particular reaped great benefit from these efforts.

The Iok Tek Amoy Girls' School was instrumental in educating thousands of girls, many of whom migrated to the Philippines. My mother was among those who studied in this school. She



L-R: David Abeel, Elihu Doty, William Pohlman, John Van Nest Talmage and Carstairs Douglas.

was a teacher all her life, just like most of the other alumnae who contributed so much to society as devoted teachers. Presently, Chinese Christian schools in the Philippines are a continuation of this great tradition.

Other migrants were not fortunate enough to have studied in China, but they learned to read the Romanized Bible and other books, thanks to the work of the Amoy Mission. One can still encounter them in the Chinese Evangelical churches today.

Unfortunately increasing numbers of Filipino-Chinese Evangelicals are losing interest in or have completely disregarded the Amoy dialect in favor of English and Tagalog. The influx of migrants from China affords the opportunity to learn (or re-learn) Mandarin, or Pu-tong-hua, but this is mostly happening in the marketplace but not in the churches, particularly among the younger generations.

The missionaries did not neglect the training of native Chinese in doing evangelistic work. Talmage wrote in

1848 that true native converts can be even more efficient than the missionaries. “They can go where we cannot, and reach those who are entirely beyond our influences. They understand the customs of the people more thoroughly. They remember what were the greatest difficulties and objections and what proved the greatest obstacles to their reception of the Gospel, and they know how these difficulties were removed, and these objections answered.”⁸

Today as it was then, evangelization of Chinese worldwide cannot be left in the hands of pastors and missionaries

alone. Churches must focus on lay training and leaders must pass on the vision and passion of fulfilling the Great Commission of Jesus Christ. Encouraging and supporting seminary students is also vital to this goal.

Endnotes

¹Gerald Francis de Jong, *The Reformed Church in China 1842-1951*, The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, no. 22. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1992). This book has been printed in Chinese as *美國歸正教在廈門1842-1951*.

²See David Abeel, *Memoir of the Rev. David Abeel, D.D. – Late Missionary to China*, comp. by G. R. Williamson (New York: Robert Canal, 1848) for more details on Abeel's life and ministry.

³Abeel, 217.

⁴Abeel, 250.

⁵De Jong, 15-16.

⁶Anne C. Kwantes, “‘She Became the Tiger of the School!’ – Tena Holkeboer (1895-1965),” in *She Has Done a Beautiful Thing for Me: Portrait of Christian Women in Asia*, 175-198 (Manila: OMF Literature, 2005).

⁷Talmage to Anderson and De Witt, July 14, 1851, *Christian Intelligencer*, January 1, 1852, p. 101, in de Jong, 37.

⁸Address to the Middle Dutch Reformed Church, Brooklyn, September 12, 1848, *Christian Intelligencer*, January 18, pp. 210-213, in de Jong, 44.