

# A visit to Fujian Province

BY PETER BARRY

In July, an American friend and myself had the unique experience of a visit to Fujian Province in China. Our main purpose was tourism and a little vacation. At the same time, because both of us had spent some time in Taiwan, we were interested in meeting the ancestors of the wonderful Taiwanese people.

We visited the cities of Fuzhou and Xiamen. These two cities are among the 200 or more cities in China which are open to foreign tourists. And yet most foreign tourists stick to the "main route" of the big cities like Canton, Beijing, Nanjing, Shanghai and Hangzhou. They would be in for some pleasant surprises if they visited Fujian.

In addition to the historical sites and parks, like Gu Shan outside of Fuzhou, the visitor gets to observe something of the life of the people in the countryside. On the eight-hour bus ride between Fuzhou and

Two Church workers in front of the Fuzhou Catholic Church.



Xiamen, we saw farmers out in their fields harvesting the season's first crop of rice (the harvest seemed quite abundant), and we stopped to purchase freshly picked "lai-chee" fruit, which was then in season. The bus driver teased some passengers from Beijing, saying that they would have to pay double for lai-chee in Beijing. "Four times as much," they responded.

At the same time, being Christians, we were of course interested in the practice of religion in Fujian, especially after the restoration of the policy of religious freedom. We are happy to report that all the churches and temples we visited were "alive" with activity.

At the Buddhist temple located on Gu Shan, near Fuzhou, we observed believers burning incense and praying to the Buddhist gods. We also talked to some of the young novice-monks, who were attending the Buddhist academy at Gu Shan. This is the third Buddhist academy (the others are in Beijing and Suzhou) to open in recent years, we were told, and there are about 50 young novices here taking the three year course. At the end of the course, they have the option of becoming full-fledged monks in the monastery. When I asked one head-shaven youth whether or not the academy was on summer vacation now, he replied cheerfully: "No, we have class right through the summer." Despite the heat, he seemed genuinely happy to be pursuing the teachings of Guatama Buddha.

We then visited the Protestant Church in Fuzhou. Located in a lane off Dong Jie Kou, the church also serves as the headquarters of the Three-Self Movement for Fujian Province. At the church, Bishop Moses Xue was just holding a meeting with some of his pastors and Bible women. They immediately halted their discussion, got up from their seats, and greeted us warmly. One could see that Bishop Xue, a man in his 60's, had the love and respect of his fellow church workers. I recalled that I had seen his picture in Hong Kong newspapers over a year ago, when Fuzhou became open to foreign visitors.

We had already heard from Bishop K.H. Ding about the ordination of 18 pastors in Fuzhou in June. Bishop Ding had attended the ceremony. Since the average age of those ordained was 63, they had evidently been waiting a long time for ordination. Seventeen of the new pastors were ordained by the laying on of hands by other pastors from nearby. But in a concession to denominational feeling, the eighteenth, a Seventh-Day Adventist, who wanted to participate in the group ceremony, was ordained by Seventh-Day Adventist pastors only. Some of the newly ordained pastors were just then meeting with Bishop Xue. So we took the opportunity to offer our congratulations.

From Bishop Xue we learned the location of the Catholic Church. It is only about a ten minute walk from the Protestant Church. At the Catholic Church, Bishop Joseph Lin Quan, a 1935 graduate of Hong Kong Regional Seminary and former Rector of the Fuzhou Seminary, was also holding a meeting with three or four priests and some lay people. They too welcomed us warmly.

The small dark church, with the words "Ecclesia Catholica" etched in cement above the main gate, had only opened last year, the bishop said, and attendance at Sunday Mass was still not large. There is a bigger Catholic church building in another part of Fuzhou City, but this property has not been returned to them yet. Most of the Catholics live in the countryside, Bishop Lin said, and at the meeting the priests and laity were discussing whether and how they could train catechists, who in turn would gather the Christians together and instruct them. They were also discussing the possibility of sending some candidates to the seminary in Beijing, which is due to open this Fall.

Regarding Catholics in the countryside, one of the priests told us that his native county now has 40,000 Catholics, whereas when he was growing up there, there were only 10,000. At the same time, pointing up the need for instruction in the faith, Father said that these Catholics, although they know how to say prayers, like the 'Our Father' and 'Hail Mary,' they do not know much doctrine. However, despite their lack of knowledge of the doctrine, "they are very fervent," Father added.

Of course, relations of the Chinese Catholic Church with the Vatican came up in our conversation. One of the Fathers pointed out two important requests that the Chinese government and the Chinese Catholics had of Rome. The first, from the government's side, was that every Chinese citizen be able to maintain his self-respect, and the second, from the church's point of view, that the Chinese Church be treated as equals. If these two conditions could be fulfilled, this priest thought, the problem of relations would more easily be solved.

Another priest added that the Chinese Catholic Church wants to remain Catholic, and not become like the Anglican Church or the Greek Orthodox. This is one of the reasons for retaining Latin in the Mass, he said.

On the whole it seemed that the Fujian priests had the feeling of "letting bygones be bygones" and of looking to the future. All the Fathers agreed that contact with outside churches was beneficial for both

the Chinese Church and the foreign churches. It could lead to mutual understanding and meaningful exchange, they thought. In fact, one of the Fathers remarked, "Why is it that Beijing and Shanghai get all the visitors? No one ever visits places like Fuzhou!"

In Xiamen, too, in addition to the historical sites, we visited the places of worship of the three above-mentioned major religions in China. In Nan Putuo temple, located just outside the gate of Xiamen University, devout believers were offering incense and bowing in worship before the images of Buddha and the other gods.

The Catholic Church and one of the Protestant churches of Xiamen (I have heard that there are two others in town) are located on the island of Gulangyu. Gulangyu, an island resort, is reached by a five minute ferry ride from Xiamen proper, much like the Star Ferry between Hong Kong and Kowloon.

At the beach on Gulangyu, where we went swimming one day, we met many visitors from other provinces in China who were also on vacation there. We toured the scenic park and climbed the hill on the island, from which one gets a magnificent view of Xiamen City. And of course we visited the Memorial Hall to Zheng Chenggong, and tried to think back to what it must have been like 320 years previously when Zheng set out from here to expell the Dutch from Taiwan and reclaim the island for China. This marked the beginning of migrations of people from Fujian province to Taiwan. As a result, the same Minnan dialect as is spoken in the Xiamen area, is still spoken by the Taiwanese on Taiwan today.

At the Catholic Church on Gulangyu, Father Chen Mingyuan, 61 years old and ordained at Rosary Church, Hong Kong, in 1947, told us that the church building, used for many years as a factory, was returned to the Catholics in November, 1981. Many fervent Catholics then volunteered their free time to paint and re-furbish the building to get the church ready for its official opening on Christmas, 1981.

A few hundred Catholics attend Mass at the church on Sundays, but just as in Fuzhou, Father Chen told us, there are more Catholics living in the countryside than in the city. The priests, few in number, spend a lot of time traveling to outlying districts to minister to the Catholics there. In fact, Father Chen himself was preparing to leave on a mission trip the next day to a Catholic village located 40 kilometers from Xiamen. We were impressed with Father Chen's apostolic spirit.

The three-storey building next to the church used to be the bi-

shop's residence and the center house of the Spanish Dominican Fathers. Having arrived in Fujian around 1600, they were the first Catholic missionaries in this area. Father Chen now lives in a monk-like cell in the basement of this house, the upper three floors of which house many families.

One hot afternoon, my friend and I strolled over to the large Protestant church on Gulangyu. It was 3 p.m., and despite the heat, many Christians (mostly elderly women) were gathering in the church for a prayer service. Rev. Cheng Dan Kheng, the pastor, who appeared to be in his sixties, told us that the original mission board of this church was the American Presbyterian Church, based in Chicago. Originally a Presbyterian, Pastor Cheng graduated from Jinling Seminary in 1948. The Christian faith was clearly evident in the smiling face of one eighty year old lady, as she said repeatedly to us in the Minnan dialect: "Thanks be to God," and "God loves man."

My friend and I agreed that the visit to Fujian Province was a valuable experience for both of us. Personally, I was glad to visit China again, after a year and three month absence (I had last been there in April, 1981). It was good to experience life in a socialist country once again, away from the frenetic activity of capitalist Hong Kong. It was also good to see again many of China's historical sites, and to appreciate once more her long and rich history.

Everywhere we went the people were most gracious. For instance, when we asked for directions on the street, as we often did, people were very helpful. I felt that their courtesy was due to the genuine good manners the Chinese people have always been famous for, and not only to recent campaigns, such as "spiritual civilization month," and "the five stresses and four beauties."

The contact with religious personnel was rewarding. I was impressed with the apostolic fervor of the Christian clergy, both Protestant and Catholic. In spite of their advanced age (the youngest were in their 60's), the pastors and priests were only interested in instructing the faithful and building up the church again after the "ten catastrophic years."

I had the feeling upon my return: we should visit China more often. And the words of one of the Fujian priests came back to me: "Instead of always going to the big cities like Beijing and Shanghai, why not visit Fuzhou and Xiamen!" Now that's good advice.