

BIBLES FOR CHINA

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interview: Rev. Chan-Young Choi

Rev. Chan-Young Choi is the Asia Pacific Regional Secretary of the United Bible Societies. On May 9th of this year, Tripod interviewed Rev. Choi in the Hong Kong office of the UBS about a proposal to set up a printing plant in China for the production of Bibles and other church-related literature. Here are some excerpts from that interview:

TRIPOD: Rev. Choi, would you tell us something about the UBS and how it came to be involved in this new venture?

Rev. Choi: Well, the UBS represents a large number of individual Bible societies spread throughout the world. Our organization has offices in over one hundred countries. We are a non-sectarian movement whose sole aim is the dissemination of the Bible to all peoples, in a language readily understood by them and at a price that they can afford. We also work with both Protestant and Catholic church groups in quite a variety of translation projects. Because we want to serve all Christian groups, we limit ourselves to printing only the sacred texts themselves, without interpretative notes or doctrinal comments, which, as you know, can sometimes lead to conflict and controversy. Because our goals are universal, embracing all Christians, it is only natural that they would reach out to the Christians of China as well.

Q: Tell us something of how your present involvement with China came about.



Our aim lies in the dissemination of the Bible to all peoples, in a language readily understood by them, and at a cost that they can afford.

A: Well, we have been in informal contact with Chinese Christians in China for some time, quietly considering with them how we might serve some useful purpose. In January of this year, we visited China for the second time and were warmly received by officials of the China Christian Council, most notably by Bishop K.H. Ting, who is also the President of the China Christian Council. There they informed us that they had already begun the production of Bibles and New Testaments and had thus far printed over 1,450,000 copies - quite an achievement given the limitations of time and resources. They mentioned, however, that there was still a great need for more. This is easily understandable, for, as you know, in the Protestant tradition one cannot become a good Christian unless one has a Bible. (I might add here that when the Roman Catholic Bishop of Johore Bahru, Malaysia, Bishop Chan, introduced us to his Christians there, he used the exact same words. Obviously, our two Christian traditions are in agreement on this particular teaching.) During this trip to China, in the course of one of our

conversations, the idea of a printing plant came up. I had asked about the possibility of Chinese Christians printing Bibles, and some theological or christian literature to meet their own needs. One of our hosts mentioned that a small printing machine might be bought for this purpose. "Why not something more ambitious," I asked, "something large enough to serve all your printing needs?" I mentioned that such a plant would also be capable of exporting printed materials as well. UBS is always hunting around the world for places that offer quality work at the best possible price. This opened up a further avenue of possibility, and when we gathered together the next day, the discussion continued with a great deal of enthusiasm. That evening Bishop Ting told me of plans to establish the Amity Foundation, and how the printing plant proposal might find favour with the Board of Directors.

Q: What specifically is your relationship with Amity?

A: Amity, as you know, was at that time only in the planning stage. It is a new Foundation conceived by Chinese Christian leaders as an expression of the church's concern for social welfare, and represents an organized response to China's social needs. Bishop Ting felt the establishment of a modern printing facility that could serve both religious and social needs would be a worthy project for the new Foundation. We parted agreeing to discuss the matter again when the Bishop passed through Hong Kong on his way to India in March. This gave both parties time to do some home-work. During the following months, I had our production consultant do a feasibility study focusing on the kinds of printed materials that would best serve both church and other needs; the latter would include educational materials such as dictionaries, encyclopedias, etc. We also aimed to make the plant self-supporting, hoping that, in time, it would also turn a profit for its sponsors as well. When we met again in March, Bishop Ting informed us that Amity would be officially inaugurated upon his return to China and that the government had given a verbal go-ahead to the plan. On March 22nd, we signed a memorandum of understanding: the Bishop representing Amity and Rev. J. Payne UBS.

This document has no legal binding. In fact, the way UBS operates is that we commit ourselves to a project first, and then look for the means to fund it. (And God always provides.) So there could be no binding contract in the legal sense. But we did want to have something down on paper to state our purpose. After the signing, we prepared a press release. And that is how it happened. It was all quite simple and took place in a very short period of time.

Q: Would you describe this project as a joint-venture, along the same model as China is making these days with many foreign investors?

A: Not really; certainly not in the profit-sharing sense of the phrase. A better way of describing it might be "sharing of resources". As Christians we believe that all that we have belongs to God. We believe that the world is God's and we have a responsibility to share with each other its resources. Where we find that God has given us an abundance, then we, as Christians, are bound by our faith to share it. That is how we see it. However, insofar as the project might involve cooperating with Nanjing Normal University or another institution, you could describe the relationship between Amity Foundation and the University as a joint-venture.

Q: If all goes well, how long before the plant will be operational?

A: We hope that we could begin production by the end of next year. The plan calls for additional buildings, and it also takes about a year to order a machine that will meet our requirements and specifications. Actually, it also takes time to train qualified personnel not only to run the presses but to oversee the whole operation. We need that much time to get things in place and be ready to move when the construction work is finished. Then, too, we must raise the necessary funds.

Q: Where will the money come from?

A: It will all come from voluntary donations. We hope that Christians around the world will be generous in support of this project. The sum is quite substantial, but we are confident that God will provide.

Q: Do you see UBS's involvement as only giving initial assistance to the project, or will there be some on-going working relationship?

A: Let me repeat. UBS's prime interest is in the publication of Bibles, and because the need for Bibles among Christians in China is great, we find this a justifiable reason for some on-going relationship. But the nature of our involvement is entirely up to the church in China and Amity, and how they see our future role. We are always ready to provide technical assistance and some necessary materials on request, as well as our experience in Bible production.

Q: Given the fact that the plant hopes to make a profit, is there any conflict here with Amity's stated goals to serve social needs?

A: No, none at all. Amity is a foundation initiated by Chinese Christians, but about fifteen percent of its Board of Directors are non-Christian. It is not a Christian charitable organization in our usual sense of the word. It is the prospect of doing good for society that draws Chinese Christians and non-Christians alike to participate in its projects. The printing plant will be donated to Amity under the agreed conditions which specify that in addition to Bibles and other Christian literature, it will also provide essential educational materials for the country at-large. Whatever profits that might come from the plant will be used to further other social welfare projects initiated by Amity. Were it an exclusively Christian organization printing only religious literature, or only for individual profit, conflicts might arise, but this press will be contributing to the country's social welfare needs, and, therefore, there is no conflict.

Q: Have you already a particular Bible text in mind for publication, or will the press print the same one the China Christian Council has been printing?

A: My understanding is that they have just finished putting the old Chinese Union Version of the Bible into the new simplified characters. They had also begun a revision of this translation, although progress had been slow; in fact, as far as we know, it has been suspended. After all, there has been a 30 year break, and also those few who have the qualified expertise to do this kind of work are now swamped with other tasks just as vital and necessary. How long before a new revised translation may be ready for printing is, at this time, difficult to say. Certainly the will is there, but resources are still limited.

Q: How available will the Bibles be to the ordinary person on the street? For instance, will it be sold in local bookstores?

A: I'm sure church leaders would like to see that, but at present there are no plans to do so. However, given the direction in which China is going, more and more openness and the liberal changes in attitude in general, I do not see why, after Christian needs are met, the market might not expand to include a wider audience. After all, aside from its religious message, the Bible itself is considered as one of the world's greatest books of literature. But I do not think it wise to speculate on what the future might hold. For the present, there is enough of a demand for Bibles among Chinese Christians to keep the presses busy for some time to come.

TRIPOD: Thank you very much, Rev. Choi for sharing with us and our readers insights into this new and most welcomed venture. And we wish to assure you of our support in your work in bringing the Word of God to all His sons and daughters.