

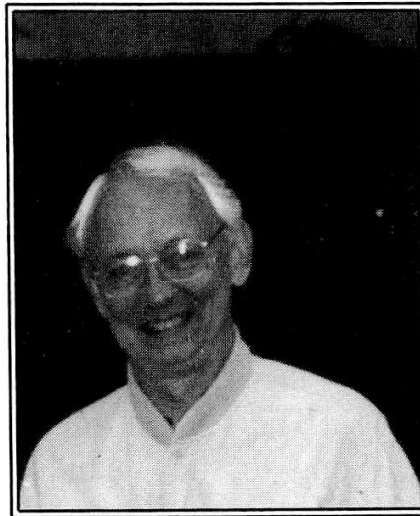
China Mission History

The Hakka Mission Yesterday and Today

By Peter Barry, M.M.

July 16, 1998 was a great day in what Bishop Francis X. Ford, the first Catholic bishop of Kaying (present-day Meizhou), called the "Hakka Mission." Three priests ordained on that day by Bishop Ford in 1948 celebrated their 50th anniversary of ordination as priests, and five Sisters celebrated the golden jubilee of their entrance into religious life.

The priests are Bishop Anthony Tchoung Quanzhang, Father Paul Liang Zhangqing and Peter Liao Yuhua. The golden jubilarians in the local Sisters' congregation are Sisters Huang Qunzhen, Li Xirong, Zhong Jingqing, Luo Lianzhen and Zhu Fengying. Over 200 local and overseas Catholics attended the commemorative Mass, which was concelebrated by 15 priests with Bishop Tchoung as the main celebrant. Overseas Chinese religious and Catholics came from as far away as the United States and Malaysia. A large contingent of clergy and Catholics made the long 800 kilometer trek overland by train or bus from Hong Kong. Among those who made the grueling 10 hour bus trip were five students from Maryknoll Technical School in Kowloon, founded in 1966 by Father Howard Trube, a former Kaying missionary. Father Trube was, until his death at age 82 in June 1995, a great benefactor of his former mission. Five Maryknoll Sisters and two Maryknoll Fathers were also in attendance, representing the missionary order which used to work in the Meizhou area.



Joy permeated the three activities planned for the day: the 9 AM Mass, the 11 AM celebratory meeting and the 12 noon dinner. Joy, not only for the jubilarians themselves, but joy that church built up in the Hakka Mission had survived and even flourished among the

many ups and downs of recent history. Today there are about 20,000 Catholics in the 9 counties covered by the Meizhou Diocese.

Who are the Hakkas?

Hakka means “guest people,” and the people who speak this language originated in north China, but through various migrations southwards throughout history have settled mainly in southern Fujian, Jiangxi and Hunan provinces and northeastern Guangdong. There are also small concentrations of Hakka people in Guangxi and Sichuan provinces and in other parts of Guangdong. Their approximately 33 million population on the mainland accounts for 3% of the total population.

Historians trace the people identified as Hakka through four mass migrations. In the first the Hakka people left the Henan-Shandong area for the Dingzhou area on the border between Fujian and Jiangxi during the turmoil accompanying the change from the Tang to the Song Dynasty (907-959).

The second migration took place during the transition from the Song to the Yuan Dynasty (1127-1279) when Hakka people settled in the northeastern area of Guangdong Province.

The third migration, during the early Qing period (1644-1800), took the Hakkas to unclaimed land along Guangdong's southeast coast (the Haifeng-Lufeng area). During this same period some Hakkas moved to Guangxi, Hainan, Taiwan and even as far away as Sichuan Province. In fact, Cardinal John Baptist Wu, Bishop of Hong Kong is Hakka, as was paramount leader Deng Xiaoping who came from Guangan County, Sichuan Province.

The fourth and last migration took place after the suppression of the Taiping Rebellion, 1850-1864, (Taiping leader Hong Xiuquan was a Hakka, as were many of his followers), and after the Hakka-Bendi (the native Cantonese speaking people) wars (1864-1867), in which, it is said, thousands of Hakka people died. This migration brought them again to Sichuan, but also to Hong Kong and Southeast Asia.

The Hakka people are not an ethnic minority. They are Han Chinese, but they speak their own distinct dialect of Chinese, much like the Cantonese or Shanghaiese, or closer to home, the Chaozhou people of Guangdong and the Minnan speaking people of Fujian. Linguists distinguish four tones in the Hakka dialect, like Mandarin,

not seven or eight tones as in Cantonese and the Minnan language (spoken in southern Fujian and most of Taiwan today). This gave added credence to the argument that the Hakkas originated in the north of China. But no doubt due in great part to necessity, the Hakkas had the ability to learn other dialects easily. Invariably it was Hakkas, for instance, who manned the ticket booths along the railway in Taiwan, for they could speak all three languages (excluding aborigine dialects) spoken in that province: Mandarin (comprising 15% of the population whose forebears spoke this language), Minnan (75%), and Hakka. (10%)

Characteristics of the Hakka People

The first characteristic, which comes to mind when describing the Hakka people, is “hardworking.” They settled in mountainous areas where no other people wished to live, and tried to eke out an existence farming on hardscrabble soil. They often took on menial jobs which others shunned, like coal mining. Many of Hong Xiuquan’s followers during the Taiping Rebellion were coal miners. The Hakka people lived in poor conditions. In fact, some of the poorest counties in Guangdong Province still today are those located around the “Hakka capital” of Meixian. If the Chinese people are known for “eating bitterness (*chi ku*),” then the Hakka people ate it even more. They represented the epitome of “eating bitterness.” But this ability to live in harsh conditions forged in the souls of the Hakka people a determination to improve their lot and the ability to stand up for their rights.

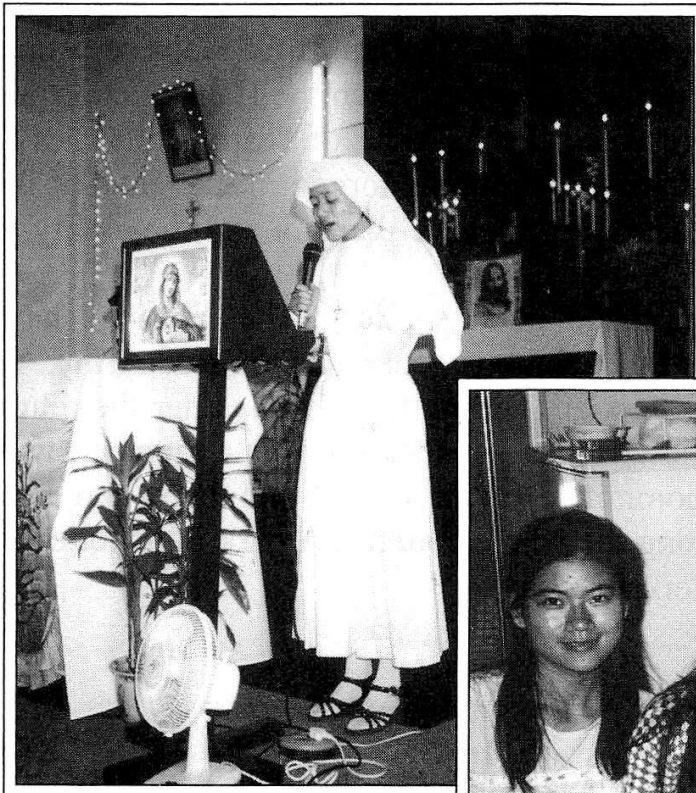
The Hakka men made good soldiers. The Taipings have already been mentioned. But a famous general of the Red Army, Ye Jianyin, was a native of Meixian. During the 1980’s, after the return of Deng Xiaoping, a fellow Hakka, General Ye was a member, with Deng, of the standing committee of the Party’s politburo, one of a handful of officials running the whole country. A park in honor of its favorite son stands in Meixian today

Means of survival

If the Hakka people had trouble getting along with neighbors belonging to other Chinese dialect groups, it was because they were migrants. They had come from outside and did not mix well with



The author, with Bishop Anthony Zhong and well wishes, at the 50th anniversary celebration.



Left: A young Sister does the reading at the anniversary Mass.



Right: Young people of Meixian join in the celebration.

their neighbors. In fact they were quite clannish. This trait can be seen from the architecture of their dwellings. They built self-contained circular compounds, which can still be seen in Meixian today, for the purpose of defending themselves from real or imagined attack. However, their rootlessness was turned into a positive resourcefulness, which allowed them to survive, and even to thrive, in any and all conditions.

Education of children was a prime concern of all Hakka parents, and no sacrifice was too great to send the children to school. Meixian, even today, possesses one of the key middle schools in Guangdong Province. Bishop Ford, recognizing and encouraging this tenacious spirit of the Hakka people, provided a hostel at the Catholic Church for students from the countryside attending the Meixian middle school. Later he would provide scholarships for Hakka students to further their education at the newly opened (1925) Fujen University in Peking.

Christianity comes to Hakka Land

Christianity was first introduced into the Kaying area by a young man by the name of Ng (Wu) Tong who had gone to Penang (in present-day Malaysia) to do business. While there he had the chance to listen to and come to believe in the Catholic religion. He was baptized in 1844. Returning home shortly thereafter, he shared his newfound faith with his family and neighbors in a village at the outskirts of Kaying. For several years Ng Tong sought the services of a foreign missionary who would come to instruct and baptize his family and acquaintances.

Finally Father Le Turdu of the Paris Foreign Mission Society came to the Kaying from a Hakka-speaking mission in Southeast Asia in 1849. Ng Tong offered Father Le Turdu a place to build a small chapel from which the missionary could preach the Gospel and instruct the people in Catholic doctrine. This marks the beginning of the Church in the "Hakka Mission."

The Paris foreign Mission Society in Hakka Land

The French missionaries of the Paris Foreign Mission Society (MEP) did the groundbreaking work of building up the church in the Kaying area. They labored there for 75 years and built up close-knit Christian communities in at least five of the 9 sub-

prefectures (today's counties). As testimony to their conscientious formation work, flourishing "christianities" exist in some of these communities today. Among these is Soule (Xiaolok), near Jiaoling, where an active Catholic community of 2,000 persons bears witness to their faith today.

The Paris society produced some outstanding missionaries, such as Father Vacquerel, who built a brick and concrete bridge across the Mei River in Kaying, which is still in use today.

Another outstanding French missionary was Father Rey, who produced a monumental Hakka-French dictionary, which was a useful tool for missionaries of subsequent generations on both the mainland and Taiwan. It was used in conjunction with Father Maynard Murphy's homemade Hakka lessons at the Maryknoll language school in Taichung. Father Rey's dictionary was a godsend for the young student of Hakka in late 1960's Taiwan. Later, George Harkin, a former Maryknoller, produced the first published textbook for studying the Hakka dialect. Sad to say, there is no evidence of anyone studying the Hakka language today.

Maryknoll comes to the Hakka mission

Maryknoll, the popular name of the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America, was actually modeled on the Paris Foreign Mission Society when it was founded in 1911. Maryknoll's older brother in the China missions was founded 250 years earlier, in 1661. Maryknoll's founders, Fathers James A. Walsh and Thomas F. Price, had an unabashed admiration for the missionaries of the Paris Society.

Father Francis X. Ford, a member of the first group (comprising four members: Fathers Price, Walsh, Meyer and Ford) of Maryknoll Fathers sent out from the States to China in 1918, was assigned by the Maryknoll Superior, Father James Anthony Walsh, to Kaying in 1925. This was done with the agreement of the Paris Foreign Mission Society, with the view of eventually separating the Kaying area from the Swatow Vicariate, led by Bishop Adolphe Rayssac, MEP. This separation took place in 1929, when the Prefecture Apostolic of Kaying was established, with Francis X. Ford as the first prefect. Kaying was raised to the status of a Vicariate Apostolic in its own right in 1935. The first bishop was again Francis X. Ford.

Father Ford arrived in Kaying on October 4, 1925. In a letter to Father Superior James A. Walsh in New York, Father Ford expressed gratitude to the French missionaries for leaving him five fully outfitted missions. Everything in the churches and rectories was left completely intact, “even down to the bedding and tableware,” Father Ford wrote.

Bishop Ford's innovative catechesis

In 1935, the year Kaying became an Apostolic Vicariate, there were 10, 451 Catholics out of an estimated 2,600,000 in the whole mission territory. To instruct people in the faith, Bishop Ford practiced a method called the “centre catechumenate.” Catholics were urged to introduce their relatives and friends to a six-week course in the Catholic doctrine, which would take place at the Kaying cathedral twice a year. Anywhere from one dozen to 50 neophytes would attend these doctrine courses. The priests, Sisters and catechists instructed them. Many of the catechumens lived at the church compound because their homes were too far away to return to at night. At the end of the course, the attendees were free to accept, delay, or even refuse baptism.

Another method for attracting people, which was innovative for the Kaying mission, was for the Maryknoll Sisters to become involved in the direct apostolate. Bishop Ford encouraged the Sisters to leave their convents and to go out and live for periods of time among the people in the villages. The Sisters could stay in people's homes; it was not necessary to return to their convents at night. This method of visitation had a great influence on the non-Catholic women, because, due to daily chores, they could not so easily leave their homes to attend the centre catechumenate. On these mission journeys a female catechist usually accompanied the Sisters, and lessons in the faith could be given in private homes. Needless to say, the Maryknoll Sisters appreciated very much this method of direct evangelization.

Bishop Ford also expanded the number of parishes in the Kaying mission. He felt that more people would be attracted to the church if it were readily available to them. Thus from the original seven parishes in 1929 when Ford became prefect apostolic, the number of parishes expanded to 23 in 1941. With Bishop Ford's “direct methods,” the number of converts more than doubled by the

time the change of government took place in 1949-50. In 1950, the last year for which statistics are available, there were 22,819 Catholics in the Kaying Diocese. These resided in 26 parishes and were served by 17 Maryknoll Fathers, 19 Chinese priests (most of whom had come from dioceses in north China) and 16 Maryknoll Sisters. Kaying became a diocese, along with the other vicariates throughout China, when the Chinese hierarchy was set up in 1946.

Catholic communities today

Today there are flourishing communities of Catholics in such towns as Jiaoling, Soule (Xiaolok), Xingning, Wuhua, Longchuan, Fengshun, and Beidouzhai. However, there are only 4 priests to care for these communities: the three golden jubilarians and one young priest, a graduate of the Wuchang Seminary, ordained in 1991. And two more counties, separated from the Guangzhou diocese, have been added to the nine original counties of the Meixian Diocese.

There are also nine young Sisters, who took their first vows on December 8, 1996, who join the five golden jubilarian Sisters in the Meixian apostolate. There is a noticeable 30-40 year age gap between the young and the old pastoral workers. This phenomenon exists throughout the Catholic Church on the mainland.

Nevertheless, the indomitable Hakka spirit, the lively Catholic faith, and the grace of the Holy Spirit, are an unbeatable combination guaranteeing continued growth for the Christian community in the "Hakka Mission." And this community will be a great credit to the missionary forebears, both French and American, who lived for a time among them.

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