

The Christian Presence on Taiwan, 1625-2012

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There have been four distinct phases of Christianity in Taiwan. The first occurred in 1625 when the Dutch East India Company (in Dutch, the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, or VOC) established a military and commercial presence in a southwestern area of the island they called Zeelandia and the Chinese would call Taiwan. Pastors of the Dutch Reformed (Calvinist) Church accompanied the Dutch East India military men, merchants, and bureaucrats, to minister to their religious needs, but also to try to convert the island's people. Once the Dutch presence in Taiwan stabilized, a number of Dutch Reformed pastors sailed to southern Taiwan to evangelize among the Chinese community that had been evolving under the protection of the VOC, and, more importantly, among the plains aborigine tribes (yuanzhumin) in southwestern Taiwan. During their forty years on the island they were able to develop communities of believers primarily among these non-Han peoples.

The second phase of Christianity began two hundred and forty years later with the arrival of Presbyterian missionaries to Tainan in 1865, and ended in 1895 when the Japanese took the island from the Qing Dynasty as a spoil of war. In the mid-1860s British Presbyterian missionaries based in the southern Fujian city of Xiamen took advantage of the dramatic new opening of parts of China to establish a missionary presence in Tainan. A decade later missionaries from Ontario in Canada, led by George Leslie McKay, established a presence in Tamsui, a river town just north and west of the Taipei Basin.

The Presbyterians worked among the Minnan (Taiyu) population and also among the aborigine populations of the island's mountainous interior, who had been pushed out of the western coastal plains by the immigrant Han from Fujian and northern Guangdong. The aboriginal people, who came to be called shandiren, or mountain people, are the subject of most of Hu Tai-Li's documentaries.

Along with the Presbyterians, Catholic mission orders took advantage of the new Taiwanese Treaty Ports and established themselves in northern Taiwan, not far from where they had had a mission in the Dutch period, which the Dutch had taken over when they drove the Catholics out of the island. Both the Presbyterian Church and the Roman Catholic Church were able to develop a presence in the island despite local Han opposition.

The third period in Christian history, the era of Japanese colonialism, began in 1895. The Japanese attempted to make Taiwan the "perfect colony" of their empire in the making. Japanese military men, civilian administrators, and high-level businessmen were engaged in projects that involved both "regime change" and "nation building." They introduced a modern educational system that went up through high school, and built a university in the capital. They developed highways and railways up and down the island's western coastal plains. They introduced modern industries, building the foundation for the Taiwanese post-war developmental miracle. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, they reorganized agriculture in Taiwan, making it the breadbasket, or rice bowl, of Japan. The Japanese did not interfere with the Presbyterian or Roman Catholic work of evangelization, which included church planting, but also the provision of educational, medical, and social services to the Taiwanese. The Japanese looked upon

missionaries as kindred souls, being also modernizers and educators; therefore they allowed the churches to continue to operate primary, middle, and high schools for Taiwanese, and during much of Japanese rule the churches, with their seminaries and education network, were able to enjoy life as normal.

Two other churches were established in Taiwan during the Japanese era, the Holiness Church and the True Jesus Church. The Holiness Church, a product of the English-Methodist evangelical spirit, had adherents in Imperial Japan; in the 1910s this church moved to Taiwan and began its work in the city of Taichung on the western coast facing Fujian. Around the same time the True Jesus Church was founded by a number of Shandong men who heard the preaching of charismatic missionaries in north China. By the mid-1920s the True Jesus Church with its use of glossolalia and its Saturday as Sabbath (Sabbatarian) had spread to Fujian. From there it was a short, if dangerous, cross-strait voyage to Taiwan to plant this dynamic, charismatic church.

The fourth phase of Taiwanese Christianity began in 1945 and continues to this day. This phase began when the Nationalist government (the ROC) took over the island from Japan. The Christian presence grew; by the 1970s the Presbyterian Church and certain Catholic missionary orders were in conflict with the Nationalist government and its ruling party, the Kuomintang (Kuomintang, or KMT). The KMT were always wary of the Presbyterian Church of Taiwan (PCT). To counter its power and influence, they welcomed other missionary groups and churches that were active in China and had become targets of PRC repression. The result was a missionary invasion that transformed the Taiwanese Christian community.

One of the first of these mission bodies was the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). The Southern Baptists established themselves in Taipei and developed a network of churches that spread into the suburbs. The church grew among the mainlander community and in the 1950s bought land in a rural corner in the most southeastern section of the city, where they built a seminary complex. But the SBC did not evangelize in the Taiwanese community; this mistake would curtail their growth, and prove fatal to it.

Mainstream denominations such as the Methodists, the Anglicans, the Lutherans, and the Assemblies of God all sent missionaries to the island. For the most part, these missionaries worked among the people they knew best, the newly arrived mainlanders who had been part of or related to the KMT, or had been large-scale businessmen or financiers and fled in fear of Communist reprisals. In effect these new churches left the Taiwanese and Hakka communities, who had inhabited and developed the island since the 1620s, to the Presbyterians and indigenous and independent churches like the True Jesus Church.

In the first two decades of this missionary invasion there was a marked increase in the number of Christians in Taiwan, but by the mid-1960s there was a decided leveling off of church growth. Some scholar missionaries conducted research to discover the reasons for this leveling off, but although they published their findings, they could do little to halt the process. Yet the churches did grow in influence, if not in number of believers.

In the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the new millennium dramatic and important changes in Taiwan affected the nature of Taiwanese Christianity and the

larger Taiwanese religious systems. Christianity became a means of developing a relationship with 100,000,000 Chinese on the mainland. Links had been forged since 1987 when the PRC opened to the people of Taiwan, both waishenren (mainlander) and bendiren (Taiwanese). The strongest of the indigenous Taiwanese churches played a role in this process; church leaders such as Zhou Lianhua of the Southern Baptist Convention became key figures in this process of cross-strait interaction. Taiwanese churches were also part of the larger movement of charismatic and Holiness forms of American and European Christianity, participating in globalized religious traditions, while the Christian churches in Taiwan, especially the Presbyterians whose membership was fifty percent yuanzhumin, played an important role in the attempts of tribal peoples to gain higher status and more respect in Han-dominated Taiwan. A good proportion of Catholic and True Jesus congregations are also tribal people. The role of Christianity in the globalized and more integrated world culture is demonstrated in the Hu/Chen mixed media production; the story behind *Returning Souls* was due in part to the impact and influence of the Christian movements on tribal people such as the Amis.