PART THREE

The Cross of Communism:  
So Near and Yet So Far

While serving in Taiwan, although we were just ninety miles off the southern coast of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), we may as well have been nine thousand miles away. Because of the Nationalist Government of Taiwan’s total censorship of outside news regarding the People’s Republic, we knew less of what was really transpiring on the mainland than most other people in the world. Even magazines like Time and Newsweek were censored. Photos of Mao Tse-tung and other PRC leaders were consistently blacked out. Reports and analytical articles about events and policy in the People’s Republic were excised. If Mao or the People’s Republic was featured, the magazines would not show up in our mailbox at all. When our family arrived in Taiwan in 1969, China was still locked in the massive upheaval of “The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.” However, we only learned about it through the distorted lens of the Nationalist propaganda machine. Even when, as president, Richard Nixon paid his surprise rapprochement visit to the People’s Republic in 1972, we and our Taiwanese compatriots were told
only that he had arrived, and then that he had left, with no additional commentary whatsoever. Our focus was on Taiwan, but we were beginning to wonder what things were really like in China, particularly for whatever Christians might be left there.

Things improved when we arrived in Hong Kong in 1974. A lot more reliable and balanced news and commentary about mainland China was available there. The media was not censored, and foreign magazines and newspapers were readily available, whatever they said about the People’s Republic. Nevertheless, China’s own censorship and isolation from the rest of the world was such that reliable information was not easy to come by. Even from the vantage point of China’s doorstep, the country still remained largely enigmatic. For example, although the worst excesses of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) had been curbed, things were still boiling on the mainland, but it was difficult to know what was really going on. Ironically, one could stand atop a hill at Lok Ma Chau and look over into rural China or ride the Hong Kong Canton Railway to the last stop before the border, but that’s as far as most foreigners could go.

The tiny Portuguese enclave of Macao was the other “gateway to China,” but that impressive border gate was closed as well to all but a few select foreigners. China had peacefully granted the tip of a peninsula and two small outlying islands to the Portuguese in 1450 as a trading post. Although Macao was still theoretically governed by Portugal, the Cultural Revolution had spilled over into the enclave in 1967, and hard core Chinese Communists had seized the real levers of power and manipulated them behind the scenes.

Our family first visited Macao, a forty-mile ferry ride from Hong Kong, in the summer of 1975. An impressive gate (which reminded me of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris), guarded by Portuguese and Chinese soldiers on their respective sides, straddled the narrow neck of the peninsular border between the People’s Republic and Macao. However, things were so tense at the time that no photographs of the gate were allowed. Indeed, our taxi was not even allowed to stop anywhere near the gate in order for us to get a good look at it. Our savvy taxi driver did, however, drive us to a small, concealed vantage point from which we could photograph Chinese border guards in their pillboxes without their being aware of it.

When we rode a small ferry that plied the waters between the main town and the two Portuguese islands, Taipa and Coloane, security personnel patrolled a wooden ledge running around its exterior to make sure that nobody even photographed the Chinese shoreline. Our
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destination was a small church on Coloane named after Francis Xavier, the legendary Jesuit “apostle to the East.”¹ The church contained the prized relic of his ulna bone, along with the remains of many Vietnamese martyrs. Francis died on the nearby small island of Shang Chuan in 1552 without ever realizing his great dream of evangelizing China. It is said that he once stood overlooking the Chinese shoreline exclaiming, “O great rock, when will you crack!?” Three hundred years later, we had a similar feeling. It was our hope that someday we would be able to pass through the Macao gate, enter the “Middle Kingdom,” and find and encourage our Christian brothers and sisters there.

Our primary focus was, of course, Hong Kong and our mission there, but the Reformed Church had also asked me to assess events in the People’s Republic and interpret them for the denomination. After all, Reformed Church missionaries had been in mission in China for more than a century, until the expulsion of its last missionaries in 1950-51, and there was still a lot of interest in that great land, particularly in the fate of its Christians. So I joined the host of other China watchers in Hong Kong and gleaned what we could from the media and other sources. The British were also intensely interested in what was happening on the other side of the border, of course, since events there affected life in their colony directly for good or ill. They had an enormous electronic listening post that monitored electronic communication within China. The United States also eavesdropped on the People’s Republic through offshore ships bristling with electronic gear and through its Hong Kong Consulate—the largest one in the world. It too was crammed with

¹ Francis Xavier (1506-1552), a great pioneer Jesuit missionary, was instrumental in the conversion of 700,000 people and in the planting of many churches in India, the Malay Peninsula, the Molucca Islands, Sri Lanka, and Japan.
electronic listening devices and with China specialists. Although these people were normally very tightlipped about what they had gleaned, neighbors and church members engaged in these activities occasionally shared confidential information.

And then there was our neighboring Communist secondary school. As long as local Communists adhered to government educational standards and did not actively teach seditious ideas or foment seditious activities, the British administration tolerated their privately run schools. From the balcony of our apartment on Happy View Terrace in Happy Valley, we could look right down on the school’s premises, where a huge PRC flag flew from a giant pole.

The school was a microcosm of the political drama unfolding across the border. During the waning years of the Cultural Revolution, it resembled a Red Guards training center. Colorful political slogans featuring the sayings of Chairman Mao were displayed prominently on playground boards. All announcements were made and classes conducted in Mandarin Chinese, even though the great majority of the students were Cantonese speakers. Every morning students dressed in drab Communist style uniforms stood in silent lines to salute the raising of the PRC flag, sing the national anthem, listen to a political harangue, and then engage in calisthenics in time to martial music. There were no social activities or sounds of music or laughter at the school. That would be too bourgeois. It was obvious that everything the students learned and experienced had one goal—to support Chairman Mao and the Chinese Communist revolution.

As the Cultural Revolution wound down, the “Great Helmsman,” died, Deng Xiao-peng and his moderates came to power, the “Four Modernizations Movement” was launched, and China once again opened its doors to the West, it was amazing to watch the gradual transformation at the school. Student uniforms became more colorful. The propaganda boards and martial music disappeared. Laughter and conversation could be heard during morning exercises. Social events, like outdoor barbecues, commenced. By the mid-eighties, the students had begun playing classical music and singing popular songs. One Christmas, we were astounded to hear them singing Christmas carols and playing sections of Handel’s Messiah, but that is getting ahead of the story.

The neighborhood took the name of a famous race course that was its main feature, where people went in droves to “get happy” by enjoying the races, gambling huge sums on the horses, and hoping to strike it rich.
The more we learned about China, about the long history of the Christian church there, and about the Reformed Church’s involvement in that history, the keener we became to visit that great land and see for ourselves. However, at that time, China was still a closed door to all but a few select foreigners, and it was particularly closed to Americans. President Nixon’s 1972 visit had opened that door a crack, but not a crack wide enough for ordinary Americans like us to slip through. I remember riding the Kowloon Canton Railway to Seung-tsui, obeying the announcement ordering all passengers who were not proceeding to China off the train, watching the train disappear into the distance with a handful of passengers, and thinking to myself, “Someday, I hope I will be able to stay on that train.” The opportunity to do just that would come sooner than I expected.

**The Middle Kingdom**

*History*

Meanwhile, we continued to keep our eyes and ears open and read as much as we could about China. We learned that the ancestors of the Chinese people first developed primitive settlements in the Yellow River area some three thousand years before the birth of Christ. From there, they slowly spread out across the vast reaches of what would eventually become one of the largest empires the world would ever see. Although there was no extant historical evidence to substantiate it, Chinese lore held that an ancient dynasty, the Hsia (2000-1500 B.C.), became the first to wield imperial power over a comparatively small
area in northern China. Oracle bones witnessed to the fact that the next
dynasty, the Shang (1700-1027 B.C.), was rooted in verifiable history.\(^3\) That dynasty succeeded in extending its rule over much of the northern
part of present-day China. Although there were occasional periods
of political chaos in China, ten dynasties ruled the country for most
of the next three millennia. The first emperor credited with unifying
the country under one central government with one written system of
communication was the despotic Qin Shi-huang. Although short lived
(221-207 B.C.), the Chin dynasty extended its rule over much of what
would eventually constitute China proper and established the basic
foundations upon which the Chinese nation would be built. It had also
constructed much of the fabled “Great Wall.”

China was only invaded twice, both times from the north. The
Mongols subjugated the country under Genghis Khan’s grandson,
Kublai Khan (1215-1294 A.D.), and greatly extended the country’s
borders. The Manchus did the same in 1644 A.D. and eventually
extended China’s boundaries to their greatest extent. However, unlike
traditional conquests in other lands, the conquerors did not destroy
the culture or the systems of the conquered. Instead, they adapted, and
in many cases adopted, Chinese ways to the point where their dynasties
(the Yuan and the Qing) were not considered aberrations of Chinese
history, but integral parts of it. Some dynasties, like the Han (206
B.C.-220 A.D.), the Tang (618-907 A.D.), the Yuan (1279-1368 A.D.),
and the Qing (1644-1911 A.D.) were basically progressive and open to
the outside world both in terms of trade and ideas. Others, like the Sui
(581-617 A.D.), the Song (960-1279 A.D.), and the Ming (1368-1644
A.D.), were xenophobic and more or less walled China off from the rest
of the world. This pattern of alternating between opening and closing
to the outside world had characterized Chinese history throughout the
ages and persisted to modern times.\(^4\)

China’s name (meaning “Central,” or “Middle,” Kingdom) was no
accident. It reflected a deeply ingrained concept that China was at the
center of the world. Early in its history, China developed the concept
of what in the Western world would be known as the “divine right”
of kings. The emperor was the “Son of Heaven,” who ruled by divine

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\(^3\) Oracle bones are fragments of bone or the underside of turtle shells on which
primitive Chinese characters were scratched and used for divination.

\(^4\) For a practical guide to China’s history, see Justin Wintle, *The Timeline History of
China: A Chronological Guide to Dates, People, and Events* (New York: Barnes & Noble,
2005). For an authoritative analysis of China’s history, see John K. Fairbank, *China:
right (as long as he ruled rightly). His throne was the literal center of the universe, from which he ruled over the Chinese nation. All other nations were peripheral, their people regarded as inferior barbarians.\(^5\) It was expected that the barbarians would show deference to the Son of Heaven and confer gifts upon him.\(^6\) Nevertheless, this notion did not translate itself into aggression. Throughout its long history, China has been a basically peaceful nation that has never launched a bid for world domination.

It is no wonder that the Chinese developed an ethnocentric perspective. In the West, the Sumerians, the Akkadians, the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, and the Ottomans had all built empires that had eventually fallen. In the East, the Mongols, the Moguls, the Burmese, the Khmers, and the Majapahit had fared no better. In the Americas, the Mayan, the Inca, and the Aztec empires had likewise passed away. Even modern European and Asian colonial empires had all but vanished. Only the Chinese empire had persisted from antiquity. When Europe, Japan, and Korea were still in diapers, China was a powerful, learned, prosperous, and scientifically advanced civilization. The Chinese were skilled in

\(^{5}\) When the great sixteenth-century Jesuit China missionary and cartographer, Matteo Ricci, was asked by Emperor Kang-xi to draw him a map of the contemporary world, Ricci wisely placed China in the middle of the map.

\(^{6}\) Interestingly enough, this concept proved to be a drain on the imperial treasury. When foreign emissaries would present gifts to the Chinese emperor, not to be outdone, he would lavish even greater gifts upon them—what might be termed the “Solomon and Sheba syndrome.”
astronomy, hydrology, chronology, mathematics, silk production, and agriculture. They developed gunpowder, paper, the compass, the abacus, movable type, and a host of other significant scientific breakthroughs. They also developed a sophisticated civil service, monetary system, and education system. For example, a boy from a peasant village could in theory work his way up through the Confucian examination system to the very top of both the academic and public service realms.

China also had a rich spiritual heritage. Its early folk religion, with an emphasis on pantheism, ancestor worship, and filial piety, was incorporated by China’s premier sage, Confucius (551-479 B.C.), into a national philosophical ethos that underpinned the spiritual and social life of the nation for more than two millennia. Lao Tzu (sixth century B.C.), another seminal philosopher, balanced Confucius’s emphasis on social order and conformity with his Taoist concepts of harmony, love, and serendipity. Buddhism, an import from India at the time of Christ, was adopted, adapted, and woven into China’s spiritual warp and woof. Chinese pragmatism and materialism was tempered by the Buddhist emphasis on withdrawal, meditation, and the world to come. Christianity, with its emphasis on service, suffering, and sacrifice for the sake of the kingdom of God, was introduced in the seventh century and waxed and waned over the centuries. Islam, with its emphasis on spiritual discipline, arrived with Arab seafarers in the thirteenth century and made its own impact on a significant minority of the population.7

Chinese culture had flowered or faded over the millennia depending on the strength and policies of the particular dynasty in power, but overall, China developed one of the richest cultures the world has ever seen. The Chinese excelled in every area of cultural development. Chinese painting was unsurpassed. Even the written language itself was developed into an art form over the centuries. Calligraphic symbols were developed into thousands of intricate characters that communicated feelings, values, and ideas. Chinese poetry, philosophy, and literature rivaled the best that other cultures could produce. Music, opera, and drama flourished, with the Chinese inventing their own scale and their own unique musical instruments. Wood, rock, and ivory carving were taken to heights that were practically impossible to duplicate,

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7 By 2010, it was estimated that 48 percent of China’s people professed no religious belief, 22 percent were adherents of folk religion, 21 percent were Buddhist, 7 percent were Christian, and 2 percent were Muslim. “China’s Faith at a Glance,” American Bible Society Record, Spring/Summer 2010, 15.
particularly when it came to jade. The Chinese developed numerous types of pottery, ceramics, and metallurgy. Over the centuries, they also experimented with every conceivable edible substance and developed a world-famous cuisine that in its taste and presentation was a work of art in its own right. The development of chopsticks turned eating itself into a kind of art form. Chinese teas became legendary. A multiplicity of ethnic backgrounds produced a plethora of beautiful Chinese dances and costumes. Chinese acrobats perfected unbelievable physical feats, while their magicians did likewise with the art of deception.  

Facts and Figures

Over the centuries, China expanded to become a vast country—the fourth largest in the world, a bit smaller than the United States. However, by 1977, its population had grown to almost five times that of the United States—800 million people! Ninety percent of that population was rural, and 92 percent was made up of Han Chinese.

The remaining eight percent was comprised of fifty-five ethnic groups, most of them living around the western and northern borders with fourteen countries, including India, Burma, Laos, Vietnam, Mongolia, Russia, and North Korea. The country was divided

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9 By the end of 2010, it had increased to one billion, three hundred forty million.
into twenty-two provinces,\(^{10}\) five autonomous regions,\(^{11}\) and two municipalities.\(^{12}\)

Although Mandarin was standardized and declared China’s official language in 1932, the Chinese people spoke fifty-five other sublanguages and more than twenty-five hundred dialects. China was endowed with high mountain ranges, crisscrossed by huge rivers, and dotted with deserts. As its people had spread out from north to south, and east to west over the centuries, they had become isolated from one another by these natural barriers and evolved a plethora of dialects. Only the written characters, which could be transmitted on paper and read by anybody no matter how different his or her pronunciation might be, had held the country together.

China’s land area was comprised of almost six million square miles, but less than 15 percent of that land was arable, since a significant portion was covered by mountains and deserts; therefore, China had to feed 22 percent of the world’s population with only 7 percent of the world’s arable land. In order to do that, Chinese farmers practiced some of the most intensive farming methods in the world. Wheat was the principle crop in the north, while rice was grown throughout the rest of the country, with two and even three crops a year being harvested in the extreme south. When I first visited China 1977, farming methods and equipment were still antiquated, and the enforced collectivization had stifled motivation. At that time, most of China’s farm work was done by human and animal power. Very few farmers had mechanized equipment of any kind. Horses and mules did most of the work in the north, while water buffalo were used in the rice paddies in the south. When peasants were too poor to own work animals, they harnessed themselves to primitive plows and carts and strained to produce the same results. China’s industrial development had also been slow. In 1977 most modern industry was still concentrated in only a few major cities along the southeastern coast.

China’s climate is as varied as its topography. There are large arid deserts in the northwest, beautiful scenic mountain ranges in the heartland, fertile plains along the eastern seaboard, and semitropical jungles in the southeast as well as on Hainan Island off the southern coast. People in the north may experience fairly severe winters, while

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\(^{10}\) Not counting Taiwan, which is also claimed by the PRC.

\(^{11}\) Border areas mainly occupied by minorities who were allowed to practice their own customs. However, these regions were as tightly controlled politically as the rest of the PRC.

\(^{12}\) The major cities of Shanghai and Beijing, the capital.
people in the south live with very hot and humid weather most of the year. Rainfall varies from practically zero in the desert areas to torrential downpours in the southeast. China is prone to earthquakes. It is also typically lashed by typhoons along the southeastern coast from July through October, which sometimes cause major flooding and landslides. Millions of people live along the great rivers of China—the Yellow (Huang He), the Yangtze (Chang Jiang), and the Pearl (Xi Jiang). Periodic flooding, particularly along the Yellow River (traditionally referred to as “China’s sorrow”), used to take thousands of lives each year and bring untold misery to millions. However, the Communists, through mass labor, had built dike and dam systems that had largely eliminated this problem and that had also generated a considerable amount of electricity.\footnote{However, in time the hasty and shoddy construction methods used by undertrained personnel made many of these projects obsolete and unstable. By 2008, the largest dam project the world had ever seen was completed on the Yangtze River at Yi Chang in Hubei Province. First envisioned by Sun Yat-sen, the construction of such a dam had been the dream of every Chinese leader since. Millions of people were resettled away from the river so as to enable the vast amount of water backed up by the huge Three Gorges Dam to cover the areas where they used to live. This unprecedented prestige project was controversial in terms of engineering, ecological impact, and sociological cost.}

China has one of the greatest diversifications of fauna and flora in the world, with more than 4,400 species of vertebrates, more than 10 percent of the world’s total. These include nearly 500 animal species, 1,189 species of birds, more than 320 species of reptiles, and 210 species of amphibians. China is home to more than 2,000 species of edible plants and 3,000 species of medicinal plants, including a wide variety of flowering plants. During the flowering season, mountain slopes are
covered with flowers in a riot of colors that form a beautiful contrast with undulating ridges and peaks. In an effort to protect its zoological and botanical resources, and to save species close to extinction, China established its first nature preserve in 1956 and, by 1977, had added a number of others.\textsuperscript{14}