SUPPORTING ASIAN CHRISTIANITY’S TRANSITION FROM MISSION TO CHURCH

A History of the Foundation for Theological Education in South East Asia

Samuel C. Pearson, Editor
The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America

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Contents

Abbreviations ix
Foreword xi
Preface xiii
Introduction 1

1 Nanking Theological Seminary and its Board of Founders 7
2 Working amid the Chaos of War 51
3 Postwar Rebuilding in Nanjing 93
4 Expanding Programs into South East Asia 153
5 The Foundation for Theological Education in South East Asia 219
6 Adjusting to a Postcolonial Era in South East Asia 267
7 Relationships with Nanjing Union Theological Seminary and China after Liberation 319
8 The Association for Theological Education in South East Asia, 1959-2002: A Pilgrimage in Theological Education By Michael Nai Chiu Poon 363

Conclusion 403
Bibliography 413
Appendix 1 Timeline of the Association 417
Appendix 2 Officers of the Association 431
Index 433
Foreword

More than seventy years of history of the Board of Founders of Nanking Theological Seminary and its successor, the Foundation for Theological Education in South East Asia (FTESEA), is succinctly narrated in this monograph, Supporting Asian Christianity’s Transition from Mission to Church: A History of the Foundation for Theological Education in South East Asia, prepared by Dr. Samuel Pearson. The monograph also includes a chapter on the Association for Theological Education in South East Asia by Dr. Michael Poon. The authors provide a valuable source of information to all those who are interested in theological education in the Protestant churches in China and South East Asia.

During the ministry period of the Board of Founders and FTESEA, Asia has gone through radical changes in the political, social, and religious arenas that challenged the organizations continually to examine their operational style and to respond to new forms of relationship with the schools they served.

The growth and vitality of Christianity in the southern hemisphere during the second half of the twentieth century has received much attention from all those who are interested in contemporary Christianity. China and South East Asian countries demonstrate
similar vitality. However, the ethos of Christianity that is experienced in Asia has moved beyond the conventional forms of Christian faith that was brought from Europe and North America. The attempts to form united and unifying Protestant churches, along with the quest to indigenize Christianity, have motivated Asian Christians to draw from the local religious and cultural ethos as they practice Christianity and to root their Christian faith in an Asian context. Meanwhile, Asian theologians are also open to new forms of Christianity that are developed and brought from outside the continent.

Furthermore, the presence of a wide variety of Christian communities in a multiethnic and multireligious environment poses challenges for the task of preparing leaders for Christian witness in Asia. FTESEA and its preceding Board of Founders have been constantly attentive to the need for contextual ministerial training and theological reflection. The carefully captured contours of this effort in this monograph will provide a great help to the ongoing engagement of FTESEA in theological education in South East Asia and China.

FTESEA is greatly indebted to Drs. Pearson and Poon for their contributions. Our special thanks are also due to Dr. Charles Forman, Dr. Charles West, Dr. Yeow Choo Lak, and Dr. Wenh-In Ng, who read the manuscript and made valuable suggestions to its authors. The tireless effort of the executive directors, Dr. Marvin Hoff and Dr. H.S. Wilson, in bringing this task into completion is much appreciated.

FTESEA records its thanks to Dr. Donald Bruggink, general editor of the Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, and his colleagues for their help in publishing and marketing this book.

Benjamin Chan
Chair, FTESEA
May 2010
The study which follows is based upon minutes of annual meetings of the Board of Founders of Nanking Theological Seminary/Foundation for Theological Education in South East Asia, papers of individuals who were members of that organization or who participated in its varied activities, earlier histories, and recollections of individuals prominent in the story. For most of the history of the Board of Founders, no one served as archivist and no efforts were made to deposit papers in an archive, a situation remedied in 1999 when the Yale Divinity School agreed to become a repository of the records. Because the Board of Founders received the Swope–Wendel legacy through the United Methodist Church, some papers relevant to the history exist at the church’s headquarters in New York and in the Methodist Archives at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey; but these are largely mixed with other church records, and researchers for this history have had only limited access to them.

Chapters concerning Nanking Theological Seminary during World War II and its aftermath were heavily dependent on the papers of Abbe Livingstone Warnshuis, which are located at Union Theological
Seminary in New York. Long a member of the Board of Founders, Warnshuis retained many of its papers, including mimeographed copies of letters from Nanking seminary faculty members in Chengdu and lengthy letters from C. Stanley Smith describing discussions and actions taken at various seminary meetings, which always accompanied the recommendations forwarded to the Board of Founders from the seminary. These documents included extensive discussion of thoughts, plans, and ideas that led to specific actions.

Unfortunately, few records for the period around the time of the Communist victory in the Chinese civil war survive. Therefore, letters written by Western faculty members after they departed China, accounts subsequently published in *Tian Feng*, a journal of the China Christian Council, and later recollections of participants have provided the limited resources for an examination of this period. The library of China’s National Christian Council, hidden at the time of the Cultural Revolution, remained intact and is now in the custody of the East China Theological Seminary (Huadong Shen Xueyuan) in Shanghai. This collection has been catalogued but, unfortunately, is not currently open to scholars. It may provide useful information for subsequent studies of Nanking Seminary and its earliest relations with the Board of Founders.

When the Board of Founders extended its work into South East Asia, C. Stanley Smith became its first regional representative. He submitted lengthy written accounts of his trips, and he assessed requests for funding and forwarded them to the Board of Founders in New York. With Sidney Anderson he visited many of the Protestant theological institutions in South East Asia in 1952 and produced the vividly descriptive *Anderson–Smith Report on Theological Education in Southeast Asia*.\(^1\) Documentation for the more recent period is limited. However, after becoming executive director of the FTESEA in 1977, Marvin Hoff made frequent visits to the region and the institutions there that the foundation aided. From 1982, those visits were extended into China. Hoff’s extensive reports on these trips to the region were generally appended to the minutes of the annual meetings.\(^2\)

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2. Additional information regarding Hoff’s observations of the Chinese church can be found in Marvin Hoff, ed., *Chinese Theological Education, 1979-2006*, Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, no. 61 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).
The problem of transliteration of Chinese names into English is complicated by the general use of the Wade–Giles system until the 1950s, when the new government of China introduced the Pinyin system there. All of the older documents used the earlier system, and all of the new ones from China use the new. With regard to place names, I have used the Pinyin spelling wherever possible, indicating the older spelling when the name first appears in the text. All references to Formosa have been changed to Taiwan, the preferred usage today. With respect to personal names, the Romanization is that which appeared in the original text and apparently was the choice of the subject, as few Hanzi (Chinese characters) ever appeared in these materials. Thus Nanjing Seminary personnel with the Chinese name Li appear as president Handel Lee and Dean Li Tien-lu.

South East Asia was still undergoing the process of decolonization when the Board of Founders first began its work there, but in the interest of clarity only current names and spellings of countries and cities are used. The few references to Siam have been changed to Thailand. Generally I have used the name Burma rather than Myanmar except where the context argues for the alternate terminology. Again, South East Asian personal names are reproduced as they appeared in the original documents. Unnecessary titles have been eliminated except where required to establish gender identity.

Finally, the history of this book, like the history of the foundation itself, is a complex one involving the work of many people. In the 1980s, an early effort was made by the executive director and members of the board to document aspects of the foundation’s history through a search of files in its office as well as relevant materials in the archives of the General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church. Subsequently, Charles W. Forman, professor of missions at Yale Divinity School and a long-term member of the FTESEA, who had chaired the board for more than twenty years, undertook the writing of a history. However, Forman found that other commitments made it impossible for him to complete the project, and in 1997 the foundation entered into a contract with a historian who had written previously on related topics for additional research and a written history. That historian engaged in a thorough and careful exploration of sources and produced a lengthy manuscript. However, after six of the foundation’s trustees read the manuscript and offered suggestions for revising it, the historian and the foundation found that they could not agree on revisions. The manuscript therefore became the property of the foundation, and the historian asked to remain anonymous. At that
point I accepted a contract to complete the manuscript, to consider revisions in light of the readers’ comments, and to prepare the book for publication. Some of this text is entirely my work; much of it is the work of others edited and revised in light of my understanding of the story of the foundation. I am profoundly appreciative of that earlier work, as I am of the chapter on the Association for Theological Education in South East Asia that was written by Michael Nai Chiu Poon. All of these people contributed significantly to the successful completion of this project. I appreciate the help received from many librarians and am especially grateful to Martha Smalley and Joan Duffy of the Yale Divinity School Library and to Ruth Tonkiss Cameron and Seth Kasten of Burke Library of Union Theological Seminary in New York for their unfailing assistance to me as I worked through the records of Nanjing Seminary, the Board of Founders, and the Foundation for Theological Education in South East Asia.

For me this project was a very personal one. I am a specialist in the history of Christianity in modern Europe and America, but I have spent eight years teaching in China, including two years at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary. Therefore I know, either personally or by reputation, many of the people whose names appear in these pages. I have also witnessed some of the results of the work of the foundation in contemporary China and in South East Asia. I hope this experience has enabled me to bring greater clarity to the history of the foundation.

Samuel C. Pearson