

People-Specific LDS Outreach Case Studies

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LDS Outreach among the Chinese of Southeast Asia

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Overview

The Chinese constitute the largest ethnic minority group in most Southeast Asian countries. Originating from present-day China and predominantly of Han descent, Chinese populations resettled in Southeast Asia in several different waves beginning in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The degree to which Chinese migrants have assimilated into mainstream society over the past decades and centuries has depended by country, with the highest assimilation occurring in Thailand. There are 10 countries in Southeast Asia where ethnic Chinese comprise at least one percent of the national population. The CIA World Factbook and other sources report that Chinese comprise 76.8% of the population in Singapore, 23.7% in Malaysia, 14% in Thailand, 11.2% in Brunei, 3.0% in Burma and Indonesia, 2.8% in Laos, 1.4% in Vietnam, 1.3% in the Philippines,[1] and 1.0% percent in Cambodia. Ethnic Chinese populations in Southeast Asia comprise 5.2% of the regional population, or about 32.5 million people. Today Chinese in Southeast Asia are generally merchants and businessmen who constitute the upper socioeconomic classes in most countries. Chinese control sizable amounts of the private economy throughout the region.

The LDS Church extends some Chinese-specific outreach in Southeast Asia. Chinese-designated congregations function in Singapore and Malaysia and Chinese-speaking full-time missionaries serve in both countries. Although the Church has made some progress in establishing the Church among Southeast Asian Chinese populations, opportunities for missionary work remain only a fraction of their potential.

This case study reviews LDS missionary activity among the Chinese in Southeast Asia and highlights successes, opportunities, and challenges for future growth. A comparative growth section compares Chinese-targeted LDS proselytism efforts to LDS proselytism endeavors among other ethnicities with sizable populations scattered throughout the world and to the progress achieved by other outreach-oriented Christian groups. A future prospects section predicts LDS growth trends among the Chinese of Southeast Asia in regards to opportunities and challenges for growth.

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LDS Background

LDS outreach among the Chinese of Southeast Asia began in Singapore. Proselytism efforts among the Chinese primarily began after 1980 although the first church meetings in Singapore were held in the early 1960s among British military personnel. In late 2012, the Church operated one Chinese-designated ward (Singapore 2nd) that appeared to service monolingual Mandarin Chinese speakers and six additional wards (Ang Mo Kio, Bedok, Choa Chu Kang, Clementi, Toa Payoh, and Woodlands) that were conducted in English but appeared to service ethnic Chinese who were bilingual in a Chinese language and English. The Church also operates two English-designated wards (Singapore 1st and Singapore 4th) and one Tagalog-designated ward (Singapore 3rd) that service the non-Chinese Singaporean population.

In Malaysia, the Church began Chinese-specific outreach in the late 2000s. In 2009, the Church organized its first Chinese-speaking branch in Malaysia in Sibu. In late 2012, the Church operated two additional congregations (Sitiawan and Miri) that were designated as Chinese speaking or that had sizable numbers of Chinese members.

There has been no reported LDS proselytism efforts specifically targeting Chinese in Thailand, Brunei, Burma, Indonesia, Laos, Vietnam, the Philippines, or Cambodia. Local members report that Indonesia is the only country without specialized missionary programs for Chinese that has sizable numbers of Chinese members. Members in Indonesia report that ethnic Chinese can be found in all but a few of the wards and branches in Indonesia.

Successes

The Church extends Chinese-specific outreach in the two Southeast Asian countries where ethnic Chinese comprise more than one-fifth of the population. In Singapore, the Church has established a strong stake primarily comprised of ethnic Chinese members and staffed by Chinese leaders. At present, the Church in Hong Kong and Taiwan are the only other locations where the Church has organized predominantly Chinese stakes. In Malaysia, the Church has mobilized Chinese-speaking missionaries in several cities and operates at least two Chinese-speaking congregations. There are at least three cities with Chinese-speaking missionary companionships (Miri, Sibu, and Sitiawan) where the Church has established a small Chinese Malaysian community. Notwithstanding missionaries reporting that receptivity to the LDS Church among Chinese is lower than other ethnicities that missionaries are permitted to teach, the Church has achieved higher convert retention and member activity rates among Chinese in Singapore and Malaysia compared to other indigenous ethnic groups in these countries. Local leadership development has also experienced good success. All group leaders and branch presidents for Chinese-designated congregations are local Chinese members. In Indonesia, the Church has successfully baptized and retaining Chinese members in most congregations notwithstanding no specialized proselytism efforts. Fluency in standard Indonesian appears to have facilitated missionary efforts among Chinese in Indonesia notwithstanding no Chinese-speaking or Chinese-designated missionaries in the country.

Opportunities

Some of the greatest opportunities for growth among ethnic Chinese are in countries where the Church has not initiated Chinese-specific outreach. In the Philippines, the Church faces no government restrictions on proselytism and has developed a significant presence in most major cities where the majority of Chinese Filipinos reside. As many Chinese Filipinos are bilingual in the local Philippine language of the city wherein they reside, the Church has likely not extended Chinese-directed outreach in the country due to few language barriers with the non-Chinese Filipino population. The primary need and opportunity for initiating Chinese-specific outreach in the Philippines centers on establishing a culturally compatible environment where Chinese Filipinos can associate with fellow Chinese and socialize at Church. Chinese-designated congregations can also improve outreach potential. Most Chinese Filipinos are Christians, providing greater ease in utilizing missionary lessons that are tailored to individuals with a Christian background.

Chinese populations in a few Southeast Asian countries have significant numbers of Christians and weaker ethnoreligious ties to Buddhism and traditional Chinese religions than among indigenous Chinese populations in China, Taiwan, or Hong Kong. In the Philippines, over 80% of ethnic Chinese are Christian[2] whereas approximately one-third of Chinese in Indonesian are Christian[3] and 11% of Chinese in Malaysia are Christian.[4] The sizable percentage of Christians among Chinese in these countries provide good opportunities for LDS missionary activity among those who have a Christian background. However, these communities may create greater challenges than reaching non-Christian Chinese if there is a strong ethnic tie to a particular Christian denomination or if prominent Christian groups among Chinese teach that the LDS Church is heretical.

The steady growth of the LDS Church in mainland China among Chinese nationals provides excellent opportunities for expanding proselytism efforts among Chinese populations in Southeast Asia. The first male full-time missionary who was a Chinese national completed his mission in 2006 and by 2010 there were approximately 100 Chinese nationals that had served or were serving full-time missions. Due to government restrictions prohibiting the assignment of full-time missionaries in mainland China, the Church must assign Chinese nationals who serve full-time missions elsewhere, most notably the United States, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and Western Europe. The assignment of some mainland Chinese full-time missionaries to missions throughout Southeast Asia with the task to proselyte local Chinese communities may be an effective method to reaching Chinese populations in the region. The Church may also assign Chinese members from Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, the United States, Australia, and Canada to provide ethnic-specific outreach utilizing Chinese missionaries.

Some of the greatest opportunities for Chinese church planting is in Malaysia as it is the country with the highest percentage of Chinese outside of Singapore, it is one of the only countries where the Church has established congregations most major cities with sizable Chinese populations, and the Church has been able to augment the size of the full-time missionary force with little difficulty from government and civic authorities. The administrative states with the highest percentage of Chinese are concentrated on the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia. Missionaries report that the class system prevents Chinese investigators and members from attending church with non-Chinese and non-Europeans. The refusal of many Chinese from associating with other indigenous ethnicities appears as a challenge for church growth in Malaysia but offers good opportunities to accelerate missionary activity and church growth by establishing Chinese-specific groups. Opening segregated congregations provides a culturally-appropriate method of extending outreach to the Malaysian population and can maximize outreach potential through church planting. The growth of the Church among the Chinese in Malaysia also provides greater long-term stability for the Church than many other ethnic groups due to their high socioeconomic status and historically higher member activity rates in the region.

Challenges

Government regulations on religious freedom pose challenges for initiating Chinese-specific outreach in five countries in Southeast Asia. The Church does not assign proselytizing missionaries to three countries in the region (Brunei, Burma, and Laos) due to government restrictions but does operate a branch or group in all three of these countries. Prospects for any

Chinese-directed outreach in Brunei, Burma, and Laos entirely relies on the efforts of local members acting within the confides of the law. Government and societal conditions prohibit or dissuade LDS missionaries from open proselytism (street contacting, door-to-door tracting) in Indonesia and Vietnam. As of late 2012, only ethnic Vietnamese members may serve as full-time missionaries in Vietnam.

The Church extends extremely limited outreach in most of Southeast Asia, reducing the scope of LDS proselytism. LDS congregations reach less than 20% of the population of all countries in the region with the exception of Singapore (100%), the Philippines (50%), and Malaysia (26%). Coincidentally, the Church extends Chinese-specific outreach only in countries where LDS units operate in locations populated by at least 25% of the national population and where ethnic Chinese comprise at least 20% of the national population. The Church will likely not make significant headway among ethnic Chinese populations in other countries until the Church has established a significantly larger national presence in individual countries and larger amounts of indigenous mission resources are developed.

Receptivity to the LDS Church among Chinese populations in Southeast Asia is often considerably lower than among other ethnic groups. Many Chinese have not been attracted to the LDS Church due to their strong ties to traditional Christian denominations, effluent social status, and lifestyle focused on preserving family tradition and achieving success in business and trade. Missionary programs may benefit from teaching resources and approaches tailored to nominal Christians and secular populations when working with Chinese in Southeast Asia.

Comparative Growth

The Church has initiated Chinese-specific outreach or targeted Chinese individuals in many areas of the world outside of China and Taiwan. The only other languages into which the Church conducts proselytism efforts on a worldwide scale are English and Spanish. In the United States and Canada, the Church has several missions with active Chinese programs and Chinese-speaking units such as in California, Ontario, and New York. In Australia, the Church operates several Chinese-designated units in a few of the major cities. In Greece and Cyprus, Chinese members constitute the majority or a sizable minority in several congregations. In Western Europe, the Church has Chinese-speaking missionaries that operate in a few countries such as France and the United Kingdom.

Other proselytizing Christian groups extend more penetrating Chinese-specific outreach in Southeast Asia than the LDS Church. Jehovah's Witnesses report Chinese-speaking congregations in Indonesia (two congregations, one group), the Philippines (two congregations, one group) ,and Thailand (two groups)[5] whereas the LDS Church does not operate Chinese-speaking units in either country. Witnesses likely operate Chinese-speaking congregations in Malaysia but do not publish congregation details online for these countries. Adventists operate Chinese-designated congregations in Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

Future Prospects

The outlook for expanding LDS missionary activity among the Chinese in Southeast Asia appears best in Singapore and Malaysia as the Church has organized Chinese-speaking congregations and has assigned Chinese-designated missionaries in both these countries. The Church may continue to organize additional Chinese-specific units in Malaysia, especially in Sarawak and in the Kuala Lumpur area. Few available mission resources and virtually no vision exhibited by mission leaders to initiate Chinese-specific outreach may delay any missionary activity directed towards Chinese in most remaining countries in the region. Prospects appear most favorable for beginning Chinese-directed missionary activity in the Philippines among countries without a known LDS Chinese proselytism programs due to the abundance of mission resources and feasibility of assigning some missionaries to exclusively serve among Chinese Filipinos. The Chinese of Southeast Asia will likely play a critical role in the long-term growth of the Church in the region as past LDS Church President Gordon B. Hinckley publicly proposed the construction of a temple in Singapore to service the region.

[1] http://www.ocac.gov.tw/english/public/public.asp?selno=1163&no=1163&level=B

[2] "Chinese Filipino," en.wikipedia.org, retrieved 10 December 2012. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_people_in_the_Philippines

[3] "Chinese Indonesians," en.wikipedia.org, retrieved 10 December 2012. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indonesian_Chinese

[4] "2010 Population and Housing Census of Malaysia" (in Malay and English). Department of Statistics, Malaysia. Retrieved 2012-06-17. p. 97

[5] "Congregation Meeting Search," http://www.jw.org/apps/index.html?option=FRNsPnPBrTZGT