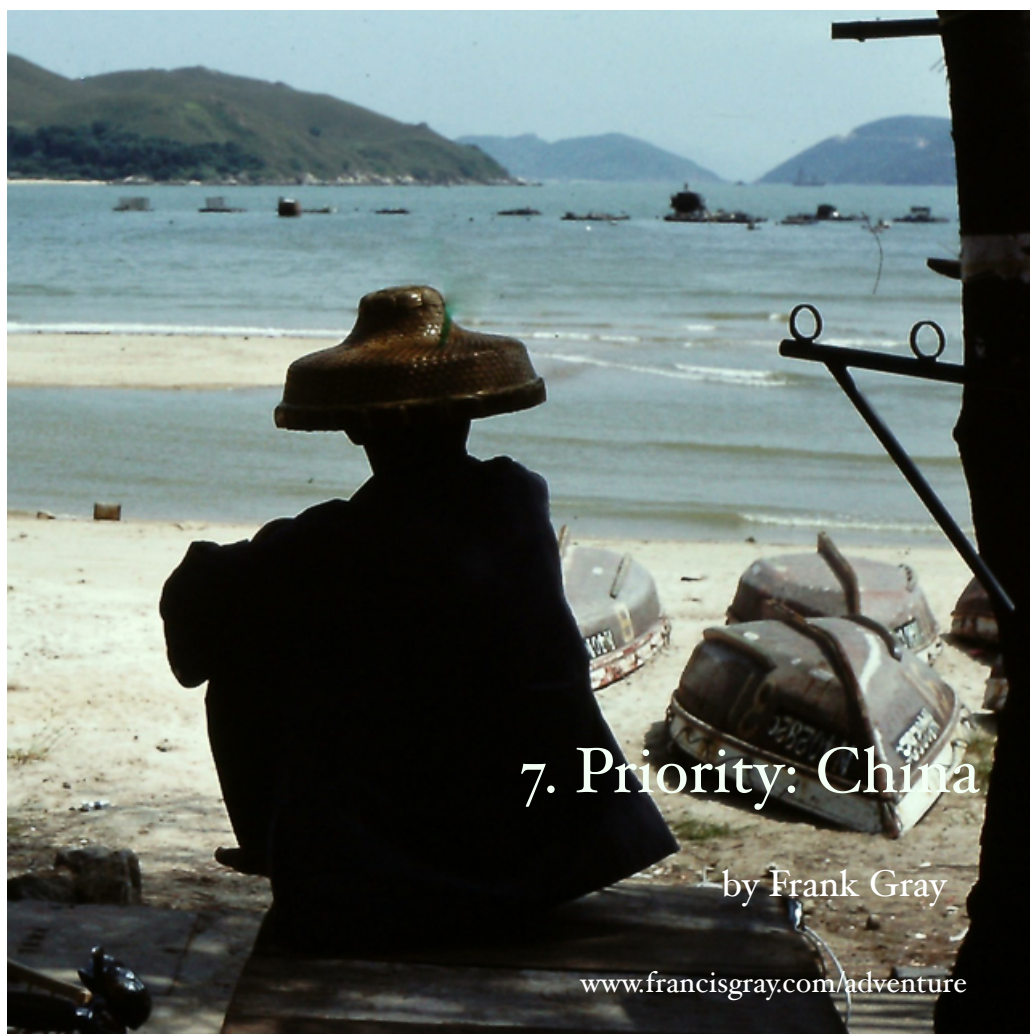


The Adventure

Priority: China

THE ADVENTURE



7. Priority: China

by Frank Gray

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The 1970s were days of turmoil and great change. If we cast our minds back to the global situation that prevailed at that time we might re-capture something of the motivation and challenges that gripped FEBC.

As a family we had already experienced this first hand and had joined in the human tragedy of thousands of people across Southeast Asia fleeing from their countries. Then, by way of the refugee camps in Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines, they found their way to new lives in North America, France and other countries around the world.

Meanwhile China with around 800 million people was hidden behind a tightly managed Bamboo Curtain and virtually out of touch. In the USSR (Russia and satellites) around 250 million people living under tight control; there was North Korea, and now the latest additions to the Communist fold – Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, around 80 million, mostly in Vietnam.

Given the ability of shortwave radio to cross political, social and geographical boundaries FEBC's first priority had to be this grouping of closed countries which were all under militant and totalitarian regimes. In the context of world mission we felt very strongly that through radio FEBC had something to offer. Meanwhile Radio Moscow was pouring out its constant propaganda flooding the air waves with broadcasts that were instantly recognisable by their rhetoric and military tone.

China had always been the top priority for FEBC since its inception. In fact the very first FEBC broadcasts were from shortwave station XGOA in Shanghai in February 1947 - just a few days after I was born. In those early days missionaries with the China Inland



Response postcards for station XGOA

Mission (CIM) – now OMF International – were instrumental in FEBC getting established.

Pioneer missionary Hudson Taylor had been one of Bob Bowman's heroes in mission and he adapted Taylor's philosophy of ministry to provide a solid foundation for FEBC. It was his great-grandson James Hudson-Taylor III who did a lot of the hard groundwork in getting the work established in China.

But the venture inside China was short-lived, however, as very soon missionaries had to leave that country under the communist advance.

John Broger, FEBC's co-founder with Bob, toured the surrounding region to find a permanent location. He found Manila, Philippines and affordable land there in the northern suburb of Valenzuela. The very first broadcasts from medium wave station KZAS (later DZAS) went on air on June 4 1948 providing coverage in the Manila metropolitan area.



Original studios in Shanghai 1947

Soon more transmitters were added for overseas services, Mandarin Chinese being one of the first. Within a few short years the number of language services and transmitters had multiplied dramatically.

The majority of services for China were carried on shortwave until powerful mediumwave station HLDA (later to be HLAZ) came on air in June 1973. Located on the southern island of Jeju (formerly Cheju) in South Korea it still carries broadcasts

in Chinese, Japanese, Russian and Korean. It became the backbone of FEBC's ministry to China while generating half the mail response.

In spite of FEBC prioritising China, support for FEBC's China ministry from the high ground of academia, had not been forthcoming for many years. Critics had argued that FEBC was wasting its time as so few people appeared to be listening. The mail response also supported that view – a pitiful average of just seventeen letters per year over the ten-year period covered by the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). That was soon to change.

Bob Bowman was a man of faith; he always used to respond to the critics by saying “God told me to broadcast and we believe millions are listening”.

In 1979 nearly eleven thousand letters were received in Hong Kong from every province of China

The dramatic turnaround came in late 1978 when the floodgates began to open and the trickle of letters soon became a deluge that almost caught FEBC off guard. It came about as an indirect result of the 1972 visit of President Richard Nixon, which gave way to so-called 'ping pong diplomacy' and signalled the start of the opening up of China to the west.

In 1979 nearly eleven thousand letters were received in Hong Kong from every province of China. By 1981 this had increased to over thirteen thousand and then began to drop off again as regulations were tightened. These letters provided us with extremely valuable information about the state of Christians and the emerging Church in the mainland. Through those letters, which were safely guarded for reasons of security, we learned more of what they had been through, what they valued about the broadcasts, the specific programs they enjoyed – and

lots more. The letters, many of which came from pastors, also revealed where they needed help.

The statistics, when analysed, revealed which provinces were the most responsive and which ones seemed to be reflecting a great movement of the Spirit as responses surged. This prompted the question ‘why?’

Suddenly there was huge interest in FEBC broadcasts and this massive influx of mail and what it was saying.

Why was it that the three provinces of Anhui, Henan and Zhejiang saw such dramatic increase in mail, year-on-year, between 1980 and 1981? Why did Nei Mongol province in the north show more responses per capita than any of the others? Why was Guangdong province so responsive?

Suddenly there was huge interest in FEBC broadcasts and this massive influx of mail and what it was saying. Among the most interested were those academics in Pasadena who had been the most vocal critics of the past. The tide of interest had turned and FEBC was now in the spotlight. It also gave a boost to fund-raising efforts. When I put out a press release on behalf of FEBC concerning the influx of mail it drew an immediate response from Fuller Seminary and others with a deep interest in China. First it was Jim Montgomery of DAWN Ministries who came for a visit to our FEBC offices. He asked a number of key questions and then concluded by saying how interesting this had been, and would I now put it all down on cassette tape because he wanted to share it around.

I was very happy to do that, and mailed him the cassette. It was just a matter of days before Dr Donald McGavran, the doyen of Church Growth, phoned me and invited me over to Pasadena to meet with him. He wanted to know more. This was music to our ears. Apparently a member of the Fuller faculty, Dr Barker, had recently been on a trip to China and

returned to tell of the growth of the church he had observed there. Now what FEBC was experiencing and learning through its China mail was adding another dimension to, and confirming, the discoveries made by Barker.

Dr McGavran was visibly excited and started building many scenarios around this concept of radio playing a significant part in the growth of churches. Given his own background in missions he was especially interested in India where he suggested 'building Christ-followers' was a high priority. This led to John Wheatley and me taking a trip to Hyderabad where special meetings had been convened to discuss the practicalities of radio in that particular context. We found that Hyderabad in April nearly dehydrated us! It was a challenge!

It had only been a few years earlier, in 1976, that I had attended summer school at Wheaton where Dr Peter Wagner was teaching Church Growth. Halfway through the 2-week course I was itching to ask him a question that was bugging me: "Excuse me, Dr Wagner, but I wonder how you might apply Church Growth principles to China?" His response seemed a long time coming. He told of a group of Tanzanian engineers who were holding a regular Bible study in Shanghai. That was it!



Recording broadcasts in Hong Kong

Surely there is a role for radio here, I thought. Maybe it was time to start thinking about practical ways in which Communication theory could engage with Church Growth theory and together produce something very powerful for the Kingdom of God in China. That thought stayed with me but it was not yet time for it to

bear fruit.

In 1981 a Chinese Program Consultant's report showed that FEBC was now beaming twenty-nine frequency hours of broadcasting each day into mainland China. Seven of these were on mediumwave (MW) stations while the remainder were on shortwave – mostly from the Philippines.

In the Spring of 1982 a cross-mission China Consultation was held in the new Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College. I was invited to attend along with others from FEBC. One of the main points of interest was a report of an interview with Bishop Ting, the government-appointed chairman of the Chinese Christian Council. He had spoken regarding his fourteen Principles of the Christian Church in China – the Three-Self church as it was known, and the only one officially recognised by the government.

A challenge was issued to Christian groups on the outside on how to best relate to churches and individuals on the inside. There were masses of agencies wanting to get on the band wagon.

Clearly we were entering a new and exciting age with regards to church and mission activity in China. It gave cause for great caution, however, as there were many opportunist elements who were ready to jump on opportunities without much appreciation of the many sensitivities. This made FEBC's Chinese staff in Hong Kong very nervous.

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My own take on China is this: God in his wisdom had closed the doors for missions to enter China over the thirty-year period to spare it from denominational rivalry and competition that could inflict untold damage on the fledgling church. No strong ecclesiastical or cultural traditions were allowed to shape the Chinese church. But God had provided radio broadcasts through which the essential elements of the Gospel could be shared with the Chinese people.

Programs were contributed for broadcast by a wide range of agencies including denominational ones, but within FEBC these were all selected to conform to a policy of fairness and balance.

Chinese Christians know much more about identifying with the poor, suffering for the sake of Christ, and sharing with one another, than we do.'

By this means listeners were able to listen in the secrecy and relative safety of their own homes and bedrooms – often unseen and unknown to other family members. There are a number of stories on this. One of them concerns a young man who had been listening secretly to the broadcasts. Over time he came to suspect that his mother was also listening, so one day his curiosity got the better of him. "Does water in a dry place mean anything to you?" he asked her. He was referring to the popular devotional programs based on the book *Streams in the Desert*. When she gave a suitable answer they discovered they were both followers of Jesus and were regular listeners!

The refining of the Chinese Church through the experience of the Cultural Revolution is noted by OMF's David Adeney. He describes in 1980 the Church as being 'stripped of the Western trappings of the past and ... no longer bound by denominational organisations.' While it had many failures and weaknesses, he observes, 'Chinese Christians know much

more about identifying with the poor, suffering for the sake of Christ, and sharing with one another, than we do.'

It is sad that so many references to the growth of the Chinese church make no mention of the significant role played by the radio broadcasts. Is it because it was 'unseen'? Is it because radio did not qualify as a recognised channel for missions? This suspicion was borne



Dr James Hudson Taylor III in 2008

out by the publication of a coloured map of the world showing the 'least-evangelised' countries. China was included in spite of having a church of 50 million people! Needless to say, FEBC leadership felt somewhat indignant and it prompted some good discussion.

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Yet in spite of this it was missionary statesmen closest to China who came up with some strong assertions to the impact of the broadcasts. One such person was Dr James Hudson Taylor III, by now a highly respected sinologist, who asserted that at least half the people coming to faith in China during those years had their first introduction to the Gospel through radio.

Time for the Thoughts of God was one program that stretched radio beyond its normal limits. It was designed to give the Bible to the Chinese people - through dictation. For fifteen minutes every day the Bible text was read, book by book, verse by verse, at dictation speed. In 1980 I was in a meeting where

Dr Jonathan Chao, a China researcher, reported that more than half the Bibles in China were hand-written. More than that, we heard that many believers had also dedicated themselves to memorising the Bible – so that it could never be taken away from them. This program was sponsored by the Bible Society and produced in FEBC's Manila studios.

Village Bible School was a whole suite of programs developed for the specific purpose of providing a Bible School curriculum for laymen and pastors alike in the mainland. Many agencies participated in this innovative approach to training and took responsibility for preparing various subjects. The selection of content was largely informed by the extensive research done by way of preparation. While there was anecdotal evidence of the need for training, there were also many thousands of letters from listeners including many from church leaders. These were duly analysed and a research report compiled from the findings.

Designed by FEBC staff in Hong Kong, in partnership with other interested mission partners, the series consisted of four courses being taught in a two-hour block each evening for three nights per week. Each block was repeated the following night. Sundays were used to review the previous week's lessons and look ahead to the coming week. The curriculum was carefully planned to provide a balanced study. It included book studies, church history, theology, just as one would find in a Bible School. The studies were spread over three years. Listeners could request study materials by writing to the station.

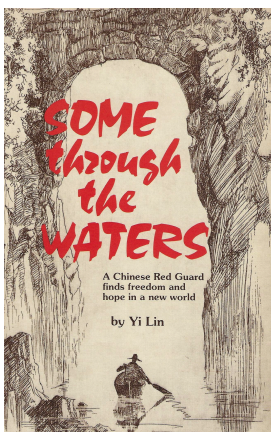
The main problem was that a high percentage of packages of materials mailed to listeners were intercepted and never arrived. This was later remedied by establishing distribution networks inside China. In due time the Internet and on-line sites provided opportunity for students to download all their materials directly.

The VBS series was run twice before it was given a massive upgrade and became a four-year curriculum under the name *Voice of Friendship Seminary*. Since then it has gone through a number of makeovers and revisions and as technology has developed much distribution of materials is done through a highly organised network inside China.



FEBC-HK 50th Anniversary invitation 2008

Since its inception in 1980 thousands of Christians have been trained by this means. Years later I was in Hong Kong for special anniversary celebrations when a group of VoFS graduates performed as a choir and gave testimony. It was quite moving to witness this tangible evidence of programming strategically prepared under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.



Lithographed cover print
by author

Persecution of Christians was still running high and many Chinese were looking for ways of getting out of China because of the pressure they faced. One of them, Yi Lin, a freedom swimmer, contacted FEBC Hong Kong as soon as he arrived in Hong Kong. It was my privilege to get to know him and to work with him in

La Mirada in writing up his story in *Some Through the Waters*, a book published by FEBC in 1979. He had come to faith as a result of the broadcasts. I even sent a copy of this to British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher at a time when the future of Hong Kong was being debated in the early 1980s.

The possibility of using radio to stimulate church growth by remote had fascinated me. We may not be able to do church growth directly, on the ground, but, through carefully planned and prepared broadcasts, we might stimulate believers in many churches to mobilise them to plant other churches – a two-step approach.

Thus it was that FEBC Hong Kong teamed up with DAWN Ministries to implement DAWN China. Discipling A Whole Nation (DAWN) was the brainchild of Jim Montgomery and operated in many countries around the world. But for China it would need to be different – so they were happy to partner with FEBC to do it by radio.

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The intended goal was to encourage each church congregation to plant two more congregations by the end of the twentieth century. If there were fifty million Christians in churches and each congregation was on average comprised of around one hundred people that meant there were approximately half a million congregations.

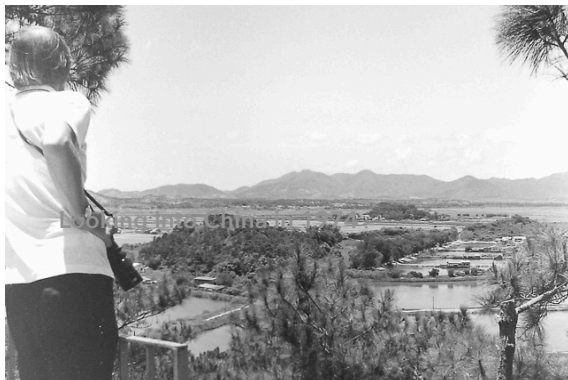
We shall never know the full impact of this initiative but we did hear some remarkable stories. At the 2008 RadioFest in

Hong Kong Rev Lo, a former director of FEBC-HK, told of an interview with a pastor, himself a convert from listening to the radio broadcasts, who now led a group of churches in southern China. He attributed the rapid growth to the DAWN China initiative. According to his estimate there were now between 5 and 10 million people in the churches he had started.

The jewel of FEBC's broadcasts to China had been the mediumwave broadcasts in Mandarin from station HLAZ in Jeju, Korea (on 1566kHz). Research conducted for BBC World Service in 1995 showed that FEBC's Liangyou Radio audience in ten major cities alone, representing 2.4% of the total Chinese population, comprised 200,500. When extrapolated to cover the rest of China it could be estimated to total around four to five million or closer to ten million, if the larger rural audiences were included.

By the time 1997 came FEBC was well-prepared. The future of FEBC-Hong Kong had been an unknown for many years but it soon transpired that it would be able to continue under agreements made to grant special status to the former British colony.

Very soon planning was underway to cautiously extend FEBC's ministry into the mainland. FEBC Chinese staff frequently travelled in and out of China so were able to develop a network of contacts. A series of family counselling workshops were organised in partnership with Christian bookstores that were springing up. These workshops proved to be a great success and were over-subscribed. It was a cautious strategy to test the waters and assess if there were any opposition from the government. None came. It was a good sign. Out of this experience plans were laid to cultivate program production units on the mainland.



Looking into China 1974

My first view of China had been in Hong Kong in 1974 shortly after Hennie and I were married. Jim Engel, who was later to be my professor at Wheaton, with a few others of us from the Communications Workshop being held in Hong Kong, stood together on a hilltop in New Territories gazing across the paddy fields toward China in the distance. That was very special.



Children in Shenzhen 1984

Ten years later I made a short day trip with my parents into Shenzhen from Hong Kong coming back via Macau.

But it was not till 1991, on our way back to the United Kingdom from Manila, that Hennie and I, together with our children, travelled across China by train. Although we had planned on doing this for

many months our plans were severely tested by the eruption of Mt Pinatubo in the Philippines just one week earlier.

When we got to Beijing it was not the drab, colourless place that I had expected. In my mind I had pictured China as a rather dismal place, without colour and without much beauty – but that was not the case. The Beijing streets bustled with traffic and masses of people on bicycles. The streets were lined with trees that were all in bloom. The people appeared energetic and hardworking.

This was the current reality that we needed to catch up with. I was also aware that things are not always how they appear on the surface. The outward appearance could be masking the hidden world of persecution well hidden from view.

The twenty-first century has seen the emergence of a new China that now competes with the world on many levels of sport and athletics. It is also amassing great wealth as the manufacturing centre for computers, smartphones and many electronic devices. Chinese-built cars are filling the streets, while unhealthy pollution abounds in the cities.

Meanwhile the church, though facing many challenges, is strong and progressive. It is also mission-minded and wants to reach out to the rest of the world. "Back to Jerusalem" was one movement that launched several years ago to accomplish this endeavour. Faithful Chinese Christians travel from China to Barnsley, Yorkshire, in the United Kingdom to visit the birthplace of Hudson Taylor and pay homage to a man who had such vision and commitment to the Chinese people so many years ago.

It is gratifying to know that through FEBC we have had some small part in encouraging this movement that is now



Entrance to FEBC-Hong Kong

impacting our world. Only time will tell the extent to which radio played a role.

NOTE:

This is the 7th in a series of draft chapters for a book to be published in due course. To stay in contact you can visit the dedicated website www.francisgray.com/adventure or look for the Adventure book on Frank Gray's Facebook page.