

Models of missional engagement in Asia: A case study of OMF International



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Introduction

The purpose of this case study is to look at the process of internationalisation undertaken by OMF International (OMF) and how it has partnered with Asian mission movements in the course of its history. OMF International is the current name of an organization which started as the China Inland Mission and later became the China Inland Mission Overseas Missionary Fellowship (CIMOMF). The case study will consider three main periods: 1) the early history of CIM from the 1860s onwards; 2) the period of CIMOMF following the departure from China to the centennial year 1965; and 3) OMF in the 21st century.

OMF has emphasized partnering with Asian churches and developing Asian leaders - principally within the OMF orbit but sometimes beyond it. This has led to a largely Anglo-Saxon agency focussed on China becoming a multi-cultural international agency focussed on East Asia with between 30 – 40 % of its members having an Asian ethnic origin. During the 1950s and 1960s a conscious decision was taken that OMF would work with Asians in its own spheres and not intervene in the development of emerging Asian missions movements. [1] In recent years this stance has been revised.

A) The structures of CIM

The CIM structure was based around an organizational interplay between Home councils for sending and a Field Council for receiving personnel, with the centre of administration firmly based in Shanghai, China. Such a model allowed for a number of international centres such as the United States, Australia, New Zealand together with European countries like Finland, Sweden, Germany and others becoming involved either through CIM Home Councils or through Associate (Satellite) missions, with the latter largely developed for non-English speaking countries. In 1900, an article appeared in *China's Millions* on "the International character of the CIM". [2] During the 1950s, after the departure from China, with the shift into a range of East Asian countries, it was decided that there should be organizational freedom to move away from the model of Associate Missions and to allow for alternative approaches to the *modus operandi* of the agency. James Hudson Taylor, the founder of the mission, strongly believed that decisions regarding the work should be taken as close to the action as possible and this remains a distinctive of the mission, with the international headquarters always having been located in East Asia.

B) Internationalisation during the 1950s and 1960s for CIMOMF

During the 1950s and 1960s, CIMOMF restructured as a mission agency. This was driven by a number of factors and coincided with the departure from China, the post World War II environment and the pending centennial anniversary of the agency in 1965. Models of mission that stressed the character of mission as mission from the west to the east needed to change and CIMOMF needed to evidence a multi-cultural character not just in its Field realities but in the composition of the mission agency itself.

The realization of the need to change prompted a review during the 1950s of "Mission" embracing "Theology", and "Strategy and Practice". From 1953 onwards there was a fresh discussion of internationalization and this took place from 1956 first under the heading "Foreign-born nationals" and later in the early 1960s "Non-Caucasian membership." [3] A

major stumbling-block was the fact that the long-term policy of so-called “Indigenous Principles” (a device to protect the churches in Asia from foreign interference and funding) became a barrier to the development of the agency itself as a multicultural mission.

By the 1964 Overseas Council, a major biennial leadership meeting for the whole organization coming just before the centennial celebrations, there was an organizational desire for a real change of direction. Discussion at the Council of the “Future of the Mission” was so far-reaching that by the time a later agenda item of “Non-Caucasian membership” was reached it had become irrelevant. The mission had so changed in its self-understanding of its nature and objectives, there were no longer any barriers to non-caucasian membership! [5] The result of this and its significance was summarized by a Korean missiologists as follows: “In 1965, OMF invited some of the Asian colleagues to join them in sending missionaries. Christian and Missionary Alliance was ahead of OMF in this regard, and both of them are still ahead of most of the mission community.” [6]

1) OMF internationalizes and welcomes Asian members (1960s-1980s)

In the years following 1964, OMF welcomed a number of individual Asian missionaries or those of Asian or Polynesian descent living outside Asia (41 such members by 1980), including people from Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, India, Philippines, and those of Polynesian descent from New Zealand and Fiji.

2) OMF internationalizes and develops structures for Asia (1960s-1980s)

In the same period, OMF was involved in three processes to foster better interactions with the Asian mission movements.

- i) The first of these was the development of the OMF structures themselves in Asia with the founding of Asian Home Councils along with a number of initiatives to strengthen the quality and work of those Home Councils and to give exposure to wider mission. These included Mission Trips for Home Leaders, a Development programme for Asian Home Councils (1980s) and the rise of Home Council Leaders’ Retreats.
- ii) The second process was the development of Asian leaders within OMF by training and facilitating the involvement of leaders at important events in OMF’s organizational calendar and life. (This represented a kind of affirmative action where leaders were given exposure to Councils and Consultations to which they might not otherwise have been “entitled” to attend.) By 2006, OMF had an Asian General Director, several Asian International Directors and an Asian Director with International Portfolio.
- iii) The process of encouraging Asian missions took place through several initiatives: these included partnerships with individual leaders who were invited to be present at key OMF council meetings in Singapore; the deployment of an international director Denis Lane to help with structural and organizational issues for Asian Missions with OMF itself; and the strategic use of a theological scholarship fund to develop individual Asian leaders.

3) OMF commits to the nurture of Asian leaders (1960s-1990s)

Beyond the immediate sphere of the work of OMF as an agency, there was a genuine interest in partnering with the Asian church. Church and mission leaders were invited as visiting delegates to major OMF Councils; a scholarship programme for theological education was set up and funds disbursed to help with the development of leaders within the Asian church; OMF also contributed to the work of student movements in Asia. For example, Chua Hwee Hian (a future General Secretary of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES) participated in OMF meetings in the 1960s and OMF members were involved in student movements across Asia.

C) Kindling Asian Mission Movements as OMF International in the 21st century

Since 2005, OMF has looked again at its relationship with Asian missions - to engage afresh in partnership, to promote capacity building and to offer resources for training or modelling as appropriate. This has led to a fresh analysis mapping the rise and diversity of Asian mission movements and their functions.

Three aspects of mission agency life seen to be of particular importance:

- i) the organizational and structural aspects of mission movements;
- ii) the multiple dimensions of pre-field training – cross-cultural training, biblical and missiological foundations, the development of ministry skills and the capability for resolving member care issues;
- iii) on-field issues - the importance of structures for on-field mentoring and support as well and the place of leadership development.

During this period, the churches in Asia have also been changing and are at different stages in their readiness and capacity to sustain mission movements. OMF has been asked to give input on structural and organizational issues, OMF is involved in training, OMF offers advice on member care issues, OMF is involved in church partnerships with individual missionaries in Asian sending hubs, and OMF enters into partnership arrangements with an agency within a limited sphere of its own ministry.

D) Diffuse approaches that contributed towards participation with Asian Missionary Movements

Beyond direct organizational change as an agency and partnerships with the Asian church and Asian missions, OMF has been committed to three other significant areas - missionary training, member care, and the development of literature for Asian missions.

Missionary Training

Since 1965, OMF has also been involved in two ventures in missionary training. In 1968, the Discipleship Training Centre (DTC) was founded under the leadership of David Adeney (a former missionary to China). With its first Asian Dean the Rev. John Ting appointed in 2000, and now followed by Dr. George Capaque from the Philippines, DTC has produced a number of leaders for the Asian church and mission movements. The Asian Cross-Cultural Training Institute was developed under the Leadership of Titus Loong in the 1970s, with a focus purely on missions training for Asians by Asians. This has provided Asian based missionary training aimed at those engaging in cross-cultural ministry. [7]

Member Care

The Department of Personnel have been involved through the 1990s with Member Care, Medical Member Care and Third Culture Children Care and Education. Western members like Michael Littlefield (Human Resources), Stroma Beattie (Medical Member Care) and Moira Smith (Education) have been active in the process of facilitating the development of Asian structures. Third Culture Children's (TCK) Advisers are drawn from a range of Asian countries with Polly Chan playing a major role in this area, although the Member Care team as a whole continues to be international.

Writing

OMF has made a modest contribution to the discussion of mission movements and connected topics. It has, however, contributed a body of works over the past fifty years which are only now being translated into Asia languages and making an impact on a new generation of readers. OMF members have been involved in writing on a range of issues: organizational development, [8] missionary training, [9] and member care. [10] In Korea, a sustained project is underway to translate appropriate books from the OMF publishing tradition – these include translations of historical books such as *Mountain Rain* [11] now selling in mainstream bookshops like the Kyobo store in Seoul, as well as contemporary Korean works such as “*Jokjabian Nights*” by Son Chang Nam.

Conclusion

From the 1960s onwards, OMF has welcomed individual Asians, adjusted its structures to embrace Asians and develop Asian leaders to the point where Asians are represented at all levels (including the highest organizational level of International Directors) of the organizational structures. OMF has probably given less attention to issues of ethos - such as the development of organizational structures and culture suitable for Asians, though these have not been completely ignored. OMF has become an international agency with a focus on East Asia and its people: it has not remained a western agency and does not currently aspire to becoming a wholly Asian one.

Some of the above developments flow from the fact that OMF has maintained its regional focus and has put a strong emphasis on appointing leaders within the organization who have strong grass-roots contact with the cultures in which they serve. In the longer term, this has led to a pool of people in the organization (drawn from the West, from Asia, and occasionally from other regions) who are capable of relating to individual Asian cultures, churches, and who are competent in speaking and using Asian languages.

The importance of relationships built over long periods of time cannot be under-estimated and is exemplified in the example of an OMF leader such as Denis Lane, who was engaging in dialogue and partnership with Asian mission movements through contact with people in Asia whom he had known for decades.

In terms of internationalisation, OMF has maintained the focus of its activity to Asia, formerly on China and latterly East Asia, but it remains concerned that the whole global church should feel welcomed by its structures to work in East Asia. Having begun with Anglo-Saxon sending countries and having extended to those of Asian ethnicity, it is now concerned that with the changing patterns in world Christianity, it should be ready to partner with churches in the Indian sub-continent, Latin America and Africa as they seek to join with the churches in East Asia – it is with these regions that the next level of internationalisation will occur.

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Footnotes

- [1] CIMOMF was concerned with the development of leaders who could nurture Asian mission movements and although attention was given to those in the CIMOMF sphere, resources and help were shared more widely where there was an interest in "western" help with capacity-building.
- [2] Sloan, 1900. The 1948 and 1949 Prayer directories list Czech, Danish, Finnish, Polish and even Estonian members, and this list of a dozen or more nationalities predates later discussion on internationalisation. *Directory of the CIM*, 1948: 39 and 1949: 23.
- [3] Beattie 1998, 17ff.
- [4] Beattie, 1998, 9-11, 28-31, 39-41. The reasons behind this are complex and it took a real conceptual shift to see the difference between, for example, Malaysians working cross-culturally as members of OMF in other parts of Asia and Malaysians being employed (with "foreign funds") to work in Malaysia as OMF partners. See my M.Sc. thesis for a fuller explanation of this issue.
- [5] Beattie, 1998, 30-31.
- [6] Lee, 1997.
- [7] Both institutions are now directed by Singaporean boards.
- [8] Lane, 1990. This is also available in Chinese and Thai.
- [9] Harley, 1995.
- [10] Beattie, Stroma, 2007. Stroma Beattie's recent article in *Missions Matrix* gives an up-to-date assessment of Member Care in the Asian sphere - an area in which OMF is very well-placed to give a high level of professional input.
- [11] Crossman, 2006 (Korean translation); Son Chang Nam, 2008.

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