THE INVISIBLE CHINA MISSIONARIES:  
THE BASEL MISSION’S CHINESE EVANGELISTS, 1847-1866

Western scholarship on Christian missions in China has generally focused on Western missionaries, largely overlooking their Chinese associates.¹ The missionaries themselves often neither identified their coworkers by their full names nor provided detailed information on their background and activities. These associates were, nevertheless, indispensable to the functioning of the missions, for whom they served as evangelists, translators, language instructors, colporteurs, teachers, and medical aides. This paper will attempt to make visible certain Chinese missionaries associated with the Basel Mission. Their contribution to the Chinese Protestant church was crucial and the role of the wives of two of these missionaries is also noteworthy. Since the Evangelical Mission Society at Basel, Switzerland, has a rich archive of primary materials extending back to the founding of its China mission in 1847, it is possible to trace the careers of several of Basel mission’s earliest Chinese evangelists.* Their methodology and perceptions of Christianity can provide insights on the initial stages in the indigenization of Protestantism in China.

The Chinese missionary corps employed by Basel had its origins in the Chinese Union, an evangelistic society founded by the independent German missionary, Karl Gützlaff.² In Gützlaff’s vision, Chinese were to be recruited into the Union and provided with minimal travel grants in order to carry the Gospel throughout China. Basel’s first China missionaries, Theodor Hamberg and Rudolf Lechler, initially drew their Chinese assistants from this organization. Though the Chinese Union became discredited, the Basel missionaries continued to recruit many of their Chinese associates from the ranks of Chinese Union veterans. Indeed, two of these veterans laid the foundation for the Basel missions in the Unterland and the Oberland. The Unterland, in Basel terminology, consisted of the peninsular area opposite Hong Kong, especially the three Guangdong provincial districts to the immediate north of what became the New Territories. The Oberland consisted largely of Guangdong’s Meizhou prefecture in the northeastern part of the province.

The Oberland, coinciding closely with what has been called “the Hakka Heartland,” is a large area in southeast China inhabited mostly by Chinese who speak the Hakka dialect. It embraces virtually all of Meizhou and also extends beyond Guangdong’s borders into neighboring Jiangsi and Fujian. To the west and southwest, it shades off into districts bordering Meizhou.
Meixian City, known in the 19th century as Jiaying, is not only the administrative capital of the prefecture, but has been considered the capital of the Hakka heartland. The Hakka are Han Chinese who, while sharing in the Confucian heritage, have their own distinctive customs and dress and speak a dialect unintelligible to most Chinese. Though the Hakka apparently originated in north China, they have been largely concentrated in south China since the Ming era.

East, west, or southwest of the Hakka heartland, one begins to find villages inhabited by speakers of other dialects, Cantonese or Hoklo, and known as bendi or “natives.” Still further away, the non-Hakka gradually constitute the majority, with Hakka village clusters interspersed here and there among other ethnic groups. In the Unterland, for example, Lilang and Buji [Pukak], two “villages” where Christian churches were founded, were really Hakka village clusters, confederations named after their market centers. Such confederations or market-town complexes, also served defensive and cultural purposes.

The Hakka of south China were disliked and looked down upon by Chinese of other ethnic groups. In the Hakka heartland, an inhospitable mountainous area, the Hakka had, during or before the Ming period, either displaced or absorbed mostly non-Han peoples. When they moved out of the heartland into areas densely inhabited by other ethnic Chinese groups, however, they met with hostility and discrimination.

Anthropologists and other social scientists have frequently related the susceptibility of Hakka to Christianity and other heterodoxies, as well as their penchant for joining revolutionary movements, to their status as a disadvantaged minority. There may well be truth in this thesis, especially in regions where Hakka were interspersed with bendi. Even so, Protestant Christianity's greatest successes among the Hakka in the mid-nineteenth century occurred in the Hakka heartland, where both the oppressors and the oppressed were Hakka, and at a time when there was little or no articulation of ethnic self-consciousness except among a few Meixian literati. This does not imply that there was no connection between being Hakka and an openness to alternative doctrines. Quite the contrary. Sensing the greater receptiveness of Hakka to Christianity as compared with other ethnic Chinese groups, the Basel Mission decided to concentrate on the Hakka of Guangdong. This decision proved to be wise. Any explanation of Christianity's appeal to the Hakka in the mid-nineteenth century must, however, be multicausal, with considerable weight given to the social context: deepening impoverishment, civil disorder and lineage feuding, and a breakdown in social morality. Not to be overlooked was the persuasiveness of individual Chinese evangelists.