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The Church Encounters Asia Spencer J. Palmer

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Book Reviews

SPENCER J. PALMER. *The Church Encounters Asia*. Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book Company, 1970. 192 pp.

(Reviewed by C. Paul Dredge of Harvard University, who is pursuing graduate study in Social and Cultural Change in modern Asia. A Hinckley Scholar while working on his undergraduate degree at Brigham Young University, Mr. Dredge also served two and a half years as a Latter-day Saint missionary in the Far East.)

Seldom in the Church has a book been written which fills such an immediate and obvious need. With the recent organization of a stake in Tokyo, the first in Asia, and the success of the Mormon Pavilion at Expo '70, the desire to know about missionary activities in Asia has probably never been greater among church members. All should welcome this thoroughly readable and unusually moving account of the beginnings and development of Mormon "Asiatica." Although some masters' theses have dealt with specific countries and a number of articles on the work in Asia have appeared in *Dialogue*, *BYU Studies*, *The Improvement Era*, and *The Church News*, Dr. Palmer's book is the first to incorporate an up-to-date account of the Church in all Asian countries where the restored Gospel has found root.

Another first is the publishing of a full account of the travels of Elders David O. McKay and Hugh J. Cannon in Korea, Manchuria, and China, as recorded by Cannon in 1921.

Those who greet this book with expectations of the insights and solid scholarship which characterize the author's previous work on *Korea and Christianity* (Seoul, Hollyn Publishers, 1967) will perhaps be disappointed. This new work is obviously not intended as a scholarly contribution but rather a strong testimonial that "a miraculous power of divine intervention is out there [in Asia]" (p. 100, quotation from Harold

B. Lee.) That it succeeds in this purpose is due to the fact that the author has collected a wealth of interesting, spiritual, and even humorous first-hand accounts from missionaries, mission presidents, converts, servicemen, and general authorities which convey in a personal and detailed manner the spirit of the work in the Asian missions. The full texts of many dedicatory prayers, including that given by Pres. David O. McKay at the Forbidden City in Peking in 1921, and the dramatic stories of conversion which tell of the vital roles played by early converts such as Kim Ho Jik in Korea and Boonepluke Klaophin and his wife in Thailand, are especially inspirational, as are stories of the filming of "Man's Search for Happiness" in Japan, the calling of Pres. Keith Garner of the Southern Far East Mission as told by Elder Hinckley, and the mission call of Elder Heber J. Grant to Japan in 1901. Unforgettable is the story recounted by Hugh Cannon of how he and Pres. McKay awoke, in the face of the Japanese use of chopsticks, to the comparatively uncivilized American method of eating a sandwich by tearing at it "very much as a bear would do" (p. 63). The obvious difficulty for a researcher in collecting such a wide selection of often obscure materials is an indication of the author's effort and ability.

Beyond the purpose of a testimony to the workings of the Spirit in Asia, Dr. Palmer has helped demonstrate the fact that the Church is and must be as much Asian as American, a truly world-wide and world-oriented organization. Unfortunately, this important cultural problem is discussed only in the context of individual accounts and is not treated in depth. Although a really thorough discussion of this issue would require a separate volume, the significance of success in converting families in the Philippines, developing priesthood leadership in Japan, learning Asian languages, converting people in spite of economic poverty, and calling 19- and 20-year-old young men to proselyte age-conscious and status-conscious Asians, can be fully appreciated only when underlying intercultural problems are fully understood. The lack of such analysis weakens the impact of the stories of success while it avoids giving a really detailed idea of the daily problems, very discouraging at times, of missionary work in Asia.

The format of the book is enhanced by a considerable number of pictures and by an index at the end which includes the names of all people mentioned in the body of the work. A

chapter on the activities of other Christian denominations in the area, and scriptures relating to missionary work in this part of the world, is a substantial contribution to the effectiveness of the overall message of the book. The inclusion of a chronological statistical table on church membership in the various missions would have helped give a concise picture of this aspect of the work, which is treated in detail in one case (the Southern Far East Mission between 1955 and 1959) but not nearly so well in others. There are also points where the reader is tantalized by being told that a particular story of conversion was an impressive one but finds that it is not covered in the book.

Dr. Palmer has fittingly dedicated his book to Elder Gordon B. Hinckley, who presided over the Asian missions for so long and whose personal journal is quoted at length concerning individual mission presidents and his own journeys among members in Asia. An especially engaging account is given of Elder Hinckley's trip to India in 1964 at the request of a man seeking baptism there. Elder Hinckley also makes a major point which emerges as the reader learns of the beginnings of missionary work in Asia. Of the over 25,000 members in Japan, Taiwan, Korea, and the Philippines, he says:

This marvelous membership is the sweet fruit of seed once planted in dark years of war and in the troubled days immediately following, when good men of the priesthood, both civilian and military, through the example of their lives and the inspiration of their precepts, laid a foundation on which a great work has been established (p. 144).

While Dr. Palmer owes a great part of his book to quotations from various brethren who have recorded their experiences in the mission fields of the East, the fact remains that had they not been compiled and presented in the knowledgeable way they appear in this new work, they would have remained obscure to most church members. As a former mission president in Korea and an Asian scholar of substantial credentials, Spencer Palmer's eminent qualifications are reflected in the inspiring account he has produced. Hopefully, translations into the languages of Asian mission fields will make it available to those whose beautiful story it tells.