

This is the Land

Mackay arrived in Taiwan at a crucial moment in its history. The island was a wild-west frontier, sparsely populated with aborigines and Han Chinese from Fujian province. It was "an unruly dependency, a kind of rough-and-tumble frontier society, only peripherally bound to the administrative structure of the Qing state on the mainland." It was still largely unknown: "dangerous seas, typhoons, and sand shoals protected its coasts; malarial plains along the west, backed by inhospitable mountain ranges sealed its isolation. Taiwan's unfriendly aboriginal populations further discouraged exploration or settlement by outsiders."

Mackay fell in love with his tropical island with all its exuberance, its crowds and smells, its dark, secretive temples, and above all, the friendly, curious inhabitants. He put on his pith helmet, grew a long black beard and set out to explore. He avoided the small European community, preferring to wander throughout Northern Taiwan, returning to Tamsui only to pick up his mail and medicines. He was a skilled linguist and learned to speak Taiwanese -- the language of the people -- from a group of herdsboys. From the beginning, he reported phenomenal success in his missionary work, and made his first convert within a month, an educated Chinese name Giam Cheng-hoa, who was known to generations of Canadians as A Hoa. A Hoa and Mackay became a team, the sect teacher and his disciple, best friends for the rest of their lives.

Since he arrived without preconceived notions, living alone without a Canadian companion, Mackay "went native," in the expression of that day. Consciously or unconsciously, he adopted the structure of indigenous religious sects, long strings of masters and disciples, all intimately connected with the leader, the black-bearded barbarian. He and A Hoa gathered a group of converts into a "peripatetic" (walking) school, who would travel through the villages wherever there were two or three houses of Northern Taiwan. The people were fascinated by this little man in a pith helmet pouring forth white-hot emotional exhortations. His style of preaching was like Chinese opera, dramatic gestures held for effect, as though he were in touch with the spirit world. Mackay spoke of Satan as a corporal being, always attacking his work. While Canadian colleagues laughed at Mackay's oddities, such beliefs were congruent with pervasive Taiwanese beliefs in ghosts and demons.

As he walked with his students, he would give them lessons in science and religion. "Under a tree or by the seashore, or in the chapels, they received instruction in geography, astronomy, church history, anatomy, physiology, etc., but chiefly in Bible truth... The advent of a procession of as many as twenty students, headed by their teacher, would of itself excite interest in the numberless hamlets and towns through which they passed." He was teaching them to see themselves through new eyes -- new Taiwanese eyes -- the beauty of nature and the world around them.

Mackay's most peculiar method was dentistry. He and his helpers would set up a table in front of the Matsu temple, sing a few hymns and preach a sermon, and then would offer to extract diseased teeth as many as 300 in one day. "The Bible and the forceps went together," Mackay stated, claiming he had extracted over 21,000 teeth in his career. He carefully wrapped each tooth in tissue paper and returned it to the patient, lest anyone accuse him of magic. Pulling teeth was not an idea Mackay brought from Canada, so it must have sprung from the needs of the people where betel nut chewing and diseases were endemic. It was his way of serving the people.

At Christmas 1877 Mackay wrote the committee in Toronto a surprising letter. On the pleading of A Hoa and the preachers, Mackay announced that he was marrying a Chinese woman who would open the hearts and homes of the women. "I am thinking how I can do most for Jesus," he wrote. Tui Chhang-Mia was the little sister [Mui-tsai in HK] or adopted granddaughter of his first woman convert, an elderly widow named Thah-So.

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