

# OUT OF OBSCURITY

## Perspectives from Asia

ELDER ANTHONY D. PERKINS

Elder Anthony D. Perkins, then a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, presented this essay at “In the Public Eye: How the Church Is Handling Increased Global Visibility,” the International Society’s twenty-third annual conference, April 2012, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

**I**n this chapter, “Asia” will refer to the region designated by the Church as the Asia Area. This area ranges from Mongolia on the north to Indonesia on the south and from Taiwan on the east to Pakistan on the west. It excludes Japan and Korea, which are in the Asia North Area, and the Philippines, which is its own area.

The Asia Area is comprised of twenty-five countries and territories, with a combined population of more than 3.5 billion people, or one-half the world total. Yet Church membership in Asia is only 161,000, which is just a minuscule 1 in every 22,000 persons. Thus, to the vast majority of Asian people who have never met a Mormon, the Church is probably just one more obscure Western religion.

In 1834, Joseph Smith prophesied, “Brethren, . . . you know no more concerning the destinies of this Church and kingdom than a babe upon its mother’s lap. You don’t comprehend it. . . . It is only a little handful of

Priesthood you see here tonight, but this Church will fill North and South America—it will fill the world.”<sup>1</sup>

If you visit the Church Newsroom website and look at the map of our meetinghouses across the world, you will see the ongoing fulfillment of this prophecy. North America is covered with red dots representing meetinghouses, as is South America, Western Europe, the Pacific, and North Asia. Red dots are beginning to cover Southern Africa. The last frontiers are Northern Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.

You might ask, “Are we making any progress in Asia?” I will respond, “Yes!” My remarks today examine this question and answer it from three perspectives:

1. a prophetic overview for the Church coming forth out of obscurity and darkness and how ancient prophecies are being fulfilled in Asia today
2. a contemporary assessment of how the “Mormon Moment” in the United States is transferring to Asia
3. a historical comparison of improving public perceptions about the Church and its members in Asia, drawing on lessons from Taiwan

## PROPHETIC PERSPECTIVE

The English word “obscurity” is recorded only seven times in scripture and by four prophets: Isaiah, Lehi, Nephi, and Joseph Smith. These seers saw our day, and their inspired usage of the word “obscurity” informs us of what the restored Church of Jesus Christ should be doing, and I testify is doing, in the latter days.

In Isaiah 59, Isaiah—whose great writings Jesus invites us to search<sup>2</sup>—warned that personal and institutional apostasy would cause the house of Israel to wander and become lost along darkened paths. Isaiah declared to the house of Israel, “[But] your iniquities have separated between you and your God. . . . Their feet run to evil. . . . Their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity. . . . Therefore . . . we wait for light, but behold obscurity; for brightness, but we walk in darkness.”<sup>3</sup>

That prophecy of apostasy was fulfilled several times, first by the northern kingdom of Israel, followed by the southern kingdom of Judah, then by the Church organized by Jesus Christ during His mortal ministry, and finally by the civilization of the Nephites. When Joseph Smith walked into the Sacred Grove in 1820, the house of Israel and the Church of Jesus Christ were mired in obscurity and darkness.

I will suggest five signs prophesied by these great seers indicating how the restored latter-day Church would one day emerge out of obscurity. Each sign will be illustrated with examples from the Asia Area.

### **SIGN 1: BOOK OF MORMON PUBLICATION**

In Isaiah 29, which Nephi quotes and expounds upon in 2 Nephi 27, Isaiah foretells in great detail the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. Isaiah and Nephi see the people are in the “deep sleep” of apostasy until a book comes forth with words “out of the dust.” They prophesy of Joseph Smith, through whom the Lord will do a “marvelous work and a wonder.” Then Isaiah writes, “And in that day shall the deaf hear the words of the book, and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity, and out of darkness.”<sup>4</sup>

Spiritually deaf and spiritually blind people in Asia are hearing and seeing the Book of Mormon at an increasing rate. In the 1960s, the Book of Mormon was translated for the first time into Chinese. In the 1970s, the Thai and Indonesian translations were published. In the 1980s, a full Book of Mormon was printed in Hindi (India) and Vietnamese, with selections in several other languages.

In the 1990s, work was initiated on a number of translations, but none were completed during that decade. Then in the 2000s, the first translations were published in Cambodian, Mongolian, Sinhala (Sri Lanka), Tamil (India), Telugu (India), and Urdu (Pakistan). Vietnamese was updated in 2003. In 2007–08, an updated translation of the Chinese scriptures was printed in both traditional and simplified characters.

After only two years into the 2010s, updated Book of Mormon translations were issued in Indonesian and Thai. In the next few years, the first Lao, Malay, and Nepali translations will appear, and an update in Hindi is underway. Who knows?—by 2020 we may have completed translations

into Bengali (Bangladesh and India), Burmese (Myanmar), and Marathi (India), each of which have over forty million native speakers.

Looking forward, technology may be the key for populous Asian nations to access the Book of Mormon. Today, because of various legal restrictions, only 5 percent of the people in Asia can possibly find a full-time missionary in their city who can give them a Book of Mormon to “heft.”<sup>5</sup> Yet almost everyone in Asia owns a mobile device, if not a computer or tablet. Book of Mormon text is now available on the Internet in most Asian languages, with mobile versions now available in Cambodian, Chinese, Indonesian, and Mongolian, with additional languages forthcoming. Efforts are underway for text and audio scriptures on mobile devices.

The first and most crucial step to bring the Church out of obscurity in Asia remains publication and distribution of the Book of Mormon in any format. We cannot invite all to come unto Jesus Christ without this sacred volume of scripture.

## SIGN 2: WELFARE SERVICE

In Isaiah 58, this ancient prophet beautifully describes an acceptable fast to the Lord, which includes dealing bread to the hungry, bringing the poor to our house, and covering the naked. Then Isaiah promises, “If thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noonday.”<sup>6</sup>

The hungry, poor, and naked in Asia are increasingly assisted by fast offerings and humanitarian donations. Many thousands of Church members are blessed in the Lord’s way<sup>7</sup> as fast offerings in wealthier Asian locations like Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan are sufficient to meet the needs of members in poorer nations like Cambodia and Mongolia.

Humanitarian projects bless the lives of millions. Currently, a volunteer force of thirty-one senior couples located in thirteen Asian nations is providing welfare training, assisting in employment and the Perpetual Education Fund, and coordinating millions of dollars in humanitarian projects. We carry out three types of humanitarian projects proximate to centers of strength where Church members can serve:

major initiatives with worldwide expertise are clean water and sanitation, wheelchairs and walkers, neonatal resuscitation, vision care, immunizations, asthma treatment, and food production

area initiatives bless the communities where our members live through assistance to institutions such as orphanages, handicapped training centers, and disadvantaged schools

emergency-response efforts include earthquakes and fires in China and Malaysia as well as devastating flooding in Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam in 2011

Our efforts do not go unnoticed by the general public or government officials. In China, recent wheelchair donations and childhood-asthma education projects were reported in local media. In a recent visit to Nepal, Church leaders received sincere gratitude from government officials for the Church and for our support of wheelchair donations, major water projects, and skills training to those who are blind or have Hansen's disease (leprosy).

Sometimes, many years of humanitarian service precede the Church being granted legal privileges such as national registration or missionary visas. As we demonstrate our willingness to help communities and live harmoniously with neighbors regardless of religious affiliation, governments have greater trust in the Church and its members.<sup>8</sup> Sincere efforts to follow the example of Jesus Christ in blessing the unfortunate and afflicted help the Church's light to rise from obscurity.

### SIGN 3: THE CHURCH FOUNDATION

In section 1 of the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord declares to Joseph Smith that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is "the only true and living Church upon the face of the whole earth" with which he is "well pleased." He also reveals that priesthood leaders who receive the commandments in the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants "might have power to lay the foundation of this Church, and to bring it forth out of obscurity and out of darkness."<sup>9</sup>

Of course, the Church is “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone.”<sup>10</sup> Upon this foundation, we must establish in each country a base of legal entities, organizational units, and priesthood leaders. This base is being set up at a quickening pace across Asia.

Currently, at least one congregation of the Church meets in nineteen of the Asia Area’s twenty-five countries and territories. In twelve regions, the Church is registered or recognized with legal entities that enable both religious and humanitarian work. In four nations—Laos, Myanmar, Nepal, and Vietnam—Latter-day Saint Charities exists as a legal entity, exclusively for humanitarian work. And in three countries—Bangladesh, Brunei, and China—the Church has no religious or humanitarian legal entity. Church officers continue to meet regularly with government officials in all of these nations to ensure we maintain or obtain an appropriate legal base.<sup>11</sup>

The organizational foundation of the Church is also expanding. Upon my assignment to the Area Presidency in July 2007, the Asia Area had sixteen stakes and twenty-two districts. By July 2012, the Asia Area had twenty-one stakes and forty-seven districts, with the first stakes recently created in the countries of Mongolia, Indonesia, and India. Taiwan’s eleventh stake was formed in 2010.

More importantly, these stakes and districts are led by dedicated local priesthood holders. Taiwan’s first stake was organized by Elder Gordon B. Hinckley in 1976 with Chang Yi Ching called as president. His son, Chang Ting Tsung, now serves as president of the Tainan Taiwan Stake—two generations of devoted stake presidents and now three generations of faithful Latter-day Saints.

President Nadeem Khokar serves as president of the Lahore Pakistan District. He and his parents were converted from Methodism in 1991. He later served a mission to Preston, England, and his four children are now the third generation of Pakistani Church members. Asia is blessed with many such leaders who faithfully follow the teachings and example of Jesus Christ.

## SIGN 4: RIGHTEOUS MEMBERS

In 2 Nephi 1, the aged prophet Lehi begins providing his final instruction and edification to his children. He prophesies of their posterity and pleads with his family to “be a choice and favored people of the Lord.”<sup>12</sup> He counsels, “Awake, my sons; put on the armor of righteousness. Shake off the chains with which ye are bound, and come forth out of obscurity, and arise from the dust.”<sup>13</sup>

Each year across Asia, thousands of people shake off incorrect traditions that lack a fullness of gospel truth and put on the armor that comes from righteously keeping God’s commandments. Asia is the center of the non-Christian world. Estimates are that 34 percent of Asia’s 3.5 billion people have no religious belief, with most of those living in China and Vietnam. Asia has one billion Hindus, primarily in India and Nepal. More than 700 million Muslims, or one-half of the global total, reside in Asia—concentrated in Indonesia, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, China, and Malaysia. Over 400 million Buddhists live in China, Thailand, Myanmar, Taiwan, Sri Lanka, and Cambodia. Only 140 million people in Asia, or 4 percent of the total population, are Christian.

And yet the clarion call of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ is gathering the elect in Asian nations from every religious and socioeconomic background. The Nyugen family lives in a home built of discarded lumber and tin that sits on stilts along the flood-prone Mekong River near Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Signs of faith in Jesus Christ and love for his prophets are evident throughout this formerly Buddhist family’s humble home.

Sumit Aurora converted from Hinduism while living in New Delhi, India, during college, and he now resides in Lucknow, India, where there is no Church branch. Each weekend he travels seven hours by train to New Delhi and has not missed a sacrament meeting in a year. Such modern pioneers push heavy spiritual handcarts to live the gospel, and when they do so, the Church comes out of obscurity one by one as their family, friends, and associates see powerful examples of the abundant life.

## SIGN 5: TEMPLE COVENANTS

In 1 Nephi 22, Nephi expounds upon the words of Isaiah and records remarkable prophecies about our day. Nephi emphasizes the “great worth” of the marvelous latter-day work is “making known of the covenants of the Father in heaven unto Abraham.”<sup>14</sup> We understand this to mean the priesthood and temple ordinances and covenants by which “shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed.”<sup>15</sup> After God’s children are “gathered together” to know the Father’s covenants, Nephi concludes by promising “they shall be brought out of obscurity and out of darkness; and they shall know that the Lord is their Savior and Redeemer.”<sup>16</sup>

A growing number of Asian Saints are qualifying themselves to receive temple ordinances and keep the associated covenants. We are grateful for the two temples that currently provide light to Asia—one in Taipei and one in Hong Kong. Because of personal sacrifice and generous allocations from the general Temple Patron Assistance Fund, many more members from every Asian nation can go to the temple.

In each of the past few years, about 250 newly married couples and long-married converts from across Asia were sealed as husband and wife for time and all eternity. Some couples travel to the temple alone, like Roshan and Sheron Antony from Sri Lanka, who both served missions in the Philippines and returned to be sealed in the Manila Temple. Some couples coming to be sealed travel with large groups, like most members from Mongolia, whose trip to the Hong Kong Temple is a two-week event requiring a minimum of three days each way by train. And some couples are like Lawrence and Saritha William from India, who were sealed in the Hong Kong Temple in 2002 and then saved for eight years to return.

In February 2012, a milestone was crossed, with ten thousand Latter-day Saints in the Asia Area holding a current temple recommend. To me, this is astounding! Such faithful members have truly come to know Jesus is their Savior and Redeemer.

These five signs of the Church coming out of obscurity and darkness—Book of Mormon publication, welfare service, Church foundation, righteous members, and temple covenants—are increasingly evident in the Asia Area. With this prophetic perspective in place, I now turn to an assessment of current events.



## CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE

The cover of *Newsweek* magazine (13–20 June 2011) showed presidential candidate Mitt Romney in mid-leap, wearing missionary attire, with the text “The Mormon Moment” emblazoned across his torso. The mocked-up photo was a takeoff of a poster for the popular Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon*, which opened in March 2011. That cover story is just one example of US media that has been awash in Mormon-related content for the past year. It has been eye-opening for me to consider the question, “Is the US ‘Mormon Moment’ transferring to Asia?” The simple answer is, “Yes,” but the more accurate answer is, “It depends.”

“Yes”—*The Mormon Moment in Asia*

On the surface, Asia is experiencing an “in-the-public-eye” Mormon Moment as illustrated in Indonesia and India.

In late January 2012, *Kompas*, the largest newspaper in the world’s largest Muslim-majority nation, Indonesia, printed a short cover article using the term “Mormon Moment.” Adapted from a Reuters story, the article mentioned Mitt Romney and Jon Huntsman, *The Book of Mormon* musical, HBO’s *Big Love*, *Twilight*, and findings from the just-released Pew Research Center’s survey of US Mormons.

In early March 2012, print and electronic media in India were saturated in two Mormon-related stories—the presidential campaign of Mitt Romney and the proxy baptism of national founding father Mahatma Gandhi. Of the latter story, the *Hindustan Times* declared, “Hindus Shocked.” But such interest quickly led to two newspaper articles that favorably profiled local members in India.

Several years ago, articles of any kind about the Church or its members rarely appeared in Indonesian and Indian media.

“It Depends”—*Public-Perception Influences*

To more deeply understand the communication of events coming out of the United States, in February 2012, I conducted a simple survey and follow-up interview with about fifty Chinese senior priesthood leaders living across mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Each man was asked

to review a list of potential “public-perception influences” that can be grouped into several categories:

Well-known politicians: Governor Mitt Romney, Ambassador Jon Huntsman, Senator Harry Reid

Church policies: Polygamy (Warren Jeffs), proxy baptism (Holocaust victims), same-gender marriage (Proposition 8), Priesthood ordination (race and gender)

Church initiatives: “I’m a Mormon” advertising campaign, Mormon.org website, Church Newsroom

Popular culture: *The Book of Mormon* musical, *Big Love* TV program, *Twilight* books and movies

Prominent members: singers (David Archuleta), actors (Jon Heder), athletes (Jimmer Fredette), commentators (Glenn Beck)

For each of these potential influences, the priesthood leader was asked to rate how often Chinese-language media mentioned the Church and, when mentioned, rate whether the effect on public perception toward the Church was positive or negative. Three conclusions emerge from this simple survey and indicate that not all public-perception influences are created equally, at least when transferring from the United States to Greater China.

First, presidential politics matter a lot. Almost 80 percent of Chinese priesthood leaders have read or viewed something about the religion of US presidential candidates. Of these informed men, 40 percent judge that Chinese media mention the Church “almost always” or “frequently” when reporting on Governor Mitt Romney and Ambassador Jon Huntsman. Also, 70 percent of our leaders think the effect of stories about Governor Romney and Ambassador Huntsman are “very favorable” or “favorable” toward the Church, with few “unfavorable” scores. In contrast to presidential politics, the importance of the US senate majority leader and his Church membership is known by few Chinese priesthood leaders (and probably most Americans).

Second, Church policies matter but are misunderstood. About 65 percent of Chinese priesthood leaders have read or viewed Chinese media content referring to the Church's historical or current policies, like polygamy, proxy baptism, same-gender marriage, and priesthood ordination. Of these informed leaders, 75 percent think the effect of such stories is "very unfavorable" or "unfavorable" toward the Church, with few "favorable" scores. Reports about the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS) and their leader, Warren Jeffs, were particularly corrosive.

Third, nothing else matters much. Less than 45 percent of our priesthood leaders in Greater China are aware of Church initiatives like the "I'm a Mormon" advertising campaign and the Mormon.org or Church Newsroom websites. Only 30 percent of these leaders know anything about a Latter-day Saint (LDS) connection to US popular culture, like *Big Love*, *Twilight*, and *The Book of Mormon* musical. Those who do know rated the effect as neutral, except in Taiwan, where *Big Love* has been actively promoted and leads nonmembers to think the Church still allows polygamy. Only 10 percent of our leaders in Greater China recognize prominent US Church members who are singers, actors, athletes, or commentators, the exception being David Archuleta, because the TV program *American Idol* is broadcast in many Asian cities.

If the conclusions from this small sample survey of Chinese priesthood leaders apply across Asia, and I think they do, then we should not be surprised when Asian media is blanketed with stories of presidential campaigns and posthumous baptism.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Clearly, visibility from the US "Mormon Moment" is accelerating the Church's rise out of obscurity in Asia, in both positive and negative ways. Credibility and respectability for the Church to come out of darkness requires both institutional and individual action.

The Church must reach out to assist content sources. Most stories about the Church in Asian media are direct translations from or adaptations of English-language content from sources such as Reuters, the

Associated Press, Pew Research, and academia. If the original writers get the facts or context wrong, then readers in Asia will be misled.

We need to watch for and correct mistranslations. Even if the English story is accurate, Asian readers may misunderstand the Church's position through faulty translation. For example, when many articles were written about Warren Jeffs and the FLDS Church, various Chinese translations for "fundamentalist" caused great confusion, which we took action to correct.

Until recently, we lacked an institutional Church voice in any Asian language where the media and interested observers might quickly access the Church's official position on doctrines and practices. The Chinese-language Church Newsroom should be launched in April 2012, and efforts are under way on Mormon.org in Chinese. We hope search-engine optimization in Chinese will soon follow.

We increasingly need individual Asian members to heed Elder Ballard's invitation to "join the conversation."<sup>17</sup> They can clarify and correct very outdated falsehoods that populate the comments section of many online stories about the Church on Asian-language websites and that circulate in social media outlets like Facebook.

Thus, the US Mormon Moment has had an impact on the Church in Asia; a few public-perception influences are helping bring the Church out of obscurity; implications include that Church members need to "join the conversation."

## HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

I now revert to a historical comparison of the Church's image in Asia, drawing on personal experiences in Taiwan and Asia over the past thirty years. My thesis is the Church's image has evolved during its sixty-year presence in Taiwan, and that evolution pattern can be applied to other Asian lands.

## A SHIFT IN PERCEPTION

As mentioned earlier, I conducted a simple survey and follow-up interview with about fifty Chinese priesthood leaders living in Greater China. One part of my questionnaire asked them to list words that would describe

public perception about the Church in Greater China fifteen to twenty-five years ago. I was not surprised when the most common words listed were “cult,” “false beliefs,” “polygamy,” and “foreign.”

These Chinese leaders were then asked to list words expressing public perception today. While some of the old words have not entirely gone away, the more common terms are now “family values,” “wealthy,” “community service,” and “kind members.”

Each man was asked to list the key factors that led to a positive shift in public perception over the past fifteen to twenty-five years. Equally mentioned responses were humanitarian and service projects, Church public affairs efforts, favorable media coverage, and prominent members. But the factor mentioned three times more than any other was the example of Church members’ actions.

Finally, our Chinese leaders were asked to choose the most common response when a friend or stranger first learns they are a Mormon. As one might expect, a somewhat positive distribution can be seen. About 5 percent mock, 17 percent giggle, 38 percent are neutral, 32 percent respect, and 8 percent praise. This positive shift in perception over the past twenty years described in this simple survey confirmed my personal observations from living in Taiwan and working with LDS colleagues whose Taiwanese experiences predate my own.

## CHURCH IMAGE EVOLUTION IN TAIWAN

The first four missionaries arrived in Taiwan on 4 June 1956, and since that day, young men in white shirts and ties have remained the most powerful image of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on this island. Yet I will contend that perceptions of the Church have evolved through three stages, each lasting about twenty years.

### *Stage 1: Nice Neglect*

In the late 1950s and 1960s, Taiwan’s population was very poor, mostly uneducated, and wary of renewed civil war. “Mormon missionaries who came from abroad were often the first foreigners that some Taiwanese people met. The young, nonthreatening missionaries gave the Taiwanese

the opportunity to meet, talk with, ask questions of, and get to know non-Chinese people coming to Taiwan willingly. The missionaries projected a positive image; they were volunteers, they lived modestly, and, most of all, they wanted to learn about the local people and their history, culture, and traditions, as well as to teach the gospel. As a result, the missionaries were received much more favorably than were US servicemen and women.”<sup>18</sup>

During this first twenty-year period, many of Taiwan’s pioneering leaders and their families joined the Church. Membership grew from zero in 1956 to about five thousand by 1970. By 1976, strength was sufficient for Elder Gordon B. Hinckley to organize Taiwan’s first stake in the capital city of Taipei.

### *Stage 2: Strangely Suspect*

When I arrived in Taiwan in late 1979, a third mission had just been created, and the significantly expanded missionary force was still the most obvious Church image. Taiwan’s people assumed all LDS missionaries were Americans, and that was troubling to many, because the United States had recently shifted national recognition from Taipei to Beijing. Everyone knew we rode around on tall bikes, but few people knew what we taught, and falsehoods were pervasive. In response, our mission developed a simple tract entitled, “Who Are We?”

One challenge was the phrase “Devil’s Gate Cult”—a twisted interpretation of the Chinese characters used for “Mormon Church.” This phrase sheltered typical anti-Mormon ideas such as paying Buddhists and Taoists to convert (“rice-bowl Christians”), infiltrating Taiwan society as CIA operatives, recruiting Taiwanese girls for Utah harems, and even sacrificing children in our temples.

Fortunately for the Church’s perception in Taiwan during the late 1970s and early 1980s, a pop culture Mormon Moment was underway. Donny and Marie Osmond captured hearts in Taiwan with their syndicated TV show and songs such as “Puppy Love.” As I knocked on doors in those years, it seemed as if every household knew Donny and Marie were Mormons and liked their wholesome family image. This feeling was so enduring that in 2005, when Marie Osmond met her oldest son in

Kaohsiung at the end of his mission, Taiwanese newspapers allocated an entire page to the story.

Despite some opposition, Church membership in Taiwan grew to eight thousand by 1980 and more than doubled again to seventeen thousand by 1990. The Taipei Temple was dedicated during this period, in 1984.

### *Stage 3: Rising Respect*

As time advanced into the 1990s and 2000s, the Church became increasingly respected for the good it represented and did in Taiwan. While good examples by members and missionaries were the most important factors for this shift in perception, institutional action also played a major role.

The Church has become recognized for community service. When a massive 7.6 magnitude earthquake killed 2,400 people in 1999, local media recounted stories of missionaries using flashlights and first aid supplies from their 72-hour kits to escort people out of damaged buildings and provide basic treatment. When the typhoon Morakot killed almost seven hundred people in 2009, a newly constructed LDS chapel housed relief operations. The media profiled members and missionaries from around the island who gathered for cleanup activities and worked together with a Buddhist relief organization.

The Church is respected for its family values. When Ma Ying-jeou was mayor of Taipei, the Church supported his administration's family initiative with a values-based family home evening manual. Later, after his election as Taiwan's president, we presented him with "The Family: A Proclamation to the World."

Amid such progress, the enduring icon of the Church in Taiwan is two missionaries, each straddling a bicycle while wearing a white shirt, a colored tie, a black tag, a shoulder bag, and a safety helmet. How ingrained is this image? I offer two examples.

About seven years ago, the government printed a basic reading book for third-grade children entitled *Society*. Its pages are filled with typical Taiwanese street scenes and people engaging in polite dialogue. On one page, two small figures on bikes are shown stopped at a crosswalk. A zoomed-in view of the scene shows a girl waving and saying, in English, "Hello!" to two perfectly attired and happily talkative missionaries. How

interesting to contemplate that on an island with twenty-three million people, a snapshot of society would not be complete without representation of only a few hundred young men and women.

Just a few years ago, the makers of the “Home Style Noodles” brand launched a thirty-second ad with missionary look-alikes at its center. In the ad, a woman opens her door and two men ask if she has time to chat. She invites them inside and offers refreshments. They say “no” three times to foods that are fried, use preservatives, and contain MSG. The housewife is perplexed about how to host these young men (who have a strict interpretation of the Word of Wisdom). In a moment of inspiration, the housewife knows to prepare packaged noodles, which they joyfully consume while being too busy to chat. Again, how interesting to consider a company linking its brand to an image of a minority religion.

Undoubtedly, the Church in Taiwan is well into the “Rising Respect” stage of image evolution. Such respect accelerated Church membership in Taiwan to twenty-seven thousand by 2000 and fifty-three thousand by 2010.

As societies modernize, they often lose their traditional values and moorings. Earlier in Taiwan, the Church was seen as young and foreign, perhaps not an institution you would entrust with your children. Now, with rising respect, many parents in Taiwan see the Church as conservative and established—just the place you hope your youth might go to be socially safe.

What about the rest of Asia? Will Asian nations follow in Taiwan’s path? I think so.

## CHURCH IMAGE ACROSS ASIA

The Church is probably in the “Nice Neglect” stage in Asian nations like Bangladesh, Brunei, Laos, Myanmar, Nepal, and Vietnam. Our in-country presence is less than ten years, our membership is just in the hundreds, and our senior missionaries are viewed as friendly, nonthreatening people. We undertake humanitarian endeavors while working with government officials to obtain legal privileges. Our activities are “below the radar,” and opposition is fairly limited.



In many Asian countries where the Church has been operating for about fifteen to twenty years, we are probably entering or well into the “Strangely Suspect” stage. Such nations might include Cambodia, China, India, Malaysia, Mongolia, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Interestingly, when membership in centers of strength has grown to the point where stakes are being considered or created, opposition seems to accelerate: false rumors circulate in the media and government; anti-Mormon websites proliferate; challenges arise to Church registration, meetinghouse licenses, or missionary visas; physical attacks on missionaries occur; and investigations of Church officers and members by the national security or intelligence agencies are common.

Perhaps our greatest protection during the “Strangely Suspect” stage is strict obedience to the eleventh and twelfth articles of faith. When we “allow all men the . . . privilege” to “worship how, where, or what they may,”<sup>19</sup> then leaders of an Asian country’s predominant religion are less opposed to our presence. When we are “subject to . . . rulers . . . in obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law,” then a nation’s leaders do not see us as a threat to political stability.<sup>20</sup>

As Church members follow these two Articles of Faith, we begin to move past the “Strangely Suspect” stage. Many Asian nations have a ministry of religion—in China it is called the State Administration for Religious Affairs or SARA, which has departments for Buddhists, Catholics, Muslims, Protestants, and Taoists. For many years, the bureau that oversaw our activities carried the title “Cults.” Recently, that bureau’s name changed to “New Religions.” I call that progress!

One element of Church image moving from suspect to respect is a country’s economic development and outside exposure. Today, people from China and India are more likely to meet a Latter-day Saint during travel to North America, Europe, or Australia than in their home countries, and many do.

For Asian nations where the Church has had a presence for thirty to forty years—like Indonesia, Macau, Singapore, and Thailand—we are hopefully moving from “Strangely Suspect” to “Rising Respect.” Persevering through restrictive government regulations or overcoming public

affairs debacles can take many years of exemplary citizenship and community service.

In Taiwan and Hong Kong, where missionaries and stakes have been established over the course of nearly sixty years, the Church has surely moved into the “Rising Respect” stage. Media is generally positive toward the Church, as is much of the populace, but challenges still arise on occasion, just as in the United States. For example, our Hong Kong public affairs council recently faced a situation where several high school principals in school assemblies warned their students to avoid Christian cults disguised as English tutors. Our Church name was specifically mentioned on several occasions.

If “Neglect-Suspect-Respect” is a general pattern as Church membership grows, we should also recognize each stage can exist simultaneously within different parts of a populous Asian nation. The Church can be respected in a national capital like New Delhi or Beijing, suspected in a commercial center like Bangalore or Shanghai, and neglected in an outlying city like Rajahmundry or Shenzhen.

Looking forward across Asia, I predict this pattern will continue, but the twenty-year duration of each stage will compress. Compared to our entry into Taiwan in 1956 or even into Cambodia in 1994, transportation and communication advancements will shorten the “Nice Neglect” stage. Hopefully, the “Strangely Suspect” stage will also be brief so the Church can move quickly toward “Rising Respect.”

We know the devil is speeding up his efforts against gospel truths,<sup>21</sup> but the Lord has promised, “Behold, I will hasten my work in its time.”<sup>22</sup> By looking at Asia’s past we learn perceptions are shifting, Church image is moving through stages, and the Lord’s work is hastening.

## PERSONAL MORMON MOMENTS

In summary:

1. From a prophetic perspective, priesthood leaders are directing institutional steps to fulfill the five signs foretold by ancient and modern seers that would bring the Church out of obscurity.

2. From a contemporary perspective, Church members are exerting individual efforts in realms such as presidential politics that increase “in-the-public-eye” Mormon Moments, for better and worse.

3. Yet from a historical perspective, I am convinced that “personal” Mormon Moments are what really mattered in changing perceptions toward the Church in Taiwan, and such one-to-one moments will still matter most as the gospel moves forth across the face of Asia.

To close, permit me to share a story that illustrates how “in-the-public-eye” Mormon Moments and “personal” Mormon Moments are combining to bring the Church out of obscurity in Asia.

In June 2011, our Singapore public affairs council was finishing open house preparations for a new meetinghouse in north Singapore. An invitation was extended to the second-highest person in Singapore’s national government: Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean. He accepted the invitation, and plans were made to guide him through classrooms depicting various Church programs.

As we began the tour, Minister Teo’s comments reinforced the importance and impact of “in-the-public-eye” Mormon Moments. He stated the Singapore government emphasizes a diverse yet harmonious religious environment, and his visit would underscore that emphasis. He remarked that the tipping point for his decision to attend our open house was the impending presidential campaigns of Governor Mitt Romney and Ambassador Jon Huntsman. Minister Teo wanted to know more about the faith of these two politicians, one whom he knew well but with whom he had never discussed doctrines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

In the middle of our open house tour, Minister Teo experienced two personal Mormon Moments. In the room set up to display the Church’s youth programs, a fifteen-year-old young man described Aaronic Priesthood offices while Minister Teo skimmed through a Duty to God booklet. Minister Teo asked, “Where did the titles deacon, teacher, and priest come from?” For me, eternity almost hung in the balance while I silently prayed

this boy's answer would be inspired. After a brief pause, the young man replied, "These titles came by revelation from God through his prophet Joseph Smith." I could scarcely contain myself from hugging this worthy priesthood holder who stated a profound truth.

Calmly proceeding on, we moved to the display of the Young Women program. Similarly, a delightful young woman articulately described the program and answered Minister Teo's questions while he thumbed through a Personal Progress booklet. When her short presentation concluded, Minister Teo asked, "How old are you?" She replied, "Thirteen, sir." Minister Teo turned to me and said, "Your religion produces outstanding youth." He is right!

When each of Asia's 3.5 billion people has the opportunity to interact with even one faithful Church member and experience a personal Mormon Moment like Deputy Prime Minister Teo encountered in that Singapore open house, then the Church will truly come out of obscurity.

I witness Jesus Christ is able to do His own work,<sup>23</sup> and He is doing it today in the Asia Area, where more than one-half of our Heavenly Father's children reside. The Church's future in Asia will be glorious as the gospel light continues to break forth out of obscurity upon these ancient lands and among these noble people.

## NOTES

1. *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 135–47.
2. See 3 Nephi 23:1–3.
3. Isaiah 59:2, 7, 9; emphasis added.
4. Isaiah 29:18; 2 Nephi 27:29; emphasis added.
5. See "The Testimony of Eight Witnesses," Book of Mormon.
6. Isaiah 58:10; italics added.
7. See Doctrine and Covenants 104:14–17.
8. See Doctrine and Covenants 44:4, 6.
9. Doctrine and Covenants 1:30; emphasis added.
10. Ephesians 2:20.
11. See Doctrine and Covenants 44.
12. 2 Nephi 1:19.

13. 2 Nephi 1:23; emphasis added.
14. 1 Nephi 22:8–9.
15. 1 Nephi 22:9.
16. 1 Nephi 22:12; emphasis added.
17. See M. Russell Ballard, “Sharing the Gospel Using the Internet,” *Ensign*, July 2008, 58–63.
18. Richard B. Stamps, “The Cultural Impact of Mormon Missionaries on Taiwan,” *BYU Studies* 41, no. 4 (2002): 103–14.
19. Articles of Faith 1:11.
20. Articles of Faith 1:12.
21. See 2 Nephi 28:20; Moroni 7:12.
22. Doctrine and Covenants 88:73.
23. See 2 Nephi 27:20–21.