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No Longer as Strangers

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When I knelt down to pray with John, we were committing a crime. When we spoke about the Book of Mormon, we were cautious of who might be listening. We were brothers in the truest sense, yet we could not openly call each other “Brother.” This story is about my friend John, the Church, and China.

About four years ago I was living in the small town of Emmen in the northeast region of the Netherlands when I came into contact with a Chinese student, Zhan Yu Feng, whose English name was John. I was serving as a missionary at the time, and my companion and I had met John one evening while looking for another student with whom we had made an appointment who lived in the same dormitory. That student never showed up, but John was there. He wanted to know who we were and what we were doing. Naturally, we were pleased to tell him.

We started meeting with John regularly, and soon we could tell that his interest in our message and the Church extended beyond mere curiosity. Despite not being able to understand Dutch, he started coming to church regularly where we would translate the entire three-hour service into English for him. As we taught him, I felt privileged to witness his conversion, to watch him grow in understanding, to listen to him pray for the very first time—a young man who had hardly even heard of the idea of God before we met him. I grew to love him deeply as a friend, a brother, and even as something of a son.

John also had a delightful sense of humor, which, when combined with the occasional translation error, created a series of memorable lines. One time we taught him that the president of the Church, President Hinckley, was the only living prophet authorized to receive revelation on behalf of the entire earth. His response was, “Only one? So rare . . . like the panda!” Another time

a Sunday School teacher got very upset at church after an argument with another member. We were concerned that seeing this contention would turn John off the Church, but he seemed to understand and take it in stride: “That teacher’s face didn’t look very much like Jesus’s face. His face looked all red and angry.” Then there was the confusion, as John was preparing to be baptized, when we told him that he would be dressed all in white and immersed in water. We suggested that he bring an extra pair of white underwear. “White? But all my underwear is red,” he said; and when we asked how this could be the case, he explained, “Well . . . it’s the year of the Pig.”

John did, in fact, get baptized. Later another friend of his, also a Chinese student, joined the Church after John introduced him to it. John was a loving and dedicated young man, and I saw firsthand how the gospel changed his life. He read the scriptures, he prayed, he fellowshiped with the other members of the Church. He had found a home far away from home, and most of all he had found his Heavenly Father. When it was time for me to leave and continue my service in a different city, he gave me an electronic wristwatch as a going-away present. “Here,” he said, very solemnly and sincerely. “It was made in China.”

John and I kept up occasional contact after I left Emmen. After working at a Chinese restaurant for some time where he was treated poorly and paid little, he eventually stopped his studies early and went back home to China. He got a job working at the Olympics, and more recently he has started a company that organizes nationwide singing contests—sort of like *American Idol* but not televised. Last spring I went to Beijing on a college seminar studying political economy; and for the first time in three years we were reunited.

We had a wonderful time seeing each other. On our first day together, we went out to lunch and then spent the rest of the afternoon at his apartment, playing on his karaoke machine. Another day he cooked lunch for me, complete with a side of frog legs, better than any restaurant meal I had had in Asia. It was a delight to eat with him, to catch up on his life, and meet his friends and roommates. But most of all I was keen on making sure that John reconnected with the Church, because, since his return to China, he had not known where to find it.

It is difficult finding the Church in China. Though it is established all over the world in every country where the government will allow us, Chinese regulations regarding the Church are very strict. Latter-day Saints are allowed to worship together, but they may not proselyte. The Church is not allowed to build formal meetinghouses in China, nor can there be any signage indicating where meetings are held. In Beijing, for example, the members meet inside an office building. I found the address on mormon.org, but it took me an hour to find the actual building because I did not know what I was looking for. And then it was only because I ran into other Mormons along the way that I knew to take the elevator around the corner to the fourth floor and then turn right and go across the hall. Nowhere was any of this information posted.

And while Latter-day Saints are allowed to worship together, there are limits to this freedom. Specifically, foreign passport-holding members are not allowed to worship with Chinese nationals. Thus, in Beijing a branch of Chinese Saints meets in the same building as the two foreigner branches, but much later in the afternoon so as to prevent interaction and even the appearance of conspiracy. We read the same books and pray to the same God, but we may not discuss Him with each other. Here is the text printed on the back of every program of the foreigners' branch:

The branch presidency wishes to draw your attention to the following:

It is important for foreign members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints living in or visiting China to be aware of the unique restrictions on religious activities here. While China permits freedom of religious belief, it requires all religious activities in China to comply with relevant laws and regulations.

We would like to remind you of the following:

1. No active or passive proselyting is permitted among local nationals in China,
2. Only individuals who hold foreign passports, and their spouses, may attend meetings or other activities of this branch,
3. No foreign nationals are permitted to participate in activities of any kind with Chinese nationals who are members of our church, and
4. Religious materials may not be disseminated to Chinese nationals in China.

Your strict observance of these rules enables us to build a foun-

dition of trust with government authorities and enables us to continue to meet together as the government permits us to do so.

With all these obstacles, it was difficult getting John linked up with the Church.

The first time I tried, I brought John along with me to the foreigner branch I had been attending, but we were stopped at the door. The brother who stopped us was kind and sympathetic but had to remain firm in prohibiting John from worshipping with us. We understood, of course. One casual exception to the rule could turn into a pattern that would jeopardize the Church's ability to exist in China at all. It is in keeping with a common attitude throughout the Church that we patiently and diligently adhere to established rules and policies, whether from external forces or from the Church itself, even if the policies are painful, until such a time as we can truly change the regulation forever.

And so that first Sunday we did not enter the chapel. I apologized to John but then insisted that he stay with me in the foyer just a little longer. We waited outside, and eventually a man came out to us carrying the sacrament—those tokens of the blood and body of Christ. And John partook. For him it was the first time in two years.

The next Sunday I went to the foreigner service by myself but waited for several hours afterward for the Chinese service to begin. John showed up a few minutes before the first meeting began, and I took him by the hand and led him to the front of the chapel where the branch president was sitting. The entire congregation was already present, watching us, and I was conscious that I had to be brief, for every second I spent on that podium was in public violation of Chinese law. One of the branch president's counselors translated for me. I told them John was a member and that I was his missionary.

I put John's hand into the hand of the branch president and said, essentially, "Here. He is yours. Treat him like your son. Look out for him. Help him find family here." And then I gave John a hug and said good-bye.

The counselor shook my hand, looked into my eyes, and said, "Thank you."

"Thank you, brother," I said, "God bless you." And I left.

I walked across the hallway, turned left, and got into the elevator. As the doors closed I could hear the first few bars of the opening hymn. They were singing in Chinese, but I knew the words.

Now let us rejoice in the day of salvation.
No longer as strangers on earth need we roam.
Good tidings are sounding to us and each nation,
And shortly the hour of redemption will come,
When all that was promised the Saints will be given,
And none will molest them from morn until ev'n,
And earth will appear as the Garden of Eden,
And Jesus will say to all Israel, "Come home."¹

I took the elevator down four flights and walked through the main lobby. As I walked toward the door I saw a middle-aged Chinese woman dressed in her Sunday best, walking past me in the direction toward which I had just come. Our eyes met, and we smiled at each other briefly—just long enough to acknowledge that, though we do not know each other, though we cannot speak each other's language, and though we are forbidden from praying together, we are both children of the same covenant. Then we passed by and I walked out the door, still smiling.

Note

1. William W. Phelps, "Now Let Us Rejoice," *Hymns of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 3.