

Part 2:

Regional Issues and Insights





GRACIA
WIARDA

Challenges and Care For Asian Missionaries

It is my privilege to be in touch with many Asian missionaries through my work as a therapist at the Counseling and Care Centre in Singapore. Several mission agencies and churches in Singapore refer their candidates and missionaries to me for assessments, counselling, and debriefing. My perceptions are therefore based on feedback from a relatively broad base of missionaries working in different Third World countries. The people I work with tend to be in their late 30s to mid-50s. The issues they face may be peculiar to their generation. They are primarily Singaporeans but also include Taiwanese, Japanese, Nepalese, Koreans, Indonesians, Hong Kong Chinese, and Chinese Malaysians. The majority of them are first-generation Christians.

Field-Side Issues

Concern for the Family

Respecting and understanding the Asian culture will involve an appreciation of the strong sense of filial piety and family loyalty—an obligation to meet parental and familial needs and wants—in the Asian psyche. There is generally a lesser sense of entitlement, but rather a keen awareness of the need to repay relational debts. However, this trait may lessen as the socio-economic and cultural background changes with the onslaught of globalization and technological advances and as the emotional hold of family life breaks down. Many Chinese Asian missionaries continue to give their parents a monthly allowance while they are away. It represents a token of their gratitude for their parents' care and provision for them when they were young. Most parents expect this token even if they may not openly ask for it. It reflects well on the family when adult

This chapter focuses on some of the common issues facing Asian missionaries when they are on the field and on home assignment. These issues can differ in some measure from those confronted by Western missionaries.

It is my hope that the various areas addressed in this article will lead to more action on the part of mission agencies and churches, as they seek to provide appropriate member care for Asian mission personnel.

children express their gratitude in monetary terms, as well as in frequent home visits and practical caregiving. Thus, the attempts of mission personnel to visit or contact parents and relatives on behalf of the missionary mean a great deal to both missionaries and their family members. Often Christian friends and church members act as proxies in the discharge of filial duty by visiting (particularly during important festivals and events) and making phone calls to the parents.

The idea of an adult child going away to serve other people instead of staying back to take care of parents is still unacceptable to some Asian parents. If the adult child goes away for money-making purposes, advancement of career, or because of a lack of other work choices, it may be deemed prudent or necessary. In the case of missionaries, there may be a mutual understanding between them and the family that they should compensate in the form of financial contributions or return when the parents (for health or other reasons) need their service. The exception may be for those who have sufficiently well-to-do siblings who support their overseas ministry.

Language Learning

There is a general consensus that Asians find learning another Asian language easier than their Western counterparts. Most have already been exposed to more than one language or dialect from a young age. Some of them have gone straight into field ministry without needing a language-learning program—for instance, a Singaporean Mandarin speaking Chinese going to Taiwan or China. Some breeze through a language program, while others plod along perseveringly. One missionary experienced undue stress when there was an inner expectation to master another Asian language faster because of his Asian background. A few mentioned feeling rather embarrassed when making language blunders and causing misunderstanding, being themselves sensitive to the Asian tendency of not asking for clarifica-

tion or correcting someone's mistakes. This Asian "politeness" is adopted so as to avoid causing the other person to "lose face" (experience shame). Nevertheless, Asian missionaries feel embarrassed when they fumble, knowing that blunders are noted even though they are not addressed.

Those who have grown up in countries where they had little exposure to English find themselves needing to learn the English language in order to become members of international missionary organizations. Many missionary candidates from Korea, Japan, Hong Kong, and Indonesia are sent for English language courses so that they can take courses in cross-cultural studies or participate in the orientation programs of their organizations. For them, the period of preparation for service is lengthened by at least a year. Many Asians already speak fluent English and have graduated from colleges and seminaries overseas. Those who had learned the language only for communication within their missions often find themselves at a disadvantage. Particularly during their first term, when bonding and mutual understanding with their international colleagues are quite critical, they usually do not have sufficient mastery of the language to help negotiate all the nuances inherent in cross-cultural communication. Apart from learning and working at mastering the national language, they need to continue learning and improving in English. Otherwise, they will not be able to benefit as much from mission conferences and seminars and will be unlikely to move into leadership positions, even though they may be very competent.

Adjusting to the New Culture

Many have expressed that, as Asians, they are able to bond more easily with nationals, whether in Africa or in Asia, because of their cultural affinity. Statements such as, "The nationals tend to open up to us and share more deeply with us than with Western missionaries," "The nationals treat us like family," and, "They confide in us and we can say things to

them,” are made. One missionary to Africa believed that what bridges the gap is the high value placed on the family and the extended family that Asians and Africans tend to share. She felt that most Western missionaries found it very hard to appreciate and understand the invisible family loyalty bonds that influence individual behavior. Another missionary shared that she was told by an African national that she was “family,” but the Western colleague was more like an employer.

In some cases, Asian missionaries feel triangulated because they identify with the nationals as Asians and with the Westerners as team members. A national may criticize a Western colleague and expect the Asian missionary to understand and take sides. Though rarely framed very explicitly, the negative aspects of what Westerners stand for are often alluded to in the criticism. A national might say, “You know the Westerners, they...,” or comparisons might be made between “them” (the Westerners) and “us” (the Asians) in the context of how things are done. Asians may not be aware of their own racial prejudice coloring their views of Western colleagues or of identification with the sentiments of the nationals. However, Western colleagues are still teammates with similar goals and calling, and Asian missionaries sometimes find themselves caught between two loyalties. On the other hand, one Asian family felt second class because the nationals preferred to host a Western family, since that was more prestigious. Among Asians themselves, there is racism based on the degree of lightness of skin color, cultural heritage, economic status of the country of origin, and other factors.

A common perception is that Western missionaries tend to be treated with more deference and outward respect, but Asian missionaries know the nationals better. Several have remarked that they are able to pick up signals when things are amiss. They feel that they can better read the non-verbal and verbal cues, what was said and not said, what was hinted at and meant. One person said, “You just know. I can pick

up when they are just being polite, when to stop pushing.”

A Singaporean Chinese expressed that sometimes the similarity she shares with the Taiwanese Chinese in both features and spoken language becomes a disadvantage. Although fluent in Chinese, she was raised in a multi-cultural context and in an English-medium school. She felt that the Taiwanese expected her to be more “Chinese” in her outlook and were less forgiving when she made mistakes in the use of the language or in interpreting some cultural cues and customs. Although educated in English, she would probably never see herself as “Western” in orientation by any means.

Asian countries share many similar cultural and religious expressions, including the wearing of school uniforms, the practice of having several generations and units of the extended family living nearby or under one roof, open markets, the offering of incense, the presence of shrines in homes, the use of talismans, and the celebration of Buddhist festivals and rites. The buildings of major religions are common sights: ornate Hindu and Buddhist temples, mosques, and Catholic cathedrals. While there are significant differences between countries and while Asians do experience some measure of cultural shock, on the whole they may be exposed to less shock in terms of an overload of differences. It seems that the Asian missionary, once settled, tends to move faster in establishing relationships and ministry with the nationals. The adjustment struggles may be more related to areas of lifestyle, standard of living, and understanding the deeper nuances of the particular culture of the country.

Collegial Relationships

Asians, particularly those for whom English is a second or third language, have to work harder to communicate with colleagues. Those who cannot hold their own with fluent English may minimize social contacts with Western or other Asian colleagues. It is natural to seek out homoge-

neous groups for social and emotional support. Often Koreans will look for other Koreans and Singaporeans for other Singaporeans when seeking fellowship.

A general belief is that working as an international team is enriching and a good testimony to the gospel message, but it is often stressful. Western missionaries, while mentally prepared to work with the nationals, are often not oriented to the cultural background of their Asian colleagues. The Asian colleague, though similar in some ways to the nationals, is quite different in other ways. Sometimes Western colleagues may have difficulty understanding where the Asian colleague is coming from. There are stories aplenty about miscommunication between the two, primarily as a result of differences in use of the language and style of expressions. Asian colleagues, in particular perhaps the Koreans, tend to value the spiritual disciplines and hard work, and they arrive on the field with very high expectations concerning the spirituality of their Western colleagues. One Asian was nonplussed by what he perceived as lack of dedication and Christian love. Some have expressed disappointment at what seems to be a vestige of colonialism. When inconsistencies of treatment and preference are perceived, these are often not verbalized. Thus, perceptions are often not clarified because of the sensitivity of the issues and sometimes because of the language barrier. Over time, the accumulation of such perceptions, whether accurate or inaccurate, leads to distancing and disillusionment.

When Asian missionaries are asked why they do not request help from Western missionaries when it is needed or would be appreciated, the frequent answer is, "I don't want to impose." This sensitivity towards being an imposition seems quite prevalent. There is a strong belief that Western colleagues value their time and space very highly. When help is proffered, Asians may still be hesitant to accept until they are certain that no inconvenience will be caused. Unfortunately, this dance may

not be familiar to Western colleagues, and the number of steps back and forth may vary considerably among Asians themselves. Some look for non-verbal cues, while others listen for repeated offers before accepting.

On the other hand, it is interesting to note that quite a number of Asian missionaries who have been on the field for more than one term mention that they have changed as a result of interacting with their Western colleagues. They believe that they are now more open in their style of communication. One revealed that, being Asian, she had tended to be reticent in sharing, but she had learned to be more self-disclosing towards the latter part of the first term. Another said she learned to speak up so as to be heard and get what she needed. She had initially expected to be looked after, but she found that she did not receive because she did not ask her team leader. Several shared that they had learned to be more assertive when dealing with their team members. However, they tend to moderate their approach and engage in socially understood but more indirect ways when dealing with Asians. It seems that they generally prefer to have help offered by Western colleagues rather than request help directly. Although they may have learned new behaviors, their preference may not have changed.

Some find the fellowship meetings difficult to cope with because of the speed at which English is spoken. The various accents of spoken English make listening hard work as well. Since Asians are still the minority in most international mission bodies, they continue to find that they have to accommodate more to the prevalent Western culture. A single lady mentioned that fellowship suppers often cater to Western palates. Another tried to be part of her international team by hosting her colleagues and cooking special Chinese meals. After the meals, however, she was left out of the table games and general conversation, where cultural references were made that only the majority group would understand. She ended up feeling

like a maid, serving food and doing the dishes while her colleagues sat around the table, played Scrabble, and chatted. She became very upset and felt discriminated against. She thought the others would try to come halfway to meet her social and inclusion needs. To cope with the situation, she stopped entertaining and distanced herself from others.

Children's Education and Welfare

Some Asian parents whose children go to boarding schools experience difficulty relating to their children as they grow older. This may be compounded by the fact that the culture of boarding schools tends to be more Western, and the longer the children are in boarding, the more fluent they become in English as compared to the mother tongue. This poses a greater problem for those parents who learned English only in order to be part of the mission organization. Unless they continue to make significant progress in English, they may find themselves becoming more distant from their children because of language problems. Unless the children are encouraged to read in their mother tongue when they are home on vacations, they may never be as fluent in it as needed.

Some parents try to get around this problem by serving in cities where there are international schools and where the children can stay at home with them. This is impossible for those working in isolated villages or other areas without such options. Most Asian school systems are such that home schooling is not a viable option. Even if possible, home schooling poses a greater challenge for children whose educational medium is an Asian language, as it would mean more isolation for them, as well as isolating the parent from the mission community. One Japanese family placed their children in the Indonesian school system while home-schooling them in Japanese and later moved to another field where there was a Japanese school when the children finished primary-level studies.

One parent expressed that his children tend to be more assertive, expressing their preferences and knowing their rights, than they would have been if they were raised in their home culture instead of a boarding school. One child was reported to have said, "You need to take my views into consideration as well." Some parents find the children more independent in their decision making than they are prepared for. Several families indicated that having siblings together at the boarding school helped them feel more assured. The parents expect the oldest child to keep an eye on the younger ones and to maintain the sense of family. Asian children are still in a minority in boarding schools, and parents may be more concerned about their acceptance and integration.

A ubiquitous parental concern is reintegration of older children into tertiary schools of the home country. There are two main fears: the children's potential struggle with cultural re-adaptation and their difficulty with the educational system. The situation is particularly difficult when the home country's educational system does not use English as a medium of instruction. This puts Asian families in a predicament if they ever desire to return home halfway through their children's schooling. Boarding schools are attempting to expose Asian MKs to their mother tongue, but not at the level of proficiency that is needed for re-entrance to a school back home. It may be very difficult for an Asian MK to enter an Asian non-English university.

Going outside Asia for higher education is an option, but it is more expensive for the Asian missionary family. Generally, an overseas education is a highly valued commodity for Asians, as it often means better educational input, status, and employment prospects for the graduate. It is unlikely that church members will be eager to fund missionary children abroad if they themselves can afford to send their own children only to local universities. Also, it is unlikely that young people will have relatives living overseas to help them

adjust there. If Asian MKs do go to university abroad, they may return to their own country and culture an additional three to four years later than the typical Western MK. It may be more difficult for Asian MKs to feel “Asian” when all their education, from kindergarten to college, is done away from the home country. The majority of their peers throughout their schooling life will not be from their own country of origin. It may be quite a task for these MKs to fit in when they return to their home countries as young adults.

Singapore presents a unique problem in its very structured, pressurized system, its two-language policy, and its requirement for a cash bond for males of 11 years and older who reside outside the country. Looking into educational and housing arrangements for middle school children needs to be high on the MK care agenda.

Leadership Styles and Opportunities

The two preferred leadership styles seem to be the benevolent authoritative and the consultative styles. Generally there is a strong loyalty towards and respect for the authority figure. It is often expected that the authority figure should have one’s interests and welfare at heart. The Asian tends to avoid challenging a leader out of respect for both the person and the position held. Therefore, Asian workers struggle when they feel that they have been wrongfully treated or that partiality has been shown towards others. To deal with the issue directly may come across as challenging leadership, being self-seeking, or owning up to feelings of hurt. This may be considered too threatening and perhaps unspiritual. The affected individuals feel anger, disappointment, and guilt simultaneously. They may berate themselves for having negative feelings and for harboring inner complaints towards the leader. It becomes an emotional and spiritual crisis for some, and they often try to process their feelings internally. They may be more open to talking to someone out-

side the system or to another trusted colleague rather than leveling with the leader.

One person bemoaned, “How can I submit when he has made such an obviously wrong decision? But not to submit is not respecting authority.” Another lady asked, “He is my leader. How can I feel this way and complain like the Israelites and not be sinning?” There is a tendency to have high expectations about the character of the leader as well, that the person be mature spiritually and emotionally. A high level of emotional control in public is expected, and if a person explodes in anger, it brings much shame and loss of face. There tends to be more willingness to forgive for incompetence than for perceived lack of patience, humility, integrity, or spiritual disciplines.

There has also been a shift among the Asians towards wanting a consultative leadership style. Some have felt hampered in their work because leaders had goals that did not take into consideration the gifting and individual goals of the missionary. Here the feeling expressed was that leaders did not trust them in the pursuit of their ministry focus. This is particularly true for those who have to work closely as a team. They feel that they have very little say in their own direction and job fit. Asians who are given free rein to develop in their ministry focus tend to express appreciation.

Team leadership opportunities within the field require a good command of English. Members from certain Asian countries are disadvantaged unless they have had the opportunity of tertiary education in English abroad and have gained fluency in the language, both spoken and written. Leadership roles also require that the person be able to communicate well with the usually larger group of Western colleagues. The homogeneity principle tends to motivate group behavior and so may work against the minority members in a mixed team. The reverse would be true if Asians dominate in numbers, and the leader chosen would then more likely be an Asian.

Pastoral Care on the Field

Most Asian missionaries value a strong connection with the home base and express a desire for pastoral care. They welcome official visits from the staff of the mission home office or from the pastor or members of their home church. Perhaps they feel that they can better share with other Asians, using their own language or slang, or perhaps they long periodically for a taste of home away from home. Little indicators that the missionary is being remembered—such as birthday cards, postcards, letters, the occasional phone call, or small packages—are valued, particularly by singles, who admit feeling lonely and isolated at times. Some share that they feel more able to process their feelings and thoughts with a pastoral person who is outside the “system.” One missionary requested a pastor to visit her and act as her mediator to resolve some team issues, as she was the only Asian member and she felt that having another Asian would be a great support for her.

The proximity of and relatively cheap airfares to Asian countries allow for frequent mission trips organized by some Singaporean churches to expose their members to missions, as well as to visit their missionaries. These trips nurture vital contact between missionaries and their church during their years on the field, and they permit church members to share in the ministry. The latter are better able to pray for and promote continued interest in the work when they return.

Home-Side Issues

Reentry Stress

A Singaporean missionary couple once remarked, “The Singapore Dream is but a dream for us. We sometimes feel like paupers among princes. Singapore has become very comfortable and seemingly or really affluent. The difference in lifestyles between Singapore and what we are used to [on the field] is almost Grand Canyon-wide. Many of our friends have upgraded

to bigger and better housing, own club memberships, and dine in fancy places. Coming back from the field, it has become increasingly difficult for us to conform and adjust to the present standard of living.”

Exposure to the good life attained by some contemporaries often brings about mixed feelings. The contrast in financial standing and spending between these individuals and the missionary may be experienced as a rude shock. One of the Asian ways, in particular among the Chinese, of welcoming a person back from a long stay away is to take him/her out for fancy meals in fancy restaurants. A Singaporean missionary said that she ate her way back into the country and then out of the country. Also, the missionary may be heaped with special monetary gifts, taken to posh clubs, and even treated to short vacations. Since it is generally expected that missionaries are “poor” and have “sacrificed to serve overseas,” Christian friends are quick to take the tab. While it is wonderful to experience abundance, some struggle with the disparity of the two worlds they straddle—perceived as poor in one and as rich in the other. Some struggle with the sense of being patronized; others, with the sense of being put on a pedestal. The question of one’s identity apart from one’s role as a missionary may trouble the sensitive soul.

Those who have been able to make more frequent visits to their home countries during their terms on other Asian fields may be less impacted by the rapid changes of technology and lifestyle. It seems that missionaries from the richer Asian countries are able to make more frequent and shorter home assignments as well as take vacations in their home countries. This is helped by the relatively cheaper airfares they have to pay compared to their Western colleagues returning home. While this may be an advantage, it challenges the expectation still held by the majority of Asian Christians that missionaries should be sacrificial and careful with money. Some missionaries feel compelled to explain their plans and actions

to ward off misunderstanding and jealousy. It is not uncommon to hear a missionary quickly respond, “This was given to me,” or, “This was a hand-me-down dress from my lawyer friend,” when complimented for having an expensive belonging or for wearing a beautiful dress.

Housing for Singles

Single missionaries are often expected to stay at the home of their parents or a sibling while on home assignment. However, there are several reasons why this may not be a good arrangement. Family members may find it difficult to understand the single’s need for separateness and space.

Most Asian families (unless particularly well to do) do not leave the bedroom of the missionary empty during the person’s term on the field. The room may have been rented out for economic reasons. One single lady had to sleep on a couch in the living room. What was more stressful was that her bedroom had been rented out to a male boarder. In other situations, the room may have been taken over by siblings or other members of the family, or, for practical reasons, it may have been converted into a study room. Single missionaries may feel less at home in their own home country than in an apartment on the field. It requires extra energy to readjust to sharing a room in crowded conditions, with disrupted family members feeling unhappy about the imposition. Sometimes the close proximity causes unresolved issues and conflicts to resurface. Several missionaries have highlighted how they feel more comfortable on the field. One heaved a sigh of relief as she neared the end of home assignment, saying, “I am glad to return to my country of service and rest up.”

For some, there is the psychological stress of adjusting to living with parents, who may revert to treating the adult as a child. Asian parents often continue to expect child-like deference and respect when one is under their roof. Chinese parents use the phrase, “I have eaten more salt

than you have rice,” to silence any dissenting opinion. Singles, who have experienced living competently abroad, find this stressful. Since many Asians find it hard to apply conflict management principles when it comes to handling differences with their parents, they feel the tension all the more. It is also difficult to bring new rules or activities into established family life. For instance, the bedroom doors in some homes are seldom closed or locked, and family members enter at will. Having savored what it means to have boundaries respected, the missionary may now feel the “invasion” to be very intrusive. One missionary found that although all her siblings had married and moved out, the parental home remained like Grand Central Station. The parents were babysitting several of the grandchildren, and her siblings and their spouses would take their evening meal at the home before taking their children home. This provided an excellent setting to reconnect with the extended family, but it left the missionary feeling frazzled.

Even with understanding parents, there may still be stress. The missionary may want to contribute financially towards the household expenses. Among traditional Asian Chinese, it is often the cultural expression of a filial and gainfully employed adult to give a token sum to the parents, even more so if the person stays with them. However, this contribution may not have been factored into the missionary’s home assignment stipend.

Increasingly in Singapore, single missionaries are advised to buy their own apartments, more to resolve a future retirement housing problem than for home assignment housing. This option is not always affordable, especially for Asian counterparts whose government does not provide subsidized public housing.

Housing for Families

Most Singaporean missionary families buy their own homes before they go overseas. However, their apartments are usually rented out so that the income can go

towards paying the mortgage. If a family wants to use the apartment, arrangements will have to be made to ensure that tenancy completion coincides with their return from the field. Thereafter, there will be further paperwork involved to get new tenants. Most Singapore families choose home assignment options that suit their older children's overseas school calendar; for those electing shorter but more frequent home assignments, this arrangement becomes impractical.

Those who have personal resources, either through well-endowed families or friends, will have their housing needs adequately met. Resources available within their home church can make a big difference. One family moved into the new and empty apartment of a church couple who were getting married later in the year. However, there are families who do not have access to a large support network and have to camp out with relatives.

Since to my knowledge none of the mission agencies in Asia keeps apartments for missionaries on home leave, appropriate and restful housing arrangements continue to present a challenge for most.

Parental Expectations and Needs

Asian families are likely to expect the missionary to do his/her part to fulfill family obligations while on home leave. Since the siblings and other relatives have been assuming the familial responsibilities and duties during the missionary's absence, the balance of relational fairness calls for the missionary to pull as much weight as possible while at home. One lady became solely responsible for taking her father to medical appointments and handling his physical care. Another cleared the financial morass created by another family member. Where there are tensions between family members, the missionary may be roped in to resolve the issues. Often a previous family role is reassumed, such as peacemaking, caregiving, or over-functioning. Much time and energy are expended in these roles, and little is left for

rest, self-care, and reconnecting with supporters and friends. Resultant feelings may include a sense of burden, guilt, fatigue, emotional drain, and being stretched at the end of home assignment.

It is common for older Asian parents to continue maintaining the hierarchical posture in relating to their adult children. They often continue to tell the adult what is good for him/her and what ought to be done, sometimes in seemingly offhand comments and sometimes very directly. Single missionaries are subtly and sometimes not so subtly pressured to get married. Marriage is seen as a means of ensuring security for the future. One lady in her 50s was still pressured to get a husband, any man, and settle down. On the other hand, since singles are supposedly less encumbered than their married siblings, they are often the ones "assigned" to care for aging and frail parents. Although traditional-minded parents generally prefer to be with their eldest son, many of them live with and are cared for by the single child. Some families tend not to see missions as a worthy enough profession to place before family obligations. The culture still defines filial piety as financially and physically supporting aged parents. Perhaps in a couple of decades this mindset will change, as young adults and parents are encouraged to do financial planning for their retirement.

There are those who are blessed with supportive and understanding family members who respect them and their calling and seek in all ways to facilitate the readjustment at home. Often these members are from richer backgrounds or have Christian siblings who have since moved up in life and are willing to support them or who are second-generation Christians.

Financial Considerations

Asian missionaries tend to be very careful about how they are perceived by others in their financial management and lifestyle. Most of them tend to be frugal and are often hesitant to ask directly for what they need. There is a reluctance to

talk about financial matters for fear of appearing unspiritual. (The Campus Crusade Asian missionaries may be different in their approach because of the culture of the mission.) When they do ask, it is often out of necessity. Missionaries are more likely to express their financial concerns only when directly approached. Some may feel financial pressure and not express it, but they would appreciate having the mission or church leadership check with them. Generally, they prefer being asked rather than to have to ask or inform leadership and others about the sensitive issue of money.

Some struggle with finances more when they are on home leave. The many social obligations to family and friends can make quite a dent in the monthly stipend. Monetary gifts to the bereaved at wakes, birthday gifts, wedding gifts, transport, and other miscellaneous costs add up. There is often an expected increase in contribution to the parents when staying with them. It cannot be assumed that parents or siblings, particularly those who are non-Christians and not too well off financially, will take care of the missionary's needs. One missionary reported that she was able to save money on the field but not while on home leave. Another reported that he was shocked at how much money he spent on social obligations and transport costs going to the various functions and church meetings.

Many reported, however, that they were amply supplied by monetary gifts slipped to them by friends and supporters. Many receive practical gifts like clothes, books, and toys. This may be one reason that church and mission leaders do not check on how missionaries are faring financially, as they expect them to be getting extra support from outside the official system. One missionary was not paid for three months because the church treasurer was too busy to sign the checks and did not think that the missionary would be financially strapped. Those who have not nurtured a good social support system before leaving for the field tend to be

those who do not have as many supplementary gifts.

As far as I know, there are no retirement homes provided for Asian missionaries, and most Asian countries are not welfare states. Singaporean missionaries are encouraged to purchase government subsidized public housing for their retirement needs. Unless they have worked for some time before becoming a missionary or have helpful and well-to-do relatives, not all of them can afford the down payment. Other Asian missionaries may not have access to subsidized housing or the financial resources to purchase retirement housing. Some mission agencies provide guidance and help in developing retirement plans, while others leave missionaries to buy their own insurance policies or handle their own financial planning. One missionary jokingly responded, "Well, I hope I die quickly," when asked whether she had enough money put aside to live on after retirement.

Children's Schooling Needs

One unique problem of Asian parents is the reintegration of their children into schools in the home country. In most Asian countries, the medium of instruction in the schools is not English. The school system also tends to be more structured and intense and operates with a class size of about 40 pupils to a teacher. Having a child above kindergarten age fit easily into the system halfway through the school year is nearly impossible, unlike in the Western system. To enter a Singaporean school for just a year while the family is on home assignment requires herculean effort, incessant prayer, and the goodwill of many levels of officials in the Ministry of Education and the school. Unless the schooling issue is creatively handled, most Asian families with primary and secondary level school children will have to make short home assignment stays.

The solution of short but frequent home assignments may become a problem in the future. Short stays feel more like extended vacations. It is difficult to

experience one's culture when one is mostly observing but not intensely participating. A worrying thought is that Asian MKs may have even less of a sense of rootedness in their home country than Western MKs. When mother tongue usage is not developed at boarding school and the school culture is likely to be Western, children shift imperceptibly but surely towards Western frames of reference. Unlike their Western counterparts, however, Asian MKs do not return to the West but to an Asian country when their schooling is done. Most parents are delighted with the educational system of international schools, which tend to be less pressured than Asian schools. They feel that their children are getting a better education. They appreciate the care and spiritual guidance provided in mission-run boarding schools. Few are thinking of the adjustment issues that their children may experience when their entire school and dorm life is within a Western orientation. There are now attempts to recruit Asian teachers to teach Korean and Chinese students in some boarding schools and to set up a dormitory catering to Asian MKs. However, there are still teething problems.

Home Church Expectations

It appears that many Asian churches are still expecting their missionaries to fit right back into church ministry while on long home assignment, such as administrative work at the church office or extensive pastoral or teaching duties. This is particularly true when the church is a fully supporting one, a smaller congregation, or a non-English-speaking one. Members may ask awkward questions like, "How is it that you are doing nothing?" and, "Why don't you...?" to a missionary who took home leave to reintegrate the children into the local schools. Some pastors may look forward to having the missionary on home assignment share their heavy work load, but they frame it as, "I want to give you opportunities to reacquaint yourself with the members." While some missionaries may have the energy to take on ministry

duties, others arrive home already exhausted from long periods of learning and serving in a different language and culture. They may return to the field not feeling adequately rested and revitalized, and some actually return more tired and drained than when they left. A couple who were able to take a vacation just before resuming their field duties reported that it helped them recoup enough to start the new term without feeling depressed.

It seems that Asians do less deputation work, on the whole, than their Western counterparts. They are more likely to take on ministry duties and to attend as many of the regular meetings of their supporting churches as possible. In Singapore, it is common to have one church, the home church, providing fully for a missionary's support. Because the support sum can be quite substantial, the church members may expect more from their missionaries in terms of ministry results or service when they are on home leave. In some international mission organizations, missionary families may have to raise a monthly support figure amounting to more than what most of their church members earn monthly. This is due to the high cost of living in some Asian countries, and included in the support package are the mission's administration costs, children's overseas educational expenses, transport allowances to and from the field, medical and retirement funds, and other items. There is generally a willingness to support the individual who is leaving a high-paying job to go into missions or who has good qualifications that would command a good salary in the secular world. In such cases, the high support amount that has to be raised by the home church is still less than the real or potential earning power of the missionary, and the missionary is perceived as making the greater sacrifice. However, if a missionary is getting more financial support than would be gained from a job or from professional training, more seems to be demanded from the individual to merit the financial investment of the church.

Some Recommendations for Asian Member Care

Field-Side Issues

Pastoral care and help for the family

Mission agencies and churches may want to give serious consideration to the importance of providing pastoral care to the parents of missionaries as part of their commitment and support of each missionary. Visiting the parents during festivals, calling on them to inquire about their welfare, treating them to special dinners or events, and praying for them when they are ill are small gestures that mean a lot culturally. These things create positive feelings towards the church and predispose non-Christian parents towards Christ. The financial support raised by missionaries may need to include an amount that goes towards parents, who expect such a contribution from their adult children. Missionaries cannot say “Korban” like the Pharisees and expect to avoid supporting their parents. One agency hosted a special Chinese New Year dinner to honor the parents and gave them the traditional gifts of oranges and “red packets” on behalf of their missionaries on the field.

Flexible language program

Tailoring language programs according to factors such as aptitude, learning style, number of languages spoken and written, and similarity of the new language to the individual’s mother tongue (for instance, Japanese writing and Chinese writing are quite similar) is a step towards acknowledging the advantages some Asians possess language-wise. Structured programs developed with the Western learner in mind may require adaptation to fit the peculiarities of the Asian learner.

Bonding with the mission team

It is important for Asians to experience bonding with the mission agency through the team members on the field. Even those

who already speak the national or local language when they first arrive on the field need to be oriented and helped in the transition. Perhaps assigning a “big brother” or “big sister” from the team would be helpful for those who do not go through the usual language and orientation program. It cannot be assumed that knowledge of a language is equivalent to knowledge and understanding of the culture and way of life. The national believers, if there are any in that field, will probably be the best informers and helpers for the new missionary. However, the mission is supposed to be the “family,” and it is important that the initial caregiving comes from the team. This will contribute to more cohesiveness between the Asian and Western missionaries.

Team building

Working with an international team will demand extra sensitivity on the part of the majority group to the needs of the minority group. It may require greater attentiveness to including the one who is most different from the group, helping those who struggle with English, and avoiding any semblance of unfair treatment.

Efforts need to be made to challenge racial stereotypes, enhance the personal growth of missionaries within the international team, and strengthen personal and corporate identity. Having lectures or presentations on the general differences between various nationalities is educational and informative, but it is insufficient for promoting mutual understanding and acceptance. Reflective and experiential group exercises that increase awareness of the latent or unconscious racial beliefs that missionaries may have imbibed from their cultural background are necessary as the first step to change. These beliefs can then be challenged and discarded. Building a cohesive team of culturally sensitive and mature individuals will go a long way toward reducing attrition from interpersonal conflicts on the field.

Boarding school for older children

Asian parents may want to seriously consider and try other options of schooling to keep their children with them until they are at least in their teens before sending them away to boarding school. This will give the children more time not only to bond with the family but also to embrace cultural values from the parents. However, this may not be possible, as there may not be any international schools nearby, some local schools are just not suitable, and home schooling does not work for every family. Mission agencies and Asian missionary families must take equal responsibility in providing for their MKs an environment that encourages and maintains some measure of their own national identity. Eating with chopsticks (for the Chinese, Japanese, or Koreans) or eating with fingers (for the Indians) once a week at the cafeteria in the boarding school is really not good enough.

Home-Side Issues

Home assignment coordinator

It may be helpful to appoint a home assignment coordinator. This person acts as a resource and pastoral person and actively looks into the various needs of the missionary during the home assignment period. Duties may include:

- Debriefing and counseling or referring for professional counseling as needed.
- Looking into orientation for reentry, housing, and cultural induction programs for the children.
- Researching schooling possibilities for children who are on a year-long home assignment.
- Planning with the missionary a personalized plan for rest and relaxation, self and relational growth programs, programs for upgrading skills, spiritual retreats, and deputation meetings.
- Collaborating with the missionary and the supporting churches regarding the kind and extent of church involvement during home assignment.

- Monitoring the missionary throughout the home assignment to ensure that the purpose and personalized plan for home assignment are accomplished.

- Supplying updates on trends in the church and society, immigration, education, and other national policies.

- Educating Asian church leaders and members as to the purposes of the home assignment.

- Processing the home assignment experience before the missionary returns to the field.

There is a special advantage to having a coordinator shared by several mission agencies or churches. Such a person knows when there are large enough numbers of missionaries back on home assignment at any one time so special growth groups, MK meetings, or marital enrichment seminars can be held.

Housing coordinator

There are several ways to resolve housing needs of singles and families for up to one year in length. The most effective is to build and maintain a broad network with the Christian community so that resources, whether financial or housing, can be tapped when needed. There are many Asian Christians who are generous and desirous of sharing their resources for the use of God's ministers. There are many churches in Asian cities that have members in the educated and well-to-do classes, and they are often very willing to offer their furnished, empty apartments/houses free or at minimal rent for short-term stays. What may be needed is a person who is respected and known in the community to take on the administrative task of coordination and management of needs and resources and to see this service as a vital contribution to member care.

Flexible arrangements for home assignments

Missionaries serving in nearby fields may wish to consider frequent and shorter home assignments and even vacations in their home country. This reduces major

disruption for the children in their schooling and increases the satisfaction of extended family members to have more frequent contact. However, missionaries may also want to take into consideration the sensibilities of their compatriots, who may view this solution as an easy life with more holidays than workdays. One church member commented enviously, "Only the missionary can travel as much as the rich and famous." Several factors will need to be weighed carefully in this matter, including the degree of hardship on the field, the stage of the family life cycle, the children's sense of rootedness in the culture, the financial burden on the church, and other considerations.

Retirement plans

International mission agencies must take into consideration that Asian countries are not welfare states that provide public health and retirement services for their citizens (as in the UK) or that have a system for social security payments after retirement (as in the USA). It is important that mission agencies and churches plan with their missionaries to consider retirement needs and encourage them to raise support either for pension plans or endowment policies.

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed some specific issues for Asian missionaries and have made recommendations for providing these workers with member care. It must be highlighted that contextual variables such as differing economic, cultural, religious, political, and educational structures exist among various South East Asian countries, creating different experiences and challenges for each group. Asian missionaries are therefore not a homogeneous group, and differences among them must also be addressed. With the trend of increasing response to missions from Asians, sending churches and mission organizations can no longer ignore Asians' special concerns and challenges.

Reflection and Discussion

1. What are some of the main strengths of Asian missionaries that the author describes? In what ways do the strengths enhance their ministry?
2. Respond to the notion that Asian missionaries would usually be more effective if they worked together as a homogeneous group under an Asian organization.
3. In what ways can the cultural gap between Asian and Western missionaries be minimized, so that cross-cultural teamwork can be enhanced?
4. What are some possible changes in organizational structure that mission agencies may want to adopt to meet the challenge of internationalization of staff?
5. How can we sensitively address the issue of racism among missionaries and work towards removing the unconscious barriers to deeper trust and acceptance?



Gracia Wiarda is Senior Therapist at the Counselling and Care Centre in Singapore. She is married to Dr. Timothy James Wiarda, a lecturer at Singapore Bible College. They have two children. Together they served with Arab World Ministries in Algeria and in the Sultanate of Oman (1980–1992). Gracia received her B.A. in psychology in 1975 from Wheaton College and an M.A. in interpersonal communications in 1976 from Wheaton Graduate School. She also holds a Marriage and Family Therapy degree (1989) from Habnemann Graduate School in the USA. Email: wiarda@singnet.com.sg.

Special thanks to Mr. Patrick Lim of WEC, Mrs. Belinda Ng of SIM, and Mr. Kenneth Tan of OMF for their helpful comments on this paper.