

Revivals And Church History :: Missionary To China: James Adam (1863-1915)

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James Adam—the Scottish missionary who led the CIM station at Anshun—arrived in China in 1887, at the age of 23. He had felt deeply discouraged by his initial years trying to reach Han people in Guizhou, and he struggled to see any way forward in the work. He was devastated by the sudden death of his Canadian wife in August 1894, when she perished from fever just two days after giving birth to a baby girl. Adam rushed home to find his beloved wife already lying in a coffin. His little daughter also died soon after.

Adam was struck to the core, and told the local believers: "When my wife was in Guiyang she was told that it would be dangerous for her to live in Anshun because of the malaria; yet she was willing to go, hoping to help you women trust in Jesus. God asks my all, my wife, my babe; He gave them to me; I willingly let Him take them back." Adam was able to muster the courage to write a letter the day after the funeral:

"I laid my darling wife and precious wee babe in the grave yesterday morning. This is such a sudden plunge into deepest affliction, that at first I felt crushed, but now, I can truly say with my glorified wife: 'I am pleased with God's will.' This was one of the precious things she said before she fell asleep in Jesus....

The Christians have all shown great sympathy...but the greatest comfort to me was that wee Mary was a living babe. But alas the Lord saw fit to take her from me too, so that He has taken all.... This is indeed a sore trial, but the Lord is having mercy upon me, and I can say, 'Though he slays me yet will I trust in Him!'"

As I told the crowd yesterday at the grave, Jesus can heal broken hearts, and He would heal mine. Pray for me and for our relations that God may bind up our grief and that I may truly profit by this greatest of trials."

After a period of grieving, Adam visited Britain in 1896, where he met with the great mission leader Hudson Taylor. When Adam asked how he could possibly share the gospel with both the Chinese and the Miao, Taylor responded, "Go on, dear brother, and do the best you can for both."

Upon returning to China, Adam expanded his work, visiting every Miao village in a 15 mile (25 km) radius from Anshun. Over time, he visited 250 different Miao villages and built relationships with many community leaders.

James Adam, who remarried in 1897, discovered that in addition to having suffered centuries of abuse at the hands of the Chinese, malaria plagued the Miao, resulting in the deaths of thousands of people each year. Moreover, the hot summer months brought infectious skin diseases, which cast many onto a bed of suffering. All of these factors combined to humble the Miao of Anshun, leaving them with little pretension or self-righteousness.

The mission obtained a supply of medicine and ointment to treat malaria and skin diseases, and a steady flow of thankful people developed a deep respect for the servants of the gospel. The first believers in Anshun were baptized in 1898, and the following year a chapel and a Christian school for boys were opened. The school turned out to be a key to advancing the gospel. One source noted that "Adam successively took in a group of poor Miao children and orphans for studies.... Within less than a year he could speak the Miao language of several dialect areas."

Anshun proved to be a strategic center for the Miao work, with many different tribes passing through the area, both for commerce and during migrations to other areas. As a result, many Miao tribes had settled in the districts surrounding the city. Each group shared a common historic kinship, but had evolved over many centuries to possess their own languages, dress and customs. The tribes considered themselves distinct from one another, and youngsters were often forbidden from intermarrying with other Miao.

Adam's writings referred to various tribal names, but it appears the two largest Miao groups he encountered in the early years of his ministry were the Hua Miao and the Hmong Shua. Other tribes inhabiting the districts around Anshun included the A-Hmao, Hmong Daw, Hmong Leng, Hmong Njua, and a small number of Hmu people who had migrated into the area from further east.

The Chinese labelled these groups by names that described their women's clothing. For example, the A-Hmao were known

known as the Da Hua ('Big Flowery') Miao, the Hmong Daw as Bai ('White') Miao, the Hmu as Hei ('Black') Miao, and the Hmong Leng as Hongtong ('Red Hat' or 'Red-Headed') Miao.

Three more tribes mentioned by Adam within reach of Anshun included the 'Wooden Comb' Miao, the Shuixi ('west of the river') Miao, and the Shui ('Water') Miao. These three tribes are all considered part of the Hmong Shua language group today.

The CIM workers were thrilled whenever they came across a new tribe. They appreciated each group's unique characteristics and realized they were created by God and precious in His sight.

The King of the Miao

Many of the Miao tribes shared a common belief that they had once possessed a written language, but when the Chinese drove them from the fertile plains into the barren mountains of south China they tried to cross a deep river, but the strong current swept many people away and their sacred books were destroyed. A pastor, Wang Mingji, expressed how the Miao people felt about having no written language:

"For thousands of years we have been like the blind. It has been very bitter. Everybody knows that there is nothing worse in the world than to be blind. However shimmering is the sun in the sky, however shimmering is the moon, however clear are the rivers and the mountains on the earth, however beautiful are the flowers in the wilderness, the blind cannot see them."

A widespread legend persisted that one day a 'king of the Miao' would come and return their written language to them. Many were astonished to discover that a white man was able to speak several Miao languages. When he began translating the Bible and teaching them how to read, many people were convinced that James Adam was the long-awaited Miao king.

In 1903, a prominent Miao leader named Li Matai even summoned the people of his village and sacrificed an ox. At the ceremony, he proclaimed, "There has appeared a Miao king in Anshun. He is very affectionate and kind-hearted to the Miao. He calls us his brothers, and he helps ordinary hard-working Miao as much as possible."

Veteran missionary William Hudspeth described the impact made by the arrival of the first Miao Scriptures: "When the British and Foreign Bible Society sent the first Gospels and these were distributed the legend grew that the once-upon-a-time lost books had been found in the white man's country, and they told the incomparable story that Jesus loved the Miao. Only the imagination can conceive what this meant to those hillsmen; some of whom travelled for days to view the books."

Broken Down with Grief

Christian history is decorated with the lives of many outstanding missionaries. In Asia, men like William Carey, Adoniram Judson and Hudson Taylor inspired generations of believers, while David Livingstone of Africa became a household name. James Adam was much lesser-known than those famous men, but his sacrificial service for Jesus Christ stands tall in the annals of Christianity in Guizhou.

Adam had arrived in China in 1887, at the tender age of 23. He had served wholeheartedly for the next 28 years, and was preparing to travel home to Scotland on furlough when he was struck by a lightning bolt while standing on the porch of his home one evening in August 1915. The beloved missionary and one-time 'King of the Miao' was dead at the age of 51.

Right up to the end of his time in this world, James Adam continued to preach the gospel to the lost and to baptize new believers into the family of God. His boundless joy and unquenchable passion for reaching the lost shone through in one of his final reports:

"This evening I baptized 126 men and 98 women; 224 trophies of the Lord's mighty saving power. Hallelujah! ... The Lord's power and blessing were wonderfully manifested, and His love filled all our hearts. How greatly our Lord's own heart

must have rejoiced tonight....

It is like a bit of glory to hear 1,000 or more saved Miao singing with much vim.... Think of it! These dear believers were once unrighteous, fornicators, demon worshippers, adulterers, unclean, drunkards, revilers, etc.... Oh, why do we ever limit the saving power of our God? All these Miao are saved, and washed to the glory of His great Name....

Nearly all of the 626 children of God baptized have been true believers for at least one and a half years. Quite a large number hope to confess the Lord in baptism next time we visit."

When the news of Adam's sudden death spread, a string of testimonials poured in from those who knew him best. John Stevenson, a leader of the CIM, wrote the following stirring tribute, which also revealed the size and influence that the Anshun mission had grown to encompass under Adam's leadership:

"A more indefatigable and hard-working missionary than Mr. Adam we have never had, a man who never spared himself and who was greatly beloved by those whom he was used to bring to the Lord....

There have been baptized from the commencement in Anshun and district 6,449 people, and at the end of last year there were 5,590 communicants. When we think of the 42 evangelists, 29 school teachers, with 639 students and 323 unpaid helpers, one can realize a little of the magnitude of the work....

No CIM worker has ever had the privilege of receiving so many converts into the visible Church, and I question whether any single missionary of any society has either.... Now, just when he was about to take a much-needed furlough, he has suddenly been taken from us. Deepest sympathy is felt for his widow and two children in Scotland who had been looking for his return."

Nearly a century after the death of James Adam, missiologists were still discussing the reasons behind his outstanding success. Ralph Covell commented:

"Untiring in travel to hundreds of villages, outgoing and friendly, fluent in the Miao language, he baptized nearly 7,000 of the Miao....

Early in the work Adam sifted out those with potential for leadership and brought them into his own home for weeks of concentrated discipleship. Those initial disciples took the lead in preaching to and teaching the many hundreds who later would respond in this snowballing movement....

Adam aggressively confronted Miao society with the claims of the gospel. After several people in a village were willing to confess the Name of Jesus publicly, Adam called for a bonfire, at which time all of the spirit paraphernalia was burned.... Adam allowed no one to be baptized who had not made a clear break with the demon world.

Even when only a few people in a village had believed, Adam, along with these converts, took the initiative in tearing down the houses used by the young people for their sexual orgies. He helped in sweeping out all remaining signs of idolatry, in cutting down spirit trees, and in finding and destroying all traces of opium, opium pipes, and lamps."

Shockingly, Adam's death proved to be the first in a string of losses for the Church in Guizhou. Missionary Thomas Windsor had been chosen to replace Adam while he was away on furlough, but Windsor had only just arrived in Anshun and was settling in when he fell ill with dysentery and died.

The very next month (September 1915), Samuel Pollard also died after contracting typhoid fever at his mission station. Thus both of the pioneers who had worked so hard to reach the A-Hmao and to translate their Bible were suddenly taken away.

The following year even more sorrow came when Samuel Clarke, after 38 years' in China, also went to be with the Lord. In a short space of time the Guizhou missionary community had lost four of its finest and most experienced leaders.

When the Miao and other Christians throughout Guizhou heard about Adam's death, many were distraught. The faith of some younger believers was shaken by the circumstances of his death, which caused them to question God's protection. The more mature church members quickly helped soothe their doubts, however, and shock at the news of Adam's passing soon turned to thanksgiving for a life well spent.

The final earthly word on James Adam's life fittingly went to two Miao Christians, who wrote a letter of sympathy to Adam's grieving widow in January 1916:

"Incalculably strange, that on the evening of the 29th day of the sixth moon, it was God's will to receive our beloved Pastor or up to heaven, while we are left behind to mourn our loss.

We were formerly dead in sin, passing our days in ignorance and darkness.... The dear Pastor came bringing us the teaching of the Savior's love. He led thousands of us Miao to repent and believe in the Lord, and he loved us with a love surpassing the love of parents for their own children. Therefore, all the Miao believers were broken down with grief, just as though we had lost our own parents.

Our hearts are pained beyond expression. We who are near cannot realize he has been taken from us to heaven. We cannot again serve him with our own hands, neither again will we hear his words of precious instruction....

We deeply desire the speedy return of our Lord Jesus, then we shall again meet our beloved Pastor, and it is for this our hearts long....

May the Triune God protect you and your family. Greetings to the two boys. We send this memorial to you with reverence.

Yang Xiguang (Water Miao tribe)

Tao Joshua (Flowery Miao tribe)."

from: <https://asiaharvest.org/china-resources/guizhou/james-adam/>