

Nei Wei

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KEITH LARSON SPENT THE FIRST YEAR of his mission in the southern Taiwan port city of Kaoshiung. After a four-month stint in Tainan, central Taiwan, he was glad to be transferred south again to the Nei Wei district, located in a Kaoshiung suburb. The only drawback was that he was now the district leader, which to Elder Larson mostly meant having to fill out an extra report each week.

Nei Wei was far enough from the city to have rice paddies and vegetable gardens along the roads. Larson liked to contemplate the cycles of rice crops in the fields. Sturdy farm wives in bamboo hats would hand-plant each delicate seedling in the flooded paddies. Within a month, the paddy was a field of lush green. When the heavy grains of rice made the stalks bend over, it was time for harvest: the rice was threshed out by machine, chaff fed to animals, and the dry stalks burned in the fields. Then the cycle would begin again. Larson marked the seasons of his mission in Taiwan by the rice crops. With three crops a year, he had seen four harvests and his Chinese language was reasonably fluent. The strict manners taught to Larson at home served him well in Taiwan. He observed the respectful demeanor which Chinese culture demands of younger persons towards elders and, unlike many American missionaries, avoided embarrassing people by demanding they be straightforward and frank like people in western society. Larson saw much to admire in the subtle, face-saving conventions of oriental society. Tall and blond, Larson towered over most Taiwanese, but his sensitivity to their ways put people at ease.

After a month as district leader in Nei Wei, Larson got a new junior companion, Elder Dennis Mason, a convert of four years from Chicago. Mason had been in Taiwan only two months and was still humble and pliant like a new stalk of rice. Larson, who had grown up in Salt Lake City from pioneer Mormon stock, found Mason to be an interesting change from the western, born-in-the-church, always-planned-to-go-on-a-mission elders that made up the majority of the mission. Mason identified himself as a democrat and had no doctrinal aversion to cola. He had seen the Broadway version of "Jesus Christ, Superstar" and while tract-

ing one morning described it in edifying detail to Larson. Since joining the church early in high school, Mason had been obedient to the Word of Wisdom, no alcohol, coffee, tobacco, or drugs. He told Larson that, being raised a Methodist, his mother had taught her children to be close to God, and he never felt comfortable with the idea of smoking and getting drunk.

One stifling summer morning, around ten minutes to nine, Elder Larson and Elder Mason swung their bicycles out of the tiny walled courtyard of their apartment and headed south on Nei Wei Road towards the tracting area for that day, a lower-class working neighborhood near the market square, which previous elders had dubbed the "Nei Wei triangle." The nickname referred to its geographic configuration (situated between the town market and two roads) and to its reputation as a grimy, lower-class neighborhood of tiny sweatshop factories. The zone leaders laughingly referred to the people who lived there as "traditional," meaning that they were mostly less educated and staunchly Buddhist—not a likely place to find people interested in hearing about the restored gospel.

By the time they reached the Nei Wei triangle, the sun had burnt the mist off the bamboo-covered hillsides and the air was hot and humid. They parked their bikes next to a neighborhood drugstore. Mason took a fresh copy of the Book of Mormon from his briefcase, a few pamphlets, and the "C" discussion flipchart. He strapped the briefcase back on the rack behind the seat, and the elders headed down the street to begin tracting.

Most homes in the Nei Wei triangle were tiled, two-story row houses with the front floor open to the street. Many were covered inside and out with soot and grease from the open work shops and tiny home factories that dotted the narrow lanes. The neighborhood was alive with the sounds of machinery and children, and the Mormon elders frequently paused for some playful sparring with masses of curious kids shouting "*mego-ga*" or "*ado-ga*," slang terms for "American" and "big nose."

"How old are you?" Larson would ask in Chinese, pointing to a little boy. "Excuse me, but are you thirty?" The children would break out in peals of laughter. "Say, are you married?" he would ask a little girl, younger than the first. Still more laughter.

"Where are you from?" one child asked.

"I'm from the moon," Larson responded, pointing to the sky. The children laughed all the more, and then peppered Larson with questions, hoping for more silly answers. Mason was glad when he could understand what was said, and noted Larson's gentle mannerisms and easy command of the language.

As Larson expected, most people waved the missionaries off with apologies of "very busy" or "come back later." Some invited them to

come in and sit, only to turn back to work right away, while others would point to the ancestral spirit tablet on the wall and with apologetic smiles and innumerable bows repeat "thank you, thank you, we are Buddhist." Despite the lack of interest, Larson kept at it. Mason was thinking more about a plate of cool watermelon and papaya for lunch than he was about tracting. On other days when they would actually get into a door and talk with people, the words all seemed to blur into one long incomprehensible speech. Sometimes Larson would turn to Mason for his part of the discussion, but then Larson would always have to repeat the basic points because people could not understand what Mason said. After two hours and dozens of doors with no one interested, Larson decided to it was time to finish the row of houses they were on and then go elsewhere, or even take an early lunch.

Larson knocked on the last door, wondering where to find more productive tracting. In the middle of his thoughts, the door opened slowly and there stood a smiling, gray, old woman. She was about five feet tall, bent with age, and half bald with crinkled white hair drawn back tightly in a bun. The skin on her face was like finely wrinkled brown paper. She was almost toothless and what teeth she did have glistened with gold fillings. Despite her age, there was a vibrancy to her countenance. Larson bowed his head respectfully and said in Mandarin, "Grandmother, good morning. Have you eaten yet?" (A traditional greeting.) There was no response except a wide grin and shining eyes, so Larson summoned his best Taiwanese: "*Ahbwo*," he said, using the local word for granny. "Is the boss home?" Again, her only reply was to smile.

"She probably can't hear," Mason said.

Larson paused. "I think you're right," he said. "Let's go." They waived to the old woman and the elders turned to leave.

As Larson and Mason started to walk away, the old woman suddenly reached out and grasped each missionary firmly by the arm. The elders were surprised at the strength of her gnarled hands, which were cool to the touch. They raised their eyes to meet her gaze. She smiled her broad, nearly toothless smile, and gently pulled their arms, motioning the missionaries into her house.

The darkness of her home contrasted with the brightness of the outdoors. The room was poor, with a few decrepit pieces of worn wicker furniture, an ancient wooden table in the squat Chinese style, and a rusty metal bookshelf, covered with jars, papers, and assorted biblets collected over many years and apparently forgotten. Taped to the wall was an assortment of scenes of the Chinese countryside, cut from calendars, now in muted colors faded with age. Above the doorway to the kitchen peered a dusty portrait of Chiang Kai-shek.

The *ahbwo* walked at half-speed, in a careful and deliberate manner,

as if she was in a slow-motion movie and wanted to consider every movement. The elders couldn't help but stride past her into the room. Larson stood politely by the rickety basket-weave couch until she motioned them to sit, with Mason taking his cue from his senior companion. The *ahbwo* turned, shuffled to the bookshelf, and carefully picked up a thick black book. She returned to where the missionaries were sitting and, grinning triumphantly, handed the book to Elder Larson. He slowly made out the Chinese characters.

"It's the Bible," he said to Elder Mason.

With a radiant smile, the *ahbwo* slowly pointed to her heart. Larson realized that this old woman was a Christian, probably the only one in the neighborhood. She put her finger on the Bible and again pointed to her heart. Larson nodded with a friendly smile.

"Very good," he said in Chinese, then remembered she could not hear.

The *ahbwo* took back the Bible and placed it on the shelf. Larson decided they should stay for a moment to commune with a fellow-believer, even if spoken communication was impossible. But instead of turning back to the missionaries, the old woman headed slowly out the kitchen door in her ponderous, meticulous gait. Now they were trapped, Larson told his junior companion. They could not leave because she had invited them in her home, and to depart without proper ceremony would be highly offensive in Taiwanese society. So the missionaries waited, with little else to do but stare at the walls and wonder when the *ahbwo* would return.

Some fifteen minutes passed before the old woman slowly ambled back into the room. As she entered, Elder Larson started to rise, hoping to leave. Mason did likewise, but then the elders saw that in each hand the woman carried a beverage can, which were already opened. The *ahbwo* smiled happily and extended the drinks to the elders. Larson and Mason politely accepted the offerings, unsure of what to do next. The cans were ice-cold and dripping with condensation, and felt refreshing against the stifling heat of the late morning. Larson held up his can for closer inspection. On it was a bright red label with writing in some foreign script, Malay perhaps, but nothing which gave any indication as to what was inside. The old woman stared at them expectantly, then made drinking motions with her hands. The missionaries glanced at each other, then raised their drinks and took a swallow.

The beverage tasted slightly sour, like moldy bread but without the musty essence. There was a sharpness in the mouth when it went down which reminded Larson of vinegar. At first Mason thought it tasted vaguely familiar, then the realization hit him and he turned towards Larson.

"This is beer."

The humble *ahbwo* still wore her grin, but was gazing at the missionaries with a anxious look, as if something might be wrong. Larson looked at her. Drink, drink, she motioned again, nodding her head. Elder Larson paused, uncertain of what to do, while Mason watched his companion for guidance. The woman must have gone out the back door to a cold drink stand, Larson thought. The government import duty on alcohol is very steep; she must have spent two week's worth of food money on these drinks, if not more. Usually, when the missionaries were offered tea or cigarettes, they explained in Chinese about the Word of Wisdom, and younger people especially would understand. But communication with the old *ahbwo* was impossible. Finally Larson spoke.

"Mason, we've got to drink this," he said firmly, and raising the can to his lips, swallowed half the contents. Mason did likewise.

"Very good, thank you so much," Larson said to the woman, and put the can on the table.

"Thank you, thank you, very good," echoed Mason, also putting his can down.

The *ahbwo* smiled a radiant smile and nodded and bowed, motioning them to finish their drinks.

"Oh, thank you, thank you," Larson repeated and politely returned the smile. He clasped his hands together in front of him and bowed his head in the reverential Oriental manner of acknowledging a great kindness.

Mason stood up too. Holding the Book of Mormon with both hands in the traditional manner, he offered it to the *ahbwo* as a gift. She smiled her toothy grin, and accepted the book from Mason with both hands in return, a sign of respect for the giver and the gift.

"Grandmother, we must leave now," Larson said, "thank you, thank you." She smiled happily and nodded her head again and again as the missionaries left the home. Larson and Mason turned back and waived.

"Goodbye, goodbye," they said with a final bow, and walked back to their bikes. For a while, neither missionary spoke a word. The street was quiet. The children seemed to have disappeared for lunchtime, which was just as well; Mason felt a little nauseous.

"Mason, do you have your Bible in that briefcase?" said Elder Larson when they reached the bicycles.

Elder Mason opened his briefcase and handed a miniaturized "missionary" edition of the King James Bible to Elder Larson. Larson thumbed the pages until he found a certain scripture. He handed the open book back to Mason, pointing to a passage with his finger.

"Matthew twelve," began Mason. "At that time, Jesus went on the sabbath day through the corn; and his disciples were an hungred, and be-

gan to pluck the ears of corn, and to eat.

"But when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto him, Behold, thy disciples do that which is not lawful to do upon the sabbath day.

"But he said unto them, Have ye not read what David did, when he was an hungred, and they that were with him;

"How he entered into the house of God, and did eat the shewbread, which was not lawful for him to eat, neither for them which were with him, but only for the priests?

"Or have ye not read in the law, how that on the sabbath days the priests in the temple profane the sabbath, and are blameless?"

"You can stop there," Larson broke in. "I think that applies to our situation. Do you know how much she must have spent on that imported beer?"

Mason shook his head.

"Forty or fifty kwai (Taiwan dollars)," Larson said. "She probably spent her month's food on us." Mason was silent for a moment.

"But why would she do that?" he asked, putting the Bible and flip-chart back and closing up his briefcase.

"I figure she's the only Christian in this neighborhood," Larson said. "And that she probably learned about Christianity from some other religious missionaries a long time ago, when she could still hear. Maybe even on the mainland before the revolution in 1949. Here come two young men from a foreign land, obviously missionaries of the gospel, and we remind her of the ones she knew before. I doubt she gets many visitors these days anyway. What greater gift can she bestow but to refresh the tired gospel messengers with the most expensive, most desirable thing she thinks we want: the best foreign beer that money can buy. Remember the scripture about 'when saw we thee an hungred and athirst?' After all, most other church missionaries probably do drink beer. I really can't think of any better way for her to honor the gospel and express her gratitude to the Lord for the service of the missionaries who introduced her to the gospel."

"But did we have to drink it?" Mason asked, as he kicked up the stand on his bike. "I mean, shouldn't we have been obedient to the Word of Wisdom?"

"I guess that's a matter of personal judgment," Larson responded, swinging himself onto his bike. He straddled the bicycle and looked at Mason. "You will have to decide for yourself. The *ahbwo* is old, so she is entitled to a great deal of respect from us. We couldn't explain to her about the Word of Wisdom, so there was no way she could have understood if we refused the beer. She would have felt terribly shamed. Remember that in this society, to reject a present means that you reject the person who gives it. That causes the person to lose face—and face is the

most important thing a person has in this country, especially when they have so little else. Figure that she gave the widow's mite as best she knew how, to messengers of the gospel. I just couldn't turn her down."

As he listened, a scripture occurred to Elder Mason, about how "the letter killeth but the spirit giveth life." Then another: "inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me."

"I'll have to think about it," Mason said. He got on his bike and the elders pedalled away.