

Lavina Fielding Anderson, "The Church's Cross-Cultural Encounters," *Ensign*, April 1980, pg. 47

## The Asian Challenge

In much of Asia, as in much of Latin America, joining the Church removes a convert from his social and cultural fabric; the Church there is most successful where it is strong enough to offer a genuine counter culture. In many parts of Asia, marriages are arranged for the youth. When a young person joins the Church, his family may disown him, thus cutting off standard avenues for marriage. But the Church can fill that gap. As Paul V. Hyer of BYU's History Department notes, "Many stake presidents and mission presidents help young Latter-day Saints meet each other." The Church thereby, at least in some ways, becomes an alternate social structure.

Countries like Japan find very appealing the gospel's teachings about happy families, the Church's meetings and activities that create another society for its members, [page 48] and its beliefs about hard work and achievement. And as Asia gradually draws away from its traditional religions, the Church finds opportunities to present the gospel answers to life's bewildering questions, just as it does in Europe.

However, one element of Japanese culture creates real challenges for new converts: the strong emphasis on group loyalty. Employees in the same company socialize together, go on vacation to company-owned resorts, and have a strong emotional commitment to their employers. In some important ways, affiliation with a demanding religion is seen as disloyalty to the employer, observes R. Lanier Britsch of BYU's History Department.

Other areas of Asia have their own challenges—and there are as many problems as there are cultures. "Nationalism is the greatest single force in Asia today," says Brother Hyer soberly. "The Chinese people have passed through a century of humiliation from Western imperialism, and national salvation is important to many of them—much more so than individual salvation. Many Chinese now see that socialism has failed and are looking for alternatives: Is a return to feudalism the answer? Is the cold technology they see in the West the answer? If we know how to present our message, we can show them that the gospel is an alternative to ways of thinking and living that have not always been successful."

In a country like Thailand, for example, it's almost unthinkable to be Thai and not also be Buddhist, according to former mission president Harvey D. Brown. Although Christian missionaries have worked there for over 150 years, less than one percent of the population is Christian—the same percentage as in Japan.

Like Latin America, the Thai social fabric is complete and covers every aspect of life. "Age, education, and social status are the three most important things in Thailand,"

summarizes President Brown. "A nineteen-year-old missionary is young, has little education, and has absolutely no standing because he's a foreigner."

Other cultural problems are associated with the Christian ideal of morality; for many Thais the word for adultery refers only to immoral relationships with close relatives or with a friend's wife. Sexual experimentation, both homosexual and heterosexual, is often an accepted part of a young man's experience. Prostitution is legal and many men have semi-official "second" wives. The change of life-style that adhering to gospel principles requires of LDS converts is often enormous.

Like other areas of the world, Thailand is accustomed to an authoritative pattern of leadership, and the gospel model of leader-as-servant is sometimes hard to grasp. Face-saving is also a factor. "If a member fails to prepare a sacrament [page 49] meeting talk, he may never return to church. Similarly, if a branch president is asked a gospel or administrative question he doesn't know the answer to, he often feels that he should be released," says President Brown.