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# Speeches

*Getting to Know China*

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# Getting to Know China

DALLIN H. OAKS

**A**t the close of his earthly ministry, our Savior, Jesus Christ, said to his apostles:

*Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. [Matthew 28:19]*

Almost everyone in this audience has participated or will participate in the fulfillment of that divine direction. The Church of Jesus Christ is a missionary church. It was so in the beginning, and it is so today in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The most populous nation in the world today is the People's Republic of China. Its 1.1 billion people make up more than 20 percent of the world's population.

We have many thousands of members of Chinese ancestry in many parts of the world, including over 30,000 in Hong Kong and Taiwan. About 10,000 of our members were born in the People's Republic of China, and many still live in that country.

The Chinese who are members of our Church make up such a tiny fraction of the total population of the People's Republic of China that we could not really say that we have fulfilled our scriptural duty to teach

that nation. This is especially clear when we do not have any missionaries in the People's Republic of China. It is currently against the law to send foreign missionaries to China or to proselyte in that country. And because our Church observes the laws of each nation, we have no plans to send missionaries or to engage in proselyting activities in that great land.

Today I will speak of the past, the present, and the future of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the People's Republic of China. I will give special and thankful emphasis to the part that Brigham Young University students and teachers are playing in that great drama.

## A Beginning

I begin my account in October 1978, when President Spencer W. Kimball gave a great missionary address to the Regional Representatives of the Church. I was then a Regional

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*Dallin H. Oaks was a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given at Brigham Young University on 12 March 1991.*

Representative, and I was also president of BYU. (I pause to note that in October 1978, most of you who are now freshmen at BYU were just entering the first grade. It takes many years to accomplish the purposes of the Lord. That idea has special application to China.)

President Kimball spoke of our obligation to take the gospel to what he called “the uttermost parts of the earth” (see D&C 58:64). His message was electrifying. No one who was present will ever forget the witness they felt that this was a prophet giving the Lord’s message to the leaders and members of his restored Church.

The prophet pleaded for us to move forward, saying, “It is better for something to be *underway* than under *advisement*.” He referred to various nations where we had not yet taught the restored gospel. He singled out China for special praise, saying:

*By comparison with the widespread breakdown of morality and discipline in the western world, the Chinese are a disciplined, industrious, frugal, closely knit people. Their moral standards are very high by modern western standards. . . . Family life is strong, with old family members still given great respect and care.*

I quote just two more sentences from President Kimball’s great message:

*When we are ready, the Lord will use us for his purposes.*

*There are almost three billion people now living on the earth in nations where the gospel is not now being preached. If we could only make a small beginning in every nation, soon the converts among each kindred and tongue could step forth as lights to their own people and the gospel would thus be preached in all nations before the coming of the Lord.*

When I returned from that meeting I asked my assistant, Bruce L. Olsen, to begin planning

for a BYU performing group to go to China. That idea was farfetched, because at that time the United States had no diplomatic relations with China, and U.S. tourists were not welcome there. But a prophet had called for beginnings, and this was a beginning BYU could attempt.

What followed seemed a miracle, even for those with the greatest faith.

Just two months later, in December 1978, President Jimmy Carter unexpectedly announced that the United States and China would exchange formal diplomatic recognition on the first day of 1979. With that announcement, a BYU trip to China became at least a theoretical possibility—if an invitation could be obtained, if our board of trustees would approve, and if we could figure out what music and dance numbers would be acceptable in that country with which we had so little experience.

Beyond all of the political and musical questions were a host of technical problems. For example, if a BYU group were invited, could they take their sound and lighting equipment, and, if so, what was the voltage of the power source in the various cities of China, and what kind of connections would be necessary to tap into it?

Miracle followed miracle. Our friends in Friendship Ambassadors, a group that fostered improved international relations through the performing arts, had close ties with officials in Romania. That nation had close relations with China. China offered to receive a tourist group sent by Romania in February 1979. Romania authorized Friendship Ambassadors to assemble the group, and they invited BYU to send representatives. By these means, Val Lindsay and Ed Blaser went to China on a trip that established our contacts with the China Travel Service, answered most of our technical questions, and gave us valuable insights into what kind of music and dance would be acceptable to Chinese audiences.

During the first few months of 1979 we began serious but confidential planning about how we could assemble a group with the varied talents that would be required for a first-class variety show. But we could only plan. We could not make any arrangements until we had a formal invitation from our Chinese hosts.

How would we obtain an invitation? As often happens when we are doing the work of the Lord and the time is right, friends were raised up to assist us. A BYU official had a friend on the island of Guam. As president of a friendship association with China, this businessman had been one of the first Westerners to visit that country. He identified the Chinese officials we should contact to seek an invitation. He also counseled us to enlist the help of prominent U.S. senators. Idaho Senator Frank Church, then chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, wrote Chinese officials on our behalf. His enthusiastic endorsement of BYU was extremely helpful.

As we kept our plans secret and waited for an invitation, our spirits were touched at the experience of a former BYU student performer. Linda Tang, a Chinese girl from Hong Kong, was working in San Francisco on an internship. As she sat at her desk one day, she had a distinct spiritual impression that she was going to return to BYU and travel to China with the Young Ambassadors. She dismissed the idea as impossible, but the impression kept returning. Several days later, she called Randy Boothe and told him about her impression. When I heard about Linda's experience, I felt reassured that our desires would be realized. I was not surprised when she was later chosen to perform on the trip.

As I recall, it was late in March or early in April when we received a brief invitation from the China Travel Service. They invited a BYU group to come, but they gave no performance commitments or dates, and they indicated that the group would just be tourists.

Throwing caution to the winds, we went ahead on faith. By this time, all of our performing groups were committed to other summer tours. Randy Boothe assembled a group of twenty performers by depleting the Lamanite Generation and two Young Ambassador groups. They rushed into the rehearsals necessary to learn the complex choreography and music for a ninety-minute program. They also had to learn enough Chinese to do some of the songs and narration in that language.

For an account of what happened next, I quote Bruce L. Olsen, the senior university official on the tour:

*Four days before the group departed, a telegram arrived from China which told us to bring only simple musical instruments.*

*Although the students had been restricted to one carry-on bag, and our equipment was cut to a bare minimum, we still had over 2,000 pounds of costumes and equipment. Despite the nature of the telegram, we prayerfully decided to move ahead with our plans.*

*Upon arrival in Canton we met our guides, who called a meeting in the International Visitors' Lounge of the airport. I wish you could have seen that gathering. Surrounding a little round table were our tour leaders, Elder James E. Faust of the Council of the Twelve (who, along with Sister Faust, was assigned by President Kimball to accompany us), and the two guides. "Just what do you expect from us?" Miss Wong asked. I remember tightening my stomach muscles and saying, "We hope to do at least one major performance in each city." The guides then questioned us in minute detail about the performance—they wanted to see the music, the lyrics to each song, and to know what the choreography to each number meant. As we moved through the show, Randy would call the students over to give their Chinese narrations or to sing their Chinese songs. Soon the balcony area of the airport was rimmed with Chinese watching this curious performance. At the conclusion, the guides*

*announced that we would perform the next morning at the Peking Minorities Institute.*

*It was clear that this performance was a test. The performance went well, and by the end our Chinese hosts announced that we would be giving another performance in the Red Tower Theater, the most prestigious performance hall in Peking.*

*The next day Miss Wong took Randy aside and told him that a great deal was riding on this concert. She said, "I don't want to alarm the students, but I am very afraid for them." She explained that the artistic elite of Peking would be attending the concert, the symphony orchestra personnel, the ballet, the opera, and the song and dance troupe—in fact, the 1,600 seats would be filled with artistic people. She said that two years ago she was sure that our group would not have been admitted to China and that how the Young Ambassadors were received would decide whether we were invited back or whether other groups would ever be admitted. We called a special meeting to explain the gravity of the situation to the Young Ambassadors and asked them to prepare.*

*It was an uneasy group of students that went on stage the next night, but their faith was great and their talent and hours of practice were rewarded. The audience responded to the performance quickly. Fifteen minutes into the show people were coming backstage telling us that "The important people in the audience are pleased." The audience "oohed" and "aahed" during dance routines and called back the clever number from the musical Shenandoah, "Next to Lovin' I Like Fightin' Best," for three bows and then demanded that after intermission we start our show by doing it again.*

*Prior to leaving for China, we were told not to expect anything but light, polite applause, but this audience demanded four encores and not only gave a standing ovation, but also held their hands high over their heads while clapping. It was the most enthusiastic response I have seen anywhere in the world. It was obvious we had passed the test.*

### **The Miracle of China**

What does all this have to do with teaching the gospel in all nations? When the first LDS missionaries began their work in Great Britain and Europe, they were often going to the countries of their own ancestry, where the laws and customs were similar to those in the United States. That has been the pattern for more than a century. In Europe and in the nations of the Americas, our missionaries have been welcomed or at least tolerated.

In contrast, in the century ahead, we will knock on the doors of nations with whom we do not have ancestral ties. In addition to differences of language and nationality, we will face barriers of culture and some barriers of hostility from wars or resentments against prior colonial or other repression.

The laws of some nations, such as China, presently forbid foreign missionaries. In other nations, the laws forbid any proselyting by Christians. Some of those barriers will drop when friendship is cultivated and trust is earned. Other barriers will fall because of the blessings of God, whose work this is. Through his prophet he promised:

*If . . . the children of men keep the commandments of God he doth nourish them, and strengthen them, and provide means whereby they can accomplish the thing which he has commanded them. [1 Nephi 17:3]*

I think this is what President Kimball meant when he said:

*If we could only make a small beginning in every nation, soon the converts among each kindred and tongue could step forth as lights to their own people and the gospel would thus be preached in all nations before the coming of the Lord.*

I think of this as I look at the miracle of China. In 1921 Elder David O. McKay went to China and dedicated that land for the

preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In his dedicatory prayer, he pleaded with our Father in Heaven to bless the land of China and its people. Notable among his petitions were these:

*May peace and stability be established throughout this republic.*

*Stay the progress of pestilence, and may starvation and untimely death stalk no more through the land.*

*Grant, our Father, that these young men and women may, through upright, virtuous lives, and prayerful study, be prepared and inclined to declare this message of salvation in their own tongue to their fellowmen.*

Many of Elder McKay's petitions have now been answered. I was impressed with this when I spoke with an aged Chinese man in Shanghai in the summer of 1980. Through an interpreter he told me that when he was a boy, he saw thousands of his countrymen without shelter or food. He described seeing people on the streets dying of starvation. Now, he said with some pride, he and his wife had a place to live and a pension that provided adequate food. By comparison with my life, his circumstances were meager; by comparison with his life as a youth and the lives of his progenitors, he was prosperous.

Fifty-eight years after Elder McKay's prayer of dedication, another young apostle, Elder James E. Faust, offered a prayer of rededication. Surrounded by the BYU participants in that first tour to China, in a location close to where the original prayer was offered, he prayed for a fulfillment of the impressive blessings promised upon that great land and its noble people.

The following year my companion and I were privileged to be in China with the second group of Young Ambassadors to perform in that land. Presiding over that group was Elder Gordon B. Hinckley. The next year,

1981, BYU's American Folk Dancers, forty-two strong, performed in China. They were accompanied by Elder Boyd K. Packer and President Jeffrey R. Holland. Their performances were televised live in China to an estimated audience of 135 million.

Since that time many other BYU performers have visited China, including the Ballroom Dancers, the Lamanite Generation, the Wind Symphony, and the Chamber Orchestra. In these visits, many ties of friendship have been forged, and much understanding has been gained. We have increased in our understanding of China and its aspirations and problems. For example, of the fifteen men currently serving in the First Presidency and Council of the Twelve, ten have traveled in China, most more than once. Several of us have had in-depth discussions with senior Chinese leaders.

On their part, Chinese officials have chosen to take a close look at our Church and its leaders and members, here in the United States and in China. For example, Church leaders have met with three Chinese ambassadors to the United States, one of whom visited us in Salt Lake City. We have hosted many Chinese leaders, including the current premier, at BYU—Hawaii and the Polynesian Cultural Center. We have met with a former president of China, with a former vice premier and foreign minister. Scores of other leaders could be mentioned.

In other important developments of the last decade, temples of the Lord have been dedicated on the continent of Asia (in Korea) and on Taiwan. In Asia we have six stakes of Zion whose membership is predominantly Chinese (in Taiwan and Hong Kong). Chinese people hold key leadership positions in the Church in many other great cities and countries of the world, including Toronto and Victoria in Canada, Melbourne in Australia, Singapore and the Republic of the Philippines in Asia, and in many cities in the United States.

We cannot send missionaries to the People's Republic of China, but each year China sends

thousands of its choicest sons and daughters to various foreign lands to study. In those places they quite naturally meet our missionaries, and many of these Chinese students are joining the Church. Some have already returned to China, and others will return when their studies are completed. We encourage our Chinese members to return to China. Their country needs them in China and the Lord needs them in China. The work of China will go forward with these young engineers, scientists, scholars, and artists. At the same time, the work of the Lord will go forward in a natural law-abiding way because of those who have received the message of the restored gospel. In every land, that message makes its recipients better citizens, better workers, and better friends.

#### **Furthering Our Ties of Friendship**

Perhaps you have noted that as I have spoken of the nations of the world, I have not spoken about governments or wars or rebellions or political repression. I am aware of all of these things, which occur in many nations. They, of course, affect the timing and manner in which we pursue our divine mandate to teach the gospel of Jesus Christ in all nations. But overarching all of these difficulties and deviations are two great realities of mortal life: (1) the brotherhood of man—all men and women of whatever nation, kindred, tongue, or people; and (2) the Fatherhood of God, who has commanded us to teach the great truths of his gospel in every nation and has promised us that he will “provide means whereby [we] can accomplish the thing which he has commanded [us]” (1 Nephi 17:3).

✓ Things do not happen rapidly in China. When the impatience of Americans meets the patience of Orientals, patience wins. I believe that in China the Lord will do his own work, and, as he has said in modern scripture, his work will be done “in his own time, and in his own way, and according to his own will” (D&C 88:68).

In the meantime, we are privileged to be good friends to our Chinese brothers and sisters. In our day that friendship has many forms. I have spoken at length about our BYU performing groups, which were in the vanguard in establishing our friendly relations with the Chinese people and their leaders. Our next and continuing relationship is with the Chinese students and teachers who have left their own country to study in other lands. Many of these are at BYU, in Provo, and in Hawaii. Others are at the Polynesian Cultural Center, where they are receiving hands-on experience in the important tourist industry. Other Chinese visitors are becoming acquainted with our Church and its members in hundreds of other locations in North America, Europe, and Asia.

Many Latter-day Saints are becoming better acquainted with China and its people by living or traveling in that great land. The David M. Kennedy Center here at BYU has arranged for LDS couples and singles to be appointed by various Chinese colleges and institutes to go to China to teach English for a year. These valiant volunteers are doing a great work of brotherly and sisterly service. Many other Latter-day Saints have traveled to China to serve its people. Experts in medicine, agriculture, technology, business, and the arts have generously given service with their heads and hearts and hands. I hope they always introduce themselves as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints so that their service to China is identified with the Christian mission of their church.

That was surely true of Dr. Russell M. Nelson. Just after his call to the Council of the Twelve, he fulfilled an earlier commitment to serve for a month as a visiting professor of surgery at Shandong Medical College in Shandong Province, China. There he taught Chinese surgeons the latest techniques of coronary arterial angiography and bypass graft surgery, as he had also done for several years

prior to his call. Sister Nelson taught English classes for the medical students. Their efforts are a model for Latter-day Saints who have opportunities for service in China or other countries of the world.

We have also sent books to libraries in China. We have arranged for microfilming of official and family records. And we have sent assistance to the victims of a devastating earthquake.

Each year there are new examples of coincidences—I call them miracles—that further our ties and our friendship with China and its people. I will give only one example, this from 1990.

Exactly a year ago this month, Elder and Sister William L. Taylor, missionaries laboring in the Ireland Dublin Mission, received an invitation to go to China as the guests of the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries. They were invited because of something that happened in China forty-five years earlier. High-ranking Chinese officials learned about them through the father of a Chinese woman Elder and Sister Taylor had met in Ireland. When the mission president told me the circumstances, I approved their leaving the mission field to accept this invitation. I cautioned them that out of respect for China's laws, they should not go to China as missionaries, but as friends who would simply seek to increase understanding between our peoples.

William Taylor was working on Wake Island as a civilian contractor in 1941. In the initial weeks of World War II, he was taken prisoner by the Japanese. He spent three and a half years in a Japanese prison camp near Shanghai, China. In May 1945, he escaped while being transferred north toward Beijing by train. Eluding his pursuers and suffering many hardships as he made his way across China, Brother Taylor eventually found his way to the Communist-led Eighth Route Army. After about two months with these friendly

forces, he was taken to Yen-an. There, Brother Taylor met Mao Ze-dong, who told him that he was the only foreign prisoner of war who had ever made a successful escape in North China. The two had their photograph taken together.

Forty-five years later that photograph, shown to a Chinese contact in Ireland, produced the invitation that took Elder and Sister Taylor to China. In China they were entertained for seventeen days in Shanghai, Chongqing, Xi'an, Yen-an, and Beijing, where they were hosted at a banquet in the Great Hall of the People. There they met a distinguished Chinese leader who had been foreign minister of China. Through that contact by a faithful Latter-day Saint man, Church leaders have been able to meet with this high-ranking man and further the ties of friendship between our church and the People's Republic of China.

As a footnote to this remarkable account, I should add that the story of William Taylor's meeting with Mao Ze-dong is probably the first story ever featured in both our *Church News* (7 July 1990, p. 6) and in the Chinese government's *Beijing Review* (28 January 1991, p. 33). I hope it will not be the last.

People sometimes ask me about what can be done to "open China." In response, I state my belief that China is already "open"—it is we who are closed. We are closed because we expect the Orient to be the same as the West, China to be the same as Canada or Chile. We must open our minds and our hearts to the people of this ancient realm and this magnificent culture. We must understand their way of thinking, their aspirations, and their impressive accomplishments. We must observe their laws and follow their example of patience. We must deserve to be their friends.

As we become friends of China, and as we learn from them, our Father in Heaven, who has made "all nations of men . . . and [has] determined . . . the bounds of their habitation" (Acts 17:26), will bring his purposes to pass in

that great nation “in his own time, and in his own way, and according to his own will” (D&C 88:68).

The Lord has said, “I am able to do mine own work” (2 Nephi 27:20). He is doing that work all over the world as walls crumble and as old prejudices are readjusted. He is doing his work in China, and we who think we are important actors are often no more than admiring spectators. The work of the Lord will go forward. We will soon see the fulfillment of the Book of Mormon prophecy that “the Lord doth grant unto all nations, of their own nation and

tongue, to teach his word, yea, in wisdom, all that he seeth fit that they should have” (Alma 29:8).

I testify of the truthfulness of that promise and of the optimism with which we look forward to continuing associations and to mutual blessings with our great friends in the People’s Republic of China. This is the church of Jesus Christ. He is our Savior. Of that I testify as I ask the blessings of the Lord upon each of us in this great work, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.