

# Tay, Timothy (born c. 1875)

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Little was known about Timothy or Timotheus Tay (surname pinyin Zheng, name in Chinese 郑, and Hokkianese Romanization Teh Hong Siang). But he had made significant contributions to the early days of the Adventist message in China, Singapore, and Malaysia.

Son of a Chinese migrant family from Fukien (Fujian) to Southeast Asia, Tay was born at Benkulen (Bengkulu), in southwestern Sumatra (today part of Indonesia). Fluent in Malay (a language spoken in the coastal areas of Indonesia), he became a Christian through the efforts of Ralph W. (1860-1934) and Carrie (1863-1936) Munson, who oversaw the newly opened Nind Orphanage along with an Anglo-Chinese school, part of a Methodist missionary outreach in Singapore. Soon Timothy decided to become a Methodist, and Munson baptized him by sprinkling at the age of 20. When Munson became a Seventh-day Adventist while on furlough in the United States, he returned to Padang, Indonesia, to open an Adventist mission in 1900. He learned that Timothy had married and was living in Fort De Kock (Bukittinggi). Munson sent Timothy a postcard inviting him to become his coworker. After several weeks Timothy arrived and for three days they intensely studied the Bible and prayed, after which Timothy became an Adventist.<sup>1</sup>

The large Chinese immigrant population meant that it was vital for Timothy to learn his ancestral language.<sup>2</sup> Munson further expressed his appreciation that in addition to his giving health treatments, Timothy was “very intelligent and clever, and he earnestly preaches the gospel wherever he has an opportunity to do so.”<sup>3</sup> In February 1904 Timothy sailed for his family hometown in China to Amoy (Xiamen) where he began studying the Fukien or Hokien dialect. While here he befriended Nga Pit Keh (also known as Ziying Guo) (1865--1937), who was the principal of the school where he studied. He prayed: “I have made up my mind that the Lord must give me one good faithful worker while I study in Amoy.”<sup>4</sup> After being called to the principal’s office to ask why Timothy broke the Sabbath, this led to a Bible study after which Keh (an English Presbyterian minister) began to keep the seventh-day Sabbath.<sup>5</sup> Keh kept his first Sabbath on Aug. 6, 1904, and two days later he sailed for Canton.<sup>6</sup> It was here that Keh was baptized by J. N. Anderson.<sup>7</sup> On their return they stopped in Swatow (Shantou) where they converted Hong Zijie, a former Baptist preacher, after which they went “to win away Baptists and Presbyterians from their allegiance.”<sup>8</sup> Thus Tay was responsible for converting the first two ordained indigenous Chinese ministers to Adventism.

In early 1905 Timothy returned to Sumatra, stopping once again in Singapore on the way.<sup>9</sup> Timothy's stops in Singapore led to the conversion of a woman, Teck Sung, and the genesis of a small group of believers.<sup>10</sup> Now Timothy would follow up on this interest returning to Singapore from Padang on May 17, 1905, and his boys formed a nucleus for a church school. Timothy was married to Sim Nio, and they had several children: John (b. 1899), James (b. 1901), Carrie (b. 1903), and Ruth and Mary (babies in 1911). Timothy worked as a colporteur distributing a Malay tract on the Second Advent and the periodical *Good Health*.<sup>11</sup> In 1906 the West Australian Mission voted to provide financial support for Timothy Tay in his missionary work.<sup>12</sup> By 1907 Timothy was selling a Malay translation of *Christ Our Saviour*.<sup>13</sup> The first edition was printed by the Avondale Press bound in paper covers.<sup>14</sup> By September 1908 he was reported to have sold 400 copies of this book in Singapore and 200 more in Penang, Malaysia.<sup>15</sup> By 1910 Timothy had returned to Macassar (Jalan Makassar) where he went into business with his father. He was friendly to Munson and G. F. Jones when they went to visit him, and they expressed the hope that he would return to ministry again.<sup>16</sup> Additional encouragement from Lily (1878-1972) and Ethelbert (1877-1962) Thorpe, Adventist missionaries, led to his being "truly re-converted to God, and his heartfelt confessions have been very touching." He planned to afterward return to colporteur work.<sup>17</sup> They lived with the Munsons once again for several months before going to start a business in Garoeta, a mountain town.<sup>18</sup> By 1914 the Tays were living in Kertosen where Adventist missionaries looked for them once again. Timothy was not home, but his wife "welcomed us and solicited our prayers for herself and her children, also for her husband that he might return to the truth he once loved."<sup>19</sup> In 1920 J. P. Anderson noted a pleasant visit with Timothy Tay in which he recounted his earlier experiences and came with them to church.<sup>20</sup> This is his last reported contact with the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and it is not known what happened to him in his later years.

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## NOTES

1. Lorilyn Horning, "Early National Workers in Singapore," *Southeast Asia Union Messenger*, July-August 1988, 11, 14-15.

2. See James W. Gould, *Americans in Sumatra* (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), 119, accessed December 17, 2021, <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007%2F978-94-011-8846-3.pdf>.

3. R. W. Munson, "Padang, West Coast Sumatra, East Indies," *ARH*, May 19, 1903.

4. "Seeking the Lost in the Far East," <https://www.chinesedahistory.org/seeking-the-lost-in-the-far-east> [accessed 12/17/21].

5. J. N. Anderson, "Letters from the Fields," *ARH*, November 24, 1904, 20.

6. "Good News from China," *Union Conference Record*, November 15, 1904, 8.

7. Mrs. J. N. [Emma] Anderson, "Our Work in South China," *The Youth's Instructor*, May 12, 1914, 6-7.

8. Cited by Joseph Tse-Hei Lee and Christie Chui-Shan Chow, "Christian Revival from within: Seventh-day Adventism in China," in Francis Khek Gee Lim, ed. *Christianity in Contemporary China: Socio-cultural Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 47.
9. See note *Union Conference Record*, February 15, 1905, 7.
10. "History of the Canvassing Work in the Far East," *Southwestern Union Record*, October 27, 1908, 5.
11. G. F. Jones, "Singapore," *Union Conference Record* [Australian], October 1, 1906, 63.
12. "West Australian Conference," *Union Conference Record* [Australian], April 30, 1906, 5.
13. "Notes and Personals," *Union Conference Record* [Australian], August 19, 1907, 7.
14. E. H. Gates, "Mission Studies," *Union Conference Record* [Australian], Sept. 13, 1909, 7.
15. "Singapore," *Union Conference Record* [Australian], September 7, 1908, 22. See section under "Books and Canvassing."
16. R. W. Munson, "The Land of Promise," *Union Conference Record* [Australian], July 3, 1910, 3.
17. See note in *Australasian Record*, May 29, 1911, 8. See also, "Lily M. Thorpe, "A New Sabbath-School in Java," *Australasian Record*, June 19, 1911, 3.
18. Carrie L. Munson, "Letter from Sister Munson," *Australasian Record*, November 13, 1911, 3-5.
19. Anna Wood, "Selling Our Malayan Paper," *Australasian Record*, May 25, 1914, 2-3.
20. J. P. Anderson, "Soliciting Funds in Java," *Asiatic Division Outlook*, Aug. 15, 1921, 8.

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