

FookMasie

Maisie Fook (1924 - 2002)

Jan Fook, June 2013

Basic biographical data





Born 1924 in Tenterfield, NSW Australia; died 2002 in Sydney, Australia.

Parentage: Father Harry Gee Hon, mother Cecilia Wong See.

Siblings: 9th child in a family 11 children.

Spouse: She married Denis Fook in 1949 at the Tenterfield Seventh-day Adventist Church, NSW, Australia.

Children: Maisie and Denis Fook have four children, two sons and two daughters. From the eldest to the youngest, their names are Barry, Jan, Jeffrey and Margaret.

Summary of Service: She founded the international organization, *Asian Aid*, in 1967 which focuses on helping disadvantage children around the world. It supports schools, training centres, hospitals, orphanages in many countries including Vietnam, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Asian Aid is an independent ministry approved by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. She was also one of the key persons who initiated the formation of the Adventist Chinese Church in Sydney, Australia.

Figure 1: Maisie Fook, founder of the Asian Aid organization.

Maisie was born into an era where women were still to gain their full footing as equal participants in both the public and domestic domains. In addition, as a person of Chinese heritage growing up in a predominantly White Australia, she struggled against further odds to make an important contribution to the social landscape of her country.

She was born into an Australian Chinese family in rural Australia (Tenterfield, about 800 km north of Sydney) in 1924. Her parents, Cecilia Wong See and Harry Gee Hon, had met in Australia but married in China. Cecilia was Australian-born (one of a small group at this time in Australia) and Harry was Chinese-born, having migrated to Australia as a teenager. Harry and Cecilia were part of that small population of Chinese families who lived in Australia after the gold rush era, and who elected to remain in their adopted country. Growing up in a small country town, where her father owned and ran a general business, must have seemed a relatively inauspicious beginning to a child with Maisie's abilities. As the 9th child born into a family of 11 children, Maisie had clear family duties. Although she excelled at school, she was unable to continue with her studies after her third year of secondary school, as she was needed to perform household duties (especially cooking) so her elder sisters could help in the shop. This early sacrifice of her academic ambitions became a solid springboard for her aspirations later in life.

Conversion to Adventism

Another early (and continuing) influence was Seventh-day Adventism. Maisie's mother, Cecilia, had become interested in the religion through a woman who helped her with housework. Cecilia was baptized when pregnant with Maisie. Maisie and her father were later baptized together when Maisie was 16. It could be said that Maisie was baptized twice, although the first time she may have had little choice! Still this may help account for her strong devotion to the church which remained to the day of her death. During the 2nd World War the Hon household held church services in their home which were attended by servicemen stationed at Tenterfield. Maisie also honed her cooking skills at this time. She remained an exceptional home cook throughout her life. Her cooking was enjoyed by many within her large family circle and beyond, and to this day several of her recipes are passed on and coveted by many. In particular her recipe for Chinese Chicken is by way of a family heirloom, and the prized sponge with caramel icing is still talked about reverently at family gatherings.

Her devotion to family was also an abiding thread in Maisie's life. She often spoke of her father and his relatively early demise in her life. He lived long enough to give Maisie away to Denis Fook when they were married in 1949 at the newly built Seventh-day Adventist church in Tenterfield. When her mother lay dying some many years later in 1977, Maisie and her sisters rallied together and created a roster to care for Cecilia. This was a particularly difficult time for Maisie as it also involved her travelling a long distance, across to the other side of Sydney.



Maisie introduced her husband Denis Fook to Seventh-day Adventism. Denis's family came



from Asian Aid but the work still continues. It now works with 197 institutions in Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka.

Maisie's dynamism did not begin and end with Asian Aid. She also decided that she would adopt the two Korean orphans she had been sponsoring. This was a first in Australia at the time, as systems and policies regulating intercountry adoptions were not then established. The arrival of Jeffrey and Margaret in 1967 made headlines and was the result of much determination and strategizing with bureaucrats on the part of a still young housewife with only a third year secondary education.

Building the Chinese Adventist Church in Sydney

Denis, however, was not without his own initiative. In 1965 he had the idea of establishing a Chinese Seventh-day Adventist Church in Sydney Australia. He and Maisie worked together to set this up. In 1966 the first official services were held at Marrickville, and only three years later land was purchased for a new church to be built in Strathfield. Denis remained a loved and respected senior member of this congregation for over 30 years until he and Maisie moved to a retirement village just outside Sydney in 2001. So it might be true to say

Maisie moved to a retirement village just outside Sydney in 2001. So it might be true to say, in a way, that Maisie did realize her wish to be a pastor's wife.



Active Retirement Service

Maisie must, of course, also have realized that she had too much energy and initiative to remain satisfied with only that role. After she retired from Asian Aid she was able to fulfill another longstanding ambition - to take up tertiary study. She studied for a Diversional Therapy qualification at the University of Sydney (she graduated in 1992) and spent several happy years after that working in nursing homes amongst the elderly. She derived a particular satisfaction from being needed and feeling that she was making a contribution to her community.

It seems fitting to end this biography with some of Maisie's own words (spoken in 1990), which sum up how she saw herself and her contribution in life.

"...I once read that just as surely there's a place prepared in the heavenly mansions for us, there's a place for us to work for God...and I used to wonder where that place was for me. Then, God led me to be involved in Asian Aid - and it really gave my life purpose. I had something worthwhile to do. I didn't have a very good education and I didn't think I could do very much for God.....He gave me the abilities I've needed. It's really opened up my world....it has been my highest privilege and greatest joy." (Quoted from the Adventist Professional in an article by Robert Allaburton)

Maisie died in 2002, 18 months after she moved to the retirement village which she had been keen to do for some years. She did some voluntary work for about a year but gave it up when she became too ill. Denis still lives in the retirement village, and her four children are spread around the world. In Denis' words, Maisie was "energetic, resourceful and remembered by many whose lives she touched both home and abroad".

Figure 2: The family of Harry and Cecilia Hon taken in mid 1920's. Maisie is the smallest girl at the front.



Figure 3: Five of the Hon children in 1928. From left to right: Albert, Maisie, June, Hona, and Teddy.





Figure 4: Denis Fook and Masie Hon on their wedding day in 1949, in Tenterfield, NSW, Australia



Figure 5: The family of Maisie (back center) and Denis Fook (back right).

Children from back to front: Jan (standing), Barry (sitting), Margaret (sitting), and Jeffrey (standing in front). Taken July 1968.



Figure 6: Mr. Denis Fook and Mrs. Maisie Fook, two of the original founders of the Sydney Chinese SDA Church, ca year?



Figure 7: Pusan Korea Cross Orphanage in Korea. Maisie setting at center holding a child.
Taken ca 1966.



Figure 8: Maisie Fook waving farewell to the children at the Orphanage in Korea, ca 1966.



Figure 9: Maisie Fook Memorial School of Seventh-day Adventist in Bangladesh, taken April 10, 2005.



Figure 10: Maisie Fook Memorial School in Dhaka, Bangladesh, taken 2005

References:

1. Wong, Jill (2011/2012), The Asian Aid Miracle, in *Thornleigh Church Online Magazine*, Edition 44, December 2011-January 2012. Available from http://www.thornleighadventist.org.au/onlinemag/edition_44/asian_aid_miracle.htm