



From the time the Back to Jerusalem vision was first given to the Chinese Church in the 1940s there have been many faithful servants of God who have courageously held on to the torch so that the present generation could see the vision become a reality. Some of those early pioneers were called to lay down their lives for the Gospel.

In this series we profile the lives of some of these early Back to Jerusalem pioneers....

John Ding & Zhu Yiming

Kangding was formerly one of the most important monastery towns on the outskirts of Tibet. After the Chinese military invaded Tibet in the 1950s they redrew the maps, allocating vast tracts of land into the present-day Yunnan, Sichuan, Gansu, and Qinghai provinces. Kangding now finds itself located in western Sichuan Province.

Two of the first Chinese believers to reach out to the Tibetans in this lonely part of the country were John Ding and his wife Zhu Yiming. Ding had received a vision to serve God among the Tibetans in the border regions while he was studying in Chongqing. One of his teachers was a consecrated young Christian lady named Zhu Yiming. A native of Shandong Province in eastern China, she had completed a university degree, majoring in mathematics, and had held teaching positions in several different parts of the country before taking up an appointment in Chongqing.

The vision to take the gospel Back to Jerusalem was moving through the Church in Chongqing at the time. The believers saw sharing the gospel among the Tibetans as a key part of the vision, which has been reignited among China's churches in recent years. Ding and Zhu attended Back to Jerusalem meetings together and got to know and appreciate one another. The more Ding thought about the call God had placed on his life, the more he felt attracted to his young teacher. Just prior to graduating he finally got up enough courage to talk with her about marriage. He said, "Perhaps I'm not what you want in a husband. You're more like a Mary while I'd be more like a Martha. I'm a Mr. Fix-it, and you are a scholar." After a pause that seemed to last a lifetime, Zhu Yiming told Ding, "Those differences could

compliment one another.” Before long the two disciples of Christ were engaged to be married. Ding talked to Zhu about his call to minister among the Tibetans, and the deprivation and difficulties that would entail. His fiancé responded with the kind of selfless manner that characterized her life: “Well, if you are to be my husband, I’ll certainly go where you go. And if that means Tibet, so be it.” The young couple arrived in Kangding and started to work alongside the small team of foreign missionaries who were attempting to establish Christianity in the far-flung town. Zhu Yiming’s mother, who was a powerful and effective preacher of the gospel, came to Kangding and ministered alongside her daughter and son-in-law, influencing many for the kingdom of God. Yiming’s mother passed away in 1958.

When the Communists decided to crack down on the Tibetan areas in the 1950s they did so with an iron fist. Tens of thousands of Buddhist monks were arrested and killed, and anyone suspected of anti-Communist activities were targeted for elimination. Ding and Zhu were imprisoned at Kangding on November 29, 1958. Ding was incarcerated in the men’s prison while Zhu was confined in the women’s. For almost three years the couple saw nothing of each other, until one day Ding was sent to gather baskets of vegetables from the hillsides surrounding the town. As he edged his way down a hill with a full basket on his back, he was overwhelmed to see his wife coming up the same trail. She too was on a work detail. He later remembered how

“No one else was close to us, a rare situation, and thus we could say a few words to each other. ‘How have they been treating you?’ I asked her. ‘There have been some bad days,’ she replied. ‘I got reported for witnessing, and the guards beat me up for that. Some of the staff women were Christians, and I urged them to be faithful. That got me into trouble. But God has been so good all along. From time to time I heard about you’

‘I love you, Yiming,’ I whispered. ‘I pray for you so much!’

‘And I pray for you, John, that your faith will not fail.’ And with that she moved slowly up the hill.”

John Ding returned to the prison full of joy and hope, not realizing he would never see the face of his beloved wife again.

In 1960, after three years of incarceration at Kangding, John Ding and Zhu Yiming were transferred to a huge prison in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province. John lost all trace of his wife, and for years the only thing that kept him going was the thought that one day he would be reunited with his sweetheart. In 1964 John was called in to see the prison warden. The cruel man broke the news of Yiming’s death in a heartless manner, saying, “Your *laopo* [old woman] was just like you. She wouldn’t stop praying, and we had to put her in a struggle session. She wouldn’t give in, even when she was beaten. After that she died. Do you want the

same? Do you want to die?” Ding courageously looked straight into the warden’s eyes and said, “Everybody dies. If my wife has died, I’m glad for her that she could leave this bitter life.... Why didn’t you inform me when my wife died?’ Ding later remembered how “They looked uncomfortable. One man nodded, and then my interrogator turned on me. ‘She died in 1961. Your health was bad at that time, so we didn’t tell you. You may go now!’”

Ding was later allowed to collect a box of his wife’s meagre possessions. The list of contents was simple: one dress, one pair of shoes, and one quilt. On the box a paper stated Prisoner Number 975 had died at 2 p.m. on August 17, 1961. It had taken the heartless authorities three years before they bothered to notify her husband. With tears in his eyes and a broken heart, Ding returned to his cell with the box of relics. He inspected Yiming’s dress and found it was worn out at the knees, and her shoes were scuffed on the toes—the marks of a woman who had spent much time on her knees in prayer.

After many more years of hardship and misery, John Ding was finally released in 1981—after 23 years of imprisonment. He returned to Christian ministry, remarried, and never lost his deep faith in God.