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Religion: Risky Rendezvous at Swatow

By [Russ Hoyle; Bing W. Wong/Hong Kong](#) Monday, Oct. 19, 1981

Bold expedition smuggles 1 million Bibles into mainland China

The beach near the mainland Chinese village of Gezhou, code named "Mike," looked deserted in the moonlight. Just offshore, in a glassy South China sea, a crew member on the seagoing tugboat Michael signaled inland with three sharp flashes of a hand-held light. Almost immediately, three answering flashes came from the shadowy trees at the edge of the 300-yd. beach. Suddenly, hundreds of figures swarmed silently down to the water's edge, where they had a brief and emotional rendezvous with their foreign visitors. The long-awaited and highly covert task that evening: unloading and distributing more than 1 million contraband Chinese-language Bibles. The 232-ton cargo of books had been printed in the U.S. and was smuggled 200 miles up the Chinese coast from Hong Kong in the largest operation of its kind in the history of China.

TIME has learned that the remarkable mission, dubbed Project Pearl and executed with military precision last June, was engineered by Open Doors with Brother Andrew International, a nondenominational, evangelical missionary organization based in Ermelo, The Netherlands. The group has specialized in smuggling Bibles mostly into Communist countries for some two decades. The purpose of Project Pearl was to bring badly needed copies of the Scriptures to 5 million Chinese Protestants, who worship under the watchful eye of the Peking government in an estimated 50,000 "house churches." Many of these churches were formed after the Cultural Revolution of the late '60s, when Chinese Christians were persecuted and their regular places of worship closed. Now even the more tolerant regime of Vice Chairman Deng Xiaoping and Premier Zhao Ziyang has begun to bristle at the swift expansion of the house church movement, and is hardly likely to countenance the Bible smuggling effort. Says an American ex-Marine who led Project Pearl: "Between obedience to God and obedience to men, we choose obedience to God."

Project Pearl, a name inspired by Matthew 13:45 ("The kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls"), had its beginnings in late 1979, when Open Doors was approached secretly by a house church leader, who urgently requested Old and New Testaments. Under the guidance of Open Doors President Anne van der Bijl, 53, staffers began raising money for the mission in the U.S. through dinners, direct mail and TV spots. The aim of the campaign was disclosed, but not the way the mission would be accomplished. Cost of the venture: \$6 million, of which \$3.5 million came from the U.S. and Canada and \$2.5 million from abroad.

Simultaneously, local operatives in the Southeast China port of Swatow, the city near the planned landing, made hundreds of area photographs and closely monitored local Chinese security forces. The plan, completed last December, called for a sturdy tug to tow a partly submersible barge loaded with 232 one-ton blocks, each packed with 48 waterproof boxes containing 90 Bibles.

Thomas Nelson Publishers of Nashville, Tenn., a religious house, agreed to produce the million copies. Photographic plates of a Union version Bible, first translated into Chinese in 1919, were forwarded to the U.S. from Hong Kong. The printing bill for the leatherbound, 629-page volumes of the complete Scriptures was \$1.4 million. The Bibles were transported last spring to Hong Kong in a container ship.

A specially chosen 20-member international crew began to practice dry runs on secluded Mindoro Island in the Philippines. A special 100-ft. barge was built, and, for \$480,000, the tug Michael was bought in Singapore. Finally, the assault party sailed for Hong Kong to pick up its illicit cargo. At the last moment, a planned Easter Sunday landing at Swatow was scrubbed by Van der Bijl because of concern that Chinese authorities might be alerted to the plan. Two months later, the crew sent a cryptic message to agents in Swatow: "We are going to have a dinner party, expecting so many people that we have arranged 21 teacups and cooked 18 bowls of rice." Dday, in other words, would take place at 2100 hours, June 18.

The show was on. The Michael weighed anchor, feigned a southward course toward Manila, then swung north up the Chinese coast. At one point, a typhoon threatened to engulf the frail expedition, but fortunately, the storm veered out to sea. Entering the harbor at Swatow, the crew had another bad moment when a Chinese gunboat approached, only to pass by harmlessly. The unloading process went smoothly as villagers snipped packets of Bibles from the submerged barge with rope cutters supplied by the smugglers, then carried them to waiting bikes, buses and trucks (Open Doors clandestinely had supplied \$75,000 to hire the vehicles). But about four hours after the departure of the Michael, an army patrol turned up unexpectedly in Gezhou village. The patrol stormed the beach, arresting hundreds who were still at work carting off the Bibles. Subsequently, according to Hong Kong reports, most of the prisoners were released.

Open Doors now estimates that some 60% to 80% of the Bibles wound up in the possession of house church groups, some as far as 3,000 miles away in Heilongjiang and Xinjiang provinces. So far, Peking has remained silent, but the illegal distribution of Bibles is certain to rankle the hierarchy of Peking's official religious establishment, the Chinese Three-Self Patriotic Church. It has attempted to bring the house churches under closer control by printing its own Bibles, although it has delivered only 135,000 copies since 1979.

Project Pearl, meanwhile, already has inspired calls from potential donors willing to finance massive new Bible-smuggling ventures to China or behind the Iron Curtain. —By Russ Hoyle. Reported by Bing W. Wong/Hong Kong