

A Chinese Look on the Roma

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Whenever I share with brothers and sisters the burden that God has given me on Roma people (More commonly known as “Gypsies”), they ask, “Who are they actually? Which country do they belong to? Do they have their own language?”



Indeed, we do not know much about Roma. We do not even realize that in addition to Europe, there are a lot of Roma living in North & South America, Africa, and Australia. Some of them also live in China and Singapore. The impression we have on Roma probably came from movies and novels, as well as media coverage. To be fair, we’d better admit that people know very little about Roma.

The new German and Italian friends I met on my trip to Europe were quite shocked when I told them that the purpose of my visit was to know more about Roma and serve them in future. They



gasped upon hearing my trip and started telling me that the task would not be easy. Yet they were quite reluctant to share with me their personal experience with Roma, mostly related to issues on theft, hygiene, and illegal settlement in public area. Some could barely recall if

they have encountered any Roma in their life. If they did remember one, the Roma would probably be a schoolmate whom they had faint impression. In general, they just felt that Roma don’t interact much with them.

Thanks for God’s grace, I had the chance to go with the Great Commission Center to Serbia and Hungary to visit Roma people in person. We met them through the local pastors. The Roma people I met did not have any wagons or special costumes as depicted in movies. Neither crystal ball nor tarot was found in their hands. What we found were many curious and friendly faces. They looked simply ordinary and tidy. When Rev. Wang and President Chan shared with Roma brothers and sisters that we owed them a debt on gospel, their eyes twinkled. They looked at us in a way as if there had never been anyone talking to them in such nice words, words that meant to bring blessings and hope to their life.

A Suspicious People Group

The origin of Roma has been mistaken by society for centuries. Some believed they were from Egypt, while others thought they were spies sent out by the Ottoman Empire. The most recent

research found that Roma people were from a tribe in northern India, and during the Byzantine period, they were forcibly enslaved by Turkish troops as servants or craftsmen and went with them to Europe. For the first few hundred years in Europe, the enslaved Roma were forbidden by their “masters” to speak in their own language. After the abolition of slavery, Roma continued to be excluded from the main stream. Meanwhile, in order to protect themselves, Roma seldom interacted with “gentiles.” As a result, many outsiders found Roma’s culture and life style mysterious. Over time, the misunderstanding between Roma and non-Roma deepened. During the rule of the Nazis, the genocide was not only inflicted on the Jews but also on Roma. What was worse was that the persecution of Roma in WWII was seldom mentioned, as this Roma group had been suffering discrimination and exclusion for centuries in Europe. Their persecution was deemed “unimportant.” No one had ever come to assist them to fight for any compensation nor apology after the war.

Inequality in Education and Employment

One may argue that hundred years ago many Chinese also faced similar situation – being forced to leave their homeland, worked overseas – but after a generation or two they mostly could manage to improve their living. And their social status was gradually uplifted. Why then, Roma people could not do the same? A Serbian pastor reckoned, “Unlike the Chinese, the self image of Roma is generally very low. When you ask Roma kids what their dreams are, you will not hear answers like to be a doctor or a lawyer. The kids would probably tell you that they want to be a cleaner or a garbage collector so that they may find some ‘treasures’ to re-sell. Or they simply want to earn a living.”

A Roma pastor grew up in Serbia told us that he had a childhood experience of being discriminated at school. Teachers would deliberately give Roma children lower marks, discouraging them and insulting them, saying they were born not as smart as others. Most Roma parents never have higher education and have minimal concept about it. Not many parents would therefore give their children any pre-school preparation. Most of them fail to help their children on homework. As a result, Roma children simply lose the game from the beginning. It is not difficult to imagine that when school kids cannot keep up with their homework and do not receive any assistance, they will easily

lose interest to go to school. Furthermore, neither the schools nor their parents are keen on their learning. We were told that in Serbia, only about 3 to 4 out of 100 Roma kids could complete their primary school. Those finishing secondary school are very rare.

Since local people show various intensity of rejection or discrimination against Roma people, employers are reluctant to hire Roma, even when the government provides special subsidy for those who employ Roma. Employers fear that they will lose their customers because of their dislike of Roma staff. The sad thing is when Roma realize the employers would rather prefer to hire locals who are less capable, they, though distraught, submissively admit their fate. They have succumbed to their powerlessness, and live in hopelessness. Generations after generations, Roma seem to fall into vicious cycle of low self-esteem, low education and low employment rate.

Living Condition

Most people have an impression that Roma is nomadic. Some think that they are dirty as they always live in filthy places. One or two tribes among Roma are said to enjoy roaming in large wagon, and you may find them in Romania and England. However, most of Roma are just like you and I. They prefer to settle down, lead a comfortable life, and work.

In Belgrade, the capital of Serbia, Roma live in a dry ditch, a so-called temporary settlement as the government is supposed to offer them public housing. Unfortunately, this proposal irritated those who are currently living in public housing and the neighborhood. They detest having Roma as their neighbors. Not only do they take to the streets, they also threaten to kill all Roma people.

In Tirana, the capital of Albania, since some people complain that the dry ditch occupied by Roma is affecting capital city’s image, the government evacuated Roma without giving them any relocation arrangement. They are completely left on their own. In the end, they live next to a highway. A Roma



father used all his savings to purchase a torn apartment for his children to have a “stable home”. His family of five are squeezed in a ten-square-meter unit, sharing a communal toilet with over ten other households on the same floor. And they have nowhere to cook except for a narrow doorway.

Few Reminders from Roma Ministry in Three Countries

The gospel, for sure, is needed for Roma in Europe. But as a church as a whole or being a Christian as an individual, how can we show Roma the reality of the gospel and let them feel the love from God? Here are some inspiration from the ministries on Roma in Hungary, Serbia, and Albania:

Acceptance, Trust, and Building up:

A couple of years ago, a Serbian pastor opened his church for Roma to attend the service. He also trained some Roma disciples as leaders and sent them to plant churches throughout the territories. With Roma serving their own community, the preaching was more effective and powerful as it became a living testimony for other Roma people to see their potential to become a leader also. Many miracles followed one after another in their churches. Besides, the churches provided some small loans for Roma as revolving capital for them to start and sustain their business.

Resources for Holistic Needs:

The Hungarian government annually gives funding to religious organizations to provide assistance to Roma and other people in need. The services provided can include education, counseling, social works, vocational training, as well as research works on Roma people group. Most important, the organizations are permitted to establish churches through home groups and guidance in daily living. So the spiritual and emotional needs could be met according to Christian principles.

Care from Your Heart without Agenda:

There are a number of missionary agencies serving the Roma in Albania. Some help Roma to fight for reasonable rights from the government, while others provide education to their kids for free. And the missionaries reminded us that never take Roma or their settlement as “scenic spots.” There have been organizations, in order to facilitate their filming and report on Roma, made many unrealistic promises to them. In the end, none of the

promises were fulfilled. Not only did their hope for a better life shattered, they felt hurt and being manipulated. They are reluctant to deal with the “gentiles.”

Special Role of the Chinese Churches

If a Roma comes to your church and wants to know Jesus, how will you respond? Will you welcome him or ask him to find another church? In Serbia, several Roma churches told us that there were some Chinese immigrants in their area but they did not know how to share the gospel with them. Roma churches asked us to help by providing them some Chinese gospel leaflets to give to those immigrants. They showed they “love their neighbors.” How shall the Chinese Christian respond to them?

Owing to the historical factors, Roma people may be skeptical to European churches. On the other hand, it is easier for them to listen to the Chinese for we both are sojourners in Europe. Though the two ethnic groups have their own traditions and cultures, they have similar values, such as strong family bonding.

Chinese churches can play an important role in Roma mission. Here are some suggestions:

Put aside Prejudices and Put on Friendship

Some Chinese immigrants in Hungary for some years told us frankly that they could not be friendly to Roma, because Roma steal from their shops. Some also told us that whenever Roma receive their monthly allowance from the government, they are happy to pay and buy in the shops. We must understand that if there are alternatives for them to earn a living, they would not have made this unwise move. “Think about it, if that thief was a Chinese and was caught by you red-handed, would you forgive him when he told you that he stole for his starving parents and children? You may be willing to listen to his explanation, or even offer him some help, all because of one reason – you two are of the same ethnic group. What if he is a Roma, would we scold him and beat him up? Jesus said, ‘Blessed are the merciful.’ Are we only acting merciful to those whom we thought they ‘deserve’ to receive the mercy?” Upon hearing the sharing above, a brother immediately responded that if he met any Roma coming to his shop again, he would give him a leaflet to introduce

Jesus to him. Another sister told us that she would not beat any Roma thief any more. Praise the Lord!

A New Understanding

Prejudices and discrimination often originated from misunderstanding. And it is always easy to label the whole people group with some isolated cases. Nowadays, when I travel overseas, some people still ask me if I eat cats – they have an impression that all Chinese people eat cats and dogs. If you find the above question ridiculous or offensive, think how Roma feel when they are misunderstood. Are we willing to put away the stereotype on Roma people and replace it by God’s perspective and Jesus’ love? Only when we consider Roma as equal, as God’s precious children, and as our brothers and sisters in Christ, then can we truly relate the love of God to the world.

Prayers and Blessings

Having removed our labels and prejudices on Roma, we can realize the problems Roma encounter and can sincerely care for their needs. Our prayers and blessings for them could then be consistent with our purpose. If Chinese churches

can start putting Roma people on their “unreached” people list and pray for them today, the intercession will be more powerful. Church leaders ought to bring Roma people in the sight of their congregation. As they become aware and learn more about the Roma they will be willing to share the blessings from God with Roma, including money, time, experience and labors.

Just as a Serbian pastor who is serving Roma mentioned, “Love is the most important language that we should learn.” Today, God heard the cry of Roma and made Chinese pastors realize God’s will on Roma people. Listen, followers of Jesus, will Roma receive what they have lacked and desired for so long from us? As church leaders, how will you strategically lead your congregation to understand and take part in fulfilling God’s will? How may the congregation prepare themselves to act on such?

God so love the world that many more marvelous and wonderful things will come to Roma people. If you are willing, you can also play a part.

(The author was one of the six member mission team from Great Commission Center visiting the Roma in 2013.)

► *From P.2* look down on themselves, not striving to advance. As a result, Roma only depends on occasional job opportunities or seasonal work. Some manage to engage in small businesses, but it is difficult to raise capitals.

It is a good avenue to evangelize Roma people through community enterprises. Mission agencies can definitely achieve this. Christian businessmen can also help. Employ Roma workers, give them some job training. Training can equip them essential work skills, which can in turn increase their self-esteem. With self-confidence and work experience, it is easier for them to find jobs.

IV. Short-term Mission

All Slovenian and Hungarian pastors welcome vocational missionaries and short-term mission groups. Here is a meaningful dialogue I had with a Slovenian pastor serving Roma people: “What short-term group members need to pay special attention to?” I asked. The pastor surprised me by saying, “Learn the language.” “How can one learn a new language before joining the short-term mission team?” I asked further. “The language of

love,” He said.

Indeed Roma people need compassion. They are excited and greatly moved when people from afar come to share with them the gospel and help them in some ways. Compassion is far

better than thousands of words. This also is what we experienced in those two weeks.

May there be people in Chinese churches willing to learn the “language of love.” And may the lives of Roma people changed due to the “language of love” from Chinese churches!

(The author was Chairman of Great Commission Center International Limited Board in Hong Kong. He was one of the six member mission team from Great Commission Center visiting the Roma in 2013.)

