

# Oss, John

## (1892–1959)

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John Oss ( *Pinyin* Shí Yuēhàn) was an Adventist colporteur, minister, administrator, and missionary to China. He was the official pioneer missionary to open the first wave of the denomination's work in Mongolia. He witnessed wars in China and was a prisoner of war.



John Oss

Photo courtesy of Center for Adventist Research.

## Early Life

John was born in Newman Grove, Nebraska, on November 11, 1892, to Ole Gullickson (1861-1938) and Theresie E. Johannesen (1868-1942) Oss.<sup>1</sup> His parents emigrated from Norway to the United States in July 1877. His mother brought him into the Adventist faith, and he was baptized at age 12.<sup>2</sup> Later the family moved to South Dakota where John attended Plainview Academy during which time he began working as a colporteur (1916-1919). On September 17, 1917, he wedded Olga Bertina Osnes (1897-1977).<sup>3</sup> He became a church pastor and promoted the publishing work in the South Dakota Conference. While there they had their one and only child, Milan Thomas Oss, who was born August 8, 1918 and died on January 11, 1919. Milan is buried in Graceland Cemetery in Burke, South Dakota.<sup>4</sup> Despite this tragedy, later that year he was ordained, and he and Olga left as missionaries to China on October 18, 1919. They arrived in Peking (Beijing) on November 21, 1919.

## Ministry

After their arrival they spent time in language study in Shanghai until June 15, 1920.<sup>5</sup> At five feet, eight inches, with grey blue eyes, he was responsible for the publishing work in the Manchuria Union, with a special focus on the North China Union.<sup>6</sup> He saw a direct continuity between the publishing work and the early founding of Adventism in Hong Kong under the efforts of Abram La Rue, who distributed literature to sailors.<sup>7</sup> John laid aggressive efforts to have new literature prepared or translated and to train and send out colporteurs across China. He developed culturally sensitive approaches for colporteurs to share their faith. Concerned that colporteurs would “lose face” by not securing an order, he encouraged the distribution of small tracts, leaving a smile on the face of the colporteur and an invitation for the listener to learn more about their faith.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, his wife, Olga, grew to deeply love the Chinese people, and her efforts to connect with Chinese women in particular and her writing, and fundraising, have largely been overlooked in Adventist historiography.<sup>9</sup>

In 1924 the division leadership asked John and Olga to relocate to Shanghai, where they were located by the next year. From here his work grew to promote publishing across China. In 1927 John and Olga spent most of the year on furlough back in the United States.<sup>10</sup> On their return trip on the “Empress of Asia” they met a young man who was interested in the Adventist faith and upon their arrival in Shanghai, John had the privilege of baptizing him.<sup>11</sup> Upon their return John and Olga would serve in East China until 1932. A major initiative from the 1930 General Conference session was the expansion of Adventism into Mongolia. Over the next two years he spearheaded the development of a missionary presence for the Mongol people. John shared a deep conviction in the power of print as the leading way for outreach.<sup>12</sup> By the spring of 1932, this took tangible shape through a hand press that was donated by the Chinese Signs of the Times Publishing House with an additional sacrificial offering of \$1,684 in local currency that made possible the procurement of Mongolian type.<sup>13</sup> John also continued to travel widely across China and described one of his missionary journeys:

I am sitting on the doorstep of our little chapel at Pingyang, in the southern part of Chekiang Province in China. We have had a busy day, holding meetings, and visiting church members and those interested in the gospel story. Now that the day is over, I have come out of doors to take a retrospect, and to meditate on the handiwork of God.<sup>14</sup>

Then again after 1930 he became publishing and home missionary secretary for the China Division.<sup>15</sup> In 1933, with growing responsibilities, E. L. Longway took over the home missionary portion of his assignment, and John continued his leadership in the publishing work eventually transitioning the next year to division field secretary.<sup>16</sup> In 1934 he became editor of the Chinese *Signs of the Times*. While working at the publishing house in Shanghai, he edited the *Shepherd's Call* and assisted in translating Ellen White's writings into Chinese, most notably the Conflict of the Ages series and the nine volumes of *Testimonies for the Church*.<sup>17</sup> During this time John and Olga worked actively to establish a missionary presence in Mongolia and Tibet. Always a firm believer in print, John worked to establish two small printing presses to make available Adventist literature in these regions. The very first Adventist publication to be printed in Mongolian was the song, “Tell It Again.” Similarly, he

shared how a “special edition” of *Bible Readings* was the very first Adventist publication in the Tibetan language, and he arranged to give a copy to a representative of the then late Dalai Lama.<sup>18</sup> From May through December 1934, John and Olga left on their second furlough to the United States.<sup>19</sup> It was during this furlough that Olga wrote her memoir of their experience, *Triumphs of Faith* (published in early 1935).<sup>20</sup>

Soon after John and Olga returned, they began to lay plans for continued aggressive missionary work through print. In early 1935 John coordinated a colporteur institute and worked to get colporteurs out on bicycles.<sup>21</sup> He continued efforts, with his friend Clarence C. Crisler (1877-1936), to expand Adventism into Tibet. After Crisler’s unexpected death, he provided key leadership planning for Adventist expansion into this opening region. Upon an extended trip to Tibet, he wrote: “One thing that has impressed me during this itinerary, is that much of old Tibet is open to us now, with increasing possibilities for the giving of the message to all the Tibetan people.”<sup>22</sup> Another highlight was his support of the Hong Kong Memorial Church dedicated on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Abram La Rue’s 1888 arrival as the church’s first self-supporting missionary to Asia. John gave a presentation as part of the dedicatory events detailing the early history of Adventism in China.<sup>23</sup>

As the Second Sino-Japanese War escalated (1937-1945) leading into World War II (1939-1945), John noted the extreme difficulties of communication and church members who “have been forced to leave their homes and take up temporary residence elsewhere. Many have lost their earthly possessions and are in need of the necessities of life.”<sup>24</sup> Church leaders met in Shanghai, despite war conditions, for a quadrennial session of the China Division from April 27 to May 14, 1939. At this meeting they noted that despite the conflict, “those responsible for its conduct [of the church’s work] have done their utmost, with the facilities at their disposal to carry on an aggressive work.”<sup>25</sup> John noted that many churches and mission properties had been destroyed. Wartime conditions necessitated moving some institutions such as the work of the China Training Institute, the primary center of Adventist higher education in China, to new facilities in Hong Kong. Similarly, the Wuhan Sanitarium had taken in more than 15,000 refugees who were living on the campus.<sup>26</sup> In 1939 John and Olga returned once again to the United States for several months, but by November of that year decided to return to their beloved China just prior to increasing hostilities.<sup>27</sup> They remained in China during the war. In early 1941 John described how “the work” was progressing despite challenging conditions:

One report announces that the teachers of one of our schools were conducting their classes with students sitting on the edge of a ditch that had been dug for protection against bombs and machine gunning. When the planes got so close as to become dangerous, classes were suspended and teachers and students secreted themselves in the ditch for protection, and came out as soon as the planes had flown by, and continued their classwork.<sup>28</sup>

Initially John and Olga were able to find comparative safety interned in the French quarter of Shanghai.<sup>29</sup> Although denominational buildings were sealed up, John continued to stay very busy in a “private capacity”:

He is holding cottage meetings, helping in several evangelistic efforts that are being conducted, and acts as an adviser to the Chinese brethren who are the acting leaders in the mission enterprise.<sup>30</sup>

By February 1943 John and Olga were interned at the Chapei camp near Shanghai that housed an estimated 1,000 Americans.<sup>31</sup> They remained in this concentration camp for nearly three years. As a result he became quite ill, but was healed as a result of prayers.<sup>32</sup> They arrived in San Francisco on October 22, 1945, on the S.S.

*Sanctuary*.<sup>33</sup> While back in America they attended the 1946 General Conference session.<sup>34</sup> Here Olga Oss shared "her dramatic recital of internment camp horrors and glorious release" that brought tears to the eyes of many delegates.<sup>35</sup>

After time for recovery, John and Olga in November 1947 returned once again to China.<sup>36</sup> When the Communists came to power, they stayed in Shanghai for another 18 months but were eventually forced to leave. During this time John wrote the book, *Mission Advance in China*, in which he described both the early history and development of Adventism in China, along with a detailed analysis of the varied cultures and peoples, including a current assessment of the church on the eve of the Communist takeover of the country.<sup>37</sup> By late 1950 they were among the very last missionary expatriates forced to leave China with Elder and Mrs. E. L. Longway and Miss Abbie Dunn.<sup>38</sup> His final published report about China in the *Review and Herald* laid forth an aggressive evangelistic program that was somewhat naïve in its optimism of cooperation with the incoming new government.<sup>39</sup> After his return to the United States, he coordinated a program (working with James Wang) to either translate or re-translate (some books needed to be updated) fifteen of Ellen White's books into Chinese.<sup>40</sup> He also spent five years as pastor of the San Francisco Chinese Church.<sup>41</sup> John again served as a delegate to the 1954 General Conference session.<sup>42</sup> On November 16, 1957, his leadership efforts resulted in the dedication of a new Chinese Church in San Francisco on the corner of Hyde and Sacramento streets.<sup>43</sup>

## Later Years

On July 15, 1959, John died from a heart attack.<sup>44</sup> His funeral was conducted by his close friend and fellow missionary, Milton Lee, in the Mountain View Church, where he was afterwards buried in the Mountain View Cemetery.<sup>45</sup> At his funeral he was described as "beloved by the Chinese people, and his work in China was likened to that of David Livingstone in Africa."<sup>46</sup> The Oss papers were donated in 1989 by nephew, Melvin Oss, and are preserved as collection #67 in the Center for Adventist Research at Andrews University.<sup>47</sup>

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## NOTES

1. For a detailed review of his family, with pertinent genealogical records, see: <https://www.ancestry.com/family-tree/pt/RSVP.aspx?dat=MTc4OTU0MzQxOzswMjJhNzUyNS0wMDA2LTAwMDAtMDAwMC0wMDAwMDAwMDAwMDAwMDA7MjAyMTEwMDIwNzE1NTI7MQ==&mac=E>  
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2. Milton Lee, "Elder John Oss (1892-1959)," *Far Eastern Division Outlook*, September 1959, 19.

3. *South Dakota, U.S., Marriages, 1905-2017* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2005. [accessed 11/1/21]
4. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/48489882/milan-thomas-oss> [accessed 11/1/21]
5. US Passport Application, United States Passport Applications, 1795-1925, accessed from Ancestry.com [11/1/21]. See also, Irwin H. Evans, "The Meeting in Manchuria," *ARH*, October 7, 1920, 7.
6. Ibid.
7. John Oss, "Even in Troublous Times," *ARH*, June 2, 1927, 19-20.
8. John Oss, "In Every Place," July 19, 1928, 17-18.
9. Heidi Olson Campbell, "The Cut Lotus Can Still Bloom: Seventh-day Adventist Women's Agency, Purpose, and Resilience in China from 1902-1951," Paper presented to the American Academy of Religion, 2021.
10. See note "Missionary Sailings," *ARH*, August 25, 1927, 24.
11. John Oss, "Getting Away from Seventh-day Adventists," *ARH*, July 5, 1928, 13.
12. Michael W. Campbell, "Building and Rebuilding Adventism in Mongolia and Inner Mongolia (China)," Paper presented to the American Society of Church History, Washington, DC, January 4, 2018.
13. John Oss, "Pioneer Mission Sketches: Securing Our Mongolian Printing Equipment," *The China Division Reporter*, June 15, 1940, 3-4.
14. John Oss, "Let Your Light Shine," *ARH*, May 3, 1928, 19.
15. "Partial Report of the Nominating Committee," *ARH*, June 10, 1930, 176.
16. J. A. Stevens, "The China Layman's Movement," *ARH*, Nov. 9, 1933, 22.
17. Obituary. *PUR*, Aug. 17, 1959, pg. 12; *ARH* August 27, 1959, pg. 25; Milton Lee, "Elder John Oss (1892-1959)," *Far Eastern Division Outlook*, September 1959, 19.
18. John Oss, "They That Were Scattered Abroad Went Everywhere," *ARH*, November 15, 1934, 11.
19. John Oss arrived in Los Angeles on May 30, 1934 then is documented as arriving in Honolulu on their return to China on Dec. 20, 1934. See: *Honolulu, Hawaii, U.S., Arriving and Departing Passenger and Crew Lists, 1900-1959* [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2009 [accessed from Ancestry.com 11/4/21]; see also notes about travel in John Oss, "The Loyalty of Our People to the Foreign Mission Movement," *ARH*, Oct. 4, 1934, 21-22. Another note states that they left on the S. S. President Taft on Dec. 8, 1934, to return

- to China from their furlough. See *ARH*, Jan. 3, 1935, 24.
20. The first advertisement for the book appears in *ARH*, June 27, 1935, 23.
  21. John Oss, "On the Highways of China," *ARH*, June 6, 1935, 17.
  22. John Oss, "The Closed Land Opening," *ARH*, January 28, 1937, 13-14.
  23. John Oss, "Memorial Church, Hong Kong," *ARH*, January 26, 1939, 24.
  24. John Oss, "Pressing Forward Amid Trouble," *ARH*, February 23, 1939, 13.
  25. John Oss, "The China Division Quadrennial Council," *ARH*, July 27, 1939, 19-20.
  26. *Ibid.*
  27. See note on *ARH*, March 7, 1949, 5.
  28. John Oss, "'What an Opportunity!'" *ARH*, September 11, 1941, 11.
  29. A. W. Cormack, "Our Missionaries," *ARH*, June 25, 1942, 32.
  30. J. G. Macintyre, "Interned in Shanghai," *ARH*, October 8, 1942, 11-12.
  31. E. D. Dick, "The 'Gripsholm' Arrives: News Concerning Missionaries Yet in Far East," *ARH*, December 30, 1943, 3-4.
  32. "Word Concerning China Internees," *ARH*, October 18, 1945, 24; "First Word from Shanghai, China," *ARH*, October 25, 1942, 24.
  33. "Arrival of Elder and Mrs. John Oss," *ARH*, November 8, 1945, 24.
  34. See list of delegates on *ARH*, June 7, 1946, 24.
  35. R. B. Thurber, "The Story of the Day, Thursday, June 13," *ARH*, June 14, 1946, 176; "An Evening With the China Division," *ARH*, June 20, 1946, 238.
  36. See list on *ARH*, April 8, 1948, 19.
  37. John Oss, *Mission Advance in China* (Nashville, TN: Southern Publishing, 1949), 28-29. At the end of the first chapter Oss notes the Communist takeover of all but the southern most cities of China who "seem doomed." He adds that it was his "hope" that "all who are interested in China's future welfare that this country may soon be able to bring about a cessation of civil strife and be able to develop a strong central liberal government that will be supported by an intelligent and enlightened people" (29).

38. W. H. Branson, "The China Division," *ARH*, July 19, 1950, 165; "News Notes," *The China Division Reporter*, Fourth Quarter, 1950, 8.
  39. John Oss, "China Division Biennial Council," *ARH*, June 15, 1950, 15. In this article he notes the restoration of churches and chapels previously closed during the war, the resumption of publishing and colporteur work, and the ambition plans for evangelism. "The doors are wide open in China," he wrote, "for an evangelistic advance" (16). Tragically this would be his last report and he would soon afterward be forced to leave.
  40. General Conference Executive Minutes, April 26, 1951, 404.
  41. John Oss, "Spirit of Prophecy Books in the Chinese Language," *ARH*, December 13, 1951, 18-19.
  42. See list of delegates, *ARH*, May 25, 1954, 12.
  43. John Oss, "Dedication of Chinese Church in San Francisco," *ARH*, January 16, 1958, 1.
  44. "Two Veteran Workers Pass Away," *ARH* Aug. 13, 1959, 32.
  45. Milton Lee, "Elder John Oss (1892-1959)," *Far Eastern Division Outlook*, September 1959, 19.
  46. "Friends Attend Funeral of Elder John Oss," *The St. Helena Star*, July 30, 1959, 6.
  47. <https://car.libraryhost.com/repositories/3/resources/148/inventory> [accessed 11/5/21]
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