



**A New Agricultural Gospel: Protestant Agricultural Missions in  
China in the Early Twentieth Century**

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**Date Submitted: March 26, 2018**

This project was submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Graduate Liberal Studies Program in the Graduate School of Duke University.

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## ABSTRACT

An Agricultural mission was a mission undertaken by Protestant missionaries to improve people's livelihood and, at the same time, to preach the Gospel, typically through applying modern science to the improvement of farming. This mission could be taken directly by an American missionary, or, more commonly, indirectly by a Chinese rural worker trained in agricultural education. In this project, I aim to address a seemingly paradoxical aspect of agricultural missions in China with a more comprehensive understanding of the movement: how did the missions combine agriculture and Christianity?

The project consists of five chapters. The first chapter is a brief introduction to agricultural missions, and the second chapter is a chronological review of the missions' early development in China. In the third chapter, I discuss the challenges that agricultural missions faced, and the missionaries' theoretical attempts to combine Christianity and agriculture. The fourth chapter is an attempt to discuss how their rhetorics and theories were applied to rural churches in practice. I will conclude by suggesting that a missionary rhetoric and a Christian theology emerged in the process of the movement to bridge the "spiritual" and "material" side of the movement. Even so, the combination of agriculture and Christianity served to defend the pursuit of secular interests in China, and agricultural missions may represent more of broadening the boundary of Protestant missions into secular realms than a Christianization of China's rural communities. This is a key question that I will leave unanswered in this project, as an invitation for further conversation and research.

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## Introduction

In a 1929 article in *The Chinese Recorder*, one of the most prestigious journals in China, Ting Shu-Ching, general secretary of the Y.W.C.A of China, appealed to a Western audience for a special help: “We need missionaries trained in rural and agricultural work to come out as experts to help our farmers[...] Through the improvement of seeds, new methods of agriculture, and through spiritual contact with the farmers, the village might be won to Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

In the early 20th century, these kinds of missionaries who were “trained in rural and agricultural work” were also known as “agricultural missionaries.” As agricultural experts, they were advocates of and active participants in the “agricultural mission,” a missionary effort to spread the gospel through rural work. Unlike other, better established work in Protestant missions( i.e. evangelism, medical missions, and educational missions) agricultural missions, the so-called “fourth dimension in missionary effort,” was sometimes regarded as “heretical” by the mission establishment.<sup>2,3</sup> How could agricultural work contribute to the preaching of the gospel? Some writers at the time were skeptical. Were not the improvement of agriculture and rural life the work of the Chinese government, rather than of foreigners from the West?

As a matter of fact, from the beginning, agricultural mission had been a controversial undertaking: Unlike medical missions and educational missions, which were

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<sup>1</sup> Miss Ting Shu-Ching, “Needs that Western Christian Can Help Meet, ” *The Chinese Recorder: Journal of the Christian movement in China* (June 1929): 379.

<sup>2</sup> J. Merle Davis phrased agricultural missions as the “Fourth Dimension in Missionary Effort.” Quoted in Hunter, James A. “Rural Social Service as an Aid to the Evangelistic Work of the Church,” *The Chinese Recorder and Educational Review* (December 1940): 739.

<sup>3</sup> “Medical missions were well-established in China and were the recipients of generous board support, but the idea of an agricultural mission was regarded as heretical by the mission establishment.”  
Stross, Randall E., *The stubborn earth : American Agriculturalists on Chinese Soil, 1898-1937*. (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1986), 95.



considered as forms of charity work and recognized as part of Protestant missions, agricultural missions were criticized for their pursuit of secular interests and their lack of religious significance. Agricultural missionaries were especially concerned about economic improvement, and sometimes their work was more comparable to that of governments or corporations. It may even be said that the mission itself was paradoxical in nature: It was a Christian mission that pursued secular interests. Some missionary members worried that, "if the rural church should consciously launch out in the role of Good Samaritan," it would "lose its spiritual meaning and message."<sup>4</sup> And though missionary John H. Reisner, one of the most vigorous supporters of agricultural missions in China, assured his contemporaries that the religious significance would not be lost, he admitted that the term "agricultural missionaries" seemed to create a mistaken impression that their work did not have "spiritual sanction."<sup>5</sup> James Hunter, a missionary of the American Board Missions, also recalled that when J. Lossing Buck, a prestigious agricultural missionary was presenting on successful agricultural projects at a missionary conference, a person, while being in entire sympathy with Buck, stood up and criticized agricultural missions for taking over the government's responsibility: "In my country this sort of work is done by the government. Leave this to them, and let us get on with the preaching of the Gospel."<sup>6</sup>

The Protestant church's agricultural work has drawn some academic interest, but most studies tend to focus on the agriculturalist missionaries' roles as secular reformers. Chinese scholars generally maintain an approving attitude toward the missionaries, appreciating contributions to China's agricultural development. Lu Yuqing, for example,

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<sup>4</sup> Stross, Randall E., *The stubborn earth : American Agriculturalists on Chinese Soil, 1898-1937*. (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1986), 106.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Hunter, James A. "Rural Social Service as an Aid to the Evangelistic Work of the Church," *The Chinese Recorder and Educational Review* (December 1940): 740.

applauded the missionaries for being pioneers of rural construction who facilitated China's agricultural modernization.<sup>7</sup> But writers interested in agricultural missionaries often neglect the religious side of the movement. And I wish to contribute, through this project, to a conversation about the spiritual, and specifically Christian, aspects of the work.

American scholars in the 1930s and 1940s, many of them agricultural missionaries themselves, conducted and wrote studies on this form of mission. Arthur L. Carson, for example, wrote a study based upon 236 agricultural missionaries and other rural workers in 1936 as his doctoral thesis at Cornell. In 1969, James C. Thomson Jr made an insightful study of American reform efforts under Nationalist China in *While China Faced West: American Reformers in Nationalist China, 1928-1937*, focusing on Protestant missionaries' activities in the rural reconstruction movement, their relationship to the Nanking government, and their confrontation with Communism. Thomson pointed out that the aim of missionaries was a "Christianizing" of economic and social relationships in the countryside as elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> A more comprehensive work about agricultural missionaries is Randal Stross's 1986 book *The Stubborn Earth: American Agriculturalists on Chinese Soil, 1898-1937*. Stross wrote a detailed description of the lives and activities of some of the most famous agricultural missionaries in China, such as George W. Groff, John H. Reisner, and John Lossing Buck. But since Stross' focus was on American agriculturalists, missionaries occupy only one chapter of the book and the non-agriculturalist missionaries who also made up an inseparable part of agricultural missions fell outside the confines of his more focused study.

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<sup>7</sup> Lu, Yuqing, Agricultural Missionaries of America and Rural Construction of China."美国农业传教与中国乡村建设(1907-1937), Agricultural History of China, 2015, Vol: 34 Issue: 1, 34-41.

<sup>8</sup> Thomson, James Claude. *While China Faced West; American Reformers in Nationalist China, 1928-1937*. (Cambridge Mass., Harvard University Press, 1969), 151.

I aim to address in this project the seemingly paradoxical part of agricultural missions in China with a more comprehensive understanding of the movement: How did these mission efforts combine agriculture and Christianity? The project consists of five parts. The first part is a brief introduction to agricultural missions, and the second part is a chronological review of the missions' early development in China. In the third part, I will discuss the challenges that agricultural missions faced, and the missionaries' attempts to combine Christianity and agriculture in their writings and their appeals for support. The fourth part is my attempt to discuss how their ideas were applied to rural churches in practice. I will conclude by suggesting that a missionary rhetoric and a Christian theology emerged in the process of the movement to bridge the "spiritual" and "material" side of the movement. Even so, the combination of agriculture and Christianity served to defend the pursuit of secular interests in China, and agricultural missions may represent more of the broadening of Protestant missions into secular realms than a Christianization of China's rural communities. This is a key question that I will leave unanswered in this project, as an invitation for further conversation and research.

## Chapter One

### Agricultural Missions

#### What is Agricultural Mission?

Listed under the entry of “education” work in the 1922 Publication *The Christian Occupation of China*, a survey that draws a comprehensive picture of missionary activities in China, agricultural missions were defined as work “to bring the Christian Message to the farmers in such a form as he can best understand, and which will help him most to live a well-balanced Christian life.”<sup>9</sup> According to *Christian Occupation*, by the time the survey was made, missions in China were doing agricultural work of various kinds, including agricultural education at all levels of the educational system, a variety of improvements, environmental protections (such as afforestation), and the commercialization of agricultural products.<sup>10</sup>

Arthur L. Carson, an agricultural missionary to China sent by the Presbyterian Mission (North), made a more comprehensive definition of agricultural missions in his doctoral thesis, “Agricultural Missions: a study based upon the experience of 236 Missionaries and Other Rural Workers.” According to Carson, the term “agricultural mission” was one that had been much used to designate a wide range of “rural service projects” under mission auspices, and “agricultural missionary designated missionaries serving country people with some degree of professional zeal for this type of work, and with some special adaptations of their program to meet the peculiar needs of their constituencies.”<sup>11</sup> Though the term agricultural missions had been well established and

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<sup>9</sup> China Continuation Committee. Special Committee on Survey and Occupation. *The Christian Occupation of China; a General Survey of the Numerical Strength and Geographical Distribution of the Christian Forces in China, made by the Special Committee on Survey and Occupation, China Continuation Committee, 1918-1921*. (Shanghai, China continuation committee, 1922), 421.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Carson, Arthur L. “Agricultural Missions: a Study Based Upon the Experience of 236 Missionaries and Other Rural Workers.” PhD diss. University of Cornell, 1936.

was already full of force and meaning, Carson argued, the persons connected with it “cannot logically be combined into one homogenous list.”<sup>12</sup>

Within the missionary community, agricultural missions could be referred to as both “agricultural missions” and “rural missions,” while as Carson suggested, difficulty arose in the definition of “agricultural” and “rural:” “The original question contained the suggestion that country itinerating, for example, should not be considered rural work unless there was some special rural program connected with it, but the exact interpretation of what constitutes specialized rural work goes back to the opinion of the individual. The significance of the division is not that it follows a standard definition, but that it denotes the tendency among missionaries as regarding agricultural service and a differentiated program.”<sup>13</sup>

Basically speaking, “rural” put an emphasis on the environment where this form of mission took place, while “agricultural” linked to agricultural activities, such as farming, animal husbandry, and forestation. But “agricultural mission” contained a broader meaning than simply “agricultural work.” Agricultural work might be the most important part of agricultural missions, but agricultural missions also included other rural programs, such as education and sanitation improvements. Since agricultural missions mainly addressed rural issues, “agricultural mission” and “rural mission” in Protestant Missions were exchangeable.

I should note that the nature of agricultural missions and its definition were subject to change. Agricultural missionaries constantly defined and redefined agricultural missions through discussions. A tentative definition would be as such: agricultural mission was a mission work serving a rural population, especially through applying modern science to the improvement of farming. This mission could be taken

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<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

directly by an American missionary, or, more commonly, indirectly by a Chinese rural worker trained by agricultural education. The work of agricultural missions could be carried out by an “agricultural missionary” in the strict sense, i.e., an agronomist, or any Christian missionary who was interested in agricultural work.

### **The Forms and Workers of Christian Agricultural Work**

Called “the Fourth Dimension in Missions” by J. Merle Davis, director of the Department of social and economic Research of the International Missionary Council in his speech to the Christian Community of Madura Raanad and Tinnevely, agricultural mission was regarded as an independent work alongside “evangelism, education and medical work.”<sup>14</sup> However, unlike well-established medical missions and educational missions, agricultural missions were not recognized as an independent undertaking by all members of church leadership. This lack of recognition was exemplified by the fact that, though the Methodist Episcopal church, the Presbyterian church, and the American Board Missions all sent missionaries with an agricultural degree to China, none of the above seem to have mentioned in their reports this kind of mission as an independent work (apart from medicine and education missions).

Most of the time, agricultural missions were mentioned as a specialized work of educational missions. In the 1922 publication *The Christian Occupation of China*, agricultural work is listed under “educational missions.”<sup>15</sup> And even Reisner, one of the most vigorous advocates of agricultural missions, when appealing to students in

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<sup>14</sup> Hunter, James A. “Rural Social Service as an Aid to the Evangelistic Work of the Church,” *The Chinese Recorder and Educational Review* (December 1940): 739.

<sup>15</sup> China Continuation Committee, *The Christian Occupation*, 421.

American to join agricultural missions, referred to the mission as a form of “educational mission.”<sup>16</sup>

It was natural to consider agricultural missions as a form of educational mission. Though this mission aimed to serve rural people, most of the agricultural missionaries worked in universities and barely stepped out of the campus. This might have resulted from the fact that college-trained agriculturalists, who were in shortage in China at that time, were considered too expensive and rare to be sent out to the countryside. The task of educating the mass of Chinese people would be undertaken by Chinese Christians. As stated by the China Continuation Committee, through education “the Chinese trained at these Colleges will take up eventually most of the agricultural work in the Middle and Normal schools.”<sup>17</sup> And agricultural education in middle and high school was considered the most practical way to carry out agricultural work in China’s rural areas. As James Hunter said in his 1933 article, “In response to ‘Re-Thinking Missions,’” “It will also be seen that the university graduates do not fill the same place that the graduates of the two high schools fill; first, because university graduates are too high priced for the average mission school, and second, because the graduates are so few in number that it would take many years to give us anything like an adequate supply.”<sup>18</sup>

However, a list of works considered as “agricultural missions” by *Christian Occupation* suggests that agricultural mission was more than educational work:

1. Agricultural Colleges
2. Agricultural Courses in Middle Schools

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<sup>16</sup> Reisner, John H. “Agricultural Evangelists,” *The Student Volunteer Movement Bulletin* (May 1922): 126.

<sup>17</sup> China Continuation Committee, *Christian Occupation*, 423.

<sup>18</sup> Buck, T.L., “Practical plans for the Introduction of Agriculture into our Middle and Primary Schools,” *The Chinese Recorder* (May 1919): 317.

3. Improvement of crops, animals farm practices, or forestry
4. Creation of interest in better agriculture and forestry. (This is done by means of lectures, practical work, relating agriculture to subjects taught, brief course in agriculture in the school, and the like).
5. School Gardens-for teaching the dignity of manual labour, for furnishing self-help, and as an aid to nature study classes. (A few instances of school ground improvement are included under this type).
6. Growing of seed, nursery stock, or vegetables for sale.<sup>19</sup>

Agricultural mission works were not only done by agriculturalist missionaries in agricultural schools. As Carson observed, “it should be recognized that there were missionaries in various lines of work, all related in some way to agriculture and specialized rural service, and they combined their resources into one movement.”<sup>20</sup>

R.A. Torrey, a Presbyterian evangelist in Shantung, was an example of non-agriculturalist missionary doing agricultural mission work in a rural community. The son of a famous American evangelist, Torrey dedicated himself to evangelism and, except for a short course in agriculture, had no experience on a farm. Torrey nonetheless helped build a demonstration field for an improved cotton seed at Shantung university, and he worked hard to persuade otherwise skeptical farmers to accept the new seed.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, though the agronomists seemed to confine themselves to campus, research on agricultural missions during this time, in this region, must note the efforts of non-agriculturalist missionaries. The following statement, from a missionary from the United

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<sup>19</sup> China Continuation Committee, *Christian Occupation*, 421.

<sup>20</sup> Carson, Arthur L. “Agricultural Missions: a Study Based Upon the Experience of 236 Missionaries and Other Rural Workers.” PhD diss. University of Cornell, 1936, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Billy Graham Center. “Collection 124 - Helen Gignilliat Torrey Renich. T1 Transcript.” Wheaton College. May 21, 2018. <http://www2.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/trans/124t01.htm>



States, also illustrates how agricultural missions were undertaken by missionaries in various lines of work: “I have never been trained for, nor am supposed to be doing, any other than evangelistic work. However, since nearly all of my people are farmers, with a definite need for help in their problems and work, and since I came from a farm myself, and have at least a little knowledge and a keen sympathy and interest in that type of work, I have constantly been doing what I could , and am anxious to know and do more.”<sup>22</sup>

Because missionaries from all kinds of backgrounds were doing agricultural work, a focus on the work of college graduates with advanced training narrows the scope of study of agricultural missions. Agricultural mission was not merely undertaken by a small group of “elite” experts in agricultural schools. As a matter of fact, in Carson’s survey, of the missionaries that were identified as agricultural missionaries by themselves or their Mission Board, only half of them were full-time agricultural missions workers, and it is interesting that some workers originally sent as agricultural missionaries were, in fact, assigned to other posts that had little to do with rural work.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, a closer examination of agricultural missions suggests that agricultural missions were not just a group of agronomists performing experiments on a piece of land or distributing improved seeds to rural people. This was a concerted missionary effort by people from various fields of work.

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<sup>22</sup> Carson, “Study Based Upon the Experience,” 71.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

## Chapter Two

### The Early Evolution of Agricultural Missions in China

I would roughly divide the development of agricultural Missions in China into four phrases:

1) Before George Widman Groff, the first recognized agricultural missionary to China arrived in 1907, agricultural work had begun in sporadic efforts to tackle isolated problems, such as famine relief;

2) From the late 1910s to the 1920s, agricultural missions gained momentum;

3) After the Jerusalem conference in 1928, Kenyon L. Butterfield's visit to China, and the Nationalist government's gaining control of China, agricultural missions began to participate in comprehensive rural reconstruction programs, turning from improvement of agriculture to reformation of community; and

4) After 1937, the Japanese invasion interrupted the Christian church's work in most rural area, while in Free China, such as Fukien province, agricultural work under mission auspices continued.

#### Before Groff

##### *Worldwide Agricultural Missions Movement*

It is worth noting, in the beginning, that agricultural Mission work in China was considered part of an agricultural missions as a world movement. Influenced by the Social Gospel movement in the late 19th century, Protestant church began to give attention to agriculture, in the belief that Christianity must be actively responsive to global demographic problems. In *The Story of Agricultural Missions*, Hunnicutt and Reid explain the church's interest in agriculture as a concern over "the enormous population in the world" requiring the "greatest human enterprise" to "secure them food by hard

toil, which would not be accomplished by a cooperation with God.”<sup>24</sup> The missionaries did not regard feeding the people as a task irrelevant to Christianity. On the contrary, they suggested Christianity was indispensable to secure the food supply and participate in social reforms.

According to Hunnicutt and Reid, from the earliest times many missionaries had been interested in agricultural improvement. William Carey, who went to India in 1793, founded the Agri-Horticultural society for India in 1820 even before such a society existed in England. James Stewart, a medical missionary to South Africa, started an elementary school of agriculture in 1903.<sup>25</sup> However, the association of agricultural improvement and evangelistic work only became a trend at the turn of the 20th century.<sup>26</sup> The two men who have arguably done the most to spark, within the United States and England, to spark Christian interest in this type of work were Same Higginbottom, who began his agricultural school at Allahabad, India, and, in 1911, Warren H. Wilson, who became director of the Presbyterian Department of Church and Country Life in the United States, and founded the International Association of Agricultural Missions.<sup>27</sup>

American missionaries' interest in China's agriculture, as I have mentioned above, began in sporadic efforts to tackle isolated problems. Before the first agricultural missionary arrived, American missionaries in China had not been entirely oblivious to rural agricultural rural concerns.<sup>28</sup> Many of the missionaries were from farm backgrounds themselves, and had planted gardens at their mission stations in China. Some had

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<sup>24</sup> Benjamin H. Hunnicutt and William Watkins Reid, *The Story of Agricultural Missions* (New York: Missionary Education Movement of the United States and Canada), 2.

<sup>25</sup> Hunnicutt and Reid, *Story*, 16.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Buck, J. Lossing. "The Chinese Church and Country Life." *The Chinese Recorder* (June 1923), 323.

<sup>28</sup> Stross, *Stubborn Earth*, 92.

introduced imported seeds or plants into their neighborhoods.<sup>29</sup> The Virginia peanut, for example was introduced into Shantung by Presbyterian Missionary Rev. S. J. Mills, and after forty years it became one of the important crops of in Northern China Plain.<sup>30</sup> And sometimes a single missionary could lead to spectacular results: in the late nineteenth century, American fruits spread spontaneously throughout Shantung, in north China, through their introduction by John Livingston Nevius, a Presbyterian missionary stationed at Quifu.<sup>31</sup>

Yet, as Stross points out, as late as the turn of the century, American Missions had no formal programs in agriculture.<sup>32</sup> “Gardening was viewed as a sideline unrelated to the work of spreading the gospel,”he argues, “and Nevius was disturbed when he observed that some people seemed to take ‘more interest in the material vineyard than the spiritual’: as he wrote to his mother, ‘I am afraid I am in danger of being known among them chiefly as a successful horticulturalist.’”<sup>33</sup> Doubt of the compatibility of “spiritual” and “material” sides in missionary work emerged in the beginning when missionaries started agricultural work, and would grow even deeper in the 20th century.

### **Famine Relief and Agricultural Work**

It is worth noting that the attention to China’s agriculture was, at least partly, a consequence of China’s frequent famines in the late 19th century and early 20th century. The missionary community, while busy participating in famine relief, began to realize that the true solution to China’s famine problem may lie in agriculture. According to Groff, “China is a land of flood and drought whose reclamation by drainage and

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<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Hunter, “Rural Social Service,” 739.

<sup>31</sup> Stross, *Stubborn Earth*, 92.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*

irrigation demands an organized effort on no small scale among her own people.<sup>34</sup>

Hunnicutt and Reid also observed that “famine caused by drought or by flood wipes out millions of lives, as has recently been experienced in several large provinces of China. A time of famine finds these people, many of whom live in almost constant hunger, without surplus food to tide over a lean period...”<sup>35</sup>

Famine became a big concern for missionaries, especially as the Church participated actively in famine relief work. And as the photos below showed, they were trying to integrate evangelism into famine relief, launching evangelism campaigns after relief work. This may be another example of the combination of secular interest and evangelical work.

Evangelistic Campaign,  
following Famine Relief  
Work in Shantung Pro-  
vince.



(“Evangelistic Campaign, following Famine Relief Work in Shantung Province”<sup>36</sup> )

Besides the Church’s philanthropic effort, some members of the Church began to seek a radical cure, a new methods of famine relief, or a missionary approach to famine.

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<sup>34</sup> Groff, G.W., “Agricultural Education for China under Missionary Influence,” *This Chinese Recorder and Missionary Journal* (March 1914), 158.

<sup>35</sup> Hunnicutt and Reid, *Story*, 3.

<sup>36</sup> *The Eighty-Fifth Annual Report Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (New York: Presbyterian Building, 156 Fifth Avenue, 1922) ,163.

As Hunnicutt and Reid suggested, for China, a region chronically suffering from famine, local applications could give only temporary ease from the pain. Nothing short of a major operation would reach the root of the trouble and prevent its recurrence.<sup>37</sup> Missionaries thought that the church could help to solve China's most besetting problem by studying the agricultural needs of China, experimenting in the cultivation of crops and in the breeding of native animals, and teaching people the most modern methods of scientific farming.<sup>38</sup> And in this sense the church's agricultural work in China was more like an outgrowth of famine relief work. The relationship between a mission's agricultural work and famine relief was exemplified by the fact that their agricultural schools were funded by donations originally raised for famine relief. According to the Presbyterian mission's annual report, "for the prevention of future famine, the balance of the General China Famine Fund has been conditionally placed at the disposal of Nanking and Peking Universities for the development of this agricultural and forestry work."<sup>39</sup>

Stross found that in 1918-19, the College of Agriculture and Forestry of Nanking had a budget of \$17,700; but five years later, with new annual appropriations from the Chinese Foreign Famine Relief Committee, the budget raised to \$175,000.<sup>40</sup> It may be worth noting the appropriation of famine relief funding by agricultural institutions was not approved by all Chinese Christians. In a letter to the editor of *The Chinese Recorder*, a Chinese Christian queried the appropriation of the famine fund with a hint of anti-foreign sentiment: "It is with astonishment I have lately heard that although around one million dollars gold has been left over as surplus famine funds, no provision has been

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<sup>37</sup> Hunnicutt and Reid, *Story*, 50.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *The Eighty-Sixth Annual Report of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (New York: Presbyterian Building, 156 Fifth Avenue, 1923), 53.

<sup>40</sup> Stross, *Stubborn Earth*, 142.

made for this further work of Child-Rescue...” The writer wrote with indignation that the “money left over has been handed over to universities to teach agriculture and to build foreign houses for their professors.” And though the writer was not against agriculture as a future famine prevention work, he argued that “our gifts given in sacrifice should not be diverted from their original intention until every legitimate claim has been met.”<sup>41</sup>

Among all the earliest missionaries doing agricultural work, Joseph Bailie, founder of Nanking university of Agriculture and Forestry, might be the most influential in using agricultural work as a way of famine relief, despite the fact that he left evangelism shortly after he arrived in China and conducted his work separate from any formal, missionary boards. Frustrated by the ineffectiveness of traditional famine relief work, he realized that there must be a measure to prevent future famine prevention. His program focused on two methods: 1) reforestation and 2) using the “unused” land. To carry out his new form of famine relief, Bailie organized refugees of a famine to colonize the Purple Mountain in Nanking, and as a result, “five years later many happy and prosperous families were living on farms on the mountain slopes, and a forest was proclaiming a new agricultural gospel to the countryside.”<sup>42</sup> He later started the Agriculture Department in Nanking University, which would become a base for Presbyterian agricultural missionaries and predictably exerted a wider influence than any other missionary institution in the Far East. This was in spite of the fact that Bailie had no formal background in agriculture.<sup>43</sup>

### Form the 1910s to the 1920s

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<sup>41</sup> B.S., “Let the Children First be Fed,” *The Chinese Recorder: Journal of the Christian Movement in China* (August 1924), 537.

<sup>42</sup> Hunnicutt and Reid, *Story*, 52.

<sup>43</sup> Stross, *Stubborn Earth*, 142.

At the same time, while agricultural work was conducted mainly as a means of future famine prevention, members within the Protestant missions were advocating an expansion of agricultural work in missions. Indeed, missionary work in China had reached a bottleneck: by the early twentieth century, a hundred years of evangelical work in China had succeed in converting only a handful of people in the most populous country in the world, and this failure prompted church reformers to cast about for new, more practical avenues.<sup>44</sup>

Protestant churches in China were in a trying situation in the turbulent 1910s and 1920s. The Anti-Christian movement and the rise of nationalism fostered a strong hostility toward foreign missionaries, and in 1927 many missions had to evacuated their missionaries from China. In the countryside, churches also found themselves losing ground to Communism. The Communists, by vigorously addressing rural problems, were gaining supports from farmers. This was also a time when agricultural missions were gaining momentum. A call for "agricultural missions" sounded in the 1910s and 1920s, providing some missionaries with a hopeful vision: if the church could improve production on Chinese farms, China's grateful rural hinterland would open up and accept the Christian faith.<sup>45</sup>

### ***"The First Agricultural Missionary"***

As Stross argues, a definite agricultural contribution to the mission cause in China came with the appointment of Gerge W. Groff as an agricultural missionary of the staff of Canton Christian College (now Lingnan University) in 1907, though Groff's work as an agricultural missionary would not began until the 1910s.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Stross, *Stubborn Earth*, 92.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Hunter, "Rural Social Service," 739.



A graduate from Pennsylvania State College, with a B.S. in Agriculture and speciality in Horticulture, Groff applied for the Students Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions.<sup>47</sup> With a slogan of "the evangelization of the world in this generation" the Student Volunteer Movement was an influential movement on American campuses in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>48</sup> As a participant in the movement explained, the movement was as ambitious in secular interests as in evangelism: "just as the United States government sends out to every nook and corner of the world especially trained and qualified 'agricultural exporter' so the churches of America and of Europe are sending forth agricultural crusaders to serve among the needy people of the world."<sup>49</sup> The naming of the United States government might suggest that the churches were seeing their efforts as equivalent to government efforts, that they were inspired by governmental activities, and that they found it necessary to emulate them in social reform.

However, agricultural expertise was unappreciated by many mission boards at that time, and Groff's was turned down.<sup>50</sup> This suspicion on the part of church leaders would reappear throughout the development of agricultural missions in the 1910s and 1920s. Of interest regarding Groff in particular is that, though his Christian fellows accorded him the honor of being "first agricultural missionary" in China, he never actually had a mission board appointment.<sup>51</sup> Originally traveling to China as a teacher at a missionary middle school in Guangzhou (Canton), Groff later established a small agricultural school at Canton Christian College and lived in China for thirty-four years.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Stross, *Stubborn Earth*, 93.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*

Technically speaking, Groff's original job included neither missionary nor agricultural work.<sup>53</sup> He was a teacher at the College, working under no auspice of any church. However, he was successful in introducing varieties. One of his most successful experiments was the introduction of the Hawaiian papaya, which came to be grown widely throughout south China. He also developed a research interest in the Chinese Lichee and introduced it to Hawaii. Groff did not develop an interest in rice, the staple crop of the region, however.<sup>54</sup>

Though his agricultural work was as miscellaneous as that of early missionaries, Groff was not only seeking to improve agriculture through random school work. He sought concerted work among the different Protestant missions. He was the first to register a complaint that fellow church agronomists would echo over and over: medical Missions were well-established in China and were the recipients of generous board support, while the idea of an agricultural mission was regarded as heretical by the mission establishment.<sup>55</sup> Despite his call for college students to come to China, only five colleges expressed mild interest, and only Kansas State organized a mission support group, sending one of its graduates, Carl Levine, an animal husbandry specialist, to Canton Christian.<sup>56</sup>

Groff, like many other agriculturalist missionaries, never ventured off the campus to build agricultural programs for the church, spending most of his time conducting horticultural studies on his college campus in Guangzhou, and his agricultural school did little to join agricultural improvement and religion. Students were required to take only one religion course in a four-year program. The primary emphasis was on agricultural

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<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Stross, *Stubborn Earth*, 95.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*

courses and hard work in the field, as the college proudly stated: "six hours of practical work a day are required of each student in the major he has chosen."<sup>57</sup> However, Groff's contributions to agricultural Missions in China is undeniable, especially in the theoretical aspect. He wrote numerous articles in Christian journals, and kept calling students in America to come to China. His theories about agricultural missions were accepted within the agricultural missionary community.

While Groff was a lone worker laboring under no sponsorship from any mission board, John. H. Reisner, John Bailie's successor, held the position of head of the Nanking university of Agriculture and Forestry and had achieved some major progress. In 1914, as an outgrowth of a famine prevention measure, the College of Agriculture and Forestry was organized as a part of the University of Nanking. Originally under the direction of Joseph Baillie, it later had its greatest growth under Dean John. H. Reisner.<sup>58</sup>

Arriving in China in 1914, Reisner was regarded as the second agricultural missionary in China, and he too spent his time on a campus, not in rural mission posts.<sup>59</sup> Under Resiner's leadership the Nanking College had made some significant accomplishments in the improvement of China's agriculture. Hunnicutt and Reid recorded one of his most prominent works. In the fall of 1919, Nanking College made a selection of twelve thousand five hundred individual cotton plants near Shanghai and chose a strain that proved to be remarkably suited for growing cotton in China. The seed of this plant was sown the next year, and seven plants were grown from it. In 1924 the quantity of seed produced from this one plant was enough to plant thirty-four acres – the best Chinese cotton in all of China.<sup>60</sup> The promotion of the seeds was more difficult

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<sup>57</sup> Stross, *Stubborn Earth*, 98-99.

<sup>58</sup> Stross, *Stubborn Earth*, 99.

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Hunnicutt and Reid, *Story*, 55.

than expected. Before 1923, no farmer in Wukiang had heard of the improved cotton, but the college rented land and placed one worker in that district, and by persuading farmers to use the seed, in the fall of 1924, the College successfully promoted the new cotton to adjacent area.<sup>61</sup> Another important effort of the College of Agriculture and Forestry of the university of Nanking (as it was also at the universities in Foochow and in Canton) was the improvement of methods of producing silk.<sup>62</sup>

Nanking also took pride in its agricultural education work. It opened a Rural Normal school where rural teachers were trained for practical forms of community service in addition to the regular tasks in the school room.<sup>63</sup> Each student in the course joined in making a rural community survey, taking part in extension work and the distribution of pure seed, practice in teaching night school, education and entertainment of the community through plays and exhibits, daily field work in the school garden and nursery, and field work in the growing of improved crops.<sup>64</sup>

Like Groff, Reisner was enthusiastic in recruiting agriculturalist missionaries to China, but they both discovered that few American missionaries followed their call to improve Chinese agriculture.<sup>65</sup> By the early 1920s, after a decade of strenuous appeals for agricultural missionaries to China, a mission census found only fifteen who had had college training in agriculture.<sup>66</sup> And even later, in 1931, of twenty-nine thousand Protestant missionaries distributed around the globe, only one hundred were said to be directly engaged in agricultural work.<sup>67</sup> By the time of 1924, Reisner suggested that

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<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Hunnicutt and Reid, *Story*, 58.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Stross, *Stubborn Earth*, 106.

<sup>66</sup> Stross, *Stubborn Earth*, 100.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*

there were twenty-seven agricultural missionaries in China who were graduates of foreign agricultural colleges, of whom fifteen were located in the colleges of agriculture and forestry and were devoting full time to agricultural and forestry work.<sup>68</sup> There were also sixteen foreigners who are giving part of their time to agricultural work, though about one-half of this number were based in the colleges rather than in field work.<sup>69</sup> Of the Chinese students they trained, eight returned to part time agricultural work, and thirty devoted full time work to mission agriculture. (Of these thirty, twenty-two were connected with the University of Nanking.)<sup>70</sup>

With the exception of Groff and Reisner, few young missionaries were able to conduct successful agricultural mission work. As Stross states it, the fact to be admitted is that the role of agricultural missionary was a rare profession. Among the American college students who signed pledge cards in the Student Volunteer Movement committing themselves to foreign mission service, the combination of technical expertise and willingness to live in uncertain circumstances in China proved to be rare.<sup>71</sup> An ideal agricultural missionary would be one who has expertise in agriculture, was religiously committed, and interested in the Christianization of a foreign land. But young agricultural missionaries in China found themselves caught in a difficult situation. That is, it was hard to maintain a balance between doing practical work and introducing Christian practices and beliefs in rural China.

Walter Clay Lowdermilk offers a good example of someone who used his missionary appointment to pursue strictly lay interests. Though being an agricultural missionary and a promising agriculturalist, the college graduate showed little interest in Christianity,

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<sup>68</sup> Reisner, John H., "The Church in Rural Work," *The Chinese Recorder: Journal of the Christian Movement in China* (December 1924), 790-791.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Stross, *Stubborn Earth*, 106.

spending most of his time in research, and probably using his experience in China to upgrade his resume.<sup>72</sup> Although Reisner was aware of this, he recruited Lowdermilk. And it shows that in the pursuit of its ideal, the church had to compromise. The missionary-agronomist who combined religious fervor with technical expertise was, it seems, a rarity.<sup>73</sup> The recruitment of specialists like Lowdermilk may have advanced agriculture and forestry in China, but such work did not contribute directly to the spread of Christianity.<sup>74</sup>

John Lossing Buck would later be known for his agroeconomics survey, but at first he was a model of agricultural expertise and enthusiasm in evangelism combined. Eventually, however, his Christian enthusiasm faded. Originally an agricultural missionary to China, Buck began his time with a combination of religious zeal and technical know-how. When he was at the state agricultural college at Cornell in the early 1910s, he participated in a Bible study lead by Reisner, then a graduate student who was soon to leave for Nanking with his master's degree.<sup>75</sup> In 1915, Buck received the assignment as an agricultural missionary to a tiny rural station at Nansuzhou, Anhui, which he took as "an excellent opportunity to improve Chinese agriculture, which would enable Christian farmers to better support the church financially and non-Christians to accept the teachings of Christianity."<sup>76</sup> For Buck, agriculture was to be used as "a practical way of teaching Christianity and as a means of making friends."<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Stross, *Stubborn Earth*, 110.

<sup>74</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Stross, *Stubborn Earth*, 111.

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*

Yet Buck observed that local farmers were quite conservative and untouched by new ideas, being “very backward in starting or accepting anything new.”<sup>78</sup> Buck also made some mistakes, such as trying to bring American agricultural equipment to local farmers, attempting to promote an improved American plow with an iron beam, which proved too heavy for the local farmers to carry on their shoulders from home to often distant fields.<sup>79</sup>

Eventually, however, Buck’s Christian enthusiasm faded. By working with local landlords, he had an opportunity to try to combine church and agricultural interests, but, although he viewed agricultural improvement as a means by which interest in and economic support for the church would be strengthened, Stross commented that, in practice, Buck reversed matters and used the church to help agriculture.<sup>80</sup> Buck’s interest in evangelism waned as he moved out of Nansuchou and taught in Nanking University, where he gradually gave up his effort in using agriculture as a way to “win the peasants to Christ.” His most notable work after Nansuchou was a survey about land use in China, which won him fame as a prestigious agroeconomist, in spite of the fact that he had no training in economics.

### **A New Era: Growth of an Organized Movement**

Despite the shortage of agricultural missionaries and exigencies that frustrated their efforts, the 1910s and 1920s witnessed a growth of agricultural missions as an organized movement. Groff and Reisner continued their campaign to draw more church support in China and at home for agricultural mission work, and in the late 1910s and early 1920s missions became increasingly interested in China’s rural problems. Numerous

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<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> Stross, *Stubborn Earth*, 113.

speeches, articles, and conferences seemed to herald a new era that would merge agricultural improvement and spiritual awakening.<sup>81</sup>

Associations of agricultural missions were built. In 1919, the International Association of Agricultural Missions was established, and representatives from China were prominent.<sup>82</sup> Chapters of the World Agriculture Society were also formed in China by the handful of agricultural missionaries in Nanking, Guangzhou, and Beijing, though their mandate to promote "better understanding" of world agriculture were rather vague.<sup>83</sup>

In 1920, the International Association of Agricultural Missions was organized in New York. It promoted a number of special projects, but chiefly served as a center for the exchange of information on the work of agricultural missions and to develop a "Christian Rural Philosophy" for this emphasis of the work of the Church.<sup>84</sup>

Within China, the church's work in agriculture was mentioned more frequently in Christian conferences, and there was a growth of Chinese efforts. In 1922, the delegates to the National Christian conference proposed a comprehensive church program for rural areas, with new emphasis on agricultural education and improvement.<sup>85</sup> The prestigious National Christian Conference recognized a pressing demographic concern: "it is commonly said that three-fourths of the people of China are directly dependent upon agriculture for a living . . . It is in itself a convincing argument for the importance of agriculture and village life in the program of the church."<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Stross, *Stubborn Earth*, 99.

<sup>82</sup> Stross, *Stubborn Earth*, 101.

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> Thomson, *Faced West*, 50.

<sup>86</sup> Stross, *Stubborn Earth*, 103.



In 1924, a group of thirty-two persons met at the college of Agriculture and Forestry in Nanking to discuss the rural phase of the mission enterprise and to organize the Committee on Agricultural Education under the National Christian Educational Association of China.<sup>87</sup> Hunter explains that “the dominant interests of the conference were evangelistic,” and agricultural missionaries “were primarily interested in making their special training and work to contribute to the effectiveness of the schools and churches that immediately serve the rural people.”<sup>88</sup> In the same year, the Rural Church Committee of the National Christian Council inaugurated a movement among the churches by asking all the Christian papers to publish sometime that fall a special number on the study and problems of rural work.<sup>89</sup>

American Missions were also organizing programs to address rural problems, mainly through providing agriculture training to their missionaries. A Methodist conference in central China led the way in calling for new agricultural programs.<sup>90</sup> To prepare their future ministers for country churches, the Methodists took what Reisner described as “what may seem to some to be a very radical step.”: They resolved to ask that their divinity schools offer “such courses as deal with agricultural production, rural economics and rural sociology.”<sup>91</sup> The Methodist reformers declared that they “kept constantly” in the minds of their students “the vital relationship between these courses and practical evangelism.”<sup>92</sup> The Methodists also planned to establish primary schools and “preaching halls” in small towns to provide services “especially adapted to rural and agricultural

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<sup>87</sup> Hunter, “Rural Social Service,” 739.

<sup>88</sup> Reisner, “The Church in Rural Work,” 790.

<sup>89</sup> Groff, G.W., “The Rural Church,” *The Chinese Recorder: Journal or the Christian Movement in China* (November 1924): 779.

<sup>90</sup> Stross, *Stubborn Earth*, 103.

<sup>91</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> *ibid.*

communities,” in the belief that “by helping to improve the grains, fruits and vegetables, the cotton or silk, we shall win the confidence of the people and again save by serving.” They also added that “no other agency contemplates this form of service.”<sup>93</sup>

### **Into the 1930s**

The general recognition of the agricultural missions as an integral part of Christian missions, however, did not come until the Jerusalem Meeting in 1928, after which agricultural missions began to seek more comprehensive rural programs to reform rural communities. A more exciting opportunity for the missionaries in China was the New Life Movement and the Rural Reconstruction Movement. After the civil war in 1927, the Nationalist government finally grasped control over China, and ambitiously launched a nationwide campaign to reconstruct China’s countryside. Christian missionaries found that they were asked by the government to be cooperators. For the agricultural missionaries, this was a task at which the church could not afford to fail.

### ***The Jerusalem Meeting***

As Thomson said, the Jerusalem conference was one of several factors that moved the Chinese church “from fruitless discussion to action.”<sup>94</sup> In 1928, the second World Mission Conference was held in Jerusalem. In the conference, material need was recognized as a necessity in Christianity: “Man is a unity; his spiritual life is indivisibly rooted in all his conditions-physical, mental and social. The abundant life, which Jesus came to the world to give to all men, enters into every aspect of their life and relationships.”<sup>95</sup> The conference named rural missions as an important part of missionary

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<sup>93</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> Thomson, *Faced West*, 51.

<sup>95</sup> 1933 Chang, Fu Liang, “Christian Leaven in Rural China,” *The Chinese Recorder* (May 1933): 273.

work: "that the rural work in mission fields is an organic part of the service of the church everywhere - East and West - to lead in the effort to build a rural civilization that shall be Christian to the core."<sup>96</sup>

After a decade's development, agricultural missions were gaining support from the Church. The importance of rural life work had been growing so much that it was called "an integral part of the missionary enterprise."<sup>97</sup> Following that meeting, as Hunnicutt and Reid claimed, the international Missionary Council took steps to promote the agricultural program of the Christian church, and to make available to the churches and missionaries in America and overseas the result of agricultural experimentation, discovery, plans, programs, and undertakings, outlining the successes and failures.<sup>98</sup>

Another event that motivated agricultural missions in China was Dr. Butterfield's visit after the Jerusalem meeting. As a prominent agricultural expert, Butterfield offered what he called "a few concrete suggestions" during his China visit.<sup>99</sup> First, Butterfield advised, practical projects needed to be launched for "rural community development"; second, "representatives of all important agencies, government and private should be brought together to work out a program for agricultural development," which Butterfield called "'An All-China Agricultural Program,' with each branch of society informing its members and the general public regarding all enterprises which look towards the development of rural community."<sup>100</sup>

The "Butterfield Conferences" followed in different parts of China, leading to the organization of the North China Christian Rural Service Union, first in Hopei and later in

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<sup>96</sup> Hunter, "Rural Social Service," 741.

<sup>97</sup> Hunter, James A., "The Church as Rural Rebuilder: In response to "Re-Thinking Missions," *The Chinese Recorder* (May 1933): 284.

<sup>98</sup> Hunnicutt and Reid, *Story*, 159.

<sup>99</sup> Stross, *Stubborn Earth*, 101.

<sup>100</sup> Stross, *Stubborn Earth*, 102.

Shantung and Shansi, with similar organizations in a number of other provinces.<sup>101</sup> China's National Christian Council called Chang Fu-liang, a Chinese Christian and a graduate of American agricultural college, to the newly created office of Rural Secretary, and The Laymen's Foreign Missions Inquiry Commission came in 1931 and 1932, laying great emphasis in their reports on the need for a broader basis for the work of missions, not only in agricultural, but also industrial work and special work for women.<sup>102</sup>

The Agricultural Missions Foundation was founded in 1930, in New York.<sup>103</sup> And Reisner, as the executive secretary of Agricultural Mission, edited the *Agricultural Missions Notes* (later changing its title to *Rural Missions*), a quarterly that collected news and information of agricultural missions around the world.

### ***The Church and China's Rural Reconstruction***

The church also found that it could take part in a governmental program that aimed to improve China's rural conditions, such the New Life and Rural Reconstruction Movement. In fact, they were asked to do so. At a conference of Methodist Mission at Nanchang, 1934, where both General and Madame Chiang and other government officials were present, some decisions had been made including "that the Christian churches be asked to respond to the Government's request of assistance in the relief of the large number of the civilian population rendered destitute by the banditry and the warfare in the province . . ." <sup>104</sup> The National Christian Council was also going to assist the newly formed Kiangsi Christian Rural Service Union in launching and carrying through a program

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<sup>101</sup> Hunter, "Rural Social Service," 739.

<sup>102</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> "Christian Rural Project in Kiangsi," *The Chinese Recorder* (January 1934):61-62.

of rural reconstruction, and a number of persons “technically trained in agriculture,” and in health work composed entirely of Christians and dominated by Christian purposes, would come to help carry out the program.<sup>105</sup>

It was apparent that, as Reisner commented before, the government was “unable to take the work.”<sup>106</sup> At least it was unable to do it alone. And in the 1930s, missionaries began to regard themselves as rural rebuilders and marked the governmental movement with mission influence. Christian missionaries considered the most outstanding contribution of Christian forces to this rural reconstruction movement in China to be those efforts made through Christian institutions, through hospitals, theological seminaries, and universities.<sup>107</sup> The University of Nanking’s leadership in agricultural improvement, for example, was recognized and undeniable, as was Yenching University’s leadership in social administration, Cheeloo University’s in rural medicine, and Ginling College’s in women’s training and organization.<sup>108</sup> Each of the universities organized service centers, and Nanking was, again, most known for its agricultural extension at Wukiang.<sup>109</sup>

In 1930s the missionaries’ relation to the government also seemed to change. In the 1920s (or in the 1930s in less central regions), when the Nationalist government was unable to control the whole nation, agricultural missionaries sometimes found themselves at the mercy of local landlords, and their relationships with governmental authorities varied from province to province. J.L. Buck, for example, found that the leadership of the agriculture society that he had built was forcibly taken away by certain

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<sup>105</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> Stross, *Stubborn Earth*, 104.

<sup>107</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *ibid.*

military men.<sup>110</sup> By contrast, in Sichuan, missionaries praised Den Chi Heo, a local warlord, as “the chief supporter of agriculture.”<sup>111</sup>

Stross writes, the church “unabashedly [saw] itself as a competitor with the Chinese government,” demonstrating its ability to usurp the role of the Chinese government as the leading force in agricultural improvement.<sup>112</sup> Thomson argues that the movement itself bore increasingly the mark of mission influence. The development of this interaction between American Christians and the so-called New Life Movement forms a perplexing but significant chapter in the history of Kuomintang China.<sup>113</sup>

#### **2. 4. After 1937**

The Japanese invasion in 1937 disrupted the rural reconstruction work. Granted, in Southwestern China, the Nanking University was still conducting agricultural experiments, and in some parts of China, rural churches continued to function. For example, in 1940, the college of Agriculture and Forestry of the University of Nanking reported on the production and distribution of improved seeds in both “penetrated” and “free” China.<sup>114</sup> During 1939, 598,744 pounds of improved wheat, millet and cotton seed were distributed to farmers. The production and distributions was a “first-class accomplishment,” and was expected to be a superb contribution to the national economy.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Buck, J. Lossing, “Agricultural Work in Nansuchow Anhui, China, 1919,” *The Chinese Recorder* (June 1920): 413.

<sup>111</sup> Brace, A.J., “rural experiments in west China,” *The Chinese Recorder* (May 1931): 330.

<sup>112</sup> Stross, *Stubborn Earth*, 104.

<sup>113</sup> Thomson, *Faced West*, 152.

<sup>114</sup> “Better seeds for China farmers,” *Agricultural Missions Notes* (April 1940).

<sup>115</sup> *ibid.*

## Chapter Three

### The Combination of Christianity and Agriculture:

As has been shown in the chronological review of agricultural missions in China, agricultural work by Protestant missionaries started before agricultural missions rose as a movement and the first agricultural missionary, in the strict definition, arrived in Canton. Therefore, it is not so much that the churches' agricultural work was the materialization of a theory as that the development of agricultural missions demands a theory to define, defend, and guide the efforts. In other words, the missionaries' secular interest and their sporadic, miscellaneous, agricultural work preexisted a theory or agenda of agricultural missions. For agricultural missionaries and their opponents within the Church, there had always been a question that needed to be answered, a question haunting the "secular nature" of their work. That is, what did agriculture have to do with evangelism? In this chapter, I will discuss the missionaries' rhetorical attempts to combine Christianity and agriculture.

#### A "Dual Task"

I would call agricultural missions' purported contributions to evangelism a "dual task." As has been mentioned above, agricultural missions had always been facing challenges, especially from within the Church. Though the Chinese government was generally glad to have the foreign missionaries to work alongside, many church members remained suspicious of a program that purportedly addresses material problems while also preaching the gospel. Therefore, agricultural missionaries needed to explain why agricultural work was part of missionary work.

Advocates of agricultural missions generally justified the movement as such. Agricultural work entailed a dual task that no other missionary work could take: one task was evangelistic, while the other was material. "Men of experience in China said," as Buck said, "we need two things at present in our work; one is, a good point of contact

with the people with whom we are working; the other is, we, as exponents of Christianity, need a means whereby we can help the people in a practical way. Agriculture would seem to fill both these needs’.”<sup>116</sup> Though later challenged and revised, this *dual-task rhetoric* was generally accepted by agricultural missionaries in China, serving as a powerful argument for the movement and observed as a principle by agricultural workers in their efforts.

### **Point of Contact**

According to agricultural missionaries, agriculture offered more “points of contact” for missionary work, providing a “practical” means for evangelism. As Carson suggested, “most of the work described as agricultural missions came about as the result or accompaniment of evangelistic effort rather than the reverse.”<sup>117</sup> It is not hard to understand missionaries’ eagerness to find a new way of preaching. One hundred years after the first protestant missionaries entered China, only a small number of the population had been converted to Christianity. Agriculture was a field unbroken, and agricultural work could be a more effective means for churches to expand Christian influence.<sup>118</sup> As Groff says, “the message of love becomes empty on the speaker’s lips unless he can put it into practice.”<sup>119</sup> Through improving the life of ordinary people, there was a hope that missionaries would win them to Christ.

And there was no other work than could bring as many points of contact as agricultural mission work. What differentiates it from medical and educational mission work was that it reached more Chinese people, and addressed issues that concerned them most in everyday life. Protestant missions in China had long been criticized for

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<sup>116</sup> Buck, T.L. 1919 “Practical Plans for the Introduction of Agriculture Into our Middle and Primary Schools,” *Chinese Recorder* (May 1919): 307.

<sup>117</sup>Carson, “Study Based Upon the Experience,” 4.

<sup>118</sup> Groff, “Agricultural Education,” 158.

<sup>119</sup> *ibid.*



deploying the majority of its missionaries in large port cities, in a country where the whole population and the membership of Christian churches was predominately rural.<sup>120</sup> How can “salvation of China and her people” be achieved, it was asked, without a rural reconstruction and spiritual regeneration of the masses?<sup>121</sup> Agricultural work, by bringing missionary enterprise to the rural communities, could help to build connections between missions and potential Christians.

Agricultural work addressed the most important issue in the lives of Chinese farmers. Buck once recalled that, though ordinary Chinese farmers were hard to approached, they could be friendly when discussing crops, because that was what concerned them.<sup>122</sup>

### **A Way of Self-Supporting**

The material side of the dual task is the task of being “self-supporting,” which was more an internal problem within the missions. Christian churches were coming to appreciate the economic pressure that “constantly bears down upon undeveloped Christian communities and retards them in their spiritual development.”<sup>123</sup> Financial troubles haunted the Protestant church in China. Only less than 20% of the churches claimed to be self-supporting, which means that the majority of churches in China relied on funds from other institutions in China and from the United States. Although American Protestant churches were relatively well-off after World War I, compared to their

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<sup>120</sup> Hunter, “Rural Social Service,” 739.

<sup>121</sup> qtd in. Price, Frank W., *Rural Church in China* (New York, Agricultural Missions, 1948), Forward.

<sup>122</sup> Buck, J. Lossing, “Agricultural Work in Nansuchow Anhui, China, 1919,” *The Chinese Recorder* (June 1920): 413.

<sup>123</sup> Groff, George Weidman, “Why More Agricultural Missionaries,” *Student Volunteer Movement Bulletin* (January 1922): 6-7.

European peers, even in the soaring 1920s American churches' income fluctuated as the enthusiasm for foreign missions at home waned.

Financial situations deteriorated in the late 1920s, when the Great Depression at home hammered American Protestant churches, forcing them to reduce their financial support to churches in China. And during the "Depression Thirties" self-support "became almost a fetish in the mission field."<sup>124</sup> In 1934, the American Presbyterian Church (North) even launched a drastic "Project Plan" for foreign missions that withdrew all grants toward salaries from local churches to use the funds released for more new work and "projects."<sup>125</sup> The Methodists (Methodist Episcopal and Methodist South) also made serious reductions in grants for salaries. In Shantung, John L. Nevius, an English Baptist missionary, proposed what he called a "New System" whereby mission funds would be used solely for itinerant evangelists but not for local preachers, seeking ultimately the establishment of independent, self-reliant and aggressive native churches.<sup>126</sup> Other missions planned a more gradual and scaled reduction, while there were some rural churches that began to receive no mission aid at all.<sup>127</sup>

Missionaries saw the backwardness of agriculture and rural economics as the reasons behind the local church's incapacity to support itself. The financial condition of people in China was described by the phrase "marginal farmers."<sup>128</sup> A marginal farmer could barely feed himself, not to mention to have extra money for a Christian rural church. A study of 2,866 farms in 17 localities in 7 provinces in China showed that the annual average family earning was \$291 (Chinese currency) or \$52 per capita, and even if every church member in China gave one-tenth of his income to his church, the yearly

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<sup>124</sup> Felton, Ralph A., *The Rural Church in the Far East* (Calcutta: Baptist mission press, 1938):142.

<sup>125</sup> Price, *Rural Church in China*, 143.

<sup>126</sup> *ibid*

<sup>127</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>128</sup> Felton, *Far East*, 8.

budget would not be large. And as a result, a Chinese pastor in one branch of the church received an average salary of only \$17 each per month.<sup>129</sup> Low pay became an obstacle to the development or even survival of rural church as no one would be willing to take such a job as a rural pastor.

Some saw agricultural missions as a solution to this problem. By improving agriculture, introducing rural credit, and helping to commercialize agricultural products, missionaries might improve the economic situation of farmers and, eventually, relieve the financial burden of rural churches. This might partly explain why agricultural missions in China were eager to improve productivity: the success of agricultural improvement programs might allow farmers to contribute to their local church. Agricultural missions also proposed that Christian institutions launch agricultural programs, such as a demonstration farm or a school or station, or a self-owned garden or dairy production within a local or middle school, to allow local Christians to earn extra income and support themselves.

They also suggested that the self-supporting of a Christian institutions or of a rural church could help make the church more “indigenous,” an imperative especially in 1920s when the vigorous Chinese nationalism inspired attacks on Christian churches for their foreign affiliations. A pastor once explained to Buck that one could talk himself “blue in the face” about the church not being foreign, but so long as he was paid by an outside organization the people could not be made to believe that there was no ulterior motive behind it all.<sup>130</sup>

The dual-task theory, which seemed to suggest agricultural work as an auxiliary measure to evangelism, did not always prove successful to missions in reality. First, as a

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<sup>129</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> *ibid.*

purported way to add points of contact, it is questionable how much agricultural work contributed to the preaching of the gospel or conversion of local people. The “spiritual” side seemed to be neglected in the agricultural education that the missions took so much pride in. While in agricultural universities, students were required or encouraged to attend religious activities, such as religious services, Bible groups, teaching in Daily Vacation Bible Schools in Nanking during the summer, and acting as assistant pastors in the churches when pastors were away from vacation and summer conferences, there is not much evidence that they were building a relationship between agricultural improvement and Christianity. Although students might work shifts or volunteer occasionally in Christian works, they were, after all, trained in an agricultural school, not a seminary. Many of the agricultural schools contained no theological courses, and a large number of Chinese students who received agricultural education did not end up in the countryside but pursued more lucrative jobs. American agricultural missionaries, such as Buck, also found it difficult to balance spiritual interest and lay interest for themselves. Once engaged in teaching or research work, the missionaries became mere technical personnel, and there was little evidence that their work had anything to do with Christianity. As Stross argued, in the real work field there was a disjunction between the material work done and the spiritual awakening that such work was supposed to bring to the people.<sup>131</sup>

As for the self-supporting side, agricultural work did have some contributions to the rural church, which I will discuss later. But in the cases where Christian workers were doing agricultural work to support themselves or their institutions, agriculture was more often than not reduced to a mere way of earning money. For example, in some middle and normal schools where agricultural projects were undertaken, boys were required to work in the school farm to pay for their tuition. Although working in a school

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<sup>131</sup> Stross, *Stubborn Earth*, 99.

farm was suggested to help the students develop “Christian character,” such as a respect for labour, agricultural work was mainly referred to as a way to “help many boys work their way through school.”<sup>132</sup> For Christian pastors who used agriculture originally as a way of self-support, the interest in material pursuit could also prevail over the spiritual interest. A minister in North China, near Peiping, for example, started a dairy to supplement his income. He soon gave most of his time to his dairy, or at least his people claimed that he did. They objected, and the pastor resigned his pastorate to give his full time to running his dairy.<sup>133</sup>

Missionaries also found that agricultural improvement did not necessarily bring economic improvement in rural churches. It turned out not only that the marginal farmer was too poor to contribute to a local church, but also that the membership was too small to make sufficient support. Almost any rural church in America or elsewhere needs at least 200 members to support a pastor adequately, while in China, where farms were so small and families so poor the number of members needed to be larger than 200, rather than smaller.<sup>134</sup> Financial independence from foreign funding could hardly be achieved until enough Christians had been converted. The success in secular interest, therefore, does not guarantee an improvement in the development of local, independent congregations.

## **A Christian Land Ethics**

### ***Farming as a Spiritual Activity***

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<sup>132</sup> “They live on the boy's school compound, it's very well equipped dormitories, and administration building being nearly completed. Near the school is its dairy and not very far off is its farm. These two industries help many boys to work their way through school, while they learn useful trades.” “Wade Dobbins Bostick,” First Baptist Church of Hillsborough, <http://www.fbchillsborough.org/wade-d-bostick>

<sup>133</sup> Felton, *Far East*, 147.

<sup>134</sup> Felton, *Far East*, 144.

While some advocates of agricultural missions were separating agricultural work into a spiritual task and a material one, an ecotheology managed to combine Christianity with agriculture, and created a Christian land ethics. The land ethics suggested that farming is in itself a spiritual activity, and thus agricultural missions, directly working with farmers and land, were essentially spiritual. As Reisner argues, “religion is not something apart from the weekday toil . . . we are unwilling to believe that the ways of making a living and ways of making a life are divisible. They are parts of a whole; not two separable halves . . . In much of our missionary work we need to rediscover God in the Fourth Dimension.”<sup>135</sup> The new land ethics aimed to regain the religious significance of agricultural work that have been lost or difficult to implement during the work.

The most distinctive argument of this new philosophy was that farming, along with other agricultural activities, was considered to be itself a spiritual experience. Agricultural missions interpreted farming not only as the material basis of supporting the Christian community, but also as a way to make contact with God. To support this argument, agricultural missionaries drew from various doctrines to show that Christianity is inherently associated with the countryside. “The country occupied a large place in the thinking and teaching of Jesus,” said an article in *Agricultural Missions Notes*.<sup>136</sup> The article quoted many biblical references to plants, soils and harvest to demonstrate that in agricultural activities lies Christian spirituality.<sup>137</sup>

This argument was based on the assumption that the soil, like anything else, is a gift of God. And the farmer, working on the God-given land, is the closest to the deity. Some missionaries, such as Mark Dawber, regarded farming as a “stewardship,”<sup>138</sup> an

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<sup>135</sup> *Agricultural Missions notes* (July 1939): 4.

<sup>136</sup> *Agricultural Missions Notes* (October 1939).

<sup>137</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> Quoted in “Soil and the Salvation,” *Agricultural Missions Notes* (January 1938).

undertaking of looking after God's land, and emphasized a peasant's holy closeness to land. Some even compared farming to a marriage: There is "a new type of farmer in the making -- he is the husbandman, who is married to the land. He treats the soil with much of the consideration and affection shown toward his wife and family."<sup>139</sup> Despite the difference in rhetoric, most agricultural missionaries highlighted an intrinsic relationship between the farmer and his land, a closeness that may also be recognized in China. At the World Conference on Church, Community and State at Oxford, 1937, a speaker described Chinese farmers as living close "to the elemental forces of *t'ien di*, heaven and earth."<sup>140</sup> Here the *ti'en di*, referred to as "elemental forces," can be interpreted as "nature" or something more spiritual. In Chinese folk-beliefs, "heaven and earth" are considered transcendent, in a way similar to the God of Christianity.

With this intrinsic closeness to the God-given land, the farmer could be in cooperation with God when he is working. "All land is holy earth. Farming is a stewardship. Farming is a copartnership, and even a co-creatorship with god."<sup>141</sup> In "Revaluing the Chinese Church," Reisner also claimed that "in producing food, man becomes in a very sense a cooperator with God." Since the land belongs to God, the farmer cooperates with the deity in taking care of it and, more importantly, in producing food to feed the masses, which is God's plan for humankind. As Hunnicutt and Reid argued, "God does his work to a certain point," and the farmers, as "the producer of food and shelter, must carry on from there in the divine undertaking." They called for a guidance for the Chinese farmers "to realize the sacredness of his high calling. The

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<sup>139</sup> "A New Farmer in the Making," *Agricultural Missions Notes* (July 1938).

<sup>140</sup> "The Rural Community, the Forgotten Man," at the Oxford Conference." *The Chinese Recorder* (October 1937):

<sup>141</sup> "A New Farmer in the Making," *Agricultural Missions Notes* (July 1938).

farmer is a direct cooperator with the Supreme Being of the universe in carrying out his plans for mankind.”<sup>142</sup>

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By attaching religious importance to farming, agricultural missions attempted to Christianize the very essential part of the farmer’s life, making farming a transcendent experience. Cultivating the field itself could be a way directly to perceive God. Reisner vividly described this spiritual experience:

When I prepare the soil for planting, I am conscious that God is manifest in the soil; when I plant the seed, I know that God is in the seed; when the sun shines on the soil to warm it, and on the plant to provide it with energy, I am conscious of the workings of the laws of God. The crop that grows, the soil

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<sup>142</sup> Hunnicutt and Reid, *Story*, 66.

<sup>143</sup> “A New Farmer in the Making,” *Agricultural Missions Notes* (July 1938).

<sup>144</sup> Hunnicutt and Reid, *Story*, 66.



that feeds the crops, are manifestation of God and His Love and provision for the needs of mankind-may be made vital, spiritual influences.<sup>145</sup>

Farming could be regarded as a religious activity because it is not only cooperation with God, but also a way to raise Christian spirits, creating “good Christians.” As Hennicutt and Reid said, this definite daily work for the Lord helps to build Christian character, uniting Sunday worship with daily work, bringing the satisfactions and stimulations of religion. One missionary even considered the missionary task in rural China as “[making] good farmers -- good fellow-producers with God -- good servants of the highest needs of human society -- and therefore good Christians.<sup>146</sup> And there was also an aspiration among the missionaries that, through agricultural education and community activities, spiritual leaders could emerge in the locality.

Therefore, through a Christian way of farming, the farmer could be invested with Christian ethics. One of the moral codes held by agricultural missionaries in China was a “respect for labor,” which, according to J.L.Buck, was especially lacking in China. He recited a story of how a young local landlord, after attending an agriculture course held by the missionary in Anhui, took some of his land back from his tenants and farmed it himself.<sup>147</sup> Buck praised the young man for finding the meaning of life and no longer idling about. While Chinese culture typically did not value physical labor, agricultural missions managed to input some Protestant ethics through the spread of agricultural techniques. It should be noted, however, that this perception of local Chinese virtues might be West-centered.

### **The “Superstitions.”**

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<sup>145</sup> Reisner, John H. “Revaluing The Chinese Church.” *The Chinese Recorder* (April 1926):

<sup>146</sup> Hunnicutt and Reid, *Story*, 66.

<sup>147</sup> Buck, “Agricultural Work,”

Another attempt to defend the missionary's lay interest and its role as social reformer was rhetoric that combined Christianity and modern science. Interestingly, agricultural missionaries generally saw Chinese local beliefs as unscientific "superstitions" rather than "religion." They regarded the Chinese farmers' "spiritual" problem, their believing in "evil spirits" and "dragons that control rain," as the results of a lack of scientific knowledge. Their beliefs could be solved through the introduction of scientific knowledge. In other words, the missionaries saw the local beliefs that hindered evangelism as secular problems that should be addressed in a secular way.

As has been mentioned in the discussion of self-support, agricultural missions found that agricultural improvement might not necessarily lead to better economic situation in rural churches, or to more converts. While Christian communities in China were too poor and too small to support their local churches, non-Christians were unwilling to pay sacrifices to God because they were spending the money on their local deities. As many surveys found, poor as those Chinese farmers might be, they spent a good deal of money on gambling, social activities, and "superstitions."

The "superstitions" had long been Christianity's adversary in China's countryside. When joining with Chinese Christians in recognizing a continuing crisis in ideology, the missionaries, as bearers in a general sense of "Western civilization" and as specific purveyors of the Christian religion, sought to fill a perceived ideological vacuum, or at least to give form and direction to ideological flux."<sup>148</sup> But was there really an ideological vacuum?

A closer look at the rural community suggests that is not the case. Surprisingly, the Chinese farmers did not hesitate to spend money on "superstitions" and "social events." Missionary Franklin. H. Crumpacker once mourned that "a right attitude to religion is the only thing that will buck up the farmer until he can resist the idea of spending a lot of

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<sup>148</sup> Thomson, *Faced West*, 151.

money at weddings and funerals just to keep his neighbors from laughing at him.” And he suggested that “the Christians’ attitude on the right use of money will have a wonderfully stabilizing influence on the farmer.”<sup>149</sup>

Attempts to discard the “superstitions” were not always successful. In a village near Foochow a small group of eighteen families planned to use the expenses of an endowment on an annual religious festival in order to “appease the evil spirits,” while a Christian from the Foochow Union High School “persuaded them to use the money to buy oil for his lamp. The villagers agreed, but when a Taoist contended that if the festival was cancelled, there would be no guarantee of safety throughout the next year, the festival was held as it was originally planned.<sup>150</sup> The money was thus - in the eyes of Westerners -- wasted.

There was no denying, missionaries contended, that those “magic superstitions,” along with the “primitive methods of agriculture,” must be discarded.<sup>151</sup> And it could be done, they felt, through demonstrating the power of science. An optimistic missionary said that “the superstitions of the farmer were rooted in the desire for good crops, and “they could be uprooted by linking Christian truth as to God and His relation to the world with a demonstration of better farming.”<sup>152</sup>

It is interesting to see that in the picture below from the Presbyterian Missions Report, what’s in place of the old China’s Keeper of the Dragon is a Biology laboratory in Nanking University.

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<sup>149</sup> Crumpacker, Franklin.H., “Urgent Needs in Rural Improvement,” *The Chinese Recorder* (May 1933): 290.

<sup>150</sup> Felton, *Far East*, 160.

<sup>151</sup> Stuart, A. Leighton, “Conflict of Cultures in China,” *The Chinese Recorder: Journal of Christian Movement in China* (August 1929): 484-487.

<sup>152</sup> Decker, J.W., “The Rural Approach,” *The Chinese Recorder: Journal of Christian Movement in China* (March 1926), 157-159 157



(“The Old China vs. the New China”) <sup>153</sup>

It may be inferred that what makes the Dragon something that needed to be discarded was not that it was a pagan belief, but that it was not scientific. For the missionaries, the measurement of superstitions was not so much Christianity itself as it was modern science. In this marking of “superstitions” Christians associated themselves closely with modern science, and did not take the local beliefs as parallel systems of meaning that it needed to counter with explicitly Christian beliefs. This might result from the myth among Christian missionaries that China was a land without religion. This “de-religionization” of local beliefs reveals that missionaries were eager to venture beyond the spiritual realm and act as secular reformers.

### ***Agricultural Science and Christianity***

Regarding themselves as the bearers of Western civilization, the missionaries interpreted agricultural science as a weapon that could be used to uproot local superstitions. The Christian rural philosophy embraced agricultural science as “nothing more nor less than God’s laws in nature.” <sup>154</sup> After citing the anecdote of the spirit-appeasing feast, Ralph A Felton made such a comment: “As the Christians learned God’s laws of plant breeding and growth of seed selection and care, they are able to

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<sup>153</sup> *The Eighty-Fifth Annual Report Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (New York: Presbyterian Building, 156 Fifth Avenue, 1922): 132.

<sup>154</sup> Felton, *Far East*, 161.

prevent the crop failures which these villagers experienced and so much feared . . . . When people learn these laws and obey them, God becomes a God of love instead of a God of fear. The evil spirits disappear and law and order take their place.”<sup>155</sup> In his rhetoric, the rules of nature and God almost become one, and a scientific understanding of nature could be seen as equivalent to Christianity. And this might also be an attempt to interpret agricultural work as spiritual and not to deviate from evangelism.

Though “the idols are strongly entrenched both in the fields and in the homes of the country people,” Reisner said, “modern methods of plant disease control, for instance, should prove “a resistless foe to the generation-old belief that the visitation of disease upon the fields has been willed by the evil spirits . . . modern scientific agricultural knowledge has placed in our hands which can be used by our Christian forces . . . Its use should lead to a recognized place of leadership that the rural church will otherwise not hold.”<sup>156</sup>

It should be noted that American agronomists’ attitudes toward Chinese agriculture was not always condescending; the interaction of agriculture between China and missionaries from the United States was not always a unilateral teaching. Not only were western seeds introduced to China, but Chinese species were also transplanted to America. Groff, for example, not only introduced Hawaiian papaya to Canton but also transplanted the Cantonese lychee to Hawaii. And there was a conviction that the Chinese were master farmers. Franklin Kings’ book, *Farmers of Forty Centuries*, was read by church leaders and exerted a tremendous influence on their thinking.<sup>157</sup> Many of them, including Groff, believed that the Chinese led the world in the conservation of plant foods, in intuitive knowledge of the needs of their few crops and in painstaking

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<sup>155</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> Reisner, “The Church in Rural Work,” 791.

<sup>157</sup> Stross, *Stubborn Earth*, 102.

effort in their production, and noted among agricultural explorers for the great variety of plants of exceptional vitality.”<sup>158</sup> Influenced by King’s book, members within the church even thought that there was nothing much that could be done for Chinese agriculture. A missionary, before leaving for a post in Fukien, consulted his missionary advisor about the task, and his advisor told him that the Chinese did not need Western techniques. However, after an examination himself, he found that Chinese ways of farming were unsustainable, causing severe losing of soil and water.<sup>159</sup>

But during the 1920s and 1930s, as American power in the interwar period grew, so did Americans' self-confidence in their own expertise and "know-how"; accordingly, Americans went to China to show the Chinese how to reform their agricultural practices, establish agricultural schools, and administer government agricultural programs, all along American lines.<sup>160</sup> And though agricultural missionaries generally agreed that it would be a mistake blindly to introduce American techniques to China, and recognized the importance of doing a survey of the local condition, they generally abandoned the thought that Chinese famers did not need help from the West. Chinese farmers were in need of “better seeds, better animal breeds, better control of animal diseases, better fertilizers, better farming methods.”<sup>161</sup> And at that time only the West could offer these.

Even though some agreed that “there are radical differences in climate which place significant limitations on the degree to which western methods of farming can be applied in the Orient... these differences between the East and the West should not discourage those interested in helping oriental farmers through the application of

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<sup>158</sup> Groff, “Agricultural Education,”<sup>159</sup>.

<sup>159</sup> Stross, *Stubborn Earth*, 102.

<sup>160</sup> Stross, *Stubborn Earth*, 12 .

<sup>161</sup> Price, *Rural Church in China*, 53.

science to agricultural production.”<sup>162</sup> While the proponents of introducing American agriculture to China agreed that “the methods of farmers in the West could not be transplanted, the fundamental principles as they relate to soils, plant and animal improvement, plant disease and insect control, and crop combinations are applicable to the Orient.”<sup>163</sup>

Besides techniques, agricultural missionaries also did not hesitate to criticize Chinese land ethics. “Idleness,” Buck said, “was the first problem needing attention in China,” He argued that farmers were “almost totally” or “partly” idle each year.<sup>164</sup> And also, there was lot of “uncultivated land.” According to Price, “only one-fourth of China is cultivated. The remainder is hilly and could be used for growing trees which would supply more than enough fuel for all of China.”<sup>165</sup> And Felton even regarded the land reserved for burials as a waste of land: “graves were located in the midst of fields by the professional geomancer, regardless of how much they interfere with farm operations. In China the land that is thus left uncultivated . . . these many large and scattered grave sites would feed eight million people if put into crops.”<sup>166</sup> The missionary “do not wish to exaggerate or dwell upon the handicaps of a country or people,” as “theses facts are mentioned merely to show the reason why rural construction work is so badly needed,” and “surely to relieve these conditions the Church must make its contribution to agricultural knowledge.”<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Lyon, Willard. “American Laymen and Missions in China,” *The Chinese Recorder* (December 1932):742.

<sup>163</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>164</sup> Stross, *Stubborn Earth*, 165.

<sup>165</sup> Price, *Rural Church in China*, 156.

<sup>166</sup> Felton, *Far East*, 164.

<sup>167</sup> *ibid.*

Agriculturalist missionaries, however, sometimes found the result of their program at odds with the plan. Buck found out that an American plow was unpractical in Chinese field, and Bailie's colonization of "unused land" failed because the land was in fact, uncultivable and only suitable for trees.<sup>168</sup> As time went on missionaries generally realized the difference between Chinese farmers and American farmers, not only from technical but also from social and economic aspects.

While American missionaries were confident that agricultural science would expel superstitions and win Chinese farmers to Christianity, Chang Fu Liang, a Chinese Christian leader, was aware of a transcendence that already existed in the mind of Chinese farmers, an already established man-land relationship. As Chang explains, "the Chinese belief includes authorities in the spiritual world parallel with those in the present...Above all these numerous gods there is one Supreme God, even as the supreme authority of the land was the Emperor during pre-republican days."<sup>169</sup> Chang suggests that it might be possible to see this supreme authority as the God in Christianity: "because of their close contact with nature, do the farmers feel the reality of the Supreme Being in their term 'Tien Lao Ya' (天老爷)?"<sup>170</sup> The "Tien Lao Ya," literally meaning "Lord of Heaven," is sometimes regarded as an equivalence of God in Chinese local belief. And Chang suggested that the belief in "the Lord of Heaven" shows that Chinese farmers already had a spiritual connection with a higher deity in through their daily toil, and what the missionaries needed to do is to seize an opportunity "to preach on the Unknown God of the countryside."<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> For Buck's mistake in introducing an American plow: "Among his early mistakes was an attempt to promote an improved American plow with an iron beam, which proved too heavy for the local farmers to carry on their shoulders from home to often distant fields." Stross, *Stubborn Earth*, 111.

<sup>169</sup> Chang, Fu Liang, "The Challenge of China's Rural Life," *The Chinese Recorder* (April 1928): 207.

<sup>170</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>171</sup> *ibid.*



## Chapter Four

### Christian Land Ethics in Practice

In this chapter, I will discuss how the Christian land Ethics were introduced to China's rural church and helped to build self-supporting rural communities.

#### The Lord's Acre Plan

Lord's acre was a project originating in rural churches in the United States. As many village farmers were poverty stricken, with fertile land and holdings too small to feed their families, or even in debt, missionaries were wondering: how could they subscribe even a Chinese pastor's meager salary?<sup>172</sup>

The Lord's Acre Plan was claimed to be successful among scattered, poverty-stricken rural people of North Carolina, and was thought to be even more adaptable to China than to America because of the former's greater difficulty in making money gifts.<sup>173</sup> Under this plan, the church member at the beginning of the year made a pledge to raise a certain animal or cultivate a crop on a certain piece of land and to dedicate the amount realized from the animal or the land to the Lord.<sup>174</sup> The parcel on which the crop was raised was called "the Lord's Acre." A small committee of laymen, and not the pastor, would undertake to direct the project. These gifts were not given to the minister but were sold by the farmers' co-operative and the proceeds, in cash, turned over to the church treasurer. These projects were often carried out by groups instead of individuals.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> "The Lord's Acre Pays a Chinese Pastor" *Agricultural Missions Notes* (October 1940).

<sup>173</sup> Felton, *Far East*, 146.

<sup>174</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> *ibid.*

Apart from being a method suited to the farmer in his way of life, the Lord's acre program was regarded as a way to train all church members in stewardship, not only improving the rural church's financial situation but yielding spiritual results. It was suggested that a man tending his "Lord's Acre" was reminded that "he is working on dedicated ground, working with and for the Lord."<sup>176</sup>

This plan was introduced to China mainly as a way of encouraging financial independence. Usually the entire congregation in China worked together on its Lord's Acre project, instead of individually, as in the United States.<sup>177</sup> Felton recorded how a Methodist Church at Chiu Pai Hu in Luan county, Hupeh province adopted this plan. Ten mow of land (2 acres) was leased for a year, and the members of the church cultivated this land according to a schedule worked out by their pastor, Rev Y.H. Yu. Four mow of corn, 4 mow of *kaoling* and 2 mow of beans were raised. The crops were sold for \$100, the expenses involved for rent and seed were \$40. The church budget received the balance \$60, which paid the salary of the pastor for two months. After trying this for one year successfully, the members of this church bought a farm of 7 1/2 mow for \$200(\$66 U.S). The farmers were not only cultivating it for their church but they are using it to grow better seeds for other farms in the parish. The pastor said of this project, "We have no trouble running this church farm. The members work happily together and they are working happily with God."<sup>178</sup>

Though originally a plan to solve the financial crisis, Lord's Acre also seems to have served as a way to teach Christian land ethics to farmers. Though we cannot know whether the farmers did have a realization of Christian stewardship, and it is possible that "working happily with God" was just the reporter's rhetoric to describe the spiritual

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<sup>176</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> Felton, *Far East*, 147.

<sup>178</sup> *ibid.*

results of the program, there is no denying that “cultivating land for the church” puts Christianity into agriculture, making the everyday activities of farmers spiritual. The spiritual significance of farming was expressed, and in return, enhanced in the rituals where the farmers offered their products to the church in church services.

In an article in *Agricultural Missions*, “Chicken Dedicated to Heaven,” Mary Mann, a missionary of the Methodist Episcopal Church, described how raising chickens can be related to Christianity. The project of raising chickens for the church (a program that can be seen as a variant of Lord’s Acre Plan) was implemented by the Methodist Church of the 15th Township, Mintsing District, which had long found it difficult to meet the budget necessary to its program. The Christians and their pastor hit upon the plan of raising chickens as a financial resource to the church, and the sale price of the chicken would go to the church. A committee was appointed to secure baby chicks and provide each family with as many as they could raise along with other chickens.<sup>179</sup>

As Mann describes, “The chicken were given to the church through a church service. One hundred and fifty “church chickens” were strutting about in a back lot, wearing the names of their owners. The early part of the short service was characteristic of any formal Christian worship service, while the unique part came when the ten members of the chicken committee entered, each carrying a handsome fowl. They stood before the altar and, in clear, meaningful tones, took their part in the responsive dedicatory readings. Beside them stood one of the oldest and most highly respected men of the community. Prayer of dedication was offered, and the district superintendent’s message concerning the history and privilege of Christian stewardship of property.”<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Mann, Mary, “Chicken Dedicated to the Kingdom,” *Agricultural Missions* (July 1939). Originally published in *Information Bulletin*, published by the Central Office of Religious Education, Methodist Episcopal Church in China, Foochow, March 1939.

<sup>180</sup> *ibid.*

Though the detail of information is not mentioned, the preaching of “Christian stewardship” here was supposed to be related to the stewardship in Christian land ethics, that is, rural work as taking care of God’s property, and in this work the relationship between man and the deity was enhanced, which makes agricultural work a sacred, religious activity. As the reporter says, “The service in which the chickens were dedicated to the support of the Kingdom, could not have been more dignified and sacred had those country people brought to the altar platters of gold.”<sup>181</sup> And it is worth noting that the chicken were not a surplus agricultural product; the farmers were aware from the beginning that the chickens they were raising were the “Kingdom”’s property, which did not belong to them and would eventually be given to the church.<sup>182</sup>

However, though such land ethics could be introduced to the rural community through agricultural activities, more often than not instead of using agricultural activities to add material improvements to inspire spiritual awakening, Christian workers were more likely to use spiritual awakening/inspiration to encourage farming and material sacrifice to the church. It is clear that the starting point of the Lord’s Acre program was financial independence, and its goal was to provide financial aid to the local church. Though spirituality was enhanced during the process, so that the farmers might internalize the land ethics while tilling the ground, their transcendental experience culminated in the offering of material products. The Lord’s Acre program was, after all, a variant of tithing, and though there is no denying that tithing enhanced a spiritual bond between the farmer and God, the land ethics were mainly taught to improve the church’s economic conditions.

### ***Worship Programs***

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<sup>181</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>182</sup> *ibid.*

Another practice to introduce Christian rural philosophy was through worship programs. Chang Fu Liang recorded how “Farmer's Spring and Autumn Festivals” taught the Christian rural philosophy in practice: “In spring and autumn of each year a Sunday is to be set aside for the celebration of these festivals. The former is centered in the theme of ‘Cooperation Between God and Man’ and the latter, in Thanksgiving.”<sup>183</sup> Suitable material was prepared by the National Christian Council for the use of rural churches.<sup>184</sup> Chang also suggested that the traveling evangelist could arrange the celebration of each of these festivals at the various rural congregations under his charge during his itinerary.

There was a detailed record of a harvest festival Sunday held in North China by Ankechuang Methodist Church in Hopei. On October 20, 1940, under the direction of Pastor T'ao and Mrs Chang, the worship service was held at the church at ten o'clock. Before this hour, many of the people had brought in their contributions and had placed them around the altar of the church. Around the pulpit were arranged 48 sacks of corn, beans, rice, and millet, each with a little paper pennant in a cleft bamboo stick announcing the name of the giver. Similarly, bunches of radishes, turnips, and ears of corn were marked and hung near the altar. Baskets of squash sweet potatoes, and firm sweet cabbage were arranged along the wall behind the pulpit. Pink envelopes contained the cash contributions of the town folk who had no gardens from which to contribute the fruits of the earth. In all, the people had brought in fruit and vegetables to the value of \$170, and cash to the amount of \$30, all of which “was used for the benevolences of the congregation.”<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Chang, Fu Liang, “Christian Leaven in Rural China”, *The Chinese Recorder* (May 1933): 280.

<sup>184</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>185</sup> Ziegler, Edward Krusen. *Rural People at Worship* (New York, N.Y.: Agricultural Missions, inc., 1943): 38-39.

The service was as follows:

*Congregational singing of hymns of Thanksgiving*

*Responsive Bible readings*

*Music by the women of the church*

*Testimonies about the material and spiritual blessings of God, by many members of the congregation*

*Thanksgiving message by a Missionary especially invited for the service*

*Dedication of the Gifts*

In the church service, as gifts were dedicated to the church, a bond between the farmer and God was built. The aim of the farmer's Spring and Autumn Festival was not only to help Christian farmers realize that "they are co-workers with God and should be grateful to Him for the harvest"; the Church also hoped that during the festivals, they would introduce the Lord's Acre Plan during these festivals."<sup>186</sup> Again, Christian land ethics not only led to spiritual awakening; it was expected to solve the more mundane problems facing churches.

Felton also suggested a pledge card that could be use for the rural church to encourage sacrifice to the church, as "the necessarily sudden withdrawal of mission subsidy in recent years unfortunately closed many church doors, decreased the number of trained resident ministers and wrecked many promising missionary enterprises."<sup>187</sup> For example:

**Acknowledging God's gifts to me, and His claim upon me and upon my time, I hereby pledge to my church: \_**

**Weekly Cash Gifts.....\$per week, to be paid if possible at the time of the regular Church service.**

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<sup>186</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>187</sup> Felton, *Far East*, 150.

**Harvest Gifts**..... ..\$to be paid in cash or produce at harvest time.

**Labor Gifts**.....\$days of labor. This labor is to be on my farm, or on the church farm, or in some village craft, the income from which is to go to my church.

**Crops**.....this crop on my farm or on the church farm, raised from my seed or from seed furnished me by the Church, I agree to tend furnished me by the church, I agree to tend faithfully and give the proceeds to my church.

**Animals**.....these animals, belonging to me or to the church, I agree to feed and care for and give the proceeds to the Church.

**Home-Crafts**.....these articles I agree to make and to give the proceeds to the Church

Signed.....

(Each member should select as many of these forms of supporting his church as he can undertake.)

In the harvest festival and in the pledge card, there was an emphasis on recognizing harvest as a “material blessing of God.”<sup>188</sup> The ritual of dedicating crops, with the bamboo sticks and red paper, might remind one of rituals dedicating to appease “superstitions”; the difference is that on the altar there was a new deity. The pledge card reflected the land ethics; however, the rhetoric aimed to encourage material sacrifice.

## Chapter Five

### Conclusion

Agricultural missions in China was an evolving movement. Before “the first agricultural missionary” came to China, agricultural work done by Christian missionaries began in sporadic efforts. The agricultural missions in China could be seen as both a part of the World Agricultural Missions movement and an outgrowth of Christian church’s famine relief work in China.

Agricultural missions in China gained momentum in the 1910s and 1920s. College-trained agronomists, such as Groff and Reisner, arrived and launched various kinds of programs to improve agriculture. Those American agronomists, with their expertise in agriculture, contributed much to China’ agricultural development through a variety of improvements, education, and agricultural extension work. Though there had never been a large number of agronomist missionaries in China, since the recruitment of American agronomists to China was difficult, other Christian workers, both Chinese and American, responded to the appeal and conducted agricultural work. The 1920s also witnessed the growth of agricultural missions as an organized movement, as a number of agricultural mission organizations were established in China and around the world. Christian conferences also started to take agricultural work as part of missionary work. The Jerusalem Meeting in 1928 marked the general recognition of agricultural missions as an integral part of missionary work with the Church, and Dr. Butterfield’s visit to China ignited the Chinese Church’s enthusiasm in rural reconstruction. The Nationalist government, who in the late 1920s finally gained control over the country, also asked the Missions to offer assistance in its countryside reconstruction campaign.

However, agricultural missions in China had never been a really organized movement. There was no clear agenda, and missionaries worked separately without much cooperation. Their interests in agricultural work could also vary from person to



person. Agricultural colleges took it as an opportunity to expand their influence in the East, while young, ambitious agriculturists volunteered in China with the hope that their expertise would bring material salvation to the people. China was considered by missionaries to be a land untouched by modern science, a test field where one could explore all possibilities and make great achievements. As for missionaries that had no agricultural training, doing agricultural work was a way to alleviate the financial strain of their institutions or of their parish. Not satisfied with only preaching, they were eager to venture beyond the spiritual realm to more mundane concerns and bring changes to the environment. Generally speaking, the Christian missionaries' secular interests varied from person to person and did not form one narrative.

It is not surprising that the missionaries' secular interests were criticized within missionary bodies for being too "secular" and deviating from evangelistic work. As a result, an attempt to combine Christianity and agriculture emerged, seeking not only to serve as a rhetorical weapon to defend the agricultural missions but also creating a new rural philosophy that could help in Christianizing China's countryside.

The dual-task model justified the missions' involvement in China's social reform by separating the significance of agriculture work into two parts: one spiritual and the other material. A new Christian land ethics combined the two, arguing that farming is in itself a spiritual activity, and thus agricultural work was addressing a spiritual issue. This Christian land ethics also could also serve as a rural philosophy, a Christian man-land relation that would help to reconstruct China's countryside and build Christian communities.

Agricultural missionaries, however, also found that they were not preaching a new rural philosophy into an ideological vacuum. Not only backward techniques but also "superstitions" hindered the missions' agricultural work, but missionaries believed that they could be uprooted by modern science—the embodiment of "God's will" and an

apparatus that Christianity was justified to utilize. But by casting local beliefs as “superstitions” that could be uprooted by Western philosophy, agricultural missions failed to recognize that local beliefs, be it the worship of “Lord of Heaven” or other “evil spirits,” already contained a man-land relation that had been practiced for generations. Just like the offering of wheat and a chicken to church emphasizes the Christian stewardship, in festivals that appease “evil spirits” the Chinese farmers’ bond with the local deity was also enhanced. And though some examples suggest that the Christian land ethics could be integrated into everyday life in an already established Christian community, there was no evidence showing that it helped to make converts. In other words, it seemed difficult to break a bond and replace it with a new one. Just as with the spirit-appeasing festival, the villagers were glad to offer the Christian pastor the money that was intended for a “superstitious” ritual, but they would not easily give up the old ritual.

The most efficient way that the agricultural missions could offer to make fundamental change might be, after all, modern science. But the relation between Christianity and modern, Western forms of science would be another tricky question for missions to address, the two being, at times, incompatible. Agricultural missionaries were always trying to stick to a dualism, trying to prove that Christianity can be equally spiritual and material. To some extent, instead of Christianizing “secular” activities the movement is more like a pursuit of missions. It is not surprising that the agriculturalists are now mostly remembered as reformers, experts or scholars, rather than missionaries.

The combination of Christianity and agriculture, therefore, can be seen as more broadening the boundary of the missions into secular realms rather than a Christianization of agriculture. As Ryan Dunch says of Social Gospel in “Beyond Cultural Imperialism: Cultural Theory, Christian Missions, and Global Modernity,” *History and Theory*, “missionaries of social gospel, though considered themselves more sympathetic to their

host cultures than their forebears, were seeking a total transformation, and were generally more culturally invasive than the more theologically conservative missionaries (of earlier or later periods) who explicitly sought to separate evangelism from political or cultural concerns.”<sup>189</sup> By undertaking a role that did not seem to belong to them, Christians were trying to prove that Christianity is more than a religion, and missions more than just preaching gospel.

However, the agricultural missions’ limited influence in converting Chinese farmers to Christianity was the result of multiple factors, especially the economic and social turbulence in the early 1920s. Facing warlordism, the rise of Communism and the Japanese invasion, only a small part of the plan was delivered. For the future, it would be interesting to look at agricultural missions in other countries and make a comparison to China.

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<sup>189</sup>Dunch, Ryan, “Beyond Cultural Imperialism: Cultural Theory, Christian Missions, and Global Modernity,” *History and Theory* (Oct 2002): 301-325.

## Acknowledgment

I would first like to thank my thesis advisor, professor Amy Laura Hall of the Divinity School. I cannot appreciate more for her patience, encouragement, motivation, and enthusiasm. Working with her is one of the most wonderful experience in my life.

I would also like to thank the rest of my Committee: Professor Prasenjit Duara of the History department offered insightful comments on my thesis and suggestions of potential future research. This thesis is actually developed from a term paper I wrote in his class, and I can't thank him enough for the inspiring class. I would also like to thank Kent, who read my thesis carefully and sent me extensive edits. I can't imagining completing this work without you.

I would also like to thank Mr. Carson Holloway, who helped me obtain resources from other institutions. Suzanne Estelle-Holmer at the Yale Library also helped me a lot in doing the research.

I also want to thank the rest of the GLS house: Donna, Dink, and Lisa, for the warmest support they gave me. I enjoyed every minute I spend with them.

Finally, I must express my gratitude to my parents and friends. This work would not have been possible without them. Thank you.

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