

THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE OVERSEAS MISSIONER



by Anders B. Hanson

In one sense this or any article that seeks to explore the contemporary scene in the People's Republic of China (PRC) in terms of the role of the Christian missionary, might as well end before it starts. In a recent issue of Christian Scholar's Review, XVII, Sept. 1987, Dr. Paul Spickard, a college professor of history, following a seven-week, on location study of church life in the PRC, and having read a wide range of books and articles on the subject, reflects the attitude of the generally recognized church leaders in China as follows: "They leave no door open for the return of Western missionaries, although they welcome friendly relations with foreign Christian organizations and individuals." (p.71) In short, there is no role today for the foreign missionary in China. But more about this later.

Yet the question persists in the minds of many, including the editor of this magazine, who has graciously offered the opportunity for me to record my reflections on the subject. Wishing to base my reflections on my personal experiences and recollections, let me briefly note the vantage point from which my observations are made. I am a China-born American of Scandinavian parentage. I grew up in central China in a Lutheran missionary home. My first four years of elementary education, including one year of schooling in Sweden, was in the Swedish language, before completing grade school in the US. Four years of high school were spent in China at a missionary school. Following college and

theological training plus two years of Chinese language study, I began my missionary career in China shortly after World War II. I served until the fall of 1949 in the provinces of Henan and Yunan. Following a study furlough I continued my missionary service for ten years in Taiwan and for sixteen years in Hongkong. Since returning to the US in 1980 I have served as tour leader for several groups visiting the PRC. Most of the groups were intent on relating to the Christian community in China in whatever way possible.

Since this assignment came to me partly because I am a second-generation China missionary, I intend to take note of any role-changes that occurred in the ministry of my father and my own - some of which were carried out in the same location. But first let me introduce my missionary parents.

A Pioneer Missionary in Henan Province, China

My father, Mauritz B. Hanson, an immigrant from Sweden, educated in America, was ordained into the gospel ministry in 1912. That same year he was sent to China by the Board of Foreign Missions of the Augustana Lutheran Church and joined the first half-dozen missionaries of that recently organized mission which was located in central Henan Province. Four years later he was joined by his betrothed, Gerda Liljeblad, who traveled to China via Siberia by rail. They were married at Luoyang, known in those days as Honanfu. In order to be properly registered with the American Consulate - my father being an American citizen - the bridal couple journeyed to Hankou in Hubei Province and repeated the ceremony with a consular officer present. My father's missionary career was spent at various locations in Henan, until his return to US in 1948.

At the outset it should be noted that the "role" of the missionary was and is quite varied, depending upon the mission, society or church in which the person is serving. Different roles depend in part also on the geographical location of the missionary's work. To serve in the larger metropolitan port cities where the influence of foreigners engaged in industry and commerce was felt and tourists were evident is quite different from ministering in a remote village. My father and I served in a mission in the inland province of Henan where the people were preponderantly rural and seldom came in contact with foreigners. Consequently the "big-nose" or "foreign-devil" - as we were often called - was regarded with mixed feelings of fear, curiosity, bewilderment, appreciation and, at times awe, and yes, at times with contempt.

In view of the mixed attitudes of the local citizens toward foreigners in general as well as to the particular individuals that took up residence in the community, it was an involved task to establish one's role in relation to the various elements in the city or town. There were courtesy calls to local magistrates, business contacts with bankers and merchants, builders and artisans, coordinating relief agencies and government officials. We negotiated with robber bands for the release of a captured colleague and invited newly arrived warlord to tea. Yet at the same time, we held true to our basic role of Christian emissary.

During my first ten years (1917-1926) two movements impacted life in China. One was the rise of bai hua, or "plain speech" or vernacular movement. The use of the vernacular language for literary purposes, in place of the stylized old literary way of writing provided the basis for much broader literacy throughout the land. Linked with this, in 1919 the Union Version of the Bible, which became the major tool for disseminating the Christian faith was published. With this the number of literates, even among women, was increased.

Another movement was the series of student uprisings, aimed in protest against the unequal treaties to which the Chinese had been subjected by Western powers. In response to the student clamor, and with the agreement by many of the missionary boards, the offending treaties were abrogated. This meant a role change for the missionary in China. No longer would the foreigner be tried by his own law and consular courts, but would be subject to the Chinese jurisprudence and Chinese law enforcement officials.

Adjustment to differences in Chinese ways of life by the missionaries was not always learnt the easy way. My parents on one occasion learned it the hard way. The first assignment given to Mauritz and Gerda Hanson was to be



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stationed in the rural town of Baofend, about 70 miles southeast of Luoyang. There being no railway. They would need to travel by horsecart. Instead of hiring the local Peking cart, with its springless suspension, the groom had purchased a mail-order Montgomery Ward horse carriage from US. It was a smart looking, spring suspended, comfortable, canopied vehicle, easily pulled by one horse. Off they rode with their baggage - like a honeymoon trip. The trip must have been an exciting adventure as they traveled on to their first mission station. As the story goes, all went well until they neared the end of the journey. It seems that the horsecarts from America did not have the same length of axle as the local carts. Hence the foreign carts were a problem on roads where the Chinese carts had cut deep ruts. And so as they approached the end of their trip the wheels of their cart got caught in the ruts and overturned spilling people and luggage in the ditch. My mother refused to ride in that carriage again. Many years later I discovered the cart hanging dustcovered from the rafters of an out-of-the-way shed in the Luoyang mission compound. By then the roads in the area were in better repair, but my father refused to allow me to hitch it up and drive around. Father refused to have anything to do with either motorcycles or cars, even though his fellow missionaries used them. He did his traveling throughout the countryside by bicycle. The moral of the story is, as I once heard one of China's leaders say: "Just because it is made in U.S.A. does not mean that it is suited for or beneficial for China."

My parents, like most of their missionary peers, went to China with a deep sense of commitment, resolved to contribute toward the well-being of China's people, be it spiritual, intellectual or physical. As so-called career missionaries they had prepared to spend a lifetime in Christian service abroad. That role has in succeeding generations begun to change, so that more short-term assignments are being filled by younger men and women.

Task of the Pioneer Missionary

My father's schooling was primarily in biblical studies and theology. However, he also had some training in practical nursing, which came in handy from time to time when the patient load at the mission dispensary the time and energy of the regular medical staff. During the course of the 38 years that he served under the mission board, he became actively involved in assisting at the hospital, directing relief projects and carrying on mission and church administration in addition to his primary tasks of evangelism and church development.

My mother, a school teacher by profession, also had taken a course in basic nursing. In China she put her training to work in various ways. She provided health care to her three children - all born in Henan - as well as giving them their initial school at home. At the same time she turned her attention to meeting some of the needs of Chinese girls from indigent families. She set up a "sewing school" to provide them with some vocational skills as an alternative to servitude or prostitution. She not only passed on her skills with needle and thread and knitting needles and yarn, but gathered the products from the school, taking them to mission gatherings and to churches in US, using the proceeds to support her "sewing girls."

Along similar lines, my wife Marit, in addition to serving as treasurer for the mission, devoted a great deal of time to Braille textbooks for secondary and college students to enable blind students to gain an education in the English language. Marit was also involved as a teacher for our children in their early schooling.

Evangelistic Outreach: Tent Bands

My father's ministry was not a one-man show. Besides working directly under the mission conference, he teamed up with his missionary



and Chinese co-workers in the area. One such area of cooperative work was the "tent band" program. Early in the history of our mission it was agreed that the missionaries - whether serving in the proclamation of the gospel in the cities or countryside, or teaching students in the schools, or healing patients in clinics or hospitals - must share the workload with the nationals. Only in effective cooperation with the trained and dedicated Chinese co-workers could there be any hope of meeting the challenge presented by China's millions.

One area of special cooperation was through the tent bands. This method was adopted early and continued for many years and formed the base of what grew into the Central Henan Lutheran Church. In order to reach the people in the thickly populated villages with the gospel, open-air preaching was carried on in market towns on fair days. Tracts were distributed and gospels sold to interested people. At times a streetside room or hall was rented to serve as a regular meeting place. More often the open-air meetings were followed by setting up a gospel tent. These tents were at times manned by ten or twelve evangelists who would visit the homes and invite people to the daily meetings. They sold Christian books and taught classes of inquirers who wanted to learn more about the Christian faith. The tent remained in a village for about one month, during which time a catechetical class might be formed and people would begin to prepare for baptism. Through the use of several tents, nine months out of the year, it was possible to reach large numbers of people with the Christian message.

Training of Chinese Evangelists

My father was not directly part of the tent band. However, together with other missionaries and Chinese pastors, he spent several weeks each year in the training of the tent-band evangelists. Besides being briefed on the logistics, economics and housekeeping matters, they were taught biblical knowledge, catechetical training methods, how to preach and give a testimony, as well as how to lead singing of gospel song. The evangelists came from many walks of life. Some had some formal education, more than likely according to traditional Confucianism. Others were not very lettered, but had a desire to share their Christian faith. Few if any were wealthy, materially speaking, but they were eager to let others know of the riches of God's grace in Christ. The role of the missionary in the tent-band movement was that of a facilitator or enabler. That same role continues to be carried out even after the tent-band method has folded, even as teachers prepare evangelists through Bible institutes and theological seminaries, as was my privilege.

Another feature of the tent-band program was that it served as a testing ground out of which promising men were selected as full-time evangelists and/or candidates for further training at the theological seminary at Shekou, near Hankou. The role of evaluator and selector of church leaders has in more recent times passed from the missionary to the Chinese church itself.

Chapels, Churches and Out-Stations

As chapels were established in towns and villages, regular worship and teaching schedules were set up and seminary graduate installed for internship, congregations would form and call a Chinese pastor; and this group of believers would begin an outreach program in some nearby community. The missionary pastor was kept busy guiding the progress of such church-building. Having a number of such projects in progress required a good deal of supervision. My father's trips into the countryside would at times keep him away from home for extended periods of time. At these so-called "out-stations" he would find lodging in the guestroom at the chapel, and usually share the fare of the local church leader, or during special evangelism gathering he would eat "big-kettle-food" along with the listeners who assembled from surrounding villages. One of my father's fellow missionaries was known by the Chinese as "the pastor of the road," a commentary on his frequent visits to the villages in his assigned area of work. Deservedly, my father could have been dubbed "the bicycle pastor" judging by the way he cycled in fair weather and foul to keep in touch with the burgeoning groups of believers in the Yenshih and Dengfeng districts. At the outset of my ministry in Henan, I too biked to the 14 outposts in the adjoining Linru and Yiyang districts, but with a significant change of role. I served as a neophyte missionary under the tutelage of a seasoned Chinese pastor.

The Missionary Compound and Mission Station

Rightly or wrongly foreign missionaries are accused of developing a "compound complex" and sequestering themselves within the walls of their



westernized homes and gardens, and living in semi-isolation from the people they came to serve. Among the early Lutheran missionaries, as well as in several other mission societies, many of the foreigners chose to live in the same kind of houses as the average Chinese family. In time, as fatigue and illness took their toll of life, some groups ours included, arranged for its

personnel to live in residences that afforded a healthier environment and also provided some respite from the energy-draining day's work.

It should be observed that the Chinese people generally lived in compounds, so the question with respect to the foreign missionary was one of the standard of living - moderate or extravagant life-style - and accessibility to the Chinese people.

Often the mission compound was part of the larger complex known in early days as the mission station. It included the chapel or church, the school/s and the dispensary or hospital. Normally there was much traffic between the various institutions and the missionary home by pastors, doctors, teachers and evangelists. Long hours of consultation about "the work" took place in the missionary's study. Missionary pastors as a rule attended the morning and evening chapel services along with their Chinese colleagues, and took their turn in leading the daily devotions, thus reinforcing the role of being a member of the team.

The Three-Self Movement

In recent years much has been written about the Three-Self Patriotic Movement in the church in China. This emphasis on developing a self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating Christian church in China was given strong impetus by the People's Republic of China government through the Three-self Patriotic Movement organization during the 1950's. Following the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) the Three-self Patriotic Movement was revived and serves as an effective liaison between government and local congregations, especially in negotiating the return of church property to the Christians. It is well to remember that the three-fold principle aimed at creating an indigenous Chinese church freed from outside domination dates back at least to the 1920's. I recall my father expressing himself along those lines in relation to the policies of the Lutheran mission program. In the 1950's and 60's during my ministry in Taiwan and Hongkong I was cast in the role of an implementer of these principles, especially in working out a program whereby there was a gradual reduction of mission subsidy both in the local congregations as well as the church related institutions. That was concurrent with the election of Chinese leadership in the church, schools and agencies.

An example is my own case, after more than dozen years of missionary service in China and Taiwan, I was transferred in the fall of 1966 to be Director of the Taosheng Publishing House in Hong Kong.

Publication work had long been a vital concern of Lutheran missions and in 1920 the Lutheran Board of Publications was established. A broad range of printed material was produced, enlisting the talents of foreigners and Chinese alike, though the directorship and funding remained largely under missionary control. The publication work was now put under an eight-man board which included two missionaries. The Taosheng Publishing House staff was entirely Chinese, but the Director of Publications was a foreign missionary. To meet the growing needs of the member churches the TPH greatly expanded production to include every type of Christian printed matter from theological textbooks and biblical commentaries to calendars. When I shed my role as Director, the post was given to an able and creative successor, Pastor Yin Ying.

At this point I seriously thought of returning to the US for the remaining years of ministry. But at the request of my Chinese colleagues I remained in Hongkong to serve at the Lutheran Theological Seminary.

While I was at TPH, one of the editorial staff was sent to the US for study in the field of Religious Education. After receiving his Ph.D., he returned to Hongkong and was called to teach at the seminary. He was installed as the first Chinese President of the seminary. The installation of Dr. Andrew K.H. Hsiao as president marked a major role change in theological education in Lutheran circles.

Dr. Hsiao invited me to be his secretary, handling English correspondence, reports, etc. What makes this interesting is that at the publishing house, Dr. Hsiao was a member of my staff. At the seminary I was a member of his staff. The positions were reversed. To bring my years of service among the Chinese to a close in this reverse role was an indication of some of the changes that have taken place in the changing role of the foreign missionary.

In conclusion, let us take note of one of the most pregnant statements ascribed to that peerless first-century missionary, the Apostle Paul. In Second Timothy, chapter two, verse two, we read that he wrote to his understudy and missionary colleague, Timothy, regarding evangelizing and church planting,

The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.

This early bit of "missiology" points directly to the missionary role as that of a missionary-maker. Circumstances may change, methods

may change, even language and customs as well as audiences and media may change, but the task remains constant: be faithful to the witness you have received and commit the message to faithful messengers who will follow you.

An addendum: As an observer of the scene in China today, there is much that registers favorable with me. But in all honesty I must call attention to one situation that troubles my mind. In a day when China is striving to "modernize", and welcomes diplomatic representatives, commercial and industrial magnates, educators in various fields, medical teams and even sports trainers, how is it the foreign missionaries are being firmly yet politely asked to remain aloof?

Genuine cordiality is extended to visiting church leaders and groups in the churches and seminaries throughout China. But to date I know of no request for persons to come and serve shoulder to shoulder in the colossal task of evangelizing or church building. Maybe in the strategy of the Lord of the church, we are awaiting the time when Chinese Christians and churches abroad will unite to implement an effective plan to link up with their Chinese brothers and sisters in the faith in the gospel ministry throughout that vast land! It still remains to be seen what role, if any, the foreign missionary will have in the China of tomorrow.

