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Mission Education as a Community Effort in Early Twentieth-Century North China

by John R. Stanley, Ph.D.

Abstract

This article looks at the dynamics of the Protestant missionary education in North China at the turn of the twentieth century. Focusing on the American Presbyterian school system in Shandong province, it investigates a number of attempts by Chinese Christian educators to claim more power and play an active role in the development of the Christian mission education. It argues that the American Presbyterian missionaries completely depended on their Chinese colleagues to administer the mission school system. As the 1910s came to an end, there were more opportunities for Chinese workers to take up administrative positions in the mission schools. To a large extent, there was a gradual process of devolution of power within the mission school system. It was in this process that Chinese staff had acquired the necessary skills and knowledge to run the schools on their own.

Mission education constituted an integral part of Christian missionary movements in modern China. The early twentieth-century witnessed intense power struggles between the Christian missionary enterprise and Chinese Republican state over control of education, as scholars such as Jessie G. Lutz and Yip Ka-che have shown (Lutz, 1971, 1988; Yip, 1980). Much attention has been given to the impact of Christian mission education on China’s modernization in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Leung, 1993). Historians either praise or criticize the ways in which Christian missionaries shaped the development of modern educational institutions in China. Some scholars have focused on the ways in which mission education contributed to the anti-footbinding campaign and therefore, empowered Chinese women in a patriarchal society (Yung, 1999). What is missing in the scholarly literature, however, is the important role that Chinese educators played in the day-to-day management of primary and secondary school systems within the Christian missionary enterprise. A closer look at the Chinese contribution to the advancement of mission education will not only throw lights on the relationship between Chinese Christians and their missionary patrons, but also contribute to our understanding of the dynamic process of “education building” in the early twentieth century.

This article focuses on the Weixian (Wei-hsien) school system, one of the most successful educational systems of the American Presbyterian mission in Shandong province, North China. Between 1900 and 1920, student numbers rose from 756 to 2,415, making up 31% of the total student population in the primary and secondary schools of the Shandong Mission. This study seeks to explore the internal operation of this Christian educational enterprise and the interactions between foreign missionaries and Chinese workers. It does not suggest that the American Presbyterian missionaries completely devolved power to the Chinese administrators within the school system, or that they wanted this to happen outside of evangelistic work at any point in the future. With usually only one missionary assigned to manage the whole school system, the Presbyterian missionaries had little time to fully devote to the educational work, a fact which missionaries themselves constantly alluded to in their correspondence. Therefore, much of the day-to-day running of the schools was left to the Chinese staff, although the missionaries retained control of the top decision-making apparatus.

Beginning with a brief analysis of the school Superintendent in the American mission, this study discusses the role of Chinese administrators and educational staff, as well as the unofficial Chinese movements within the system, including Chinese students’ activities and the expansion of educational activities undertaken by Chinese staff outside the mission system. The period under study is from 1900 to 1920 when the major expansion efforts in the mission school system took place.

I. The American Presbyterian Educational System in Shandong

The American Presbyterian country school system began in the 1880s but its student body was minuscule compared with later years. At this early stage, missionaries played the primary role in running and coordinating the system on the ground. By 1890, however, the school system had grown considerably with about 1,000 pupils recorded in 1895. Because of the increase in the number of students and the limited amount of time each missionary could give to their work, the quality of the mission schools started to decrease. To ensure uniform quality in the system, the missionaries appointed Li Shi-huo, a Chinese Presbyterian, as “Superintendent of Country Schools” to take charge of the boys’ country school examinations and to “unify them and get them in better shape.” In 1891, the missionaries considered Li’s work to be a great success, and the system remained decentralized. This, however, gave rise to varying levels of academic standards.

In 1891, the administrative role of the Superintendent was enhanced. Li Shi-huo was now given the job of ensuring a uniform quality of studies and materials used in the schools. With greater power given to a layperson such as Li, the missionaries had trouble convincing the Chinese pastors of their need for a Superintendent. They did not give much explanation for this difficulty, but one can assume that the Chinese pastors felt any field the missionaries had control of would devolve to them, if to anyone at all. In any case, by 1892, the missionaries reported that Li’s work had “vastly improved” the efficiency and quality of the country schools. Unfortunately, no records have been found from the Superintendent about what his work would have actually entailed, and whether or not he, as opposed to some other force at work, was indeed responsible for the improvements. The work of the Superintendent changed little in the following years with much of the control over the schools remaining in the hands of the missionaries.
Two years later, in 1894, however, the number of day schools became too great for the missionaries to take a primary role in their running. The missionaries thus increased the role of the Superintendent and hired a second individual from Dengzhou College, a Presbyterian mission school, to lessen their workload. As Weixian Boys’ High School became prominent as the primary preparatory school for the College, there was a need for a more efficient system of advancement. With the withdrawal of the missionaries from the hands-on work of examining the country boys’ schools, the responsibility for choosing candidates for advancement fell largely to the two Chinese Superintendents in charge of examinations. One should note, however, that while they were charged with the general running of the system, final decisions of advancement were still made solely by the missionaries.

In 1898 the missionaries brought the day schools under the control of one individual to further improve the efficiency of the school system. They noted that a disjointed system could not ensure the same level of scholarship, but if the primary responsibility lay with one missionary, they could create a system with uniform standards of scholarship. In the past, 49 schools were divided among two or three missionaries. Now the system, extending over a 500 square mile area, came under the control of Frank Chalfant. The new responsibilities entrusted to him included making recommendations for teachers and school directors and enforcing the system’s regulations. Because of the increased workload, Chalfant looked to the Chinese Superintendents for more administrative assistance than had previously been asked of them. During the Boxer Uprising in 1900, the missionaries abandoned the station and retreated to the coastal cities until 1901 when they were permitted to re-enter the interior of Shandong. Upon their return, the missionaries sought to expand the school system. To accomplish the goal, they hired Ralph Wells, a professional educator, to take charge of the educational work.

In 1907, after the school system had gradually recovered from the Boxer Uprising, the position of Chinese Superintendent was restored. As before, he worked under the general oversight of a foreign missionary and was responsible for visiting and conducting the examinations in the primary day schools. Ralph Wells was brought in specifically to run the school system. Prior to his appointment, foreign missionaries had retained much control over the school system. But Ralph Wells was more concerned with running Point Breeze Academy in Weixian and making improvements there rather than travelling around the countryside and overseeing the country school network. The responsibility to supervise the country schools was therefore left to the Chinese Superintendent. In his report of 1912, Wells stated, “the actual supervision of the schools has been carried on by an efficient school inspector, a good deal of time has been spent conferring with him.” The Chinese Superintendent was also asked to look after student life and the material conditions of the school. There was indeed, then, a transfer of some administrative duties from the educational missionaries to the Chinese staff.

One should note that the Chinese Superintendent was only in charge of running the boys’ country schools. The girls’ country boarding schools were still overseen directly by the missionaries. However, when girls’ day schools were formed and expanded in 1907, a Chinese female Superintendent was appointed.

Devolution of power to the Chinese mission staff was not the only issue during the first decade of the twentieth century. By 1910, the Chinese Superintendent had been a part of the station’s school system for many years and gained much administrative experience. They had also cultivated contacts outside of the religious sphere, and had established close connections with local government schools and inspectors. The Chinese Superintendent continued to maintain a close relationship with the heads of government-run schools. They often shared information and visited each other’s schools, hoping to improve the standards of their own institutions. This inevitably impacted the views of education and the form that work took. In the case of local schools, some of the former Chinese Superintendents established private schools outside the missionary system. But those local schools within the missionary system instituted new teaching methods, one of which was to break up elementary and intermediate pupils, and to establish higher primary schools for intermediate pupils. A departure from the missionary approach of teaching all intermediate and elementary pupils in the one-room schoolhouse system, the creation of higher primary schools was indeed a step forward and later adopted by the missionaries themselves on a limited scale.

A certain degree of devolution of power to the Chinese Superintendent was underway to ensure the academic quality of students brought future success in higher education. However, the Superintendents were only one way to ensure the system’s success. The missionaries, presumably with the Superintendents, looked at all the day schools under their supervision and chose an individual they felt to be the best teacher. For example, in 1915, a Chinese teacher was chosen and freed from his duties so that he could visit all the country schools and spend a period ranging from one day to one week at each school. He would attend all the classes and introduce new teaching methods to country teachers. In the areas where he felt the local teachers were deficient, he would teach the class himself under the observation of the teachers in question, and then discuss the different teaching techniques with them. The objective of this programme was to introduce better teaching practices to the country schools and improve the performance of rural students. Soon after it began, in 1916–1917, this programme of itinerant teaching was replaced by a new banner system in which Chinese Superintendents would grade all the schools on a 1000-point scale based upon their teachers’ and students’ work, the condition of their equipment and buildings, and the health of their students. Upon reaching 800 points, a school would receive a “red satin banner” and be given the title of “standard school.”

The Chinese colleagues were only asked to administer the elementary schools, and were largely kept outside all major decision-making bodies. In 1913, however, an important move was made with the appointment of a Cooperation Committee consisting of five members, including Chinese

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and missionaries. This new organization set up an Educational Committee to take up the general oversight of the station’s educational system. The Committee appears to have taken direct control of the country primary schools so that Ralph Wells and Madge Mateer, one-time head of the girls’ country schools, could concentrate on the management of the Christian high schools and evangelistic work.

The first major accomplishment of the Cooperation Committee was to reform the girls’ country schools. All but two of the girls’ country boarding schools were transformed into day schools. This move helped create 34 new girls’ schools and 2 boarding schools serving as co-educational intermediate schools. Combined with the move towards co-education in the lower primary schools, there was new hope that a larger proportion of daughters would be able to obtain an education. Although Madge Mateer was not immediately won over to the new plans, she was surprised at the success of the schools on her first inspection tour in 1914. While acknowledging the small number of pupils taking advantage of the new co-educational policy, she was heartened by the educational push being made in the country districts.

The influence of the Cooperation Committee was not only felt at the elementary level but was also noted at the high school level in matters concerning the finance and curricula of Point Breeze Academy and Wen Mei School. Prior to the 1910s, both schools had a rather informal funding policy. However, with the involvement of the mission’s Educational Committee and the station’s Cooperative Committee, a more formal structure of tuition was put into place. In 1912, the Educational Committee proposed a self-supporting educational system requiring all pupils in the boarding schools to pay the full boarding cost. At the 1913 mission meeting, this proposal was accepted. However, the Cooperative Committee of individual stations formed a special committee to decide how much financial aid the mission should give to students who could not afford such an expense. This with this in mind, fees in Wen Mei School were raised to 26,000 large cash per student (approximately 26 Mexican silver dollars per student), beginning with the fall semester of 1913. Point Breeze Academy quickly followed suit and in 1914, introduced tuition fees for the first time. The new fees were equal to the full payment of the student’s expense on food. Only a few students could afford the full tuition fees, but 32 out of the 89 students paid some percentage of the tuition over the full boarding cost required by the mission. To help the students pay for their boarding costs, the Academy instituted a work-study programme for “worthy students of good character.”

Another area that came into prominence in the early 1900s was the addition of English to the curriculum at Point Breeze Academy. There had never been much debate among the missionaries, as they took the same view as their brethren in Dengzhou College that all teaching had to be done in Chinese so as not to de-nationalize the students. In 1911, the American Presbyterian West Shandong Mission resolved that the question of introducing English as an academic subject would be left to the individual Middle School principals, but that the introduction of an English course should not interfere with the current curriculum. In 1913, the Cooperation Committee used its weight to push the introduction of English into the Academy’s regular curriculum rather than allow it to be left as an optional subject. As the curriculum was enlarged to include English as a regular subject, the length of study was extended from two to three years. The introduction of English into the curriculum was gradual but quickly extended throughout the three class years.

Underlying these changes was the increase of Chinese involvement in the school system. Although the American missionaries did not always sanction all the educational proposals made by their Chinese colleagues, they did not criticize or oppose Chinese efforts to open new schools and improve the academic standard of students. One can see an “unofficial role” that the Chinese staff played in the Christian school system. If there had not been Chinese input, the system would not have been so successful.

In 1889, for the first time, Chinese Christians took steps themselves to establish new schools within the Presbyterian mission field. While we do not know if they finally succeeded nor the extent to which the missionaries were involved in this project, it is important to note their determination to establish schools for their children without waiting for the missionaries to do so. In the highly literate Chinese society, it was common for local communities to take independent action to establish private schools for their children as shown in Stig Thøgersen’s study of village schools in Zouping, Shandong (Thøgersen, 2002).

II. The Chinese Contributions to Mission Education

Although the missionaries had nominal control over these Chinese Christian schools, we do not know how these Chinese Christian founders and teachers ran the schools. What is known is that without a central organizing and supervising force, there arose once again the problem of keeping a uniform level of scholarship. In the 1890s, the introduction of Chinese Superintendent indicates that with the increase of school numbers, the Chinese teachers were actively involved in the decision-making process on the ground. It was through the enforcement of examination and school regulations that many of these Chinese Christian schools initially outside missionary control had been gradually integrated into the American Presbyterian missionary enterprise. The day-to-day operation of these schools, however, remained in Chinese hands. This shows that local Chinese Christians increased their control over mission education during the last decade of the Qing Dynasty.

This Chinese Christian initiative to construct boys’ and girls’ schools for Chinese students continued throughout the 1910s. After the 1911 Revolution, a major national reform of the school system in 1912 provided the broader framework for educational change in Shandong, for example the introduction of compulsory education and the coeducation of boys and girls, but not all aspects of the reform were implemented locally (Thøgersen, 2002, 59–60). Nevertheless, greater impetus for people in Weixian to found modern schools was noticeable. While many schools were founded along the old-style
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educational model, a significant number of the Chinese Christian schools sought to become part of the American Presbyterian mission school system. As Ralph Wells noted in 1915, those self-supporting schools begun by the local population in the countryside were applying to the Presbyterian mission to be “recognized as Cooperation Committee schools.” Once accepted, these local schools would continue to act on a self-supporting basis and would be able to send their students to the boys’ high school in the American Presbyterian Weixian station. In order to be accepted into the mission school system, the Presbyterian missionaries required local teachers and managers to be Christians and the schools to follow the regulations and curriculum set by the Cooperation Committee. These schools would be allowed to have pupils sit for the admissions examinations for the high school in Weixian, but the missionaries would send the Chinese Superintendent to visit them on occasion. Students graduating from these schools would receive the same certificates as the rest in the mission school system, and local teachers would also be able to take advantage of the periodic teachers’ institutes at the mission station and find resources. Indeed, these Chinese local schools had much to gain from affiliating with the Presbyterian mission. It is however unclear whether the local girls’ schools were integrated into the mission school system.

The Chinese contribution to the mission school system can be seen in the story of Pastor Liu Guang-zhao who founded the Anqiu Normal School south of Weixian with his wife. It opened with thirty-one students from the government and mission schools. The attendees signed up for a nine-month course after which each was given a certificate. The school was basically self-supporting with funds coming from students, local officials, and “one or two foreigners.” The students came from the mission school system. They, for one reason or another, could not attend or finish the full course at the Wen Mei School and only had a primary school education. The purpose of this school was not solely to replenish the teaching force of the Presbyterian primary schools, but also to provide more teachers for the government schools. Serving as a training institute for schoolteachers, the Anqiu Normal School quickly expanded by opening a primary day school for training purposes, and employed three government teachers to raise its quality. What Pastor Liu had achieved was remarkable. Without his efforts, there would not have been enough schoolteachers for either the mission or local school systems. By 1914 almost half of the female teachers in the government schools were trained at the Anqiu Normal School. What surprised the missionaries was the fact that these teachers only had a general primary education with one year additional training at Anqiu. By 1918, thirteen teachers in the girls’ country schools came from the Anqiu Normal School, and twenty-three were graduates of the Wen Mei School. Although Pastor Liu’s institution was not designed to supplant the mission station’s teacher-training programme, the education it provided was important for the local government girls’ schools.

With the success of the Anqiu Normal School, the benefits of this kind of training institution became obvious. The only reason for stopping the missionaries from opening a similar school for men was lack of space. It was only after the relocation of the College of Arts of the Shandong Christian University from Weixian to Jinan in 1917 that the missionaries decided to found the East Shandong Bible and Normal School to train primary schoolteachers and male evangelists.

This study would not be complete without a discussion of students’ involvement in shaping the policy of the newly affiliated local schools. After the 1911 Revolution, students throughout China were becoming more actively involved in politics and ensuring their needs to be met in schools. This eventually blossomed into the May Fourth Movement (1919–1921). The growth of student activism in national politics had an impact on students at the local level. In Shandong, the students at the high school level appeared to be very active in voicing their concerns to the missionaries. For example, in the fall semester of 1908, some students protested against the school’s cook and demanded his removal, threatening to leave the school otherwise. In 1912, Ralph Wells resolved this problem by allowing the students to supervise the cooking department, and the students elected a committee to run the new cooking department with their teachers serving as advisors. Wells believed that the students would benefit from this experience, and later introduced the same arrangement in Wen Mei School. The high school student movements did not end with this small victory. While the students were allowed to run the kitchen, they also protested against the Chinese Classics teacher. Although not as forceful as those against the cook, their protests entailed a refusal to attend his class such that Ralph Wells was forced to take action against the teacher by asking him to resign. The teacher soon left the school. In 1914 too, the students decided to adopt a new school uniform without inducement from the teachers or other school officials. In addition to this, the students began to take a greater interest in athletics without official encouragement. Because of student insistence, the missionaries had to introduce uniforms and athletics into the school, although they tried to avoid propagating the militaristic nature of these rituals and practices. Clearly, the students exercised a certain degree of influence in the school.

III. Conclusion

Through a case study of the American Presbyterian school system in Weixian, this article provides a fresh perspective on the contributions of Chinese staff to the development of the mission education. In the past, scholars have criticized Christian missionaries for not involving Chinese staff in educational work. However, this study has shown that at least in Weixian, the Presbyterian missionaries completely depended on their Chinese colleagues to administer the mission school system. As the 1910s came to a close, there were more opportunities for Chinese workers to take up administrative positions in Weixian. In many high schools, the Chinese were appointed as principals throughout the 1920s. To a large extent, then, there was a gradual process of devolution of power within the Weixian school system at the beginning of the twentieth century. It was in this process that Chinese staff acquired the necessary skills and knowledge to run the schools on their own.

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What happened to the Weixian mission school system during the turbulent period of the 1930s and 1940s? Despite the Japanese invasion of North China in the mid-1930s, the American Presbyterian missionaries and their Chinese staff continued to run the schools. But after the Pearl Harbor attack on December 7, 1941, the Japanese Imperial Army captured all foreign nations in Shandong and placed them in the Civilian Internment Camps. The Weixian School Compound was taken over by the Japanese forces. It was turned into an internment camp with barbed wire around its walls and admitted its first internees in March 1943. Through its gates passed approximately 1,200 internees, the most famous being Eric Liddell, a Scottish Presbyterian missionary and the 1924 Olympic champion. Although it had a checkered past as an American mission station and a Japanese internment camp, the Weixian School Compound was changed into a state-run educational institution after the Communist Revolution of 1949. The old mission school compound is a living testimony of the long history of cooperation between American Presbyterian missionaries and local Christians in the creation of one of China’s modern school systems. Today on the old mission school compound stands the No. 2 Middle School, a preeminent educational institution in the city of Weifang, and many contemporary schools in Shandong can trace their history back to their Presbyterian roots.

ENDNOTES


3. After 1900, the school was rebuilt and renamed the Point Breeze Academy. Its Chinese name also changed at that time.


6. Before 1907, there was no reference to the position of Chinese Superintendent in the missionary correspondence.


8. In his report for the year 1913–1914, Ralph Wells stated, “This year as in former years I have had charge of the Point Breeze Academy and the fifty-two Boys’ Country Schools in the Wei-Hsien district. Sixteen hours a week during the autumn term and seventeen during the spring term have been given to teaching which together with the station treasurer, the management of affairs in connection with the Compound Gate and membership on the University Property Committee and other committees have kept my time fairly occupied.” See “Personal Report for Year 1913–1914,” no date was given, Weixian, RG82/8/8/20–8, PHS.

9. Unfortunately, the names of Chinese educational and evangelistic staff at the Weixian Station were never mentioned in the missionary correspondence. “Personal Report of Mr. and Mrs. Ralph C. Wells to the Shantung Mission for the year ending August 31, 1912,” RG82/4/2/20/8, PHS.

10. In the report for the Weixian station for 1914, the new role of the superintendents was noted. “The material equipment of the schools is gradually being improved, and the inspectors [we assume there is more than one at this point] are gathering material for a comparative chart to use at our next institute, to show the sanitary conditions, lighting, ventilation, condition of the walls, floors, desks, seats, blackboards and other equipment.” See “Report for the Wei-Hsien Station for the year ending July 11, 1914,” RG82/8/8/20–2, 22, PHS.


13. Ibid.


16. The sources do not indicate how many Chinese were present on the Cooperation Committee, but there seems to have been at least two. The sources also do not mention the exact number of Chinese members on the Educational Committee. The Seventy-Seventh Annual Report of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (1914): 154, PHS.

17. After 1900, particularly after 1911, education became a status symbol and many parents found that education allowed their daughters to secure a better marriage. Therefore, there was strong support for education for girls at the local level. In Weixian, it was the local communities that introduced girls’ education. “Wei-Hsien Quarterly Station Letter,” 26 January 1914, Weixian, RG82/8/7/102; J. A. Fitch to A. J. Brown, 6 April 1914, Weixian, RG82/8/7/43; “Report for the Wei-Hsien Station for the year ending July 11, 1914,” Weixian, RG82/8/8/20–2, 22–23, PHS.

18. The policy at that time was to ask students to pay whatever they could afford. Then, the mission stations or other sponsors would pay for the rest of the educational expenses.


21. “Report of the Wei-Hsien Station for the year ending August 20, 1913,” Weixian, RG82/6/2/20–2, PHS.


23. The question of introducing English into the school system followed the protests in the Arts College in which one of the students’ demands was that English language instruction be introduced. Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the Shantung Mission of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, October 1911 (Weixian: Shantung University Press, 1911): 12, PHS.

24. One should note here that the Weixian station was very much ahead of its time in allowing Chinese staff members to participate in the running of its schools through the Cooperation Committee. The American Presbyterian Shandong Mission did not form its own Cooperation Committee until 1913. Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the Shantung Mission of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1913 (Weixian:
The 1911 Revolution was the final overthrow of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). This signified a new age in Chinese history and many modernization reforms were begun during this time. Most importantly, the government attempted to establish modern schools and regulate the missionary schools. At this time the government was very weak as is seen in the rise of various warlords across China. It was not until the Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek gained control in 1928 that significant changes were enacted.

31. “Report of the Wei-hsien Boys’ Primary and Intermediate Schools for the year ending June 30, 1915,” RG82/10/7/20–2, PHS.

32. In the missionary literature his name is given as Liu Gwang Djao. His principle occupation was as a pastor and he worked as principal in a local government school before opening the Normal School. This school and the work it represented became the hallmark of the City Evangelization Movement in the 1910s and 1920s.


34. The Seventy-Eighth Annual Report of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (1915): 148, PHS.

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