Surviving Chinese Xenophobia, Anti-Missionary Sentiment, and Civil Wars

The Norwegian Lutheran Mission in the Turbulent 1920s

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Abstract: The theologically conservative organisation which is now called the Norwegian Lutheran Mission began to propagate the Gospel in the Chinese provinces of Henan and Hubei in the 1890s and very early in the twentieth century. Evangelisation was complemented by educational and, to a lesser extent, medical ministries. By the 1920s, a decade marked by almost continuous political unrest and civil wars in China, the NLM had 70 to 80 men and women in various kinds of missionary endeavours there. The present article explores the crises to which it was exposed, how it dealt with them, and how at the end of that decade it seemed to stand on relatively firm ground, despite ongoing instability and widespread hostility to foreign missionaries. The NLM continued to prioritize the evangelization of "heathens" during this period but also strengthened its efforts to provide medical care. Only rarely did its missionaries evince any understanding of the so-called "unequal treaties" which had been imposed by foreign powers on China to facilitate the sending of foreign purveyors of the Gospel into central China. Leaders of the NLM, such as secretary general Johannes Brandtzæg superintendent Olav Espegren were at times more concerned about the inroads which theological liberalism was making in China than with addressing issues of social injustice. The partial transfer of ecclesiastical leadership to Chinese did little to stem indigenous hostility and did not prevent the expulsion of the NLM and virtually all other foreign missionary organizations after the proclamation of the People's Republic of China in October 1949.

Keywords: Norwegian Lutheran Mission, China, xenophobia, anti-missionary movements, unequal treaties, 1920s.

Sammenfatning: Den teologisk konservative organisasjonen som nå heter Norsk Luthersk Misjonssamband begynte å utbre evangeliet i de kinesiske provinsene Henan

og Hubei på 1890-tallet og svært tidlig på 1900-tallet. Evangelisering ble supplert med skole- og i mindre grad medisinsk virksomhet. På 1920-tallet, et tiår preget av nesten kontinuerlig politisk uro og borgerkriger i Kina, hadde NLM 70 til 80 menn og kvinner i ulike typer misjonsinnsats der. Denne artikkelen går nærmere inn på krisene de ble utsatt for, hvordan de håndterte dem og hvordan NLM på slutten av det tiåret så ut til å stå på relativt fast grunn, til tross for pågående ustabilitet og utbredt fiendtlighet mot utenlandske misjonærer. NLM fortsatte å prioritere evangeliseringen av såkalte "hedninger" i denne perioden, men styrket også innsatsen for å gi medisinsk behandling. Bare en sjelden gang viste dens misjonærer noe forståelse av de såkalte "asymmetriske traktatene" som hadde blitt pålagt av utenlandske makter på Kina å lette sendingen av utenlandske formidlere av evangeliet inn i det sentrale Kina. Ledere i NLM, bl. a. generalsekretær Johannes Brandtzæg og tilsynsmann Olav Espegren, var til tider mer bekymret over utbredelsen av teologisk liberalisme i Kina enn spørsmål om sosial urettferdighet. Den delvise overføringen av kirkelig lederskap til kinesiske kristne gjorde lite for å motvirke fiendtlighet og forhindret ikke utvisningen av NLM og praktisk talt alle andre utenlandske misjonsorganisasjoner etter erklæringen av Folkerepublikken Kina i oktober 1949.

Keywords: Norwegian Lutheran Mission, China, xenophobia, anti-missionary movements, unequal treaties, 1920s.

Introduction[1]

The scholarly historiography of Norwegian missionary endeavours in China, not unlike that describing analogous endeavours in southern Africa, has advanced on an uneven front. From a relatively early stage, Lutheran and other Norwegian Christians who sought to propagate the Gospel in the Middle Kingdom recorded their successes and failures and wrote extensively about the many challenges they faced. The archives of their commissioning agencies are rich troves of documentation, and the periodicals which those organisations published placed a wealth of information before the eyes of their supporters. Popular books detailing many aspects of this broad, interdenominational endeavour began to appear well over a century ago and have continued to be published in recent decades. However, when one turns to scholarly treatises about Norwegian missions in China, the yield is unsurprisingly inconsistent. To be sure,

1 The research for and writing of this article were done at Fjellhaug International University College in Oslo, where I was privileged to be a Visiting Scholar for three months in 2022. I wish to express my gratitude to archivist Håkon Bakken, former archivist Erik Kjebekk, and librarian Tom Erik Hamre for their assistance in my quest for the multiplicity of sources on which this article rests.

missiologists, historians, and others have ploughed many furrows in this expansive field, but much of it remains virtually virgin soil.

Within the broader matrix encompassing several parachurch and other agencies, the history of the Norwegian Lutheran Mission's[2] nearly six decades of endeavours in China has not been completely ignored in the published literature of missions to East Asia. However, most of what has appeared is of a popular sort, written more in a celebratory than a critically analytical mode. Thus one finds such surveys as those by Arne Tiltnes and August Vik[3] and a very circumscribed number of more specialised, annotated studies, such as Erik Kjebekk's article about the martyred missionary Knut Iversen Samset[4] and book about the Norwegian-American physician Tønnes Frøyland, who was murdered during an attack on the main station in March 1914.[5] Measured by the canons of professional historiography, much of the NLM's work in East Asia remains untold.

Most of the history of the NLM's endeavours in China during the crucial period of the 1920s, an era marred by verbal and physical abuse of both personnel and property culminating in the temporary evacuation of most foreign missionaries representing dozens of agencies from vast areas of the Middle Kingdom in 1927, has been treated only superficially. To be sure, crises were a recurrent theme in the general saga of missionary Christianity there, but in this decade several of them overlapped to threaten the vitality of the enterprise. Indeed, a considerable number of the expatriates who were compelled to leave their stations chose not to return to them, and some missionary agencies considered suspending their operations in China wholesale. Furthermore, although most of the organisations whose stations were evacuated managed to re-establish themselves in their traditional fields within one or two years, they emerged from that major disruption fearing that they faced chronic threats to their existence. Hostility to asymmetrical treaties imposed on the nation, vociferous resistance to the Gospel, students' recalcitrance at Christian educational institutions,

2 This English translation of the organisation's original name, *Det norske lutherske Kinamisjonsforbund* (literally the Norwegian Lutheran China Mission Alliance), is used in the present study because it echoes that used by the organisation's historian and former archivist, Erik Kjebekk. It should not be confused with the Norwegian Missionary Society, another large Lutheran parachurch agency that entered the Chinese field in 1902, *i.e.* eleven years after the NLM had done so in 1891.

3 Arne Tiltnes and August Vik, *Det norske lutherske Kinamisjonsforbund gjennom 50 år*, II (Oslo: Det norske lutherske Kinamisjonsforbunds Forlag, 1946).

4 Erik Kjebekk, "Knut I. Samset – Missionary and Martyr: A Norwegian Missionary who [*sic*] Compiled a Chinese Hymn Book" in Tormod Engelsviken, Notto R. Thelle and Knut Edvard Larsen, "*A Passion for China: Norwegian Mission to China Until 1949* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2015), 54-68.

5 Erik Kjebekk, *Han falt på slagmarken: martyrmisjonær dr. Tønnes Frøyland* (Bergen: Sambåndet Forlag, 2009).

ongoing large-scale banditry, and the ascendancy of the Communist Party of China in militant opposition to the ineffective Nationalist government all became fixtures on the landscape well before 1930 and remained so after that time.

For several decades the uncritical nature of NLM historiography has left this pivotal period only weakly explored. In his segment of the general article about the NLM in the *Norsk Misjonsleksikon*, for example, Jakob Straume cited the above-mentioned martyrdom of Frøyland before turning to the wider xenophobia and hostility to missionaries in the mid-1920s. He declared imprecisely, "In 1926 came the communist revolution," initially in southern China but quickly metastasising to northern regions of the country. In the same paragraph, Straume also mentioned "the anti-Christian agitation" that prompted the evacuation of large numbers of missionaries, including all of them in the employ of the NLM, from the interior of the country "to the coast", though which coast this was he failed to state. Straume did not attempt to explain the reasons for Chinese hostility to missions or mention the more inclusive xenophobia with which it overlapped. Instead, he reported with unveiled gratitude that the crisis had ended in 1927 and that within a year most of the refugee missionaries had returned to their stations.[6] His sketchy paragraphs about the 1920s included almost nothing of an analytical character.

Moderately more enlightening and analytical is the section dealing with that decade in Erik Kjebakk's forthcoming and eminently readable popular history of the NLM in China.[7] Encompassing approximately 2,000 words but without specific indication of the sources on which much of it is based, this brief survey correctly identifies robber bands and civil war among the most serious difficulties which the NLM encountered during those years, compelling the missionaries to flee their stations. However, Kjebekk's narrative of the 1920s is based largely on secondary accounts rather than the wealth of reports and letters written by numerous missionaries. It overlooks or treats only cursorily such vital matters as the conservative theology of the NMS in a time when orthodoxy struck its concerned leadership as being on the wane in China. During the past decade various other writers have explored numerous aspects of Norwegian missions in China without, however, contributing significantly to the scholarly literature about the specific topic at hand.[8]

6 Jakob Straume, et al., "Norsk Luthersk Misjonssamband" in *Norsk Misjonsleksikon*, III (Stavanger: Nomi Forlag, 1967), cols. 255-256.

7 I express my gratitude to Lunde Forlag in Oslo and to Erik Kjebekk for allowing me to read his as yet unpublished book manuscript. As of April 2022 it bore the imprecise provisional title *Et glimt av Kinas kirkehistorie i provinsene Hubei og Henan*.

8 See, for example, Camilla Brautaset, et al. (eds.), *Møter med Kina. Norsk diplomati, næringsliv og misjon 1880-1937* (Bergen: Fagbokforlaget, 2018), and Tormod Engelsviken, et al. (eds.), *A Passion for China: Norwegian Mission to China Until 1949* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2015).

The present article seeks to extend the frontier of published scholarly knowledge of how the NLM perceived and responded to the existential crises which it faced during the turbulent 1920s. Our principal foci will be on its missionaries' awareness of Chinese students' criticism of foreign influence in their country and particularly how missionaries were among the targets of this xenophobia, the rise of communism, and the forced evacuations of 1927. Their responses to these challenges are discussed against the crucial background of the NLM as a theologically conservative Lutheran agency unaccustomed to raising a collective prophetic voice against various forms of injustice, though whose missionaries, like their counterparts in other missionary societies, had welcomed the revolutionary overthrow of the Qing dynasty in 1911-1912. There were certain misgivings and concerns about instability almost from the beginning of the republican period in 1912, however.[9]

Establishing Expanding NLM Fields in Hubei and Henan

When the troubled 1920s dawned, the NLM had existed for nearly three decades, and from its earliest days it had concentrated its foreign efforts on evangelisation and other forms of ministry in China. Founded by "low church", chiefly lay members of the Church of Norway in 1891, officially named *Det norske lutherske Kinamisjonsforbund*, and provoked by the reluctance of the Norwegian Missionary Society, which had been founded in 1842 and was very active in southern Africa and Madagascar, to open a Chinese field, it commissioned its first personnel to China in the early 1890s. From their arrival until the closure of this field in 1950, nearly all of the NLM's activity was concentrated near the Han River in the provinces of Henan and Hubei near the centre of the country. It continued to send both male and female representatives intermittently until after the conclusion of the Second World War but, like many other agencies, was compelled to cease its activities in China in 1950, *i.e.* less than a year after the Communist Party of China under the leadership of Mao Zedong acceded to power in October 1949. Though primarily an evangelistic agency that proclaimed the Gospel at and near its stations, from an early stage the NLM also conducted educational and medical ministries. Its periodical *Kineseren*, usually published on a weekly basis, conveyed a massive amount of subjective information in the form of missionaries' letters and detailed reports.

Within the context of nineteenth and early twentieth-century Protestant missionary endeavours, little about the NLM's work in China was unique. As an orthodox Lutheran agency, it emphasised evangelisation and the salvation of individual Chinese people through conversion to Christianity. However, and in full accord with their

9 "Lidt fra Revolutionen i Kina" in *Kineseren* XXII, no. 6 (March 1912), 57-60; "Stillingen i Kina" in *Kineseren* XXII, no. 7 (April 1912), 73; "Stillingen i Kina" in *Kineseren* XXII, no. 8 (April 1912), 81-84; "Kina og fremtiden" in *Kineseren* XXII, no. 10 (May 1912), 105-106.

organisation's theological position, these Norwegian Lutherans also conducted educational and medical ministries from an early stage.

The programme developed in the city of Laohekou on the Han River in Hubei province illustrated this multi-pronged strategy. The first of several stations in that municipality of approximately 100,000 people was Liangigai, which Ole Mikkelsen Sama established in 1894, *i.e.* less than two years after arriving in China and staying briefly in Hankou. He began a school for boys that year and a second for girls in 1895. Medical treatment was offered at an early stage, and after the turn of the century Frøyland opened a rudimentary hospital in Laohekou. In 1896 the first convert was baptised; a church was organised two years later and a large chapel built in 1917. This city remained the central point of the NLM's activities in China.

The network proliferated slowly in the 1890s but accelerated after the turn of the century and particularly following the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion. From Laohekou it spread to Junxian further up the Han River and also to Yunyang in 1899. In 1903 Richard Olsen founded a station at Shihuagai which, like Junxian, was in the province of Hubei. Further north, in Henan province, missionaries went in 1904 to Dengzhou, Nanyang, Xichuan, and Zhenping. Less than three years later, the field was extended even further north to Lushan. In 1913 Karl Bergfjord began the Fangxian station far to the south in Hubei. By that time the NLM's field had reached the geographical scope which it still had when the grave instability of the 1920s kept its personnel under nearly constant threat and eventually forced their temporary evacuation. Forms of evangelisation continued to multiply. Among the developments were tent meetings, which by the second decade of the twentieth century were popular venues for proclaiming the Gospel, and the acquisition in 1922 of an evangelisation boat allowed missionaries to take the Good News to scattered locales where they had not established stations or organised churches. A hymnal which encompassed Chinese translations of Norwegian and other songs was published in 1921.

In 1920, the NLM had twenty-three male and thirteen female workers as well as twenty-one wives of missionaries in its Chinese field. Alongside them were fifty-seven Chinese men (several of whom were functioning as pastors) and twenty-seven Chinese women. A total of eighty people were baptized that year, sixty of them adults. The churches which the NLM had gathered then encompassed 1,232 communicant members, 772 of whom were men. Its primary schools, which included the first four years of instruction, enrolled 1,071 pupils, of whom 314 were girls. The schools which included the next three years of instruction had 125 pupils, only thirty-three of whom were girls.[10]

At a relatively early stage, training of both men and women to serve as unordained evangelists began. This was a crucial step in the indigenisation of the work in China, and again it followed a fairly typical pattern. Chinese personnel also served as pastors,

10 Unpaginated statistical table accompanying *Kineseren* XXX, no. 23 (6 June 1920).

teachers, and in various capacities within the medical programme. The governance of the churches was also gradually transferred to indigenous Christians. In 1920, when there were twenty-two local churches, two presbyteries or councils of elders, with respectively ten and twelve congregations in each, were organised. These bodies continued to function in the absence of missionaries after the latter were evacuated in 1927. After their return approximately a year later, the missionaries generally did not serve on the councils. In harmony with the NLM's "low church" profile and extensive use of lay evangelists, it did not develop an episcopal polity.

Re-emphasising a Primarily Evangelistic Mission

This enterprise was driven in the theologically conservative spirit in which the NLM was founded and commissioned its first missionaries to China in the 1890s, and which was still normative three decades later. Perhaps its unflinching orthodoxy was most clearly demonstrated by the participation of Secretary General Johannes Brandtzæg in the national meeting of approximately 950 orthodox Lutherans representing some twenty-five organisations in January at the Calmeyergaten Mission House in the capital in January 1920. In the historiography of Norwegian Lutheranism, this highly publicised "national meeting" is interpreted as a crucial event in which the allied forces of orthodoxy took a decisive stand against "liberal" theology and vowed not to interact with theologians who were its spokesmen. Brandtzæg was elected one of its two vice directors. In an essay published a fortnight later in *Kineseren*, he expressed his unalloyed confidence that the assembly would be "a beneficial and necessary battle cry against liberal theology and modernism in general". Its ripple effects, he predicted, would wash across Norway from Nordkapp in the far north to Lindesnes on the southern coast.[11]

Responding to the Increasingly Turbulent Twenties

Such tribulations as the murder of Frøyland occurred well before 1920, but others multiplied in the early 1920s, approximately a decade of political instability after the revolution which ousted the Qing dynasty and established the Republic of China, under the brief leadership of Sun Yat-sen. It is remarkable that under such conditions the NLM, like many of its counterparts representing a spectrum of denominations and countries, actually managed to expand its work (though not the geographical scope of its field) while several of its flocks of converts grew during this heavily burdened period.

11 Johannes Brandtzæg, "Landsmøtet" in *Kineseren* XXX, no. 5 (1 February 1920), 39. For details of, including speeches delivered at, the four-day sequel, see Joh. M. Wisløff (ed.), *Landsmøtet i anledning av kirkestriden avholdt i Calmeyergatens Missionshus 15.–18. februar 1920* (Kristiania: Lutherstiftelsens Boghandel, 1920).

Yet it was evident to at least some of the personnel that after a decade of post-revolutionary discord, China was rapidly changing, and that especially its younger generation was no longer willing to assume that the foreigners who proclaimed Christianity to them were somehow their superiors. Peder Simonsen Eikrem, having returned to Norway but in frequent contact with personnel in China, commented explicitly in 1922 on the evolution of their attitudes and an underlying attitudinal shift regarding religion in general. "When in 'the old days' we went out with the Gospel we encountered people who, with few exceptions, were religious, even though many of them lived as if there were no God," he recalled. "But there was no organised resistance to God and judgment. It was merely *our* God they did not wish to know anything about." But times had changed, admitted this veteran of twelve years in China. Now, Eikrem generalised, for many there was "no God, no soul, no judgment – nothing that is *incomprehensible*." Moreover, he asserted, in previous times foreigners' superiority in knowledge and leadership went unchallenged; that era had faded into history. Missionaries, this veteran of the field believed, were the first to feel the effects of this shift.[12]

The same concerned missionary wrote presciently that year about the menacing rise of the broad "Young China" movement among the nation's university students.[13] Part of it, he remarked, was the "Anti-Christian Student Union". A greater danger, Eikrem thought, was that "Young China" was "riddled with Bolshevism". This, too, presented a challenge to the advance of Christianity, because adherents of that ideology which was bringing about the wholesale restructuring of Russia preached that immorality and warfare belonged to the Christian nations. Precisely what this meant for the future of the church in China Eikrem declined to predict, but he noted warily that the Christian student movement was part of "Young China".[14]

Reviewing the status of the mission at the end of 1922, superintendent Enok Osnes could report much that was encouraging. To be sure, he emphasised the ongoing and in some respects mounting tribulations that he and his more than seventy Norwegian colleagues were still enduring. China was in a period of rapid transition that bedevilled their work, he emphasised in a staccato logorrhea of laments:

12 P.S. Eikrem, "Mænd og motstand" in *Kineseren* XXXII, no. 42 (12 November 1922), 2.

13 An enlightening though rudimentary history of this dimension of hostility to Christianity is Ka-che Yip, *Religion, Nationalism and Chinese Students: The Anti-Christian Movement of 1922-1927* (Bellingham, Washington: Center for East Asian Studies, 1989).

14 P.S. Eikrem, "'Det unge Kina'" in *Kineseren* XXXII, no. XXXII, no. 27 (2 July 1922), 2.

> Political unrest. A failed leap into modernity. A reactionary turn back to the past only to find that it cannot become the modern age. Opposition to injustice ending in worse injustice. Poverty leading to the rim of ruin for the country, and hoarding of millions by the men who lead it. Money-driven warlords. Rapacious hordes of bandits. Earthquakes, floods, and storms sweeping people to their deaths. Drought for months in nearly half of the country. Intense resistance to Christianity on the part of professors and students … Civil wars among at least four different factions.[15]

In spite of these many obstacles that had filled and would continue to riddle the reports of missionaries in China and the pages of *Kineseren*, Osnes could report that by and large the mission was functioning well in most respects. Certainly the selected statistics he adduced pointed to its vitality. The NLM then had no fewer than seventy-seven missionaries in China who worked alongside 203 indigenous colleagues. They toiled at a dozen main stations and fifty-three outstations. More than 250 Chinese had been baptised in 1922, and over 1,500 were being prepared for baptism. 1,850 members of congregations were entitled to participate in communion; 314 others were not. Nearly 1,600 pupils attended the NLM's numerous schools. To be sure, medical work lagged. At Laohekou a "small but very attractive" clinical building had been constructed, but in the absence of trained personnel it was still treating relatively few patients.[16]

In the spring of 1923 Eikrem perceived an acceleration in the growth of the NLM's work and attributed this in part to the more active roles played by Chinese colleagues, some of whom had been ordained as pastors. Furthermore, he thought there was less intense resistance to the Gospel among the local people and broached the possibility that if Christianity gained rapid acceptance it might become too easy to convert to it in a merely nominal way.[17] His colleague Johannes Karstad shared his sentiments to a degree. Comparing the status of missions when he had arrived in China approximately fifteen years earlier with that of 1923, he was gratified that the days were gone when many Chinese people came to the stations merely in search of employment and to worship services largely out of curiosity. Christianity in China was genuinely taking root, Karstad believed, and many of the "best" citizens were professing Christian faith.[18]

At no time did the personnel of the NLM generally write sanitised, roseate descriptions of the conditions in which they worked. On the contrary, especially the menace of warlords plundering villages, raping women, and taking hostages became a *Leitmotiv* in their reports, and many of their troubling accounts were printed in

15 E. Osnes, "Forbundet i 1922" in *Kineseren* XXXIII, nos. 24-25 (24 June 1923), 4.
16 Osnes, "Forbundet i 1922", 4.
17 P.S. Eikrem, "Kina i almindelighet" in *Kineseren* XXXIII, no. 21 (27 May 1923), 2-3.
18 Johannes Karstad, "Fra forbundets missionsmark" in *Kineseren* XXXIII, no. 24 (17 June 1923), 2.

Kineseren.[19] At times they expressed frustration at the apparent ineffectiveness of the government to suppress banditry. Writing from Lushan in March 1923, for example, Karstad lamented that although bandits had not yet entered that city to harass its intimidated populace, they were lurking in the vicinity, and few of the soldiers who were stationed there bothered to venture outside its gates to quell a reported uprising. A major hindrance, he suggested, lay in the fact that the soldiers were not receiving any salary and had almost nothing to eat, making it necessary for their officers to collect food from the inhabitants to nourish them. It seemed to Karstad that any village in China could be sold by its unpaid soldiers.[20]

However, some of these missionaries also appear to have maintained an optimistic spirit and were pleased to comment on progress during the early 1920s. Ole Mikkelsen Sama, for example, wrote joyfully about the Christmas festivities in 1921, including a Sunday school celebration which some 500 children had attended. On Christmas Osnes had preached in a nearly full sanctuary, and seven children had been baptised at that service. The following day twelve men were baptised. At that time no fewer than thirty-six Norwegians, including missionaries' children, were at the three stations in or near Laohekou.[21]

In the mixed matrix of missionary perceptions of conditions in China and the status of their endeavours, the appointment of the so-called "Christian general" Feng Yuxiang[22] offered a glimmer of hope that he might prove effective in pacifying central China and thereby help to create more favourable conditions for his fellows in the faith. To Hjalmar Mjelve in Nanyang, his appointment as the military governor in Henan in 1922 seemed like a godsend. Indigenous Christians and missionaries alike were overjoyed and grateful that for the first time the province would have a Christian in a high office.[23] To be sure, the euphoria did not endure. Well before the end of the following year Eikrem reported that Feng no longer had the univocal support of Christians in China, his popularity having declined after he executed two Christian men and declared his opposition to President Li Juan-hung. Nevertheless, Eikrem mused that if Feng became president of China the country would at least have a capable man of faith at the helm. Moreover, in accord with the *raison d'être* of the

19 For a sample of such reports that were printed, see "Fra forbundets missionsmark" in *Kineseren* XXXII, no. 11 (12 March 1922), 2; "Fra Kina" in *Kineseren* XXXII, no. 29 (30 July 1922), 2; "Fra Kina" in *Kineseren* XXXII, no. 30 (6 August 1922), 2; Marit Staurseth, "Fra forbundets missionsmark. Fire dage blandt røverne" in *Kineseren*, XXXII, no. 38 (15 October 1922), 2-3 and no. 39 (22 October 1922), 2-4.

20 Johannes Karstad, "I røverkulen" in *Kineseren* XXXIII, no. 19 (6 May 1923), 2.

21 "Fra Kina" in *Kineseren* XXXII, no. 9 (26 February 1922), 2.

22 The standard biography is James E. Sheridan, *Chinese Warlord: The Career of Feng Yü-hsiang* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966).

23 Hj. Mjelve, "En kristen general" in *Kineseren* XXXII, no. 31 (27 August 1922), 2.

NLM, this missionary was pleased that "4,000 souls have been added to the church in Feng's army."[24]

Continued Unrest in the Mid-1920s

The middle years of the 1920s did not offer significant relief from the tribulations that had bedevilled the NLM and other missionary agencies for several years. In the triennial report covering the years 1924 through 1926, it was stated that warlords and bandits had continued to wreak havoc, and that one of the NLM missionaries, Arne Anda, had fallen into bandits' hands for a month before being released. Several Chinese attached to the stations had lost their lives to the violence; considerably more had lost their property. Nevertheless, there had been modest progress in terms of church growth. The number of Christians in the stations' congregations had risen from 2,150 in 1922 to 2,425 in 1925. On the other hand, the number of Chinese being instructed for baptism had remained around 1,500. The size of the staff had changed very little during those years, from seventy-seven Norwegian missionaries and 203 Chinese colleagues to seventy-six and 219. More encouraging was the willingness of these congregations to increase their financial self-support by slightly over 50 per cent during this period.[25]

The Crisis and Evacuation of 1927

That the personnel in China took the threats to their work seriously is indisputable, but the degree of their concern varied significantly. Brandzæg had arrived in the country in October 1926 on his second inspection tour (and first in a decade).[26] However, widespread unrest prevented him from visiting the various mission stations to the extent he had planned. Writing from Laohekou in early November after more than a week there, he did not seem particularly worried about hostility to missionaries, for his misgivings as a churchman stemmed primarily from other matters. Indeed, in a lengthy letter published in *Kineseren* at the beginning of January 1927, he declared outright that "the greatest danger" for Christian work in China at that "critical time" was "not the strong national or nationalistic tendency", even though it was making many Chinese Christians "stiff-necked" in their relations with foreigners. With no mean condescension, Brandtzæg declared that they were behaving like youth in their "rebellious phase". The Chinese were sensitive to anything that could be interpreted as a sign that they were not yet being treated as real adults, he thought, and often they perceived such an attitude among missionaries. Brandtzæg chose to interpret such a

24 P.S. Eikrem, "Kristen og general" in *Kineseren* XXXIII, no. 39 (28 October 1923), 2.

25 *Forelæg for Det norsk lutherske Kinamissionsforbunds Generalforsamling i Kristiansand 30. juni–3. juli 1927*, 11-12, Box Ab-0001, Folder Generalforsamlingen 1927, Feltarkiv, NLM Archives, Fjellhaug International University College, Oslo.

26 "Forventninger" in *Kineseren* XXXVI, no. 44 (5 December 1926), 2.

reaction as a natural byproduct of a transitional period in personal development, one that should be welcomed as indicating a maturing feeling of responsibility. At the same time, he reported that many Chinese Christians were aware of the incipient crisis and were attempting to maintain community equanimity and guide the spirit of the times in a positive direction.[27]

The greater danger, this dogmatically inflexible pastor asserted, was that the gospel of Christ was being eclipsed, especially by "modernism" in preaching, educational work, and "many other hidden and underground ways which cannot be traced and controlled". Brandtzæg was certain that numerous missionaries shared his perception and pointed to a recently published book, *The Red Theology in the Far East* by Charles H. Coates of the China Inland Mission to corroborate his opinion. He assured readers that he could fill many issues of *Kineseren* with details of "modernism" and its dilatory effects on the missionary enterprise. Brandtzæg granted that in China, as elsewhere, one could find many "outstanding people" who were diligently promoting "Christianity as they understand and proclaim it". Nevertheless, he thought that the consequences of theological modernism were "so sad that one could shed tears of blood over them".[28]

As late as mid-January 1927 Brandtzæg projected a spirit of hope and optimism and reported that in Laohekou "peace and quiet" still prevailed, even though the city had "gone over to the nationalists". He acknowledged that "students and the trade unions were raging like wild animals in some places" but believed that if the government could get the upper hand over the "radicals" it could usher in an era when "China will surprise the world with its humanity and its good order" and Christianity will enjoy "good times". Brandtzæg also envisaged a sorely needed period of purification (*utrenselsesprosess*) for the church in its current tribulation, "because 'modernism' among the missionaries has created so much half-heathen Christianity".[29]

In a patently more moralistic vein, Anna and Ole Hansen could report from the station at Xichuan before Christmas that evangelisation was reaping a rich harvest of repentance. "What a sea of sin has been confessed to God and partly to fellow people!" they wrote with glee to their superiors in Oslo. "Enmity has been removed, stolen goods returned, idols burned, and that which is old has been set aside; everything has become new." The Hansens were especially pleased that at a meeting for young people one girl and two boys had sought salvation and given testimonies which moved the people who attended. This was particularly heartening to this missionary couple because "the youth out here, fourteen to eighteen years old, bear a burden of sin that is usually unknown to the youth at home."[30]

In the meantime, however, seasoned missionaries in the field had begun to disa-

27 "Stillingen i Kina" in *Kineseren* XXXVII, no. 1 (2 January 1927), 2.
28 "Stillingen i Kina", 2.
29 "'Alt i alt er her fremtid og haap'" in *Kineseren* XXVII, no. 10 (6 March 1927), 2.
30 "Vekkelse" in *Kineseren* XXVII, no. 5 (30 January 1927), 2.

gree with Brandtzæg's initially almost dismissive attitude about the magnitude of the threat posed by anti-missionary nationalism. Jakob Straume, for instance, wrote from Fangxian in its south-western corner on 22 January that the region had become a seed-bed of Bolshevism. He noted that in the past half year there had been fifty-six strikes against both Chinese and foreign companies in Wuhan and that these industrial actions had become linked to a nationalist movement. The repercussions for Christian missionary activity were becoming apparent. Straume reported that locally people were calling for "Revolution!" as well as demanding "Give us back our school rights!" and "Give us back the churches!"[31]

A month later, one of Straume's colleagues in Fangxian, Ludvig Tveit, wrote that that generally quiet place had been changed almost overnight into a "Bolshevist nest" full of "agitators against the foreigners and Christians". He described how at a recent Sunday service it had been necessary to bar the door to prevent a "mob" from surging in. As worship continued in the sanctuary, one of the mob's "preachers" proclaimed a message to the malcontents assembled outdoors. Tveit's consolation lay in the fact that the service included the baptism of an unspecified number of converts who were added to the congregation. This, he believed, confirmed the venerable truth that times of storm and tribulation were periods of growth for the church.[32]

That the situation was rapidly deteriorating became undeniable before the end of January. The following month *Kineseren* carried a disheartening letter from a Swedish missionary, Ingeborg Wikander, who lamented from Changsha in Hunan that before Christmas the directors of the Yale Hospital there had found it necessary to close that institution as well as the affiliated medical and nursing schools. "The reds smuggle their adherents in everywhere, among the teachers, the nurses, and pupils," she explained. "Their assignment is to cause dissension, strikes, and trouble." The distressed Wikander found this particularly disheartening because this hospital was reputedly one of the finest in China and awarded diplomas which were recognised by American universities. She asked rhetorically, "Will all of this now be ruined?"[33] In the same issue of *Kineseren* it was reported that all the personnel in the Church of Sweden Mission in China had left their stations and gone to Shanghai. Their counterparts in the Norwegian Missionary Society were following suit.[34]

Brandtzæg belatedly saw the handwriting on the wall. On 21 February he wrote from Laohekou that the local mandarin had allegedly declared that Christianity must be driven out. Opposition to missions came primarily from radical youths. Brandtzæg and his colleagues had not yet been attacked but subjected to verbal abuse in the streets. It was no consolation that conditions for the personnel in Junxian conditions

31 "I Kina idag" in *Kineseren* XXXVII, no. 11 (13 March 1927), 2.
32 "Urostider" in *Kineseren* XXXVII, no. 17 (24 April 1927), 2.
33 "Hvor bærer det av?" *Kineseren* XXXVII, no. 7 (13 February 1927), 2.
34 "Kina" in *Kineseren* XXXVII, no. 7 (13 February 1927), 3.

were significantly worse and that according to a rumour an eighteen-year-old boy was about to replace the current mandarin.[35]

The evacuation of the NLM's personnel began in mid-March.[36] Straume, for example, removed to Shanghai, which he described as a "military camp" with streets replete with soldiers and its harbour filled with gunboats. He reported travelling with numerous other missionaries from Hankou down the Yangtse River on a Chinese vessel which was accompanied by a British naval ship staffed by marines with drawn bayonets.[37]

When the missionaries returned to their stations many months later, they found their properties and flocks in a relatively broad spectrum of conditions. Writing from Laohekou a week after his return in late October 1927, Even Staurseth lamented that "many of the baptised have left the congregation forever" and that some had simply turned their backs on the church and become "ridiculing opponents of Christianity". On the other hand, he was pleased that the genuinely faithful members had come through their very trying time with greater spiritual maturity.[38]

Inga Ohrset and three of her colleagues travelled back to Nanyang in November 1927 and discovered that during the "terrible days of the communists" most of the furniture there had been requisitioned. Their "Bible woman" and evangelists had sold the missionaries' belongings to prevent them from being stolen, forcing Ohrset to refurnish the house. The station was still occupied by soldiers who felt free to enter the house without announcing their advent. Most of the people who had previously worshipped in the chapel had left, although a small core of the congregation remained intact. Ohrset found joy in the attendance of a few people who were willing to confess their sins. Two young women admitted murdering their children. They and a third woman were subsequently baptised.[39]

On the other hand, Olav Espegren perceived an enormous challenge in areas which had come under the control of the young Communist Party of China. During the period of evacuation "the reds" had taken measures to lower the esteem in which many of the local people had held the missionaries by simply requisitioning their stations and transforming them into barracks, while chapels and schools were designated for housing people and horses alike. Organs and bells had been removed, "borrowed", or sold. Even lower-ranking officers had refused to grant "audiences" to missionaries who had waited outside the gates of their stations to speak to them. Chinese congregations had been compelled to meet in garrets or private homes while their chapels had become the venues of alcohol-fuelled debauchery. What the solution to this miserable

35 "Den 'røde' agitasjon" in *Kineseren* XXXVII, no. 14 (3 April 1927), 7.
36 "Brev fra Kina" in *Kineseren* XXXVII, no. 18 (1 May 1927), 2.
37 "Til Shanghai" in *Kineseren* XXXVII, no. 21 (22 May 1927), 2.
38 "Da vi kom tilbake til Laohokow" in *Kineseren*, XXXVIII, no. 3 (15 January 1928), 1.
39 "Under nye arbeidskår" in *Kineseren* XXXVIII, no. 10 (4 March 1928), 2.

state of affairs might be Espegren was uncertain. He asked rhetorically whether he and other missionaries should appeal to their consuls "with the support of the detested 'unequal treaties'" and answered that they never would.[40]

Olaf Lie, who had served at the Laohekou station before the evacuation, wrote a lengthy narrative about his voyage back to the interior in October 1927 that was published serially in *Kineseren*. In one segment subtitled "The Way of Injustices", this returning missionary described how soldiers had extracted money from the captains of boats that were carrying foreigners. That had not happened previously, he thought, but would have to be expected repeatedly in the future, for in the "uniformed national plague" one found not a hint of justice and love of the common people. Lie speculated that subjugated people commonly imitate their oppressors when they replace them in power. His hope lay in his vision of more people accepting Christianity because of their ongoing plight.[41]

Similar was the experience of Ole Hansen, who had spent nearly twelve months in Shanghai before returning upcountry despite the mixed tenor of reports from colleagues who had already gone back and reports of renewed hostilities near Hankou. At Yohkiakow, where the boat on which he was travelling waited with hundreds of others for military escorts to protect them from hordes of bandits, he discovered that a new toll station had been erected, ostensibly to collect money for the "brave" soldiers who protected them. One such individual became furious upon discovering that the boats were transporting foreigners. "What are the foreigners doing in China?" he had shouted in an effort to rouse his colleagues. "Kill them! Kill them!" Hansen could report that the latter had not heeded his "frothing" admonition but allowed them to pass.[42]

Conspicuously absent from the missionaries' reports from the field was more than an occasional trace of concern about the economic woes then besetting highly stratified Chinese society or interest in *why* the "agitators" were attracting considerable numbers of the peasantry. Instead, as emissaries of the Gospel they were preoccupied with effecting conversions and promoting the spiritual life of their flocks.

Continued Faith in a "Christian General" – Feng Yuxiang

Fear and uncertainty remained recurrent themes in the reports of the missionaries after their return to their stations. Few if any of these seasoned personnel apparently had illusions about the complex tensions in Chinese politics, not least those posed by the communist insurgency and the ever-present threat of militant bandits in several parts of the country. Nevertheless, in some missionary quarters a spirit of cautious optimism prevailed. The conclusion of the civil war after Nationalist forces under *inter*

40 "Nye kår" in *Kineseren* XXXVIII, no. 8 (19 February 1928), 1.
41 "Tilbake til indlandet" in *Kineseren* XXXVII, no. 45 (11 December 1927), 2.
42 "Tilbake til felted" in *Kineseren* XXXVIII, no. 26 (15 July 1928), 2.

alios Chiang Kai-shek and the "Christian general" Feng Yuxiang drove the erstwhile bandit Zhang Zuolin, who had been the *de facto* military dictator of China since 1927, out of Beijing in June 1928 seemed to bode well. *Kineseren* carried an unsigned article expressing hope that the emergence of Feng atop those competing for power on the national level might finally bring about a unified China. That, in turn, could be a bulwark against Japanese aggression and lead to significantly greater domestic stability–and thus to improved conditions for the propagation of Christianity.[43]

This spirit of hope on the home front echoed what *some* of the personnel in China were writing about the eventuality that the seemingly endless instability might yield to a more amenable era for resumed missionary endeavours. Writing from Lushan in September 1928, for example, Knut Iversen Samset expressed his joy that the stations in Hunan had been liberated, although the two at Nanyang and Lushan had been appropriated by the Nationalist army for use as field hospitals. Samset was relieved to report that in accordance with what he assumed was Feng's policy they had been promptly returned to religious use when the missionaries who supervised them requested that. This missionary had found it a joy to return to Hunan and find Feng's neatly clad, thoroughly disciplined, and courteous men in control of the area. Samset acknowledged that uncertainty about Chinese political life still prevailed and that reactionary forces aimed to restore the monarchy. However, he was confident that Feng's forces could suppress their counterrevolution soon.[44]

On a more specific note, Dr. Olaf Olsen, who had been in China since 1923, could report in March 1928 that his clinic at Laohekou and the hospital at Dagai had continued to function after their foreign personnel had evacuated twelve months previously. His counterpart Dr. Han and the other indigenous personnel had been left in peace to provide basic medical services. Neither facility had been requisitioned by soldiers. Moreover, with their staffs augmented by the return of the foreigners, the number of patients seen had doubled between November 1927 and late February 1928.[45]

It thus seemed particularly auspicious that on Good Friday, 6 April 1928, the long-awaited Frøyland Memorial Hospital was finally dedicated in Laohekou. Dr. Han presided at the ceremony, at which his voice competed with the cacophony of soldiers and their "irritating commands" on the next door. Many of the city's prominent citizens attended and were offered a tour of the hospital. Staurseth acknowledged in a letter to Oslo that the building was still incomplete and much of the contractor's work had been done poorly. Furthermore, apart from medical instruments and beds, most of the equipment was a farrago assembled from scattered mission stations.

43 "Kina" in *Kineseren* XXXVIII, no. 25 (17 June 1928), 1.
44 "En ny tid" in *Kineseren* XXXVIII, no. 42 (11 November 1928), 1.
45 "Fra hospitalsarbeidet" in *Kineseren* XXXVIII, no. 25 (17 June 1928), 2.

Nevertheless, the hospital could accommodate sixty to seventy admitted patients, while the polyclinic could treat as many as 100 per day.[46]

Assessing the Last Three Years of the 1920s

The resumption of the Norwegian missionaries' work at their stations in 1927 and 1928 was not the advent of a golden era in the history of the NLM, but despite ongoing political instability, banditry, and other challenges there were noteworthy advances. The report for the triennium 1927-1929 echoed that for the preceding three years in underscoring the hindrances caused by political instability. Moreover, banditry was again a central theme, as was the loss of Chinese Christians' lives to these two chronic plagues. On the credit side of the ledger, the medical dimension of the mission had progressed notably with the completion of the hospital at Laohekou; by 1929 the NLM had two Norwegian and one Chinese physicians in its field. No less heartening was the progress of the Chinese congregations towards autonomy and self-sufficiency. The anonymous author of this three-year report was patently pleased that this transfer of leadership, which was nearly complete, gave the Norwegians significantly more time to devote to evangelising "the heathens", training church leaders, and supervising medical and other charitable ministries. Reliable statistics of conversions and church membership between 1927 and 1929 were admittedly sparse, but seventy-five adults and sixteen children were said to have been baptised in the latter year. Moreover, the number of missionaries had risen to eighty despite the unveiled dangers of serving at stations in China.[47]

Writing from Chenping in January 1928, Superintendent Olav Espegren declared that the most important development the previous year was the transfer of local ecclesiastical authority to Chinese Christians. He boasted that this had been done before they had demanded it, thereby obviating disputes about power sharing.[48] This transfer of ecclesiastical authority from expatriates to indigenous members of the churches which the NLM had gathered did not stem the hostility of many Chinese to missionaries or foreigners in general, nor did it prevent the eventual expulsion of large numbers of missionaries after the proclamation of the People's Republic of China.

Espegren's perception of the NLM's endeavours in central China and of the crises it faced in the late 1920s is particularly useful for understanding the *modus operandi* of this conservative Lutheran agency. He remarked that the NLM did not include any of the "great men" of foreign missions, own any universities, publish any literary works,

46 "Da 'dr. Frøylands Minne' blev innviet" in *Kineseren* XXXVIII, no. 25 (17 June 1928), 2.

47 *Forelegg for Det norsk lutherske Kinamisjonsforbunds General forsamling i Drammen 29. juni – 2. juli 1930*, 11-12, Box Ab - 0001, Folder Generalforsamlingen 1930, Feltarkiv, NLM Archives, Fjellhaug International University College, Oslo.

48 Olav Espegren, "Årsmelding 1927" in *Det norsk lutherske Kinamissionsforbund. Årbok 1928* (Bergen: A/S Lunde & Co.s Forlag, 1928), 4, 6.

or have any influence on powerful people in China. Rather, far removed from railway lines, steamships, and the retreat centres where counterparts in other missions spent their summers, the NLM's calling was "to reach common people with a message of salvation, teach them about Christianity, and prepare them for independent church life". In addition, Espegren acknowledged, they managed to do "a few" benevolent deeds for the welfare of the Chinese.[49]

In the same annual report, Espegren expressed his joy that Lutheran missionaries and churches in China had "stood firmly on the bedrock of Scripture against rationalism". Rationalists had long held a strong grip on prominent church leaders in China, he lamented, but God seemed to be raising "strong, Biblically sound churchmen with deep Christian experience". He believed they would emerge as the strongest force in Chinese churches and that theological liberalism in China had reached a crisis. Espegren observed that there were numerous other "movements" in that country, including those opposing Bolshevism, opium, and footbinding, but he appears to have regarded them as of secondary importance to the task of propagating Christianity and establishing churches.[50]

The Red Terror – a New Decade of Precarious Existence

The missionaries' re-establishment of their endeavours in Hubei and Henan was thus characterised by an appreciable measure of hope, but their optimism was tempered by an awareness that China remained an ideologically fractured land in which their presence was not universally welcomed. Banditry was never fully suppressed, and both general xenophobia and specifically anti-missionary sentiments remained widespread. The ongoing rise of communism seemed to confirm fears that had been evident since the first half of the 1920s.

The gravity of this threat became painfully evident in the spring of 1931. The superintendent in Laohekou reported in early July that in recent weeks four of the stations in Hubei had been "plundered and more or less destroyed", three of them by communists.[51] In correspondence with Swedish-American colleagues later that summer, the same NLM superintendent placed the devastation into a larger context of what was becoming a protracted war between the Nationalists and communist insurgents. He reported that the sixteen bungalows that the NLM had restored at Haishan since 1928 had all been burned, though by soldiers who were apparently waging scorched

49 Olav Espegren, "Årsmelding 1928" in *Det norsk lutherske Kinamissionsforbund. Årbok 1929* (Oslo: Forbundets Forlag, 1929), 3-4.

50 Espegren, "Årsmelding 1928", 17.

51 [Superintendent] (Laohekou) to NLM Fellesstyret, 4 July 1931, Box Da - 0004, Folder Rapport om kommunistherjingen, NLMs arbeid i Kina og Hong Kong. Feltarkiv, NLM Archives, Fjellhaug International University College, Oslo. The copy does not indicate who the author was.

earth warfare against local "reds" by burning both their homesteads on that mountain and missionary property. While expressing relief that all of the NLM areas had been at least temporarily "freed from the reds", he had no illusions about the future. Indeed, he thought that the ongoing war could prove to be "a greater calamity with more far reaching consequences than the looting of some stations earlier this year". Nevertheless, he vowed to press ahead despite the undeniable dangers to missionary personnel, who would seek to continue to proclaim salvation to "the heathen".[52]

Conclusion

This foreboding proved essentially correct. The protracted strife between Nationalist forces and the communist insurgents under the leadership of Mao Zedong profoundly affected the general course of Chinese history during the 1930s and kept many Christian missionary endeavours, including those of the NLM, in a precarious state perennially. The eventual victory of the Maoists in 1949 led directly to the termination of the NLM's presence in the Middle Kingdom.

Considered retrospectively in the broader context of Protestant missionary endeavours in China during the turbulent 1920s, those of the NLM are largely within the mainstream. These Norwegian Lutherans faced recurrent threats not only to the growth of their programme but also to the very viability of their stations and efforts to evangelise, educate, and heal Chinese people in Henan and Hubei. They were not entirely isolated from other Christian missionary agencies in this era of intense tribulation, but after a few years of involvement in the National Christian Council of China chose in 1925 to withdraw from that interdenominational body which they perceived as rife with theological liberalism and was, in the indicting words of superintendent Olav Espegren, "meddling in politics" at the cost of its spiritual emphasis.[53] Thereafter, the NLM's co-operation was chiefly with agencies that shared its denominational history in the Lutheran Church of China.

The fact that the NLM placed less emphasis on educational and medical ministries than did numerous other agencies while adhering consistently to its conventional Lutheran confessional theology arguably did not alter its long-term viability in a persistently hostile environment where ultimately foreign missionary endeavours became virtually impossible to conduct. That the NLM's efforts recovered from the challenges of the 1920s testifies not only to the dedication of these men and women chiefly from rural districts of Norway but also to that of their many indigenous partners in mission.

52 [Superintendent] (Laohekou) to Friends in the Covenant Mission, undated, Box Da - 0004, Folder Rapport om kommunistherjingen", NLMs arbeid i Kina og Hong Kong. Feltarkiv, NLM Archives, Fjellhaug International University College, Oslo. The copy does not indicate who the author was.

53 Olav Espegren (unspecified provenance) to Johannes Brandtzæg, 6 January 1926, NMS Feltarkiv, Box Da-0003, Folder Olav Espegren 1926.

They would continue to soldier on through the 1930s and 1940s, decades when new waves of violence, anti-missionary sentiments, and other tribulations washed across much of China before the ascent of the Communist Party and the proclamation of the People's Republic of China on 1 October 1949 sounded a secular death knell for foreign missions in that land. Regardless of their theological heritage, their acceptance or rejection of doctrinal modernism, and the particular content of their programme of outreach to the Chinese whom they had spent decades serving, the Grim Reaper came for all.