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## The Amoy China Mission of the Reformed Church in America, 1937-1951


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Since the political and economic reforms of Deng Xiaoping in the 1980s, Christianity has enjoyed a period of unsurpassed prosperity in China. 2010 estimates recorded China's Christian population at somewhere around 106,721,000. If current growth rates are sustained, there could be over 170,000,000 Christians in China by 2025, giving it the third largest Christian population of any nation. By 2050 China's Christian population will probably have swelled to over 200,000,000, making it the nation with the second largest Christian population, just behind the United States.<sup>1</sup> These figures raise the question of how a religion so commonly associated with the West could gain traction in an area of the world that had developed its own unique religious heritage and has often had a hostile attitude towards Western ideologies. Christianity, however, has always been an evangelical religion; its success worldwide has been due in part to how effectively it challenges indigenous ideologies. Even in the West where Christianity has been considered a cultural norm, it was originally a foreigner and had to earn its place through competition. A similar situation occurred in China when British victory in the Opium War forced open China's borders to foreigners and allowed for Protestant evangelism. This was a dream come true for many Protestant denominations that had long desired access to China, sensing that it was fertile ground for missionary work due

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<sup>1</sup> Todd Johnson, Brian Grim, and Gina Bellofatto, *The World's Religions in Figures: An Introduction to International Religious Demography* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 117. Ebook.

to its large population and impoverished peasantry. As a result, in the mid-1800s Protestant missionaries from a variety of different denominations established a presence in China. One of these denominations was the Reformed Church in America.

Due to its small size and its activities being restricted to the southeast coast of China, the RCA's role in the larger missionary endeavor has been understandably overlooked by many historians who have dealt with Christianity in East Asia.<sup>2</sup> In spite of the lack of recognition, the Reformed Church played an important role in southeast China by attempting to establish an independent Chinese church that did not require the presence of the missionaries in order to function.<sup>3</sup> Attaining this goal proved especially important for the survival of the mission during the continuous social and political turmoil that rocked China from 1937 to 1951. While events such as the Second Sino-Japanese War, WWII, and the Communist takeover of China had a detrimental effect on the mission's status that ultimately resulted in its closure, the RCA was successful in assisting the larger missionary endeavor in the creation of an indigenous Chinese church that proved hardy enough to weather the religious persecution leveled against it by the

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<sup>2</sup> The exception to this is Gerald De Jong's little known book *The Reformed Church in China, 1937-1951*, which proved to be an invaluable piece of scholarship to my own research as it detail the entirety of the Reformed Churches activities in China.

<sup>3</sup> Gerald De Jong, *The Reformed Church in China, 1842-1951*, (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1992), 62-63.

Communist party, as well as the stormy days of the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution.

### The Christian Reformed Church in America

To better understand the impact the Reformed Church in America had in China it is worthwhile to briefly examine its origins. Able to trace its roots in America back as far as 1609, the RCA is one of the oldest denominations in the U.S. It was founded by Dutch immigrants who sought to preserve their religious traditions while seeking better economic opportunities in the New World.<sup>4</sup> The congregation attempted to remain distinctly Dutch in its tradition and practice; however, being so far removed from the Netherlands made this difficult at best and an inevitable process of “Americanization” began. This was exacerbated by a wave of patriotic fervor generated by the American Revolution which began to center the Church’s attention more on America as a Promised Land that was set aside by God and enjoyed his special blessing. Through the gradual process of assimilation American customs and culture replaced much of the Dutch heritage that the RCA had placed such an emphasis on. The result of this was that the RCA came to value its unity over ethnic distinction.<sup>5</sup> This history gave the RCA a very American flavor to its ideology and fostered a desire to participate in international

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<sup>4</sup> Corwin E. Smidt, ed., *Divided by a Common Heritage: The Christian Reformed Church and the Reformed Church in America at the Beginning of the New Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) 21.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-29.

missionary activities amongst its members. The RCA congregation was driven not only by the Christian command to “go out into the world,” but also by the American nationalistic sentiments of manifest destiny and expansionism that were embraced at this time.

Whether it was due to one or both of these factors, the RCA placed a high emphasis on evangelism and missionary activities. To help facilitate this the RCA joined the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in 1826. During this time the denomination’s small size and subsequent funding problem proved a barrier to it taking a leading role in the organizations mission activities. Due to this, the early years of the RCA’s mission activity saw its missionaries playing a supporting role to the Boards activities. It was under this arrangement that in 1830 Reverend David Abeel of the RCA was sent on a mission tour of South East Asia. Abeel was very interested in conducting missionary work in China, having lived there for a year in 1829. His opportunity came in 1842 with the conclusion of the Opium War and subsequent signing of the treaty of Nanking.<sup>6</sup> For the first-time Protestant missionaries could legally enter China and spread their faith. This was a major victory for Protestantism, which had been

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<sup>6</sup> De Jong, *The Reformed Church in America*, 13-15.

seeking entry into China for many years due to its large population, most of whom had never been introduced to the words of Christ.<sup>7</sup>

Abeel chose to begin the Reformed Churches efforts near the island harbor city of Amoy [Xiamen] located off the south-east coast of China in Fujian province. “Amoy Island had a deep-water harbor, one of the best in China. Moreover, the estuary and three main rivers gave it easy access to the mainland.”<sup>8</sup> It is unlikely given his enthusiasm that Abeel could have found a more fitting location given the ideals that pervade mission work. Despite this, the missionary was not willing to live in Amoy himself, preferring to set up headquarters on Kulangsu [Gulangyu], a much smaller island located a mile to the south of Amoy. Kulangsu was under international authority and lacked many of the more unsavory aspects of Amoy. From there the missionaries could easily access either Amoy or Fujian province on the mainland while still having a place that had more favorable living conditions.<sup>9</sup> This was particularly important because many of the missionaries brought their families with them. Unfortunately for Abeel, poor health forced him to leave China and return to the United States in 1844, just two short years after founding the mission. He died in 1846 without being able to

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Fay, “The Protestant Mission and the Opium War,” *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (1971): 147-149.

<sup>8</sup> De Jong, *The Reformed Church in China*, xi.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, xi-xii.

return to China.<sup>10</sup> He died with his work only just begun; however, other members of the mission continued his work.

### Relations to Other Missions

The early decades of the mission had been wrought with an insufficient number of missionaries and poor conversion rates. The mission may not have survived at all had it not been for the strong relationship it developed with the London Missionary Society and the English Presbyterian Church, both of which were also operating missions in the Amoy region. Due to denominational differences, close affiliation with other mission groups was typically discouraged, as it caused confusion as to which denomination converts officially belonged to. However, RCA missionaries were willing to make an exception in China, much to the indignation of their superiors.<sup>11</sup> Despite the disapproval of the General Synod, the RCA missionaries continued to work in this direction, eventually determining that denominational differences needed to be set aside all together and a formal partnership should be created with the goal of creating an “indigenous Chinese Christian Church.”<sup>12</sup> This partnership had two advantages. First, it conserved resources for all three missions by preventing redundancy in mission work. Thus, the activities of any one of the missions served to benefit the whole. Second, it

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-67, 74-75.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

averted the possibility of confusing the local Chinese with multiple interpretations of Christian doctrine.<sup>13</sup> Instead the missionaries in Amoy could present Christianity as a unified whole and focus on impressing the joint tenets of their faith on the Chinese rather than denominational differences.

### Conflict with the RCA Leadership

Part of what makes the Amoy mission unique is that it arrived at this solution long before many other Protestant missions, which didn't begin to take this approach until after waves of anti-Christian sentiment rocked China during the Boxer Rebellion in 1900. Surprisingly, from the very beginning the RCA missionaries made it their goal to establish an autonomous Chinese church that was not dependent on foreign support to function. It is worth noting that this approach was implemented by the missionaries themselves and stood at odds with the general leadership of the RCA, who thought that Chinese converts should be considered members of the RCA.<sup>14</sup> Needless to say this difference of opinion created a certain amount of tension between the missionaries and their superiors. This tension was increased by the long distance separating the two; often the missionaries felt that the RCA leaders failed to adequately grasp the situation in China and viewed their reactions as contingent upon a lack of understanding.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 63, 66.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 67.



Because of this, the early mission leaders would sometimes disregard ordinances from their handlers and act autonomously in the best interest of the mission.<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, it doesn't appear that punitive measures were ever taken against the missionaries who acted in this manner. This is probably because missionary workers were in short supply and had a high turnover rate due to the difficult living conditions in China. Any issues that arose due to this autonomous behavior, while upsetting for the leadership, were ultimately dropped, or conveniently swept under the rug.<sup>16</sup>

### Mission Work

The work that was required of RCA missionaries was difficult and diverse. However, from the start of the mission in 1842 until its end in 1951, the general experience of the missionary saw little change. The first priority of newly arrived missionaries was to learn the Amoy dialect as quickly as possible. New recruits were encouraged to take classes in basic Mandarin for several months in the United States before leaving for Amoy.<sup>17</sup> They were assigned to a teacher of the Amoy dialect once they arrived in China with whom they were to study for two years. However, this was sometimes impossible due to the mission's limited

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<sup>15</sup> Murray Rubinstein, "Go Ye unto the World: The Defining of the Missionary's Task in America and China, 1830-1850," *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan jindai shi yanjiusuo jikan*, vol. 10, (1981): 389-340.

<sup>16</sup> De Jong., *The Reformed Church in China*, 76.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 269-270.

manpower. As a result, new missionaries often felt that their language training was inadequate.<sup>18</sup> While new missionaries were busy mastering the intricacies of the Amoy Dialect of Chinese, they were also being trained in their future responsibilities and participating in ongoing missionary activities. The work that was done in Amoy could be divided roughly into three categories: evangelism, education, and medicine. Of the three, evangelism was considered the most important with education and medicine existing almost exclusively to support it.<sup>19</sup>

For the RCA missionaries, evangelism was the fulcrum around which all of their activities orbited. It was a complicated task that consisted of far more than simply preaching the Christian Gospel to the Chinese masses. It also included ensuring that the local churches the mission established functioned properly and efficiently, translating scripture into Chinese and then disseminating it to the local population, writing religious tracts and other literature, training Chinese converts to fulfill roles as members of the religious community, organizing bible studies and prayer services, and participating in outreach trips in order to spread the gospel to the many smaller villages scattered throughout Fujian province.<sup>20</sup> Through these and other activities, the missionaries attempted to keep a steady

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<sup>18</sup> Julie Van Wyk, "Oltman, Theodore V and Helen Oral History Interview: Old China Hands Oral History Project" (1977). Old China Hands Oral History Project. Paper 8. 1-2. [http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/old\\_china/8](http://digitalcommons.hope.edu/old_china/8).

<sup>19</sup> De Jong, *The Reformed Church in China.*, xii.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-33, 44, 46-47.k

stream of new converts trickling into the churches. This was important not only as the primary goal of the mission, but also as the most practical means the mission had of dealing with their constant lack of manpower. To further facilitate the growth of the Chinese Christian community, the Mission established a series of five stations throughout Fujian from which the missionaries could centralize their efforts. The first originally located in the city of Amoy, was later moved to Kulangsu. This outpost served as the mission's primary headquarters as well as a retreat for missionaries who had earned a brief furlough. The other four stations were all located on the mainland: one at Tong-an [Tong an] twenty miles to the North of Amoy, one at Leng-na [Leng na] one-hundred miles North-West of Amoy, one at Changchow [Zhangzhou] about thirty-five miles West of Amoy, and one at Sio-khe [Xiaoxi] sixty miles from Amoy.<sup>21</sup> Due to this, the missionaries could spread their message to virtually any part of Fujian.

### Education

Early interactions between Protestant missionaries and the Chinese peasantry had revealed that most of the Chinese population was illiterate. Due to this, certain evangelism techniques, such as distribution of religious tracts, were rendered ineffective.<sup>22</sup> This issue was further complicated by the Chinese

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<sup>21</sup> Notes, Box 1, Folder 2, Koeppel, Edwin (1888-1956) and Elizabeth (Renskers) (1895-1976) Papers, 1917-1956, The Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland.

language's notorious difficulty due to its use of thousands of complex ideographs. Consequently, learning to read Chinese was a very time consuming process and was normally reserved for the wealthy elite.<sup>23</sup> The RCA missionaries found this to be a major obstacle to the conversion of the Chinese as there was no way to reach most of them outside of direct contact with the missionaries. Even worse, the Christian bible, the core of Protestantism, remained a closed book to the Chinese. Due to this, most of the Chinese couldn't read the materials presented by the missionaries nor fulfill the Christian obligation to study the scriptures even if they wanted to.<sup>24</sup> The RCA missionaries realized that they would have to spend valuable mission resources to educate the local communities to win a case for Christianity. It was with some reluctance that the early missionaries deemed the Mission's time and resources would have to be spent making education available to the Chinese.<sup>25</sup>

The Mission took two major steps towards making education available to a broader segment of the Chinese population. First, they created a Romanized version of the Amoy vernacular that only required the memorization of the Roman alphabet as opposed to the thousands of complex ideographs found in Chinese script. Due to this, it was much easier to learn and cut down considerably

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<sup>22</sup> Peter W. Fay, "The Protestant Mission and the Opium War," 149-151.

<sup>23</sup> De Jong, *The Reformed Church in China*, 37-38.

<sup>24</sup> Fay, "The Protestant Mission and the Opium War, 149-151.

<sup>25</sup> De Jong, *The Reformed Church in China*, 118-119.

on instruction time.<sup>26</sup> Second, they built schools that offered a western style of education. In all they operated four such schools. Two of these schools were the girls' schools Chin-tek, located on Kulangsu and Yok-tek, located in Changchow. Both were created with the intention of providing young girls with the opportunities for education not afforded by their native culture. This motion to educate women signaled a direct attack by the missionaries on traditional Chinese culture. Despite this, the schools managed to find students and even prosper.<sup>27</sup> Mission run girl's schools were the first institutions of their kind in China and played a significant role in altering the Chinese perspective on women's education. Talmage Collage, a boy's middle school named after one of the founding missionaries, was built on Kulangsu (moved to Changchow in 1920 so it could expand) and served as the primary school ran by the RCA missionaries. Finally, there was Union Theological Seminary which was also located in Kulangsu until 1925 when it was moved to Changchow.<sup>28</sup> The existence of the seminary shows how education was connected to the Mission's evangelistic endeavors. In addition, all the schools required classes on "scripture and bible history."<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, the missionaries did not require a conversion to

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 37-40.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 121-123.

<sup>28</sup> Notes, Box 1, Folder 2, Koeppel, Edwin (1888-1956) and Elizabeth (Renskers) (1895-1976). Papers, 1917-1956, The Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland.

<sup>29</sup> De Jong, *The Reformed Church in China*, 122.

Christianity to attend these schools and many Chinese did so merely to take advantage of the western education that was offered.<sup>30</sup>

### Western Medicine

In addition to education, the RCA missionaries also poured considerable resources into bringing western medicine to China. This was advantageous to the mission for two reasons. First, it supported evangelism by attracting the attention of the local population. Western medicine was a novelty to the Chinese who often had to make due with local remedies and superstitions when dealing with injury and disease. For example, Dr. Clarence Holleman recounts the story of his first patient who had been in labor for several days. The child was already dead when he examined the mother and traditional Chinese medicine had been powerless to help the woman, who was in danger of losing her own life. Fortunately, Dr. Holleman was able to extract the fetus and she made a full recovery.<sup>31</sup> Such acts allowed the message that the missionaries spread about healing the sick to be more than mere rhetoric. The result was that they could attract the Chinese with medicine and then minister to them at the same time. A second reason that medical work was important to the missionaries is that it created solidarity between them and the Chinese communities in which they lived and worked.

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>31</sup> Clarence Holleman, Address to the osteopathic association of Pomona and surrounding areas, Box 1, Folkder 6, Holleman, Clarence H. (1890-1973). Papers, 1929-1971. The Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland.

Medicine gave the RCA missionaries something tangible that they could offer to the local Chinese, making them valued members of the community.<sup>32</sup> The importance of solidarity cannot be understated in regards to the mission's survival, as the message that the missionaries sought to spread was iconoclastic to the Chinese population.

Much of the Amoy mission's medical work took the form of training the Chinese in western medicine and administering the hospitals that the mission erected, as there was no established medical institution from which the missionary doctors could draw potential medical students or nurses. This meant that they had to begin with nothing whenever they went into a new area. Fortunately, it was not difficult to find young Chinese men who were eager to improve their societal standing by studying under the missionaries.<sup>33</sup> It was not long before the missionary doctor began turning out some of China's first doctors trained in western medicine. Nurse trainees on the other hand were more difficult to find. This was because the Chinese viewed nursing as a form of menial labor that undermined a woman's social status. As a result, nurse recruits were in short supply until the missionaries were able to instill a western perspective on nursing

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<sup>32</sup> De Jong, *The Reformed Church in China*, 149.

<sup>33</sup> Clarence Holleman, Address to the osteopathic association of Pomona and surrounding areas, Box 1 Folder 6, Holleman, Clarence H. (1890-1973). Papers, 1929-1971. The Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland.

<sup>33</sup> De Jong, *The Reformed Church in China*, 122.

into the Chinese Christian community.<sup>34</sup> This again meant challenging the indigenous culture. The mission also commissioned the construction of a hospital at each of the mission stations: Hope-Wilhelmina hospital on Kulangsu (this was originally two hospitals that were merged), Changchow Union Hospital in Changchow, Fagg Memorial Hospital at Leng-na (this hospital was lost in 1929 when the communists drove the RCA missionaries from Leng-na), Blauvelt Memorial Hospital at Tong-an, and Neerbosch Hospital at Sio-khe. As with the training of medical staff, oversight of hospital construction was mostly left to the mission doctors that had been assigned to the area. This proved to be quite the challenge for the doctors, as the Chinese construction workers often had no idea how to build a western style building. At Neerbosch Hospital, Dr. Holleman installed the toilets and plumbing himself because the Chinese construction workers lacked the necessary experience to do it properly.<sup>35</sup>

#### Status of the Mission by 1937

By 1937 RCA missionaries had been active in the Amoy region of China for almost a hundred years and had become a well-established part of the social landscape of Amoy. In all three of the areas they operated: evangelism, education, and medicine, considerable advancements had been made. The five mission

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<sup>34</sup> Julie Van Wyk, "Oltman, Theodore V and Helen Oral History Interview," 10.

<sup>35</sup> Clarence Holleman, Address to the osteopathic association of Pomona and surrounding areas, Box 1 Folder 6, Holleman, Clarence H. (1890-1973). Papers, 1929-1971. The Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland.



stations the missionaries operated continued to give them access to most of Fujian via a short journey by foot or boat. These were often used as bases from which outreach trips could be launched.<sup>36</sup> In addition, the mission also continued to operate the three schools: Chin-tek, Yok-tek, and Talmage College. Perhaps most important to the main goal of the mission, Union Theological Seminary had remained open and continued to draw in recruits from the local population.<sup>37</sup> Finally, the mission was involved in running four hospitals in addition to various small medical clinics. These smaller clinics were usually focused on a specific medical issue such as opium addiction or maternity.<sup>38</sup> The RCA missionaries were optimistic about China's future, as the country had begun to make strides in its slow advance towards modernization.<sup>39</sup> On all fronts it appeared that the mission was doing well and expecting a fruitful year. This rosy outlook changed abruptly in July when the Japanese launched a full-scale invasion of China.

### The Second Sino-Japanese War

The Second Sino-Japanese War was the first major conflict to directly involve the area in which the RCA missionaries were stationed. Triggered by the

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<sup>36</sup> Notes, Box 1, Folder 2, Koeppel, Edwin (1888-1956) and Elizabeth (Renskers) (1895-1976). Papers, 1917-1956, The Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> De Jong, *The reformed Church in China*, 255.

Marco-Polo bridge incident, during which a small skirmish broke out between Chinese and Japanese soldiers near Beijing. The situation quickly spun out of control and Japanese troops soon poured over the border from Manchuria. Possessing superior weaponry and training, the Japanese troops were able cut their way south like a scythe. Chinese troops fought hard against the invaders, but they were outmatched and forced to give ground by the better trained and equipped Japanese.<sup>40</sup> By May of 1938 they controlled almost half of China's eastern coast and had penetrated inland. Furthermore, naval detachments had been sent from the Japanese colony of Formosa (Taiwan) to secure the major harbor cities on China's southeast coast. One of the cities that the Japanese targeted this way was Amoy. The RCA missionaries in Amoy realized that they would not escape the conflict yet the location of their headquarters on Kulangsu did offer some refuge due to its being international territory.<sup>41</sup> Regardless of what happened at Amoy or the mainland, the Japanese did not risk drawing the ire of America and Britain over a piece of land scarcely more than two kilometers long.

Despite the Japanese's continued advance inland, few of the RCA missionaries opted to leave China even though it was feared the Japanese would reach Fujian. The American Consulate feared that the missionaries would

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<sup>40</sup> Evan Mawdsley, *World War II: A New History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 60-66.

<sup>41</sup> De Jong, *The reformed Church in China*, 256.

eventually be cut off and unable to move about after the Japanese took control of the area.<sup>42</sup> Bearing this in mind, one missionary who worked at Talmage College left for Amoy on May 5, bringing with him medical supplies that Hope Hospital was sure to need once the fighting began. He arrived at Amoy five days later on May 10, aboard a small British vessel just as the Japanese were launching their attack on Amoy. His account reveals how Kulangsu was deliberately left alone:

On nearing the entrance of the Amoy Harbor we could see several war vessels and an aircraft carrier. A few planes were in the air. As we proceeded more planes were in sight and soon were diving near and over the Amoy University campus. With glasses we saw a few direct hits and soon one building was ablaze. Several ships were anchored near the international settlement of Kulangsu, and a small British gunboat was just coming from the inner harbor...Later we moved nearer to Kulangsu and an officer from the British gunboat came and reported that that troops had landed on Amoy Island and that fierce fighting was in progress...At this time six to ten planes were in the air all the time bombing almost continuously. Shelling could be clearly heard.<sup>43</sup>

Reverend Henry Poppen had a different vantage point from on Kulangsu:

tons of ammunition fell on the defenders of the city; incendiary bombs started fires in the villages. The continuous shelling and bombing together with the reply from forts and the anti-aircraft was deafening. The impression left of these thirty-six hours bombardment was ghastly and will never be erased from our memory.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> De Jong, *The Reformed Church in China*, 270-271.

<sup>43</sup> Jesse Platz to unknown, Box 1, Folder 10, China Mission. Papers, 1888-1979, The Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland.

<sup>44</sup> Henry Poppen to Unknown, Box 1, Folder 9. China Mission. Papers, The Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland.

Such military maneuvers must have been a shocking experience for the missionaries, most of whom had never experienced war. Yet, despite the volatile nature of the situation most of the missionaries remained steadfast in their commitment to the Chinese people.

The attack was much harder on the Chinese who lived in Amoy. To credit the Japanese military leaflets were dropped on the city warning “representatives of third powers to leave the city.” This gave warning to the local inhabitants as well, many of whom fled as refugees to the relative safety of Kulangsu. According to Poppen, “all of Amoy flocked to our small island of Kulangsu.”<sup>45</sup> It was reported that Kulangsu’s population, normally at 40,000, swelled to 100,000 with the influx of refugees from the beleaguered city of Amoy. The massive influx of refugees quickly taxed the Mission’s resources and there was not enough food to go around on the first day of the crisis. Things became even more serious a short time later when the Japanese cut the water supply from Amoy, leaving the island without a source of fresh water. Fortunately, the U.S. consulate convinced the Japanese Navy to allow a U.S. Navy ship, the U.S.S. Ashville, to ferry water from Amoy to Kulangsu.<sup>46</sup> This act of goodwill temporally prevented catastrophe, and enabled the missionaries to continue assisting the beleaguered refugees.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

Hope-Wilhelmina Hospital was of great benefit throughout the crisis. During the attack the missionary and Chinese doctors treated injured soldiers and civilians, set up a milk bank for mothers with babies, and gave out inoculations to control the spread of disease.<sup>47</sup> As a result, the doctors managed to control the outbreak of infectious diseases despite the massive influx of people into Kulangsu. The Japanese let most of the refugees cross over to Kulangsu unmolested, but any soldiers who attempted to flee to the island were slaughtered. Dr. Holleman watched helplessly from Hope-Wilhelmina Hospital as captured Chinese troops were gunned down at the water's edge:

The sight of from 10 to 40 Chinese soldiers being captured in a building, marched out to the street and be compelled to kneel before the Japanese flag, after which they were forced to run in a body to the edge of the water and then, just as they were jumping, have the machine guns turned on them is not one easily forgotten. It was repeated several times during the day in our sight.<sup>48</sup>

Such things were difficult for the doctors and missionaries on Kulangsu to bear witness to; however, they no doubt derived some satisfaction from the aid they were able to render to the Chinese refugees and the few soldiers who were fortunate enough to escape the battle. After three days the battle ended and Amoy lay in the hands of the Japanese.

#### Effect of the War on the Mission

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<sup>47</sup> Clarence Holleman, "Address to the Osteopathic Association of Pomona and Surrounding Areas," Box 1 Folder 6, Holleman, Clarence H. (1890-1973). Papers, 1929-1971. The Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

Almost overnight the mission's status had changed completely. Rather than be a part of a vibrant and growing Chinese community it was now a refugee camp; they had gone from reaching out to the people to being inundated with more individuals than they could cope with. Yet, through it all the missionaries never seemed to lose sight of what their primary goal was: to evangelize as many Chinese as they could. To this end, the RCA missionaries viewed the war and subsequent attack as both a challenge and a potential blessing.<sup>49</sup> Never before had they been able to reach such a massive number of people with their message in so short a period of time. The RCA missionaries did this through song and encouragement, as well as invitation to bible lessons and sermons. Due to the chaos of war time conditions and rapid movement of refugees it is unknown whether the missionaries' efforts during this time were effective at winning converts. Still, the reality of the situation was that the refugees could not stay on the island indefinitely. Thus, the missionaries focused on transferring them either to the mainland or some of the other islands off of China's coast as rapidly as possible.<sup>50</sup> One can imagine the comfort the compassion and aid that the RCA missionaries offered must have brought to the beleaguered Chinese; regardless of their often-conflicting world views, at this moment in history they were one.

#### The U.S. Enters WWII and the Occupation of Kulangsu

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<sup>49</sup> Gerald Francis De Jong, *The Reformed Church in China*, 258-259.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 257-258.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor at the end of 1941 placed the mission in a precarious position. Open war with the U.S. meant that the missionaries were no longer protected from the Japanese military. The same day as Pearl Harbor the Japanese seized Kulangsu and placed the ten missionaries there under internment.<sup>51</sup> This mostly resembled house arrest and many of the missionaries commented that the Japanese treated them surprisingly well: “No violence was inflicted on anyone but there was a general indifference to the hardships suffered by women and infirmed people. Mothers with children were released on the first day.”<sup>52</sup> Despite this the missionaries’ movements were highly restricted and most of their belongings were either confiscated or looted by the Japanese soldiers. The Japanese held them with the intention of trading them to the United States for Japanese nationals that were similarly being held in the U.S. The exchange was a success and all the RCA missionaries held in Kulangsu were safely returned to the United States by 1943.<sup>53</sup> Throughout the course of WWII only five RCA missionaries remained in China. The rest either fled or were captured and

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<sup>51</sup> Theodore Oltman, Report on Conditions in Amoy China, Western Theological Seminary, Box 1, Folder 33 W88-0315. China Mission. Papers, The Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> De Jong, *The Reformed Church in China*, 277-278.

repatriated to the U.S.<sup>54</sup> The result was that the mission was only barely able to survive the chaos caused by the Second World War.

### Aftermath of the War

With the defeat of the Japanese in 1946, the RCA missionaries returned to China to attempt to rebuild their enterprise. By the end of 1946 the RCA had thirty-six missionaries in China, returning its manpower to prewar levels.<sup>55</sup> The devastation of the war had made China a very different place from what it had been in 1937. Inflation had increased dramatically due to the fighting, much of the infrastructure lay in ruins, and the Communists had gained power in the north and were engaging Chiang Kai-shek's nationalists in a civil war. Many of the buildings and real estate owned by the mission had been looted or vandalized in their absence, making their return a painful experience. Missionary Elizabeth Koeppe, who served the Amoy mission alongside her husband Edwin Koeppe from 1919 to 1951, paints a vivid picture of conditions on Kulangsu upon her return:

The streets are in bad condition, holes everywhere; but they are kept pretty clean by CINRRA fellows. The Japanese at first repaired them but as their fate appeared certain they let things deteriorate. Lai-chu-o got a couple American bombs and a lot of houses and people were destroyed. We took a walk around that part of the island and find that the Japs must have been digging

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 283-284.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 286.



themselves in pretty deep. Our three houses on the hill are a sorrowful mess. Even from this place we can look right through their shells. The only thing of beauty I saw was a Honolulu creeper trying desperately hard to cover a few of the ruins...There is no running water, because our planes sank the water boat. Electric lights are on from mid-afternoon until early morning. Shops are full of furniture, odds and ends of dishes ect. all loot from the occupation period. Everything is priced so high.<sup>56</sup>

The difference in tone between this and the optimism with which the missionaries had entered 1937 reveals how damaging the war had been not only to the mission effort but to the moral of the missionaries.

Undoubtedly the worst damage sustained by the mission was the looting of Hope-Wilhelmina Hospital. Dr. Clarence Holleman, the superintendent of Hope-Wilhelmina Hospital, described the condition of the hospital upon his return:

After a month's journey I arrived back in the city I had left five months before. What a sight met my eye! This splendid, well-equipped institution which had been one of the best in China was now an empty shell. All equipment gone—nay more—glass from windows, locks from doors, all electric wiring from the walls, toilets, lavatories, basins—all gone. Tears came to my eyes. What chance was there to repair such destruction?<sup>57</sup>

Damage to the hospital was estimated at 250,000 U.S. dollars, a sizable sum of money at the time. In spite of this, the missionaries in conjunction with the

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<sup>56</sup> Elizabeth Koeppel to Roger and Owen Koeppel, 15 November 1946, Box1, Folder 2, Koeppel, Edwin (1888-1956) and Elizabeth (Renskers) (1895-1976). Papers, 1917-1956, The Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland.

<sup>57</sup> Clarence Holleman, "China Reminiscence," Box1, Folder 6, Holleman, Clarence H. (1890-1973). Papers, 1929-1971. The Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland.

Chinese Christian community agreed to rebuild without seeking aid from Western sources. This was done as a symbol of the Chinese church's independence and Asian dedication to the Christian cause. The total cost to repair and reequip the hospital came to a total 300,000 U.S. dollars, all of which came from Asian sources.<sup>58</sup> In addition to this, the hospital had to be completely restaffed. A breakdown of the new staff shows the dedication of both the missionaries and the Chinese Christian community to keep the institution as independently Chinese as possible. Of the twenty-three doctors placed there, twenty-two were Chinese. Likewise, of the sixty-five new nurses, sixty-three were Chinese. The resident pastor assigned to the hospital was also Chinese.<sup>59</sup> These figures are indicative of the amount of progress the mission had made since the early days as well as the efforts towards modernization that China had made.

Repairing the damage that had been done during the war was even more problematic due to an increasingly erratic inflation rate. Between 1946 and 1937 the exchange rate between the U.S. dollar and the Chinese National Currency (CNC) climbed to \$24,000 CNC to one U.S. dollar.<sup>60</sup> Such rate made commodities, especially foreign commodities, even more expensive than they

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Elizabeth Koeppe to Owen Koeppe, 31 May 1947, Box 1, Folder 2, Koeppe, Edwin (1888-1956) and Elizabeth (Renskers) (1895-1976). Papers, 1917-1956, The Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland.

were in the U.S. The mission attempted to give the missionaries some stability by allowing them to fix their salaries. The same was not true for many of the Chinese pastors and teachers who received part of their wages in the form of rice.<sup>61</sup> As the civil war between the Nationals and Communists increased in intensity, inflation rates grew to astronomical proportions. In a correspondence to her children in 1948, RCA missionary Elizabeth Koeppel recorded the exchange rate as high as \$300,000 CNC to one U.S. dollar. She goes on to say that, “rice is difficult to get because the shops hate to sell for fear they will have useless currency instead of commodity. The smallest bill of value is a \$500 but that and the \$1000 bills are taken at discount, like small money.”<sup>62</sup> The result of this was that during the years immediately following the war inflation was the primary concern of the mission.<sup>63</sup> This is probably because the mission was deep enough in Nationalist territory to avoid contact with the violence of the civil war.

### The Communists Gain Power

Despite monetary concerns being the foremost of the missionaries’ worries, they were by no means unaware of the encroaching Communists. In fact, early on it became apparent to the missionaries that the Communist would

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<sup>61</sup> De Jong, *The Reformed Church in China*, 288-289.

<sup>62</sup> Elizabeth Koeppel to Owen, 9 March 1948, Koeppel, Edwin (1888-1956) and Elizabeth (Renskers) (1895-1976). Papers, 1917-1956, The Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland.

<sup>63</sup> De Jong, *The Reformed Church in China*, 288.

probably win.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, they were aware of the uncertainties that a communist regime would bring to the mission effort. Despite this, they were resolved to carry out their duties. Mrs. Koeppe summed up their position eloquently in one of her correspondences:

The threat of war and communism seems more lowering every day and it is difficult to carry on a forward looking program here. But if one doesn't, things are worse than 'at a stand-still.' It's hard to imagine just what the future will bring. But, yet there is satisfaction in just doing one day's duties well, knowing that we are not told to try to rule the world but rather to govern ourselves and love the Lord and our neighbors.<sup>65</sup>

Despite the fears and uncertainty that the civil war caused, the missionaries had very little contact with the Communists until their victory in 1949. There were minor exceptions, such as one of the hospitals caring for a group of wounded Communist soldiers and a few being captured in Sio-khe.<sup>66</sup> However, for the most part the missionaries past the civil war years focused their attention on the arduous process of rebuilding what they had lost and spreading their message to the local population.

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<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 316.

<sup>65</sup> Elizabeth Koeppe to Owen Koeppe, April 1948, Koeppe, Edwin (1888-1956) and Elizabeth (Renskers) (1895-1976). Papers, 1917-1956, The Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland.

<sup>66</sup> Elizabeth Koeppe to Owen Koeppe, 18 Jan 1948, Koeppe, Edwin (1888-1956) and Elizabeth (Renskers) (1895-1976). Papers, 1917-1956, The Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland.

In 1949 the missionaries' prediction that the Communists would win the war came true. Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist forces were driven from the mainland to Taiwan, leaving the Fujian province, along with the rest of China, in the hands of Mao Zedong and the Communists. For the missionaries, this was a bitter blow, as Communism represented an ideology that was incompatible with the Christian worldview.<sup>67</sup> Despite this obvious fact, the missionaries were willing to attempt coexistence with the new regime. Indeed, the early days of the new government even appeared promising in this regard. The Red Army, famous for its discipline and restraint, was under order to "protect both the person and property of foreign missionaries." The result of this was that most missionaries considered the takeover to be "peaceful and orderly."<sup>68</sup> RCA missionaries in Kulangsu, who witnessed some lingering fighting as the nationalist troops were forced to withdraw, were allowed to continue normal operations under the new government.<sup>69</sup> Even more encouraging was that in 1949 the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) took the official position of allowing religious freedom. Mao believed that once the peasantry had advanced enough they would no longer have any need for religion and would reject it without government prompting.<sup>70</sup> Under

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<sup>67</sup> Nancy Tucker, "An Unlikely Peace: American Missionaries and the Chinese Communists, 1948-1950," *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (1976): 103.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>69</sup> De Jong, *The Reformed Church in China*, 323-324.

<sup>70</sup> Tucker, "An Unlikely Peace," 102-103.

these circumstances, the RCA missionaries began to feel that their worst fears may have been unfounded and that the mission would be able to continue its existence under the new government.

While early interactions with the Communists proved encouraging for Protestant missionaries, after a short time cracks began to appear in the CCP's benevolent shell. For example, early in 1950 Communist leaders began to meet with Chinese Christians and impose regulations on the Church. Most of these were leveled against American missionaries, such as the removal of foreign workers and funds. In addition, Chinese Churches were forced to instruct their congregations in how Christianity had been used as a part of American Imperialist expansion. The CCP also refused to allow any missionaries entry into the country; even those who took a furlough stateside were refused readmission.<sup>71</sup> This was the case for the RCA missionaries in Fujian; local authorities imposed a rule that the missionaries had to give a fifteen-minute lecture on communism as a precursor to any sermons that were preached. In addition, their travel throughout the region was highly restricted due to the territory being divided into different military zones. Finally, the RCA missionaries also suffered frequent interrogation, during which the communists would attempt to pressure them into incriminating themselves and the Chinese Christian community in Fujian.<sup>72</sup> Under these

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 103-104.

conditions, the initial optimism that the missionaries had viewed the CCP with began to drain away as the reality of how much different life under the Communist regime would be sank in.

### The Death of the mission

Despite the difficulties that the CCP imposed on Christian missionaries, it was still largely believed that coexistence was still possible. This changed in June of 1950 with the outbreak of the Korean War. China and the U.S. found themselves on opposite sides of the conflict; this changed the missionaries' status to one of enemy alien and dramatically increased the amount of persecution leveled against them.<sup>73</sup> In Amoy and the surrounding area interrogations became more frequent and disruptive to the RCA missionaries, and many were restricted to their homes, only allowed to leave for short errands and walks.<sup>74</sup> This made it increasingly difficult for the RCA missionaries to accomplish their work and most had given up on preaching or teaching by June.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, the government seized total control of the hospitals and removed the mission staff. One exception to this was Dr. Theodore Oltman, who was caught between rival groups within the local government, one of which wanted the hospital to persist with its current

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<sup>72</sup> De Jong, *The Reformed Church in China*, 326.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 328-329.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

staff. Due to the conflict, Dr. Oltman was not permitted to leave China and was forced to live in the hospital quarters, having been evicted from his own home.<sup>76</sup> As conditions deteriorated, many of the RCA missionaries and their families began to leave China.

The final death blow to the mission came as waves of Anti-U.S. propaganda began to sweep through China's cities. According to Elizabeth Koeppel, one of the tactics that the Communist used was to associate the U.S. with Japan, giving rise to slogans such as "To fight America is to fight Japan."<sup>77</sup> This strategy proved most effective given that the atrocities the Japanese had carried out against the Chinese during the Second Sino-Japanese War were still fresh in the people's minds. The bulk of the Chinese people rallied behind their government in opposition to the U.S. and U.N. task force in Korea, turning public opinion against the missionaries and Chinese Christians. While some of the missionaries may have been able to tolerate the pressure that this exerted on them, they were far less willing to allow the trouble that it brought the Chinese Christian Community. Soon their very presence was detrimental to the Chinese Christians and their dealings with the CCP. At the institutional level, some Christians felt that the missionaries had become a liability: "Now we had become enemy aliens

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<sup>76</sup> Van Wyk, "Oltman, Theodore V and Helen Oral History Interview," 36-37.

<sup>77</sup> Elizabeth Koeppel to Norma, Roger and Owen Koeppel, 6 June 1948, Koeppel, Edwin (1888-1956) and Elizabeth (Renskers) (1895-1976). Papers, 1917-1956, The Joint Archives of Holland, Hope College, Holland.



and it was about this time, June of 1950, that the Fukien Christian University told us that now we are an embarrassment. Up to this point they had said that there was no need for us to leave. But from June on they said, ‘you’d better consider leaving.’”<sup>78</sup> Fukien Christian University was a nondenominational College located in northern Fujian Province. Two members of the Amoy Mission, Gordon and Bertha Van Wyk, even obtained positions as faculty members.<sup>79</sup> To the missionaries the climate on campus would have reflected the general views of the elite Christian population. To lose the support of the Christian intelligentsia in Fujian was no doubt a painful development for the missionaries; however, it did not reflect the view of all the Chinese Christians. Many of the Chinese Christians that the RCA missionaries worked closely with showed no signs that they wished their foreign friends to leave. For example, the Oltmans reported no drop off in their number of Chinese friends, even though they would frequently inquire as to whether they wanted to be seen with them.<sup>80</sup> All the same, the RCA missionaries realized that their presence was now something of a paradox. They had come to China to spread their faith, heal the sick, and educate those less fortunate than themselves; however, now their very presence was causing harm to the very

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 326-327.

<sup>79</sup> De Jong, *The Reformed Church in China*, 302.

<sup>80</sup> Van Wyk, "Oltman, Theodore V and Helen Oral History Interview," 38.

people they sought to help. It became apparent that the only chance their Chinese brethren might have would be if they left China.

From 1950 to 1951 missionaries from across China began to leave in a mass exodus. During this time the population of foreign missionaries dropped from roughly three thousand to about one hundred.<sup>81</sup> In August of 1951, Dr. Oltman, the last RCA missionary, was issued an exit permit by the government and left China. This signaled the official end of the Amoy mission and the Reformed Church's presence in China. For 109 years, the mission had incessantly spread the Christian faith, cared for the sick, and brought western education to China.<sup>82</sup> Even more important, they sought, along with the larger missionary effort, to establish an independent Chinese Church that could function without the interference or support of western churches. The success of this endeavor would now be put to the ultimate test. From 1951 onward, the Chinese Church was on its own, under a government that was hostile to its very existence. Between the 1950s and 1980s, the Church faced increased persecution from the Communist government as well as the horrors of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. By the 1970s it appeared to the West that Christianity had been all but eradicated in China and the missionary endeavor had come to naught. It came as a surprise in 1980 when, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, the CCP

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<sup>81</sup> De Jong, *The Reformed Church in China*, 332.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 338.

eased its restrictions on religion and the Chinese Christian Church emerged intact.<sup>83</sup> The Chinese Church, against all odds, had survived as a series of underground home churches.<sup>84</sup>

### The Measure of Success

Whether the RCA was successful in its China mission depends on how one views success. On one hand, they were driven from China when it was clear that they believed they still had work to do. Furthermore, their evangelistic efforts were only marginally successful, as they never saw vast numbers of Chinese converting to Christianity. China never became a Christian nation as the missionaries would have no doubt been overjoyed to see. On the other hand, the missionaries focused more on producing stable Christians over vast number—even making conversion difficult to prevent people from seeking it for impious reasons.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, the missionaries knew that the best way to ensure the conversion of China was to establish a strong and independent Chinese church that could reach out to its own people. They believed this so strongly that they were even willing to set aside denominational differences in order to ensure that

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<sup>83</sup> Patrick Shan, “Old Faith for the New Millennium: Religions and the Chinese Civilization in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” in *Chinese Civilization in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. Andrew Targowski and Bernard Han (New York: Nova, 2014), 51.  
<http://site.ebrary.com.ezproxy.gvsu.edu/lib/gvsu/reader.action?docID=10951504>.

<sup>84</sup> De Jong, *The Reformed Church in China*, 343.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 40-43.

the Chinese church would be a united one.<sup>86</sup> In this the missionaries were undeniably successful. The church that they helped to establish proved more resilient than anyone could have imagined by not only surviving in one of the most anti-Christian environments of the time, but also enduring the insanity of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Furthermore, it has gone on to grow to a size that should impress even the most hardened critic. What the future holds for Christianity in China is unknown. It is unlikely that the majority of the population will ever ascribe to Christianity. However, it is entirely possible that one day they will hold the largest Christian population of any nation. The very fact that this is even a possibility attests to the success of the RCA and other denominations that sent missionaries to China.

Several limitations and areas where further study could be done should be noted in regards to this research. The first and most glaring is the lack of Chinese sources. Ideally the RCA missionaries' accounts would be balanced by how the Chinese they worked with viewed their efforts. Furthermore, this should include accounts by Chinese Christian converts, with a special emphasis on the shift in their view of the missionaries that occurred in 1951. Incidentally, the Chinese side of the entire Christian mission endeavor would make an excellent research project, as very little has been written on it by western scholars. In addition to this, consideration should be given to the specifics of how the Chinese Christian

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 63.

Community managed to survive in the hostile environment that the CCP created for it. Again, little historical inquiry has been made into this and it would make an excellent topic for someone interested in the history of the Chinese Christian Church. Finally, more emphasis could be paid to any affect the RCA may have had on China and U.S. foreign relations. Historian John K. Fairbank championed the examination of U.S. missionaries in this capacity and it would be interesting to see if a connection to a smaller denomination, such as the RCA, could be found.

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