

# Advocating the Reform of Reformed Missions in China

Cornelia Spencer's *The Missionary*

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Sammendrag: *The Missionary* av Cornelia Spencer (pseudonym for Grace Yaukey) ble først utgitt i New York i 1947 og står i en forholdsvis lang tradisjon av engelskspråklig skjønnlitteratur om utenlandske kristnes misjonsinnsats i Kina. Boken er en idéroman som tar til orde for et grunnleggende skifte i misjonen, fra evangelisering til sosialt, og særlig medisinsk, arbeid, spesielt på landsbygda. Vektlegging på misjonsfeltet fra evangelisering til sosialt, og spesielt medisinsk, tjeneste, spesielt på landsbygda. For det andre argumenterer Spencer for anerkjennelse av spesielt buddhismens etiske forskrifter, i en atmosfære av gjensidig religiøs toleranse. Det hevdes i denne artikkelen at hovedpersonen, en relativt ung amerikansk reformert misjonær ved navn Daniel Eaton, er basert på arbeidet til Spencers ektemann, Jesse Baer Yaukey, som hun tjente sammen med i den lille byen som i 1920-årene het Yochow, men nå er Yueyang i Hunan-provinsen. Begrunnelsen for endring av vektlegging i misjonsarbeidet er knyttet til paradigmeskiftet foreslått i den velkjente, men kontroversielle, tverrkirkelege rapporten *Re-Thinking Missions: A Laymen's Inquiry after One Hundred Years*. Men den foreslåtte vektleggingen av medisinsk oppsøkende arbeid, hadde vært en viktig del av holistisk misjon Kina siden det nittende århundret og allerede var ganske godt utviklet da Spencer og hennes mann ble kalt til feltet i 1924.

Nøkkelord: Cornelia Spencer, *The Missionary*, Kina, holistisk misjon, medisinsk misjon, kristen-buddhistisk dialog.

Abstract: Published initially in New York in 1947, *The Missionary* by Cornelia Spencer (the pseudonym of Grace Yaukey) stands in a relatively long tradition of English-language fiction about foreign Christian missionary endeavours in China. It is a *roman à thèse* which advocates a fundamental shift of emphasis in the mission field

from evangelism to social, and especially medical, ministry, especially in rural areas. Secondly, Spencer argued for recognition of especially the ethical precepts of Buddhism in an atmosphere of religious toleration. It is argued in the present article that the protagonist, a comparatively young American Reformed missionary named Daniel Eaton, is based on the endeavours of Spencer's husband, Jesse Baer Yaukey, with whom she served in the small city then called Yochow but now known as Yueyang in Hunan province. The case for a change of emphasis in missionary work is related to the paradigm shift proposed in the well-known but controversial interdenominational report *Re-Thinking Missions: A Laymen's Inquiry after One Hundred Years*. However, with regard to the proposed emphasis on medical outreach, this had been a vital component of holistic ministry in China since the nineteenth century (though far more in cities than in rural areas) and was quite well developed when Spencer and her husband were called to the field in 1924.

Keywords: Cornelia Spencer, *The Missionary*, *Re-Thinking Missions*, China, holistic missions, medical missions, Christian-Buddhist dialogue.

## Introduction

Both general information about Christian foreign missions and arguments in debates about missionary policy have long been communicated through a variety of channels, among them scholarly and popular journals, denominational meetings, and direct exposure through visits to mission fields. During the twentieth century, such media as novels and the cinema joined them near the informational and rhetorical forefront. The relevance of the construction of missionary endeavours in these popular formats to missiology has repeatedly been underscored internationally. Jamie S. Scott's articles in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* prosaically titled «Missions and Fiction» and «Missions and Film» underscored this particular expansion of the subject.<sup>1</sup>

China has provided the setting for many novels involving missiological themes, as the supposed mystique of the Orient offered a goldmine of exotic elements, examples of cross-cultural tensions, and other material for recurrent exploitation. Beginning in the nineteenth century, literary artists have written about the personalities of and challenges to Christian missionaries in the Middle Kingdom, and since Pearl Buck took up the verbal cudgels in the 1930s these cross-cultural purveyors of the Gospel have remained a nearly evergreen theme in American literature. Such authors as Richard McKenna (*The Sand Pebbles*), John Hersey (*The Call*), and Bo Caldwell (*City of Tranquil Light*) have contributed credible novels about facets of this complex

1 Jamie S. Scott, «Missions and Fiction», *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, XXXII, no. 3 (July 2008), 121–124, 126–128, and «Missions and Film», *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, XXXII, no. 3 (July 2008), 115–120.

topic. Whether lauded for their fortitude in seeking to sow the seed of the Good News in stony East Asian soil under sometimes harrowing conditions or damned as condescending cultural imperialists, missionaries to the Celestial Empire continue to stir the imaginations of *littérateurs*.

Not only literary scholars but also missiologists and church historians have taken the ever-expanding body of imaginative works under the loupe. As a noteworthy spin-off, motion pictures depicting related themes have also been subjected to critical analysis. One particularly useful though as yet only weakly developed approach has been to locate the creative literature in question within the contours of American cultural and literary history. Grant Wacker's article of 2009, «Pearl S. Buck and the Waning of the Missionary Impulse»,<sup>2</sup> is an especially stimulating analysis of this sort. He linked her portrayals of China and particularly her critique of foreign missionary undertakings there to a wider waning of American interest in such evangelism and to a controversial shift of emphasis from evangelism to social ministry.

While missiologists, church historians, and other scholars have mined much pay-dirt from that lode, many nuggets remain to be extracted. One of them is the work of Pearl Buck's literarily gifted younger sister, Grace Yaukey. Writing under the pseudonym «Cornelia Spencer» beginning in the mid-1930s, she crafted more than twenty credible and provocative novels and non-fictional works about China past and present. Particularly significant to missiological inquiry is her work of 1947, *The Missionary*.<sup>3</sup> Despite receiving an appreciable number of laudatory reviews in both the religious and the secular press, this unabashed *roman à thèse* was always overshadowed by other books by her senior sibling and soon faded into oblivion.

The arguments which Spencer put forth regarding especially the re-emphasising and expansion of medical missionary endeavours and recognition of the moral validity of Buddhism merit consideration not least because of the historical context in which her perceptions were made and her opinions formed. Raised in China though educated in the United States of America, Spencer began her career as an educational missionary in the turbulent early 1920s and continued to expand her writing during the period when numerous other Protestant churchmen were re-evaluating the successes and failures of their endeavours in Asia. One particularly well-known fruit of such introspection was the seminal volume *Re-Thinking Missions: A Laymen's Inquiry After One Hundred Years*, published in 1932. Spencer's own views dovetailed neatly with much that was expressed in that provocative book. In the present article I shall consider how she dealt with pivotal issues, especially by using her husband, who was a reform-minded Reformed missionary of an unconventional and nonconformist sort, as a model for the protagonist and a *de facto* advocate of new directions.

2 Grant Wacker, «Pearl S. Buck and the Waning of the Missionary Impulse», *Church History*, LXXII, no. 4 (December 2009), 852–874.

3 Cornelia Spencer, *The Missionary* (New York: The John Day Company, 1947).

## The Reformed Church in the United States

Grace and Jesse Yaukey were commissioned by the Reformed Church in the United States, a theologically somewhat fluid German-American denomination rooted in the Reformed wing of Germanophone Protestantism. Its principal institution for training pastors for service in the USA or foreign mission fields was Lancaster Theological Seminary. Doctrinally it was relatively diverse by the time Jesse Yaukey was ordained in it.

For decades this denomination's Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missionaries did little more than support financially Benjamin Schneider, a German-American pastor whom the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, a largely Congregationalist agency, had sent to the Ottoman Empire. In 1879, however, it undertook work in Japan, where its first church was gathered in Tokyo in 1884. This field subsequently spread to such locales as Sendai, Akita, and Fukushima.

One of its seasoned missionaries at Sendai, where he had been a founder of the North Japan College, William Hoy, and his wife accepted a transfer to the Chinese city of Hankow in 1899. The Boxer Rebellion prompted them to return briefly to Japan.<sup>4</sup> After that xenophobic, anti-missionary movement subsided, the Hoys returned to Hunan, this time to Yochow, in 1900, where they established the mission at which the Yaukeys would begin to serve in 1924. Among her other achievements, Mary Hoy established the school for girls there, an institution that would be mentioned repeatedly in *The Missionary*.<sup>5</sup> The station at Yochow grew rapidly, albeit on a relatively small scale, during the next several years. Crucially, Dr. J. Albert Beam, a physician from Chicago, was commissioned to undertake medical work in Yochow in 1902.<sup>6</sup>

### Jesse Baer Yaukey

Born in 1897 in Elbrook, Pennsylvania, Jesse Yaukey graduated from high school in nearby Waynesboro in 1915.<sup>7</sup> He earned his bachelor's degree at his denomination's Ursinus College near Philadelphia in 1919 with a degree in what was called the «Classics Group», an interdisciplinary curriculum that emphasised the ancient Greek and Latin languages and was described as particularly appropriate for students who planned to enter the teaching profession or study theology at the postgraduate level. Yaukey participated in numerous extracurricular organisations, among them the Young Men's Christian Association, the Zwinglian Literary Society, the Brotherhood

4 «Rev Wm. Hoy Is Safe», *The Semi-Weekly New Era* (Lancaster, Pennsylvania), 30 June 1900, 1; «Dr. William Hoy First Reformed Worker in China», *The Lancaster Sunday News*, 7 September 1924, 3.

5 «Mrs. W.E. Hoy Dies; Pioneer Missioner», *The Philadelphia Enquirer*, 7 November 1937, 4.

6 «Farewell Meeting to Dr. Beam», *Mercersburg Journal*, 23 May 1902, 1.

7 «Waynesboro Graduation», *People's Register* (Chambersburg, Pennsylvania), 25 March 1915, 1.

of St. Paul (an organisation for prospective missionaries), the College Choir, and the Ursinus College Press Club.<sup>8</sup>

Yaukey then undertook theological studies at the Central Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio, and graduated with a Bachelor of Divinity in 1922.<sup>9</sup> By then he was one of numerous prospective missionaries «under appointment» and preparing for departure for China.<sup>10</sup> Evidently Yaukey's vision of serving in that country influenced his choice of thesis topic at the Central Seminary. It is especially noteworthy that he chose to write a critical study titled «Buddhism—A Detriment to Civilization».<sup>11</sup> This harmonised with the prevailing missionary *Zeitgeist* within much of American Protestantism in the early 1920s, especially in those circles that sent missionaries to Asia to proclaim Christianity to adherents of different religions. However, the protagonist in *The Missionary* expressed a vastly different and generally appreciative opinion of Buddhism in the mid-1930s.

In September 1922 Yaukey sailed from San Francisco to Shanghai to begin his missionary career. Still a bachelor, he spent approximately a year receiving instruction in Chinese at a special language school in Nanjing. During that time, his undergraduate training in educational journalism served him well, as he worked as the circulation manager of an annual publication for his fellow language students appropriately titled *The Linguist*. In 1923 Yaukey announced to his mission board in Philadelphia his engagement to «Miss Grace C. Sydenstricker», who was then serving as principal of the George C. Smith School, an institution for girls in Suzhou. Her responsibilities there would prevent her from resigning and joining him immediately, but that would be possible the following year.<sup>12</sup> Their wedding took place in Nanjing on 30 June 1924.<sup>13</sup>

8 Carolyn Weigel (Ursinus College Archives) to Frederick Hale, 2 May 2019 (electronic correspondence).

9 «Ten Graduate from Reformed Church School», *The Dayton Evening Herald* (Dayton, Ohio), 25 April 1922, 20.

10 «Discuss Missionary Work at Convention», *The Lancaster News Journal* (Lancaster, Pennsylvania), 8 July 1921, 16.

11 «The Graduate from Reformed Church School», 20.

12 Jesse B. Yaukey (Shanghai) to Allen R. Bartholomew, 11 August 1923, RG 2017.001, Box 44, Folder 006, Board of Foreign Missions, Reformed Church in the United States, Evangelical and Reformed Historical Society Archives, Lancaster Theological Seminary, Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

13 Dr. A. Sydenstricker, Grace Caroline Sydenstricker and Jesse B. Yaukey, Nanjing, wedding announcement, 30 June 1924, RG 2017.001, Box 44, Folder 006, Board of Foreign Missions, Reformed Church in the United States, Evangelical and Reformed Historical Society Archives, Lancaster Theological Seminary, Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Looking ahead, Spencer left no doubt that the protagonist in *The Missionary* was modelled on her husband. When interviewed late in life for the Midwest China Oral History and Archives Collection, she explained that although Jesse was officially “an evangelistic missionary similar to my father» he «never took to preaching». Instead, he concentrated his ministry on meeting Chinese people at approximately a dozen scattered out-stations. Aided by a Chinese lay assistant, Yaukey distributed «simple medicines—like castor oil, bandages, and quinine, which were always in demand». Spencer placed her husband’s incipient medical ministry into historical context: «He developed what I think of as a preliminary barefoot doctor plan which became so popular later on during the People’s Republic.» She expressed certainty that the indigenous rural people «welcomed that very, very much» as it was “a physical help which they could see» and «because there was such great need».14

### From Grace Sydenstricker to Cornelia Spencer

Cornelia Spencer’s decades in China endowed her with an excellent perspective from which to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of evolving missionary endeavours in the Middle Kingdom. She was born at Zhenjiang on the Yangtse River, less than seventy kilometres east-north-east of Nanjing in Jiangsu province in 1899 to parents were seasoned Southern Presbyterian missionaries there. Though too young to remember the Boxer Uprising of her infancy, she subsequently witnessed the careers of her conventional, evangelising father and his colleagues, the latter of whose narrow-mindedness and disrespect for Chinese culture would be the targets of some of her sister’s most vitriolic criticism.15 After gaining her primary education at home from her mother and being raised bilingually, Grace Sydenstricker was sent to the Shanghai American School.16 From there she was accompanied in 1918 to Maryville College,

14 Grace Sydenstricker Yaukey. Midwest China Oral History and Archives Collection. Typed transcript of tape-recorded interviews, 30–31 (In the possession of Dr. Jean Yaukey Matlack, Camden, Maine. I express my gratitude to Dr. Matlack for kindly lending me this volume in 2021).

15 One of her first expressions of this came in July 1932, when she published an epistolary article titled “Give China the *Whole Christ*» in *The Chinese Recorder*. This unabashedly disgruntled veteran of the mission field exercised very little restraint in damning unnamed personnel among whom she had spent her early years in China as «narrow, bitter missionaries» and professing that she had never experienced people so brimming with «criticism, harsh and pharisaical» and «such contempt and lack of understanding of the Chinese». Foreshadowing a qualified position which she (and, though less bluntly, her sister in *The Missionary*) would repeatedly espouse, Buck juxtaposed the positive achievements of educational and medical missionaries with what she derisively termed «that arid and sterile preaching of the mere word of the gospel». See Pearl S. Buck, «Give China the *Whole Christ*», *The Chinese Recorder*, LXIII, no. 7 (July 1932), 450–452.

16 Grace Sydenstricker Yaukey. Midwest China Oral History and Archives Collection, 1.

a Southern Presbyterian undergraduate institution in Maryville, Tennessee, where she received her Bachelor of Arts *cum laude* three years later.<sup>17</sup> During her college years, Grace was a particularly active member of the Young Women's Christian Association and the campus affiliate of John R. Mott's Student Volunteer Movement, which responded enthusiastically to his endlessly echoed call for «the evangelization of the world in this generation».<sup>18</sup> Almost immediately after graduating in 1921, Grace returned to China, serving initially as a teacher and then as principal of the George C. Smith School in Suzhou. This affiliation ended with her marriage to Jesse Yaukey in 1924.<sup>19</sup>

The Yaukeys were commissioned to the Reformed station at Yochow, on a tributary of the Yangtze River in Hunan province, that year and remained there through the turbulent 1920s, apart from brief interruptions occasioned by anti-missionary hostilities, until their furlough began in 1929. Their sons Raymond and David were born in 1925 and 1927, respectively, the latter in Kobe, Japan, after most missionaries from upcountry had left their stations and sought refuge in Shanghai and other major cities. They used their year in New York to acquire master's degrees at Columbia University before returning to Yochow in January 1931.<sup>20</sup> Their second tour of duty was cut short in 1935, however, when they felt compelled to take their infant daughter, Ann, who had been severely injured in childbirth, to the United States for medical treatment which failed to save her life. The Yaukeys never returned to chronically war-torn China, but Grace's interest in and personal attachment to the country endured for the rest of her days.

After settling in the United States, the Yaukeys had little contact with the Reformed Church, choosing instead to affiliate first with the large All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, D.C., and subsequently with a Society of Friends meeting in Bethesda which they helped to establish. Jesse never served as the minister of a church but

17 «Commencement at Maryville», *The Journal and Tribune* (Knoxville, Tennessee), 31 May 1921, 5.

18 *Maryville College Bulletin. Register for 1917–1918. Announcements for 1918–1919*, 70 (uncatalogued materials, Maryville College Archives, Maryville, Tennessee).

19 Dr. A. Sydenstricker, Grace Caroline Sydenstricker and Jesse B. Yaukey, Nanjing, wedding announcement, 30 June 1924, Evangelical and Reformed Historical Society Archives, Reformed Church Board of Foreign Missions, RG 2017.001, Box 44, Folder 006, Board of Foreign Missions, Reformed Church in the United States, Evangelical and Reformed Historical Society Archives, Lancaster Theological Seminary, Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

20 Jocelyn Wilk (Columbia University Archives) to Frederick Hale, 1 May 2019 (electronic correspondence).

was a very active Quaker layman while pursuing a lengthy career as a public health administrator.<sup>21</sup>

Restrained by responsibilities of motherhood, Grace launched her literary career (as «Cornelia Spencer») with short stories in the monthly periodical *Asia*, which her sister Pearl helped to edit with her second husband, Richard J. Walsh. Published in 1934 and 1935, the first two dealt with the threats which the contemporary civil war and widespread, militant banditry in China posed to missionary work,<sup>22</sup> a matter highlighted many years later in *The Missionary*. Then followed *Three Sisters: The Story of the Soong Family of China*, a somewhat fictionalised tripartite biography.<sup>23</sup> Her first novel, *China Trader*,<sup>24</sup> published in 1940, was an enthusiastically received venture in historical fiction dealing with commercial relations between China and several Western countries chiefly in the early nineteenth century and focussing on moral dilemmas posed by the illicit opium trade.

## Plot Summary

Spanning approximately 270 pages and divided into forty-five chapters, the narrative of *The Missionary* canters at a relatively brisk pace through part of the mission field in central China. Largely linear, it traces a segment of the life and shifting attitudes of an American missionary, Daniel Eaton. A small number of brief flashbacks to his upbringing in the United States of America and his call to the field only briefly interrupt the forward flow. The story is told by an anonymous though hardly omniscient third-person narrator. Most of the other missionaries (all of whom are American) represent varying degrees of conventionality in their religious and educational ministries.

The story unfolds mainly during an eventful period of less than two years in 1933 and 1934, a tensely turbulent era in China as the Republic's army seeks to suppress the rural revolution staged by the Communist Party of China. Bandits and warlords complicate the matrix of militant forces vying for regional power and ill-gained wealth. An inland American naval presence also makes itself known, albeit only briefly, as the result of «unequal treaties» concluded in the 1920s to protect foreign commercial and religious property and personnel in that region.

The fictitious mission is in a small city then called Yochow but now known as Yueyang in Hunan province, very near where the Yaukeys served. Neither the denominational identity of the clearly Protestant mission nor the time of its founding is stated. However, by the early 1930s it is sufficiently well established to boast a hospital,

21 Grace Sydenstricker Yaukey. Midwest China Oral History and Archives Collection, 72–73.

22 Cornelia Spencer, «The Reds Are Coming!», *Asia*, XXXIV, no. 10 (October 1934), 636–638, and «Catholic Father Released», *Asia*, XXXV, no. 3 (March 1935), 187–188.

23 Cornelia Spencer, *Three Sisters: The Story of the Soong Family of China* (New York: The John Day Company, 1939).

24 Cornelia Spencer, *China Trader* (New York: The John Day Company, 1940).



a primary school and, a few miles distant, a secondary school for boys. Underscoring the maturity of this mission at Yochow is the presence of Chinese members on its staff in positions of leadership and responsibility. One of the pastors of its congregation is a Chinese named Reverend Han. Furthermore, the physician at the hospital, Dr. Liao, is Chinese. Both of these men are respected individuals, and especially the latter is a major character.

The novel begins with a dual focus on Daniel and Anne Eaton, and subdued tensions between them surface immediately. They foreshadow and are a microcosm of the missiological issue concerning the tension between conventional evangelisation and worship and a supposedly newer emphasis on medical ministry. Anne has spent most of her life in China and slightly more than a decade at Yochow. Her husband has also been at the mission there for a decade when the story opens. While this young man, unmistakably disaffected with established forms of missionary work and holding no brief for much Christian doctrine, prefers to get away from Yochow and conduct educational and medical work at out-stations, she quietly thrives spiritually and emotionally within the confines of the pious, conventional lifestyle in which she was raised as the daughter of missionaries. Travelling largely on foot, Daniel treks from one village to another, aiding rural teachers, treating minor illnesses, dispensing medications, and the like. This itinerancy and the opportunities it offers him to serve his beloved Chinese peasants in direct, practical ways appeal to him far more than the worship-orientated religious life at the station in Yochow. The thoroughly bilingual Anne previously accompanied him on these forays. It is also revealed in the second chapter that Daniel's theologically more conservative colleagues regard him as something of a maverick because of his general absence from the worship life of the compound and preference for itinerant social ministry.

Accompanied by a porter, Daniel sets out on a spring tour of villages in a nearby mountainous area. His interaction with various Chinese allows him to voice his opinions about the need to check the rapid growth of the population while simultaneously improving agriculture to enhance food production.<sup>25</sup> Daniel's views on these matters get a mixed reception from individuals with whom he discusses them. A conversation about medical practice gives him an opportunity to describe how many Chinese fear undergoing surgery.<sup>26</sup>

Long childless, Anne becomes pregnant, and her condition continues without any noted complications. Nevertheless, questions arise concerning her delivery and reveal yet another set of disharmonious attitudes among the missionaries. Having spent many years at Yochow, she does not doubt the adequacy of the medical mission there. Friends, however, including Mary Thompson, the American pastor's wife, have less confidence in the respected Dr. Liao's obstetrical skills and urge Anne to place herself

25 Spencer, *The Missionary*, 44–46.

26 Spencer, *The Missionary*, 47, 50.

into the care of a Western physician who has extensive experience in delivering babies. Daniel agrees and suggests that she remove temporarily to Hankow or Changsha. She staunchly rejects their counsel and goes into labour in Yochow. Readers are told extremely little about the problems encountered in the birth. At any rate, despite Liao's efforts, the baby's life cannot be saved.

The limitations of confidence in Liao's ability appear to reflect attitudes that were present before the birth of the Yaukeys' first child, Raymond, in 1925. Two years later, when their second son was born, Jesse Yaukey wrote to his mission board in Philadelphia and requested the adoption of clearer policies regarding medical expenses which missionaries incurred. He revealed that in 1925 he and Grace had elected to go to the «Yale Hospital» in Changsha for the delivery «in preference to remaining in Yochow where we had only a Chinese doctor who, we did not feel, was equal to our need».<sup>27</sup>

After Dr. Liao leaves his post to join communist rebels in their «Long March» (possibly having been compelled to do so, though that is not stated), the hospital is left without a qualified physician. Daniel volunteers to contribute his limited knowledge of medicine gained both when treating patients at the out-stations and during an epidemic when he assisted Dr. Liao.

In the final chapter, the story is carried hurriedly to the spring of 1935. Conflicts between Nationalist forces and communist insurgents continue to mount, and casualties fill the mission hospital. Another doctor has finally arrived to serve there. Daniel continues his practical ministry of service to the peasantry and retains their trust and respect. *The Missionary* thus ends on a note of success in a new form of Christian service in a China that many local people believe will become a post-traditional, communist society.

### **Foregrounding Itinerant Medical Ministry**

From an early stage in the narrative, graphically detailed attention is paid to the medical components of Daniel Eaton's itinerant ministry to the out-stations, cementing its importance in the minds of readers. In the fourth short chapter, the narrator describes how he prepares for departure on one such foray by gathering medications from a cupboard in his residence. Before leaving, he dispenses some to a servant who is suffering from a «chill». «There was always a certain pleasure in the giving out of medicine when one knew that it could cure something,» the narrator explains. This is immediately linked to the theme of the inadequacy of the present

27 Jesse B. Yaukey (Kobe, Japan), to Allan R. Bartholomew, 21 April 1927, RG 2017.001, Box 44, Folder 006, Board of Foreign Missions, Reformed Church in the United States, Evangelical and Reformed Historical Society Archives, Lancaster Theological Seminary, Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Meant is the Hunan-Yale Medical School and Hospital in Changsha, the capital of Hunan province.

state of medical missions: «There was so terribly much that he was powerless to help.» The magnitude of the need takes a toll on Daniel's emotional state: «He was oppressed by suffering unless he fought consciously against that feeling.»<sup>28</sup> However, at least he has established the rudiments of a network that can provide certain basic services in rural areas when he is not present. On his tours, Daniel replenishes the supplies of medications that teachers can dispense to the sick.<sup>29</sup> There are also plans in place to transport patients with acute needs to Yochow, even though from some points that is a three-day journey on foot.<sup>30</sup>

When Daniel is in his village clinics, he is confronted with a wide spectrum of ailments. Spencer does not spare her readers disturbing images of the patients. A brief sample will illustrate her frankness in this dimension of her rhetorical strategy: «A child covered with plasters was brought to him, and he began the sickening process of taking them off, lancing and pressing a dozen boils, cleaning and sterilizing and dressing.» «A man shaking with ague came next, and he counted out the quinine powders.» «A woman came with eyelids glued shut with trachoma, and he cleansed them and put in argyrol and gave her more to take home.» «A child with scaly head disease came, and Daniel smeared it with the thick black ointment prescribed for it, and gave him more, covering his head with a small white cotton cap, and making him promise to wash and boil the cap each time the ointment was changed.» «A skeleton came with a deep cough, and Daniel knew that he could do nothing but urge him to eat many eggs and as much meat as he could and to rest and sit in the sun.»<sup>31</sup>

Spencer also emphasises early on that the vastness of the health needs is endemic in Chinese society and can be attributed in part to public ignorance and attitudes that militate against effective treatment. Several examples of these problems in rural China are embedded in the text at an early stage. Open sewage systems are described for no apparent reason other than to underscore the inadequacy of sanitation.<sup>32</sup> This seems to be linked to a startlingly high rate of infant mortality. In a heated exchange with an older woman, the wife of the Chinese pastor of the mission congregation mentions that she gave birth to her eighth child when she was fifty-four years old, and her older children «scolded» her for that. However, she seeks to excuse her alleged reproductive irresponsibility by assuring that the youngest is «a very intelligent child».<sup>33</sup> Daniel adds his voice to the issue when on his first lengthy tour of the out-stations. In a discussion with a villager, he acknowledges that there are also serious health problems in the United States of America but insists that they are less grave than in China.

28 Spencer, *The Missionary*, 28.

29 Spencer, *The Missionary*, 39.

30 Spencer, *The Missionary*, 61.

31 Spencer, *The Missionary*, 54.

32 Spencer, *The Missionary*, 25.

33 Spencer, *The Missionary*, 32.

«You have too many people for your land,» Daniel states without reserve. His conversation partner agrees but faults Chinese women while not mentioning the male role in this demographic explosion. «The women do nothing but bear,» he grouses. At the same time, however, he insists that people must have sons.<sup>34</sup>

### **Daniel Eaton's Encounters with Buddhists**

Strongly implied from the outset of *The Missionary* is that Daniel is not concerned with details of Christian theology and does not believe that the acceptance of a particular set of religious doctrines is a condition of one's salvation—or that salvation in a conventional Christian sense is necessary. Indeed, the narrator states clearly that this missionary did not go to China full of «enthusiasm about saving anyone». Furthermore, «He had never believed in any such theological necessity.»<sup>35</sup> No less significantly, at some unspecified point Daniel has made it clear to his colleagues that he did not regard Christianity as the sole path to a relationship with God. Consequently, they regard him as a «dissenter, different from his fellow missionaries». The narrator summarises Daniel's stance succinctly: «He could not declare salvation through Christ the only way to God. He could only serve the people in their need.»<sup>36</sup>

Daniel's long-standing spiritual distance from his colleagues is amplified quite explicitly in the second chapter. The narrator states that upon his arrival at Yochow he understood that his colleagues were «not of the same mind» as the furloughed missionary in Pennsylvania who had inspired him to consider going to China to serve its suffering people: «They took for granted attitudes that he knew with sudden clarity were not his.»<sup>37</sup> Daniel and his colleagues continue to co-operate in their tasks, but his spiritual and attitudinal alterity is obvious to all concerned, and accordingly his duties are defined to fit his views that do not mesh well with established rules and procedures at the mission. The reason for this is stated frankly: «He was not asked to preach—after the one time when he spoke informally of man's different ways of finding God.» On that occasion, the narrator reports, his message seemed unclear to his American colleagues, but to some of the young Chinese men in the audience it was sufficiently appealing to make their eyes shine as they leaned forward and listened eagerly.<sup>38</sup>

Spencer embeds in her initial chapter a two-fold element of religio-cultural symbolism that echoes these different attitudes. As the first day of the narrative begins in Yochow, Daniel hears the ringing of the church bell. To his ears, this bell is «orthodox American, its tones clear and untrembling». Daniel compares their unambiguous sound with those he has heard from Buddhist bells in the city's Yellow

34 Spencer, *The Missionary*, 44.

35 Spencer, *The Missionary*, 1.

36 Spencer, *The Missionary*, 11.

37 Spencer, *The Missionary*, 14.

38 Spencer, *The Missionary*, 15.

Temple. The «deep tones» emanating from those Asian bells are «mellow, clinging to the air, fading imperceptibly, seeming even to return sometimes on the wind, and then faltering before it blew again». At least to him, their tones «did not say anything clearly, but they suggested everything.»<sup>39</sup>

Daniel's initial conversation with a Buddhist is recorded in Chapter Eight and occurs in the final stage of his first narrated tour of the mission's out-stations. He has followed a «jagged path» as the only road to a place high in the mountains. Accompanied by a grunting «baggage coolie», he perspires profusely under a blazing early summer sun but selflessly rejects his servant's suggestion that he should be riding a pony or be carried. In the afternoon they finally reach a «Buddhist hermitage» built in a cave in a rocky bluff.<sup>40</sup>

In this remote venue, Daniel meets one of its few residents, an elderly Buddhist priest who immediately recognises him. How much previous interaction these two men have had is not stated, but the priest knows that Daniel is the «foreign teacher» and bows to him while fingering what the narrator calls his «rosary», presumably referring to prayer beads (*fózhū*) that many Chinese Buddhists use in their devotional life. Daniel shows his respect for this Chinese gentleman by politely declining to be called a «teacher» when in the presence of someone «so much more learned than I.»<sup>41</sup>

The religious segment of their dialogue begins when the unnamed priest draws forth from his gown a pamphlet which he identifies as «one of the Jesus Christ books». It is titled *The Good News of John* and is presumably the text of the fourth canonical gospel. Having read it, the elderly priest announces his judgment of the text: «This talks of much that is like the teaching of the Great Teacher Lord Buddha—kindness to all, love to all, sincerity, and simplicity.» He does not quote even a single verse from its twenty-two chapters, nor does he comment on any of the miracles, the parables or other specific teachings, the theistic nature of God, the eschatological dimensions, or the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Instead, he declares categorically, «There is nothing new here but simply the same teaching from another who might well be a follower of Lord Buddha.»<sup>42</sup>

Daniel's response is truncated; he says far less than one might expect of a theologically educated Christian missionary. He begins by affirming the words of his host by uttering a solitary syllable: «True». However, Daniel immediately tempers his assent by pointing out one essential difference between the elderly Buddhist's assertion and Christianity as presented in what he recognises as a pamphlet distributed by «the mission centres». The novel element in the Gospel of John that he believes distinguishes Christianity from Buddhism (and, one must add, justifies his own service-orientated

39 Spencer, *The Missionary*, 8.

40 Spencer, *The Missionary*, 55–56.

41 Spencer, *The Missionary*, 56.

42 Spencer, *The Missionary*, 56.

rather than doctrinal understanding of his religion) is that «men are to practise the teachings rather than to repeat good words.» He immediately admits that «all of us alike fall short.»<sup>43</sup>

In the wake of this visit to a Buddhist hermitage, Daniel continues to a village where he is asked to address the people who have gathered to welcome him. This is challenging because, in the words of the narrator, «It was hard always for him to speak of his religion.» Nevertheless, Daniel gamely seeks to deliver a brief message in accordance with his post-orthodox faith. He tells the crowd that whether there are abundant crops or famine «depends upon the kindness of heaven», something that no person can control. What one has the power to do, however, is find internal peace. In accordance with his theologically liberal convictions, Daniel then declares, «People have found this peace in different religions. Some of you find it in the words of the Lord Buddha. We of the Christian church find it in the words of one, Jesus.»<sup>44</sup> This broad-mindedness surprises and is unacceptable to the Christian teacher in the village school, who rebukes the visiting missionary. «There is need for repentance first,» he reminds Daniel. «First of all must be recognition of sin and the need for salvation.»<sup>45</sup> Daniel neither answers him nor compromises his own belief. Instead, he continues to devote himself to his social and particularly his medical ministry.

His final two encounters with Buddhists in rural areas occur in monasteries while trekking with fellow missionaries and international tourists in the mountains near Hankow. In the first of these establishments, the narrator emphasises exotic aspects of the buildings and their ornamentation. Especially to those visitors whose familiarity with religious architecture has been shaped by minimally adorned Protestant chapels, their surroundings must have seemed utterly peculiar and overwhelming. In the second court to which the entourage is escorted, a bronze incense urn rises to a level above the height of a man, and from it curls fragrant smoke. Stone lions stand guard in the four corners of the room, and they are only the relatively familiar beginning of a statuary menagerie: «The caves of the main building, which formed one side of the courtyard, were mazes of dragon heads, phoenixes, and small half-mythological animals that seemed poised to leap down upon anyone who passed.» From this bright court the visitors proceed into the darkness of the main temple hall, where at first only candles are visible. After their eyes adjust to the dim light, they notice prayer mats laid out in neat rows, centred about an enormous but undefined image with red candles burning before it. The religious elements come into view: «Around the walls were ranged hundreds of other gods, each with its smaller candle and incense burner, the joss sticks stuck in the deep grey ashes.»<sup>46</sup>

43 Spencer, *The Missionary*, 56–57.

44 Spencer, *The Missionary*, 60.

45 Spencer, *The Missionary*, 60.

46 Spencer, *The Missionary*, 160–161.

The priest who guides the group through this paragon of polytheism then leads them to a courtyard to meet the senior leader of the monastery. He explains that «the Ancient One» is nearly 100 years old and has resided in this temple for more than half a century. Speaking in a «cracked» and «tremulous» voice, that master welcomes the visitors, who he assumes are Christians. This provides an opportunity to insert into the text a thrust against the exclusivist claims of conventional missionary Christianity. «You are the bearers of the gospel of one called Jesus, who is called the Son of the Lord of Heaven,» he states matter-of-factly without interrupting his cordial hospitality. He then underscores his belief in the validity of religious pluralism: «There are many who are the sons of the Lord of heaven, but we serve the one we know and love best. I say to you, many ways are true and lead to the truth.» But this master nevertheless urges his visitors to continue in their missionary endeavours because, he assures them, «Jesus was a good man, and some of you from the West are sincere.» However, he adds one caveat: «But do not urge good Buddhists to become Christians. Let them keep what they have. For Gautama too was good, and we must serve him as we can.» Possibly aware that some Christians had argued that contemporary Buddhism had drifted from the teachings of Gautama Siddhartha and that numerous schools of the Buddhist faith had emerged in its more than two millennia of history, the master acknowledges that followers had changed the Buddha «very much» and added physical forms to the core beliefs. This he justified on the grounds that «man loves what he can see and feel» and «cannot worship a spirit only». Again sensing that his visitors might have felt overwhelmed by the statuary and other accoutrements of the temple, he reasons that «all this . . . serves to bring many to the spirit, so what does it matter? Each in his own way, each in his own way!»<sup>47</sup> So concordant is this message with his own convictions that Daniel wishes to return and converse further with the master. To his dismay, however, he sees that the old man is fatigued and nearly blind.<sup>48</sup> No subsequent visit occurs in the narrative.

The last rural encounter follows hard on the heels of this one and unfolds at another temple which the international trekkers reach a few hours later. The episode is anticlimactic and adds nothing to Spencer's case for appreciating spiritual value in Buddhism. Planning to spend the night there, the party see the temple in a deep valley and look forward to a respite from the heat of the day. The building stands in a grove of «ancient» trees, a setting that underscores its age but tells readers little else. The narrator states that it is «a usual resting place for travellers» and that its priests «argued» about the prices they should charge for accommodation and water sold to the group that includes the missionaries. After a brief bit of haggling, these tourists are led to a court near the rear of the structure and an adjacent room where they can spread out their bedrolls and set up mosquito nets. The timelessness of the setting is indicated by

47 Spencer, *The Missionary*, 161–162.

48 Spencer, *The Missionary* 162.

what is described as «the spiced scent of a century of incense».<sup>49</sup> No dialogue between the foreigners and the monks is recounted. Conceivably Spencer included this weak scene merely to counter the detailed and generally positive impression made in the previous one by presenting a mundane view of monastic life in a rural setting.

### **Echoing *Re-Thinking Missions***

To readers who are familiar with a crucial development in the history of American Protestant foreign missionary thinking during the 1930s, the pivotal themes in *The Missionary* will seem entirely familiar. Under the leadership of Professor William Ernest Hocking, a Congregationalist layman who taught philosophy at Harvard University, a committee comprising laymen from seven denominations investigated the current state of missionary efforts in Asia. Hocking himself was among those who travelled to China on this errand. The first fruit of their research was a book published in 1932 (the same year when Pearl Buck delivered her controversial speech at the Astor Hotel in New York questioning the need for Christian foreign missionaries) under the title *Re-Thinking Missions: A Laymen's Inquiry after One Hundred Years*.

Among their recommendations, two stand out as particularly germane to a historical contextualisation of Spencer's novel. The first considered what the principal emphases in missionary endeavours. «We believe that the time has come to set the educational and other philanthropic aspects of mission work free from organized responsibility to the work of conscious and direct evangelism,» these lay churchmen professed. «We must work with greater faith in invisible successes, be willing to give largely without any preaching, to cooperate whole-heartedly with non-Christian agencies for social improvement, and to foster the initiative of the Orient in defining the ways in which we shall be invited to help.»<sup>50</sup>

Second, there was a clear call for recognising at least some value in other religions. «The mission of today should make a positive effort, first of all to know and understand the religions around it, then to recognize and associate itself with whatever kindred elements there are,» the report declared. «It is not what is weak or corrupt but what is strong and sound in the non-Christian religious that offers the best hearing for whatever Christianity has to say.»<sup>51</sup>

Against this background, one could read *The Missionary* and get the impression that to a great degree Spencer wrote it as a fictional argument in conscious support of *Re-Thinking Missions* or at least of some of the controversial missiological positions which it incorporated.

49 Spencer, *The Missionary*, 163.

50 William Ernest Hocking, *et al.*, *Re-Thinking Missions: A Laymen's Inquiry after One Hundred Years* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1932), 326.

51 Hocking, *et al.*, *Re-Thinking Missions*, 326–327.



## Conclusion

*The Missionary* is a lucid work of tendentious fiction by a gifted writer who combined her facility with the pen and her first-hand knowledge of the successes and shortcomings of conventional evangelistic propagation of Christianity in rapidly changing China. The lessons Spencer sought to convey mimic recent developments in missiological policy without sacrificing the compelling narrative form of the novel.

Spencer's emphasis on tensions between Eaton's medical ministry and his colleagues' conventional maintenance of preaching and worship is arguably misleading. The historiography of Protestant missions in China makes clear the fact that these two general dimensions had often gone hand-in-hand nearly from the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Underscoring the point, Detailed statistical tables in the second edition of *The Encyclopedia of Missions*, published in 1904, indicate that foreign Protestant agencies then operated a total of 138 «hospitals and dispensaries» in China.<sup>52</sup> According to the comprehensive, statistically fulsome reference work of 1921, *The Christian Occupation of China*, in 1920 twenty-one missionary societies reported a total of 246 hospitals.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, as mentioned above the Reformed Church in the United States had emphasised health care from the earliest days of its endeavours in Hunan. The well-established hospital at the mission compound in Yochow harmonises with this historical core of its undertaking in China. Apparently Spencer understood that the many efforts still fell far short of the needs, not least in rural areas.

In terms of literary quality, *The Missionary* is arguably not great fiction on all conventional counts. It does not loom above its contemporaries on the terrain of twentieth-century novels with its generally unimaginative use of language and narrative technique. Nevertheless, within its sub-genre, *The Missionary* soars notably higher than most other works of its generation. As a *roman à thèse* it is of almost singular value in its treatment of certain vital issues. Pearl Buck's works were often lauded because they sprang from an intimate knowledge of Chinese culture by a sympathetic participant-observer. *Mutatis mutandis*, much the same might be said of her sister's privileged position as a literarily skilled writer who took up her pen armed with a first-hand intimacy with the issues treated and as well as the need for ongoing reforms. The galleries of individually limned and never stereotyped indigenous characters and expatriate missionary personnel come to life, giving readers a carefully defined neither patronising nor hagiographic portrayal of each variegated group.

52 Henry Otis Dwight, et al., *The Encyclopedia of Missions. Descriptive, Historical, Biographical, Statistical*. Second edition (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1904), 841.

53 Milton T. Stauffer (et al.), *The Christian Occupation of China* (Shanghai: China Continuation Committee, 1922), 428.

Numerous American critics lauded *The Missionary*. Writing in *The New York Times*, for example, John Bicknell called it «a fine, calmly paced novel, which not only reveals the life of central China but evokes a host of skillfully drawn portraits, both Chinese and American, seen against the background of civil war.»<sup>54</sup> For historians of foreign missionary endeavours in China during the crucial period under discussion, Cornelia Spencer's voice richly complements the wealth of prosaic, non-literary sources written by representatives of dozens of agencies in numerous languages. Furthermore, *The Missionary* merits republication and reading today by Christians engaged in cross-cultural ministry in a world in dire need of healing and interfaith dialogue.<sup>55</sup>

54 John Bicknell, «Mission to Yochow», *The New York Times*, Book Review section, 2 November 1947, 10.

55 A significant part of the research for and the 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 and librarian Tom Erik Hamre for their assistance in my quest for the sources on which this article rests.