

The Uniqueness of the Chinese Mission Movement—Past, Present, and Future

International Bulletin of
Mission Research

2022, Vol. 46(1) 60–70

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DOI: 10.1177/23969393211026444

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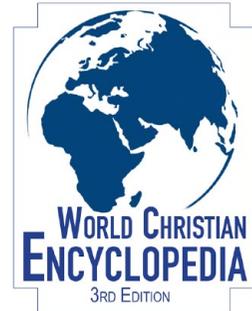


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Abstract

Using the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 3rd edition (*WCE-3*) as the springboard, this article explores the uniqueness of the Chinese missions movement from China, not including the overseas Chinese diaspora or Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. First, we provide an overview, context, and backdrop of the Chinese missions movement. Second, we compare and contrast China's missions sending with that of (1) the United States/United Kingdom and (2) Brazil. We then highlight the unique characteristics of the Chinese missions movement and conclude with a future outlook.

Keywords

Chinese missions, missions from China, Brazil missions, mobilization, mission sending, indigenous mission movements

The Chinese missions movement is taking place in the midst of a dramatic shift of the center of gravity in global Christianity from the Global North to the Global South. According to the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, third edition (*WCE-3*), 82 percent of the world's Christians lived in the Global North in 1900, versus only 18 percent in the Global South (4). In 2020, however, only 33 percent of the world's 2.5 billion

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Christians live in Europe and North America, while 67 percent live in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Oceania (3). This trend is projected to continue into the future, with the Christian population in the Global South expected to be 77 percent by 2050.

As of 2020, eight of the ten countries with the largest Christian population are in the Global South, including China and Brazil (7). China's Christian population is one of the world's fastest growing through conversion, whereas in Brazil the growth has been primarily through natural increase (i.e., births; 7). Nonetheless, both countries not only boast a sizable Christian population but also have become a significant missions force. The *WCE-3* lists China's Christian population across multiple denominations as 106 million, and in Brazil there are 194 million. For comparison, in the United States there are 244 million Christians; in the United Kingdom, 42 million.

Not surprisingly, this global shift in Christian population has also led to a dramatic shift in mission sending, changing from what fifty years ago was predominantly *from the West to the rest* to what is now a global "missions traffic jam" of workers going *from everywhere to everywhere*. Although Europe and North America still send 53 percent of the world's missionaries,¹ several of the Global South countries are now among the top senders. The *WCE-3* (32) identifies the US as the world's largest missions-sending country (135,000 missionaries), Brazil as second (40,000), China as sixth (15,000), and the UK as seventh (14,000). Of the top seven sending countries, we have selected the US and UK together as one of our comparative data points because of the role they played in developing Protestant missions. We have also selected Brazil as a recent example from the Global South from which to learn. Brazil is closer in cultural values to China and just a few steps ahead in missions.

Moreover, the Center for Mission Mobilization, in its Mobilization Index (MI), has identified and ranked the countries "with greatest mission sending potential and thus locations where the Church is ripe for mobilization."² According to the MI, China is ranked third highest in mission sending potential in the world, right behind the US (ranked #1) and South Korea (#2) and just ahead of Brazil (#4).³ The US and Brazil thus provide especially interesting comparisons with China.

While we marvel at the Christian demographic and mission shift southward, we are nonetheless sobered that there has not been a similar shift of the world's resources to the Global South. In reality, Christianity is currently growing the fastest where the Human Development Index (HDI) is the lowest;⁴ where poverty, disease, and civil strife abound; and where access to clean water, health care, and education is limited. The future of church growth and mission sending will be largely from less stable and resourced regions. These less developed regions also host the majority of the world's unreached peoples and the largest cities with significant urban socioeconomic complexities.⁵ Moreover, we are engaging in missions in the era of the highest persecution of Christians and martyrdom in history. Open Doors asserts that more Christians were persecuted during the last two years than at any other time in the modern era.⁶ Similarly, Christian martyrs have increased from 344,000 during the decade 1890–1900 to 900,000 during 2008–18, to a projected 1 million by 2015–25.⁷

Since becoming a Communist country in 1949, China has been designated as a Creative Access Nation (CAN—i.e., one that does not allow entrance to self-designated

missionaries). Moreover, since 2018, the persecution of Christians and government restrictions on religious activities have increased significantly. According to the *WCE-3* (195), China is a complex mosaic of 514 people groups speaking 227 languages. China sends not only national workers to these unreached people groups within China but also missionaries to unreached people groups beyond its borders. Today, 85 percent of the world's frontier people groups population (i.e., groups with less than 0.1 percent Christians) are either Hindu or Muslim peoples in CAN nations with a high amount of persecution and limited religious freedom.⁸

Given today's complex socioeconomic challenges, missions from the Global South, including China, will shift dramatically from the more philosophical and theological preoccupation in the West to a more practical approach focused on doing "things that deeply affect the lives of numbers of people . . . about life and death matters."⁹ This is the backdrop of Chinese mission sending.

Comparing China with the United Kingdom/United States

We will begin our analysis by comparing China with the UK and US, two traditional Western sending countries. Our comparison will cover several areas. First, we will look at the MI. Then we will consider the beginnings of both and how they each practiced what we could call holistic kingdom missions. This is followed by a consideration of the role of circuit preachers and lay ministers. We conclude with some discussion of significant global events that have influenced the development of missions in the West.

Mobilization Index

On the MI, the US ranks as the country with the highest sending potential, with China as third, based on six factors: (1) the number of evangelical Christians, (2) the level of prosperity, (3) access to unreached peoples, (4) cultural distance from nations with large populations of unreached peoples, (5) religious freedom and persecution, and (6) the number of missionaries sent both in-country and abroad.

While China and the US have comparable evangelical population, a major difference is that the US has little regional access to unreached people groups, while China itself comprises 395 unreached people groups and 151 unengaged people groups,¹⁰ the third highest in the world. Moreover, China is much closer in cultural distance to the countries with large populations of unreached peoples. Chinese Christians are thus ideal for engaging unreached peoples both within and beyond China.

Both the US and the UK rank very high in the prosperity subindex. Missions from both countries have traditionally been finance driven. China, which ranks much lower in the prosperity subindex, will perhaps require an alternative way of sending. The restrictive environment in China means that mission entities cannot be registered and cannot openly raise and distribute funds. But research shows that while a nation's prosperity affects sending abroad, "prosperity does not appear to be a factor when

looking at internal mission sending.”¹¹ This suggests that cross-cultural work within China is unhampered by China’s low ranking on the prosperity index. China’s greatest limitation in missions sending is its increasing persecution and restricting of religious freedom, compared to the open sending from the US and the UK. To fulfill its sending potential, Chinese missions would need a sending structure different from the Western open-sending model.

The holistic beginnings: Following the trade or diaspora routes

A brief look at mission history reveals some of the similarities and differences between the missions from China and the missions from the US/UK. Although there were prior mission activities, Protestant missions exploded in England after 1792, when William Carey published *An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen*. This seminal work became a catalyst for the emerging of mission societies all over England and the rest of Europe. This incipient era of missions was holistic, merging gospel spreading and church planting with incarnational ministries that directly addressed socioeconomic issues. In 1810 the very first mission organization was established in the US, initiated by Samuel Mills and a group of college students. This period, from 1792 to 1914 in both the US and the UK, marked what Kenneth Latourette called “The Great Century of Missions.”

The first missionaries from the UK followed the European trade routes into untapped mission fields. Similarly, modern-day Chinese sending could potentially follow in the tracks of China’s economic expansion and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has access to more than 60 countries, with over 125 countries signing the BRI accord.¹² Historically, China also has a warm and open relationship with many Muslim and CAN countries, including Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, and North Korea.

China’s missions movement is younger and started in the early 1900s with Uong Nai-siong. Described by Rudolf Mak as a “William Carey” type, Uong both planted churches and undertook sociopolitical initiatives. He was a Methodist minister, educator, linguist, political activist, and newspaper publisher, and he mobilized workers to serve in what is modern-day East Malaysia.¹³ Then in 1929 a Chinese missionary to Vietnam, Leland Wang, established the first mission sending agency, the Chinese Foreign Mission Union, which sent missionaries predominantly to Southeast Asian countries. Instead of following trade routes, the early Chinese migrated often in large numbers following the track of the Chinese diaspora and planting Chinese churches, some of which are still flourishing in Southeast Asia to this day.¹⁴ However, China did not witness the same ubiquitous explosion of mission societies that emerged in England, Europe, and the US, primarily because of the ensuing Sino-Japanese War (1937–45) and the Japanese occupation of China.

Kingdom missions

The early Protestant missions from the UK were holistic and incarnational, evangelizing and planting churches while establishing schools and hospitals and abolishing

social ills, such as infanticide and suttee (the burning of widows in India). However, early Chinese missions was predominantly focused on evangelism and church planting. While the Chinese missionaries also worked cross-culturally among the nationals in the recipient countries, there was less direct transformational impact on the local culture.

This pattern is beginning to change today. Recent events in China, including SARS in 2003, the Sichuan earthquake in 2008, and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, have all prompted the Chinese church to engage in incarnational ministry that would be needed for global missions from China. Additionally, Chinese Christian doctors today are increasingly serving overseas, using medicine to open access for the gospel,¹⁵ similar to the early Protestant missions from the UK and the rest of Europe. Historian Paul Pierson notes that a theological breakthrough in mission today is the recovery of understanding the kingdom of God as calling for extending Christ's values beyond personal faith into the society at large.¹⁶

Circuit preachers—frontier spirit westward

Another important development in Chinese missions began about 1946, when several indigenous mission bands independently heard the call to take the gospel westward from China all the way to Jerusalem. Collectively known as “Back to Jerusalem,” many of the bands started from eastern and central China, evangelizing along the way westward. Similar to both the UK and the US, some of this new Chinese mission activity was student driven, especially in more western university settings, beginning in the early 1940s. For example, Mark Ma, who founded Preaching the Gospel to All Places Band, began to call students at a China Inland Mission Bible school in Shaanxi to take the gospel westward back to Jerusalem.¹⁷ However, none of the missionaries from these indigenous mission bands left China because of the Chinese civil war (1945–49) and the subsequent Communist rule. Many of these missionaries were jailed and died in the western province of Xinjiang. Nonetheless, we celebrate the vision and courage of these pioneers who sacrificed to take the gospel westward.

Although off to a promising start, China's incipient missions sending efforts that started in the 1920s, the collective Back to Jerusalem movement in the 1940s, and the fledgling students missions movement were all squelched by the Sino-Japanese War, the Chinese civil war, and the subsequent Communist Chinese clampdown on churches in the 1950s. At that point, China's doors were closed to the outside world, not to reopen for the next thirty years. Many in the West conjectured that the Chinese church would die out during the upheaval of the severe Cultural Revolution (1966–76).

But the opposite was true. The Chinese church was resilient and creative. Despite the government clampdown, the gospel continued to spread across China like wildfire. Itinerant preachers emerged in China with a “frontier spirit,” not unlike the early Baptist lay preachers and the Methodist circuit riders in the “Go West” era after the American Revolutionary War in 1776.

The Wenzhou Christian churches on the east coast of China began their missional expansion after the Cultural Revolution with lay businessmen, migrant workers,

marketplace professionals, and circuit pastors. Qing Quan describes this as the “good neighbor model,” based on “‘one who journeys’—meaning everyone who journeys into a community, who goes to those in need, can become a missionary.”¹⁸ The Wenzhou churches had flexible structures, a circuit system with circuit pastors, and gospel funds for outreach into new areas. Many of the preachers traveled and held revival meetings around the country. Christian merchants from Wenzhou would establish businesses in other regions, planting churches as they went. They became fervent mission tentmakers. Today, there are about 75,000 Wenzhou merchants-cum-missionaries sharing Jesus in about 100 countries and planting Chinese churches from Europe to Africa.¹⁹

Renewal movement and lay leadership

Missions in America was fueled by the Methodist and Baptist growth westward, which prompted frontier revivals and the beginning of the Pentecostal/Charismatic movement, characterized by spiritual renewal, fervent prayer, power encounters, miracles, and healing. Pierson posits that the beginning of most missions movements, including the Moravians, the Wesleyan movement, and American missions, all stem from renewal movements.²⁰ These renewal movements have flexible structures and were led significantly by lay leadership, both men and women. In the US, the Second Evangelical Awakening also helped to ignite the Student Volunteer Movement among colleges, resulting in the largest wave of missions from America.

Similarly, in China in the mid-1990s, a revival and a house church movement exploded in Henan Province, marked by fervent prayer, miracles, and healings. These house churches were led by ordinary laypeople, including many women. Two of the key leaders, known as Brother Yuen (author of *Heavenly Man*) and Peter Xu, reactivated the Back to Jerusalem movement in a highly publicized initiative, casting a vision of sending 100,000 missionaries westward through predominantly Muslim countries to Jerusalem. The actual number of missionaries sent has been far fewer, and the mission effort is only partially representative of Chinese mission sending.²¹

Today, Chinese mission has set its sights beyond Jerusalem and has a clear missiology for world evangelization. For example, a recent initiative is Mission China 2030 (MC2030), launched by urban churches to send 20,000 missionaries to other countries by 2030.²² However, MC2030 is only one of several independent mission movements from China today. To increase in missions momentum, the entire Chinese church needs to continue experiencing revival and spiritual renewal.

Edinburgh, Lausanne III, Mount Hermon

A key catalyst in early missions from the UK and US was the landmark Edinburgh Conference in 1910, which gathered 1,200 mission delegates to discuss and work practically and ecumenically toward the goal of world evangelization. At that event, only a handful of Chinese delegates were present, since China was a country that received the most missionaries. A hundred years later, in 2010, the Lausanne III Congress in Cape Town, South Africa, catalyzed Chinese missions in a similar manner. Although the

Chinese delegates were barred from leaving China, the Congress helped to identify and connect with key Chinese mission leaders and to increase global awareness of the Chinese church. This event united the global missional community with Chinese leaders, who also helped raise travel scholarships for other Asian attendees.²³

Another key event in US missions was the Mt. Hermon Student Conference, which in 1886, with just 251 students, launched the Student Volunteer Movement (SVM), which eventually sent 20,500 students overseas. In China starting in the 1980s, college students have been moving to different parts of China to study and establish college fellowships. For example, by 2010 college students from the Wenzhou churches alone had established more than thirty fellowships.²⁴ Despite the religious restrictions, Chinese college students have increasingly hosted their own mission conferences, both in-country and abroad. Also, large numbers of Chinese students are in universities all over the world, many of them taking the gospel back to China after becoming Christians overseas in the so-called sea turtle movement.

Missions from the UK took off during the expansion of the British Empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. American missions also flourished in the twentieth century, at the height of its leadership in the world arena. Will China as a significant global player likewise assume a significant role in missions in the twenty-first century?

Comparing China with Brazil

Mak and Saraiva have compared China's mission with Brazil's, identifying the following nine areas in which China and Brazil are comparable as sending countries:²⁵

1. Both are high on the Mobilization Index. China is listed as #3 and Brazil as #4 in sending potential.
2. Both are mission minded and prayer driven. The size of the church in the two countries is similar, and both have significant participation in mission prayer meetings and conferences.
3. Both have a per capita GDP that is about 15 percent that of the US.
4. Both are BRICS countries—that is, one of the five major emerging economies (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa).
5. Both are part of the Global South indigenous mission movement, or the emerging sending movement, with Brazil at #2 as a sending country and China at #6.
6. Both are actively developing their sending structures. The Association of Brazilian Cross-Cultural Missions—the coordinating arm of the Brazilian missions movement, similar to Missio Nexus in the US—noted that the number of missionaries grew from 5,000 to 15,000 from 2010 to 2019. Similarly, China is poised to send thousands of missionaries in the next twenty years.
7. Both historically were not involved in colonial aggression but were victims.
8. Both have access to unreached people groups (UPG) within their own country and within reach of their diaspora community. Believers can engage in cross-cultural UPG work without leaving their regular place of residence.

9. Both have a much shorter cultural distance between themselves as a sending entity and the receiving fields. With UPG practically as neighbors, the cultural distance to the field is closer.

Uniqueness of Chinese Missions

From the above discussions, we may list the following unique characteristics of the Chinese missions movement:

- There presently is a large Chinese church population for mobilization.
- Chinese Christians have an open, passionate heart toward missions.²⁶
- China's overarching concept of missions is based on proven Western mobilization models, as taught in *Perspectives* and *Kairos* courses.
- China has warm relationships with many Muslim and CAN countries.
- The Chinese represent the largest global diaspora population and are currently planting churches all over the world.
- China has an open access through its expansive BRI initiative into many restricted countries.
- There are many UPG and ethnic minorities in China for cross-cultural missions. For example, the province of Henan is home to 1 million unreached Hui people within a travel distance of less than eight hours by bus.
- The Chinese church already understands how to work around government restrictions and how to suffer under persecution.
- The Chinese house church model can be adapted for church planting in other CAN countries.
- House churches are growing strong in the renewal movement led by lay leaders, both men and women.
- Bivocational circuit preachers have been planting churches for decades.

The future outlook

What will the Chinese missions movement need in the future? Four essentials are listed here.

Kingdom theology

In light of the present-day political and socioeconomic realities of the Global South, the Chinese missions movement will have to adopt a holistic incarnational approach.

Identity

In today's missions sending, Chinese missionaries will need authentic tentmaking and bivocational identities to support themselves and to provide a valid platform in both the sending and the receiving country, both likely being CAN countries. Today,

Chinese-language teachers are widely sought after and welcomed in countries such as Pakistan!

Structure

Chinese missions need a sending ecosystem that can address the practicalities of sending *from* a restricted country and sending *to* both open and restricted areas. Mak suggests that an integrated missional enterprise that incorporates characteristics of “business as mission” can potentially serve as a sending base and provide legitimacy to the authorities in both the sending and the receiving countries.²⁷ This approach has a precedent in the Moravian missions movement of the 1700s, which adopted an integrated model of missions and business.

Indigenous and global partnerships

Today, many Chinese missionaries are sent directly by their churches and house church networks. Some sending churches are less effective in providing ongoing support, pastoral care, and cross-cultural expertise. A few indigenous sending organizations have been established but are limited in their sending capacity and ability to distribute funds. Instead of operating independently, Chinese churches need to collaborate more fully with indigenous sending organizations to pool their expertise, effort, and resources.

Increasingly, both formal and informal mission training programs have emerged, ranging from practical pre-field training to more academic certificate-level preparation. Many of these efforts are nationally led. In addition, many local churches and mission entities have university student outreaches, rural church planting, and short-term mission trips to serve either minority groups or to conduct incarnational ministry among the marginalized. However, there remains a great need for Chinese missions to increase in training and equipping its workers in missional, cross-cultural, and vocational skills. Other field services also need to be strengthened, including pastoral care, selection and orientation of new missionaries, and partnerships with local entities in the field. Practical realities also need to be addressed, including children’s schooling, insurance coverage, repatriation, and contingency planning.

Moving forward, China needs to continue to expand its global mission partnerships. There is much mission experience, mobilization strategies, anthropological knowledge, and training resources from other countries with longer mission sending history that China can draw from. The Lausanne III congress marked just the beginning of Chinese partnership with global players.

Conclusion

The road ahead is not all rosy. China must overcome significant challenges. First is the standard language and cultural adaption that every missionary faces. Second is establishing a solid missiological basis for sending from CAN to everywhere. Third is the

steep learning curve of developing sending structures in a restricted country. Fourth is the humility to transform the ethnocentrism of China (*Zhongguo*, literally the “central kingdom”) into an epicenter of kingdom missions to the nations. May China become a true global epicenter of missions!

Notes

1. The *WCE-3* defines missionaries as “Christians of all traditions who cross national borders for a period of two years or more” and national workers as “Christians engaging in ministry within their own cultural context or across cultures (such as Christians from South India working in North India)” (32–33).
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26. Daniel Jin, a church leader in China, attributes this characteristic to a prolonged period of prayer meetings on mission. There are at least seven such online prayer meetings every week organized by various groups since the COVID-19 pandemic broke out. Some of these prayer meetings draw several thousand in attendance.
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Author biographies



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