UNBINDING TIES: FEMALE MISSIONARIES AND CHINESE WOMEN IN THE LATE QING

(SEEN THROUGH THE EYES OF BERTHA SCHWEINFURTH OHLINGER, 1856-1934)

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On April 27, 1876 a 20-year-old Ohio schoolteacher, Bertha Schweinfurth, promised to love, honor, and obey her new husband, Franklin Ohlinger, and to follow him to the ends of the earth. Six months later they would debark at Foochow, China, where 400 million Chinese awaited conversion to Christianity.

Like today's Peace Corps volunteers, Bertha was undoubtedly both idealistic about her new undertaking and eager for adventure in exotic Cathay. In fact, the spirit of adventure was in her genes. Her father had made just such a move west to a new continent as a pioneer Methodist circuit rider, leaving his native Germany for the American middle west. Franklin's parents, likewise, had left the familiar Pennsylvania Dutch country to try their luck in the opening frontier of Ohio in the early 19th century, following the model of their German ancestors who had set sail for America a century earlier. Now the Methodist Episcopal Church offered Bertha and Franklin an opportunity to serve in a new land.

By 1876, the Industrial Revolution had created ease of travel and communication that allowed adventurous young Americans of modest means like the Ohlingers the opportunity to reside in foreign lands. There is no question about the strength of their youthful idealism and dedication to Christian service, but it is doubtful whether they gave much thought to the inequity of

This paper is dedicated to my grandfather, Gustavus Ohlinger, son of Franklin and Bertha Ohlinger, whose powerful influence on me as a child led to a lifelong fascination with China.

Note on sources: Much of the research for this paper was done at Yale Divinity School where the Franklin and Bertha Schweinfurth Ohlinger Papers reside. Special thanks go to Martha Smalley and Joan Duffy of Yale Divinity Library Special Collections who assisted me in my research. Items from the special Collections are labeled in the body of the paper as follows: (14/238), indicating Box 14, File 238 of the Ohlinger Papers (Record Group 23). Where possible and relevant, I have also given the date of the letter or article. Some items cited, however, are from my personal collection of letters and memorabilia, and these do not therefore have a citation—only a date, when available. Nearly half of the letters and articles were written in German, which have not been translated, so that information is necessarily limited as a result. Finally, I have retained some of the original spelling, such as Foochow (now written Fuzhou).
treatment of foreigners on the two continents. In 1876, both U.S. political parties had a “Chinese Exclusion” plank in their platforms in order to court California voters, which led to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the first of its kind in the U.S.\(^1\) Meanwhile, in 1876 in China, Chinese authorities were forced to rebuild a Methodist chapel that had been ransacked by an angry mob, and to agree to the propagation of Christianity in the city of Yen-p’ing near Foochow.\(^2\) Franklin Ohlinger would be involved in some of these negotiations. As Harold Isaacs wrote:

Even as the rights of Americans in China were being enforced by arms when necessary and by the exercise of extraterritorial rights which placed foreigners in China above Chinese law, the American government moved to discriminate legally against the Chinese within its own borders.\(^3\)

Bertha was Franklin’s soulmate in the China endeavor. In 1881 they founded the Anglo-Chinese College in Foochow in which she was the first teacher. She was one of the first westerners to transcribe western melodies into Chinese and to publish a Chinese hymnal. They would lose two children to a plague-like illness in Korea and endure conflict and injustice at the hands of a fickle Methodist bureaucracy. However, in 1876 the world was theirs. After a honeymoon at Lakeside, Ohio, Bertha gave a farewell speech to the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society and they set off for the Middle Kingdom.

Bertha and Franklin did not know that they were representative of a demographic and cultural trend of their time. The Protestant missionary endeavor tended to attract ambitious and idealistic young people of the rural midwest. Nineteenth century farming communities tended to produce young people of a spiritual bent who were far less wedded to creature comforts than their urban counterparts. Women such as Bertha were particularly drawn to foreign missionary service. By 1890 female missionaries to China (married and unmarried) comprised 60% of the mission force.\(^4\) It is not hard to understand that the status afforded the foreigner and the teacher in China meant greater prestige and opportunity than the role of farmer’s wife (or preacher’s wife) back home. Farm girls generally experienced greater freedom than city girls in the late 19th century, and were, therefore, more willing and able to take on the hardship and adventure that a foreign posting involved. Many female missionaries had spent time teaching, like Bertha, and were not averse to working for a liv-

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\(^3\) Isaacs, 112-113.
Unbinding Ties: Female Missionaries and Chinese Women in the Late Qing

The post-Civil War era in the U.S. was a time of empowerment for many women from both urban and rural backgrounds. Women's colleges were founded since leading schools like Harvard and Yale were open to men only. Women were considered capable of making their own living. Bertha concurred (admittedly after a period of considerable financial hardship for both of them): "Every woman ought to be able to support herself, for she can never know how soon the tide may turn against her."6

The Industrial Revolution freed many women from ties to hearth and home, allowing safe modes of travel and residence for unaccompanied females. Furthermore, late 19th century ideology saw women as the moral, orderly element of society, able to steer civilization in ways of righteousness and purity. The Female Moral Reform societies, founded in the 1830s and 1840s to "rescue" urban prostitutes, continued beyond the Civil War, expanding into fields like temperance and women's rights. Many female missionaries brought reform fervor and organizing skills with them to China.7

In the U.S. the Victorian "civilizing" influence of women was believed to be best exercised at home, improving the morals, orderly living, and hygiene of husbands and children. In the missionary field, however, the path was open to social endeavor and professional achievement in a way that might not be encouraged in the U.S. To put it another way, missionary women in China might be praised and rewarded for criticizing the surrounding social conditions as they might not at home. One researcher points out, "It was less disturbing to criticize another culture for injustice to women than to castigate one's own."8

In central Ohio, an ambitious woman might be an old maid schoolteacher (likely living at her parents' home) or a preacher's wife; in China she could stand out as an idealistic reformer, perhaps even allowed to preach in church pulpits on home visits. In China, furthermore, there was a niche available to the newly liberated western woman: ministering to the cloistered Chinese female population out of reach of the male missionaries.

The status of Chinese women when Bertha arrived at Foochow in 1876 had been essentially unchanged for a thousand years. Women were seldom seen in public. One missionary remarked that women "never go anywhere to speak of and live...the existence of a frog in a well."9 A Chinese woman later recalled:

We were not allowed, my sister and I, on the street after we were thirteen, People in P'englai were that way in those days. When a family wanted to know more about a girl who had been suggested

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5 Hunter, 29-36.
6 Ohlinger Papers 3/45; December 15, 1896.
8 Kwok, 102.
9 Kay Ann Johnson, Women, the Family and Peasant Revolutions in China (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 14.
for a daughter-in-law and asked what kind of a girl she was, the
neighbors would answer, "We do not know. We have never seen
her." And that was praise.\(^{10}\)

Footbinding had been the practice of Han women since the Song Dynasty
and was considered essential to winning a desirable husband. Bound feet were
a sexual fetish for men and an obsessively practiced custom for women. A
Chinese female might not be able to alter the face that she was born with, nor
substantially change the monetary fortunes of her family, but she could prac­
tice a fierce discipline to achieve admirably small feet, thus influencing her
future and her family's fortune by attracting a desirable man. Girls as young
as four had their feet tightly bound by their mothers and grandmothers, break­
ing the arch and essentially laming the girls for life. Being unable to run away
from home, they were considered choice marital material: their chastity and
maternal availability were guaranteed. A significant percentage of young girls,
furthermore, died from infections and other complications of the practice. The
12th century Neo-Confucian Zhu Xi memorialized her plight: "Starving
to
death is a very minor matter; losing one's integrity [chastity] is a matter of the
gravest importance."\(^{11}\) In times of war, virtuous Confucian women would
drown themselves rather than submit to marauding invaders. Franklin men­
tioned this in regard to British gunboats:

Hence the stampede when the first British came in and fired her
salute, joy suddenly gave way to fear in a few instances and some
women and girls jumped in wells and committed suicide. They
thought the battle had begun.\(^{12}\)

While Chinese women were required to be absolutely chaste outside of mar­
rriage, men were expected to have as many concubines as their appetites and
finances would allow.

Female infanticide was often practiced in times of economic hardship,
since the cost of raising a girl who would leave home to marry a stranger was
seen as prohibitive. The Ohlinger Papers contain a picture of a "baby tower
for female infanticide" of the later 1800s or early 1900s in north China.\(^{13}\) It is
a small hexagonal building with one small door and one tiny window on the
upper level. It is not clear whether this was a place to leave unwanted, living
children, a tomb for the tiny corpses, or a memorial structure.

The seclusion of Chinese women meant that the male missionaries could­
n't reach them—not the Jesuits of the 17th and 18th centuries nor the

\(^{10}\)Johnson, 14.
\(^{12}\)Ohlinger Papers 5/91; August 31, 1900.
\(^{13}\)Ohlinger Papers 14/238.
Protestants of the 19th century. It was understood, however, that such "heathen" women could still have enormous influence over male Christian converts. In fact, mission publications portrayed Chinese women alternately as victims of a savage patriarchal system, but also as fierce obstacles to Christian conversions in China.

Helen Barrett Montgomery, who influenced public opinion toward women missionaries, said:

"The citadel of heathendom was in the heathen home and... could be taken only by the assault of women... Women are the real obstacles that keep thousands of the leading men... from publicly accepting Christianity."  

Bertha concurred:

"If you would win China for Christ you must win the women of the nation. For the women conserve the religious influences of the family, and on them depends the bringing up of the boys and girls. It take the women to reach the women."  

Bertha provided a graphic account of two Chinese women she met in 1882, confirming the view of fierce, untamed females:

"Our ears are greeted with the sounds of scolding, such a sound as the women of this province, when angry, alone can produce. Not one in a thousand who lives in Christian America has ever heard such a sound, not one in ten thousand ever imagined the words they shriek at each other. After a full hour, they seemed to be at the end of the vile vocabulary, the emphasis at the close of each sentence becoming less prolonged and threatening, while the next followed with less explosive vehemence. Travellers continued their journey, and the neighbors resumed their interrupted work. Suddenly the younger of the two women, as if to silence her opponent forever sent another vigorous yell through the olive grove, reviling her as being old, but childless. This was the signal for something worse than words...[later] we heard the weeping of the younger and, as it would seem, vanquished woman till late in the night, and were told that she had taken poison as a last resort to punish her enemy."  


"Family collection, brochure entitled, "24 Hours at a Country Station," 1882."
This is a graphic illustration of the so-called “three weapons” of women in traditional China—words, tears, and suicide.

What were young Bertha’s first impressions when she arrived in the Middle Kingdom in October of 1876? She wrote many years later:

The next morning found me sitting opposite a Chinese literary gentleman, an opium-smoker, by the way, who gave me my first instructions in Chinese. He began by pointing out the objects in the room and giving me the Chinese name for them. Soon he would be quite overcome by opium, and then fell asleep. It was only when I made a mistake that he would rouse himself with a start, and almost bounce from his chair in his eagerness to correct me.17

One week later her husband journeyed into the interior to distribute literature and narrowly escaped with his life when at daybreak a mob set out to pitch him from a high cliff to the rapids below. The local magistrate rescued him by disguising him as an officer and bringing him back to Foochow in the magistrate’s official boat.

Bertha wrote that there was no means of travel except by boat or sedan chair—the latter costing all of fifteen cents per day. Some years later, Bertha travelled by sedan chair to a mountain village sixty miles above Foochow. Her sedan-bearers cautioned her to keep the curtains closed, since people of that region had never seen a white woman before and an unruly crowd might form as a result. She recounted:

They fastened down the curtains of my chariot securely, as they thought, and when asked whom they were carrying, replied: “A bride.” In China no one is supposed to look into a bride’s chair, for by lifting the curtains, evil spirits and bad influences might slip in and destroy the good luck of the bride. There were chinks, however, at the corners of the sedan, through which the little youngsters peeped and discovered the strange looking creature.

They ran in advance of my equipage in the direction of the village which they quizzed from my coolies was to be my stopping-place for the night. As they scampered in advance of my sedan they called out at the top of their voices the strange sight. They heralded my coming to the village of Lek-Du, and from all sides people came running together to see the show. When we reached our headquarters for the night, the crowd numbered three thousand, and was so dense my sedan-bearers had to carry me above the heads of the people. The inn-keeper begged me not to come into the house for they would follow me and crush it. We then made a sort of

17Family letter, 1933.
enclosure about 16 x 16 out in the open, beyond which they solemnly promised they would not intrude provided I allowed them to stand there and look at me. 18

Raising up a group of Christian wives for male converts was seen by the missionaries as critically important and was one of the main forces behind the establishment of mission schools for girls in China. 19 In 1875, when missionaries broached the subject of establishing such a school, the response from the Chinese side was,

“Whoever heard of a girl learning to read? They have no souls, and you might as well hold a book before a cow and ask her to read.” We have asked them to let us try. “We cannot spare them, they herd the cows and watch the geese and ducks, and who will do this if we let them attend school?” “How much does it cost a day to hire some one to take their places?” “About two cents a day.” “Very well, we will pay the two cents a day, and you send your daughter to our school.” They agreed to this and in many instances these little girls outstripped their brothers. Their places on the hill-sides were very well filled by the old men and women who were unfit for anything else, and who were glad to earn the money. 20

The girls proved to be eager students. Bertha wrote of the closing exercises of the Girls School in Foochow in 1879:

Those who had regarded women as inferior to men were astonished at the accomplishments of the girls. Girls 6 to 8 years of age recited the entire catechism from memory. Older girls translated the Chinese classics, as well as modern books, from Mandarin into the vernacular by the hour. The music students sang and played amazingly well. The best students were rewarded by the gift to each one of a pair of white stocking and a white handkerchief, which, to them, was a rich reward for a year of hard work. 21

Bertha commented on footbinding, which was common in late 19th century China. One of her female students, Hu King Eng, the daughter of a Chinese pastor, was the first Chinese woman to study medicine in the United States. On her return to China, she built a large hospital for women and children and was known as the “ministering angel” of Foochow. 22 The story of Hu King Eng’s childhood is interesting. Her father (the preacher) spoke against the evils of footbinding and vowed never to inflict it on his daughters. However,

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19 King, 121.
20 Family letter, 1933.
21 Family letter, 1933.
22 Family letter, 1933.
One day when he returned to his home after a tramp over his district, his little daughters did not as usual come out to meet him. He feared they might be ill. On entering the house he heard the weeping and wailing of the little girls and he asked his wife the meaning of it. "Oh," she replied, "you know as well as I do that the binding of feet always means the shedding of a bucket of tears." He went into the bedroom and saw the little girls hanging over the chairs and shaking their feet to ease the pain. He at once ordered them unbound.\(^{23}\)

Not all foot-binding stories had such a happy ending, however. The missionaries established schools for "Bible women" who would travel from village to village spreading the Christian Gospel. One such woman was Pau Hwoi Mu, who had tiny 3 1/2 inch bound feet. She asked the missionaries to help her unbind her feet as some of the younger women were doing. Bertha declined to do this, since Pau was over sixty and the result would be excruciatingly painful. Pau went ahead on her mission regardless, insisting on fulfilling her duty.\(^{24}\)

In spite of initial Chinese resistance to girls' schools, the attempt to convert women to Christianity enjoyed modest success in late 19th century China. Women were often more spiritually oriented than men. In addition, women tended to be interested in taking on roles outside of their family responsibilities. In traditional China, many women practiced Buddhism, in part because attending religious services was the only reason they were allowed to venture outside women's quarters. Rural women, who were accustomed to greater freedom of movement than their urban counterparts, tended to be good candidates for conversion. From the women's perspective, however, it is likely that they took up the practice of Christianity as a new and intriguing spiritual discipline but without necessarily intending to give up other spiritual practices. The missionaries' requirement that Christian converts forsake all ancestor worship and other forms of devotion was an unfamiliar concept to the Chinese who had traditionally enjoyed an eclectic and inclusive approach to religion.

Often, classes in religious instruction for women were popular because they taught basic literary skills in written Chinese. The women generally enjoyed hymn-singing. Bertha recognized this and was the publisher of one of the first Methodist hymnals in Chinese.

Methodist, in fact, led the way in the egalitarian treatment of women. A women's religious conference was held in Foochow in 1885 and included Chinese Christian converts. The first Chinese female Methodist preacher was ordained in 1923. Methodists ordination of women worldwide was approved in 1924,\(^{25}\) although full clergy rights for women did not begin until 1956.

In 1887 the Ohlingers were posted to Korea where, as in China, women

\(^{23}\)Family letter, 1933.

\(^{24}\)Family letter, 1933.
were under severe patriarchal authority, although footbinding was not practiced. Bertha wrote about a Dr. Howard, the first female sent by the Methodist Woman's Foreign Missionary Society to work with Korean women. Male doctors were traditionally not allowed to examine female patients. An ailing female would be allowed to place her hand by a hole in the wall so that a male doctor on the other side could take her temperature, or she would protrude her tongue through the aperture so that he might have a look at it. Dr. Howard set about to treat women patients in one of the rooms of the old Korean house where the Ohlingers lived. Bertha recounted:

One day she called me to help her with one of her patients who had attempted suicide. The woman had tried to cut her throat but only succeeded in cutting the wind-pipe. When the doctor began treating her she protested that she did not wish to get well. Life meant nothing to her, for her husband had abused and cruelly beaten her so often that she felt bruised and sore all over her body. He had been told that his bride was a very beautiful woman, and when he saw her after the wedding ceremony he discovered that she had hare lip. When her throat was healed she asked the doctor whether she could repair her lip. After the lip was healed the rumor spread everywhere and finally reached her husband's ears. He came to the hospital and ordered her to go home with him, but she stoutly refused, saying: "When I had an ugly lip you beat me and abused me every day, and now that my lip is as good as yours you want me to come back and wash and sew your clothes for you. I will never go back." 

Bertha then tells of meetings they organized for women, at night:

There is a great bell in the center of the city. When that bell was rung at night-fall every man had to go indoors and the women had the right of way and were free to come and go as they chose. They came to our homes carrying their babies and the necessary bedding on their backs. We placed round straw mats on the floor for them to sit on. They knew nothing of chairs. They unstrapped their babies and their bedding which they put on the floor and were then ready to listen to us. So eager were they to hear that they often stayed until the small hours of the morning. We were delighted with our success and things were going on very well we thought, when an imperial edict prohibited all religious instruction. We closed our schools, but concluded that there could be no harm in receiving the Koreans in our homes. Curious crowds came daily to inspect our queer household arrangements. The scrolls with which we had decorated

\[^{25}\text{Kwok, 85-86.}\]
\[^{26}\text{Family collection, brochure entitled, "Twice-Told Tales," 12-13.}\]
our walls attracted their attention, but instead of the sayings of the great Chinese sages with which every oriental delights to grace the walls of his apartments, ours bore the sayings of Christ. "Who is the author of these sayings? What great sage uttered those words?" In answering their questions we were enabled to do a little work in a quiet and unobtrusive way while waiting and hoping to get permission to do more direct work among them.  

Protestant missionaries interpreted Christian symbolism in interesting ways for the benefit of their Chinese converts. They discovered that the fierce patriarchal society of traditional China responded best to messages of God’s compassion rather than God’s wrath. This “feminization” of religious symbolism stressed meekness, inclusiveness, and compassion. The Garden of Eden story told by missionaries deemphasized Eve’s role in eating the apple. Some would say this was in order to appeal to potential female converts; others point out the depressing reality that the Chinese viewed women as frivolous, as being without souls, so that Eve was simply ignored. Finally, the concept of God as “single parent” was discordant to the Chinese sense of family harmony and symmetry. Didn’t Taoism state that the entire universe was divided into yin and yang? The missionaries dealt with this problem by stressing the image of God as both merciful and stern, an androgynous mother/father image—although they wouldn’t have identified it as such. Missionaries stressed Jesus’ appeal to women in the Bible. This would seem to be right on target in Confucian China, where women had a low status similar to that of first century Palestine. If women could connect with Jesus’ message, why then so could we all.

Missionary women were the first to speak out forcefully against footbinding. The custom had been in place for a thousand years and had only grown in popularity in the face of several stern Manchu edicts prohibiting it. It took embarrassment in front of foreigners finally to convince thoughtful parents not to practice this on their daughters. Male missionaries at first had been reluctant to take a stand on the issues of footbinding and concubinage. Alexander Williamson stated at a missionary conference in 1877:

We should be extremely careful about interfering with the customs of the country when no moral question is involved. We have plenty to do without exciting a new opposition among the Literati and mercantile class.

It is reasonable to assume that the Jesuits of the 17th and 18th centuries never came into close contact with women so as to be able to take a stand on the

28 Kwok, 30.
29 Kwok, 51-53.
30 Kwok, 42.
31 Kwok, 111.
issue. However,

Women missionaries, working closely with Chinese women and children, were more likely to see the need to abolish footbinding, and they pushed harder than the male missionaries to make unbinding a requirement for admission to the schools.32

Parents were reluctant to endanger their daughters' prospects for marriage by unbinding their feet. The early girls' schools were founded largely to educate Christian wives for male converts and some schools took upon themselves the responsibility of finding suitable husbands for the enrolled girls. Often this meant that the schools had to provide full tuition, room, and board for the girls, probably leading some Chinese to wonder just what the missionaries' ulterior motives were.33 A story Bertha told about Korea points out just such popular superstitions against missionaries:

In the spring of '88 the report was current that we were a very barbarous people, who came there to kidnap their children, that we fattened them in our cellars and feasted on them. The report was spread that our American minister had eaten three fat babies at one sitting. Placards were posted up in conspicuous places calling on the people to massacre the strangers.34

The first organization to take a stand against footbinding was the anti-footbinding society (jie chanzu hui) which began in Xiamen in 1874 under the auspices of John Macgowan of the London Mission and his wife. Some sixty Chinese Christian women met to discuss the issue of footbinding. Some were critical of the church for not taking a stronger stance against it.35 In 1895 a more organized group formed when Alicia Little, wife of an English trader, established the Natural Foot Society (tian zhu hui) in Shanghai. Churches and schools supported the new organization and branches formed in several other cities. Mission schools stressed that educated womanhood was incompatible with bound feet and many schools would only accept girls with natural feet. When the ultranationalistic Boxers rampaged through the north China countryside in 1900, however, they sought out Christians for persecution, looking for unbound feet as clues. Some girls re-bound their feet temporarily to avoid being harmed.36

With the collapse of the Qing Dynasty in 1911 and the tumultuous period of rebellions that followed (particularly the May 4th Movement of 1919), young Chinese females attempted to carve out a niche for themselves in the

32Kwok, 112.
33Kwok, 112.
34Family brochure entitled, "Twice Told Tales," 15.
35Kwok, 110.
36Kwok, 113-114.
new Republic of China, envisioning roles that went far beyond what the missionaries had in mind. For while the social gospel of the Christian missionaries in China was liberal vis-à-vis the ways of traditional China, still the Christians were basically a conservative bunch who saw women’s highest calling as being model Christian wives and mothers. Indeed, female missionaries were often caught in their own struggle between self-realization and allegiance to their families. The young women of the May 4th Movement, therefore, came to surpass the goals of missionaries to make women confident, contributing members of families.37

How great was Bertha’s accomplishments and those of others like her in China? Although she was never ordained, she served as a teacher of many young women (among others) and was particularly proud of teaching English to noteworthy Chinese women like Ida Kahn and the doctor Hu King Eng. Franklin claimed that she was the first white woman to teach Chinese children in China. Research reveals that this is doubtful, but she was clearly a pioneer in this department. The publishing of one of the first Chinese hymnals was a remarkable cross-cultural achievement.

Bertha may have had her greatest influence on American audiences to whom she lectured on furlough in the United States. Particularly between 1895 and 1899, when she lived in Ann Arbor, Michigan, she had a busy schedule of lecturing to church women’s groups all over the midwest. The Woman’s Foreign Mission Society was instrumental in sponsoring many of these sessions and much of the research of this paper comes from the lecture notes of these events. Harold Isaacs points out that this type of missionary appeal to grass-roots organizations like churches for support of Chinese reform gave several generations of Americans a favorable view of China.38 On a less positive note, however, those who remembered saving their Sunday School pennies for the starving but grateful Chinese, were likely to feel confused and outraged when the Communists took over in 1949. Even today, human rights groups and congressmen in the U.S. use words like “unacceptable behavior” to refer to human rights abuses in China, singling out China in world terms, and hearkening back to the moralistic vocabulary of missionaries.39

Decades of missionary service made Bertha a realist. When she felt Franklin was being treated shabbily by the Methodist hierarchy she was not above sending a series of fulminating diatribes to the bishops whom she felt were responsible. She worried constantly about money when she was residing

37King, 117-124.
38Isaacs, 145.
39An article in the Washington Post, April 11, 2000, on the subject of trade with China, used language that could have come from missionaries a century earlier:

We are helping to promote change in the country in ways most Americans would surely deem positive. And we are doing it in the most effective way: from the bottom up, one Chinese at a time. . . . Americans bring their values along when they live and work there. And these are what have made the difference.
in the U.S. with her children when Franklin was working in China for very lit­
tle income (curiously, there seems to be no such anxiety when she was living
in China.) In a letter of December 1, 1909, she declared, “I am disgusted with
missionaries, have lost all faith in them. They dealt with us in a backhanded
way.” In the same letter, she declared, in a similar vein:

I have not been going to church. I haven't the clothes to wear. I
needed a coat last winter and for economy's sake managed to
get over the winter without it.... A straw hat is all I have for my
head. My shoes are so torn and out of shape I can scarcely walk on
them. My stockings I have patched and darned until they are getting
too lumpy for comfort.40

In fairness to Bertha, the majority of her letters are more positive than this
one, but it is refreshing to see that she did not feel constrained to utter pietis-
tic phrases at all times.

Did the missionaries achieve their goal of converting heathen China to the
values of Christianity? Clearly the results were more modest than they could
have imagined. When Mao threw out foreigners with the establishment of the
People’s Republic of China in 1949, it appeared that the missionary endeavor
had been an entirely futile one. However, the Reform Era since 1978 has
shown an intense interest in religion in all forms in China, including
Protestant Christianity. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the Western
model of monogamous marriage and the nuclear family, as promoted by the
missionaries, is now the predominant model in China.

American Protestant missionaries were so full of Evangelical zeal that
they often failed to see the arrogance of their cultural assumptions. Bertha per-
ceived some of this in her later years:

How much of vice has been brought to China by the picture-show.
No wonder those eastern people point the finger of scorn at us so-
called followers of Christ! No wonder India and China are returning
to their gods, or to Communism.41

Just four months later, on May 25, 1934, she died at age 78 in Columbus,
Ohio, not far from where it had all begun.

40Family letter, December 1, 1909.
41Family letter, January 1934.