

**MISSIONARY EDUCATION AND THE CHINESE IN MALAYSIA:
A CASE STUDY FOR THE SYMBIOTIC GROWTH OF THE
METHODIST MOVEMENT**

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David Hempton, in his book *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit*, has suggested a symbiotic model for thinking about the growth of Methodism as a religious movement.¹ Methodism's growth, according to Hempton, does not depend solely upon internal factors such as beliefs or structures nor solely upon external factors such as the existence of large groups of lower-class laborers. Rather, Methodism's growth depends upon a symbiotic fit between the movement and its environment. Furthermore, in the examples Hempton cites of such cases in the history of Methodism, it is often where Methodism fits with processes of social change that it is most successful in its growth.

In this paper, I intend to use this symbiotic model for growth and explore how education for boys served as a trait which allowed the Methodist movement to fit well with its environment in the context of missions to the ethnic Chinese in Malaysia² at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century. I will argue that education for both males and females is a strong characteristic of Methodist missions, world-wide and especially in the Malaysia mission.³ At the same time, Chinese attitudes towards education were changing at the turn of the twentieth century, and the Chinese were showing an increasing interest in Western education for boys, especially instruction in English. I intend to examine how this convergence between the movement and its environment played out and what the implications were for the Methodist church and its evangelistic efforts.

¹ See Chapter 2 in David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2005).

² The term Malaysia commonly refers to the modern nation-state of Malaysia, a territory exclusive of its neighbors Singapore and Indonesia. Nevertheless, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Methodist missionaries (and others) referred to a territory including modern-day Malaysia, Singapore, and a portion of the islands of Indonesia as Malaysia. It is in this expansive sense of the term employed by the missionaries themselves that I use the name "Malaysia" in this paper.

³ Methodist work in Malaysia began in 1885 as an offshoot of the South India Annual Conference. In 1888, it was promoted to the Malaysia Mission Conference, and then in 1902 to the Malaysia Annual Conference. Even after becoming an Annual Conference, however, the Methodist church in Malaysia was still dominated by missionaries. Therefore, in this paper, I will refer to the Methodist work in Malaysia as the Methodist mission or the Methodist church interchangeably, using both to indicate the work carried out in the entire time under study, regardless of the official organizational status of the Methodist body. The missionaries involved did the same.

Education as Hallmark of Methodist Missions

Education as a hallmark of the Methodist movement stretches back to its start, both in Britain and America. From the beginning, Methodists carried out a program of Sunday schools, emphasized literacy for their members (for the sake of Bible reading), and encouraged their ministers to read widely. Formal education made its reappearance in American Methodism beginning in the 1830s with the founding of the first Methodist colleges.⁴ From there, the number of Methodist schools skyrocketed. Roger Robins reports, “Between 1840 and 1860, Methodists founded at least thirty-five institutions of higher education, and they founded more than one per year for the succeeding forty years.”⁵

It was in this same time period that American Methodist mission began to expand broadly. Here, too, efforts began small and then quickly accelerated. The Methodist Episcopal Church’s first missions began in Liberia in the 1820s. From there, Methodists expanded to Latin America in the 1830s, then “the church set up operations in China, Argentina, and Germany in the late 1840s, India in 1856, Japan and Mexico in 1873, Korea, Angola, and Singapore in 1885 . . . American Methodism also established a presence in other European lands, notably Switzerland, Bulgaria, Italy, and Scandinavia, before the end of the nineteenth century; . . . Methodism became established in the 1880s and ‘90s in Mexico, Brazil, Uruguay, Venezuela, Bolivia, and Chile.”⁶

It is perhaps not surprising that formal education and missionary endeavors, expanding at the same time in the Methodist Episcopal Church, should go hand in hand. Education became one of the defining characteristics of Methodist Episcopal missionary enterprises. Dana L. Robert describes educational efforts as the cornerstone of the mission philosophy espoused by the women of the Methodist Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society (WFMS): “Missionary women founded a full range of educational institutions in response to their faith in education as a means of both evangelism and social uplift.”⁷ David Hempton concurs, stating of all American Methodist missions, “[T]he pattern of using education as the chief device of Christianizing native populations became the Methodist hallmark.”⁸ The prominence of educational institutions within the mission enterprise is especially true of two important Methodist missions which were forerunners to the mission in Malaysia: India and China. Wade Crawford Barclay writes that in China, “within two decades teaching the Christian religion had come to be recog-

⁴ Umphrey Lee, *For the Rising Generation: A Sketch of the Methodist Heritage in Higher Education* (Nashville: The Methodist Publishing House, 1958), 8.

⁵ Roger Robins, “Vernacular American Landscape: Methodists, Camp Meetings, and Social Respectability” *Religion and American Culture* 4.2 (Summer 1994), 167.

⁶ Hempton, 157-158.

⁷ Dana L. Robert, *American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice* (Macon, GA: Mercer UP, 1997), 160.

⁸ Hempton, 157.

nized as equally important with preaching as a method of evangelization. In India and in other fields much the same course of development occurred.”⁹

Education in the Malaysian Mission

If education was important to Methodist missions in India and China, it was even more so to the mission in Malaysia. J. Tremayne Copplestone reports, “India and China were the only national missions with more pupils under instruction than in the Malaysia mission. No mission in the Methodist Episcopal Church, however, had so many pupils in proportion to the number of its church members.”¹⁰ He describes the mission’s school system thus: “Paralleling the development of evangelistic activity and church life on the Peninsula, sometimes complementing it, but largely overshadowing, even competing with it, was the expansion of the Mission’s day school system.”¹¹

The prominence of education in the Malaysia mission, however, was not just a matter of numbers; it was a matter of mission philosophy. The early leaders of the Malaysia mission believed strongly in the importance of education as a missionary strategy. James M. Thoburn, the first Presiding Elder and then missionary Bishop for the Malaysia church, was as staunch an advocate of the importance of education in Singapore and Malaysia as he was for his main area of work, India. He declared, “The Mission-school in some form is inseparable from ordinary missionary work.”¹²

The first missionaries assigned to Singapore, William F. and Marie Oldham, were also solid supporters of educational missions. Born in India, they had both travelled to the United States to study to become educational missionaries, William at Allegheny College and Boston University and Marie at Mount Holyoke.¹³ Marie later wrote, “I am convinced that there ought not to be any discrimination between evangelistic and educational work; each can be as educational or evangelistic as the one in charge chooses to make it.”¹⁴ William agreed: “The Spirit-filled preacher is a great agent for the spread of the gospel, but the Spirit-filled teacher has also his secure and worthy place in bringing in the Kingdom. Let each in honor prefer the

⁹ Wade Crawford Barclay, *History of Methodist Missions: The Methodist Episcopal Church 1845-1939, Vol. 3: Widening Horizons, 1845-1895* (New York: The Board of Missions of The Methodist Church, 1957), 189.

¹⁰ J. Tremayne Copplestone, *History of Methodist Missions: Vol. IV: Twentieth-Century Perspectives (The Methodist Episcopal Church, 1896-1939)* (New York: The Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, 1973), 772.

¹¹ Copplestone, 771.

¹² James M. Thoburn, *India and Malaysia* (Cincinnati: Cranston and Curtis, 1892), 329, quoted in Ho Seng Ong, *Methodist Schools in Malaysia: Their Record and History* (Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Board of Education, Malaya Annual Conference, 1964), 53.

¹³ Theodore R. Doraisamy, *What Hath God Wrought: Motives of Mission in Methodism from Wesley to Thoburn* (Singapore: The Methodist Book Room, 1983), 101.

¹⁴ *Malaysia Message* 17 (January 1907), quoted in Doraisamy, *What Hath God Wrought*, 103-104.

other and supplement him.”¹⁵ Ho Seng Ong writes, “From the earliest years school work was an integral part of many a Malaysian missionary’s calling. Oldham described himself as an educational missionary all his life time and his example was followed by many.”¹⁶

Spurred on by such mission strategies, early Methodist missionaries to Malaysia promptly went about starting schools. Shortly after arriving in Singapore, William Oldham was invited to speak at a meeting of the Celestial Reasoning Society, a group of Chinese merchants dedicated to the life of the mind and learning English. One member of the society, Tan Keong Saik, asked Oldham for tutoring in English. Oldham agreed, and this arrangement led to more requests for tutoring and then, within months of Oldham’s arrival in this new country, a school, not for the merchants themselves, but for their sons. It was to be the first of many.

In some cases, Methodist missionaries started schools even before they started churches. When the Methodists expanded their work to Penang, B. L. Balderstone started a school for Chinese children within three weeks of arriving, before his colleague Daniel Moore reached Penang and began preaching in English.¹⁷ The school was not only before preaching chronologically, but when B. F. West wrote a summary of the work of the mission for one of the mission board secretaries, he mentioned the school work in Penang before he mentioned the church congregation there.¹⁸

Many of the schools started by Methodists were for Chinese children (for example, the many prestigious Anglo-Chinese Schools), and it is these schools which are the primary focus of this paper. Nevertheless, Methodists also started schools for Tamil children and schools which enrolled students from a mix of races. All of the early Methodist schools were conducted in English, which provided a common forum for students of differing native languages. Chinese schools and Chinese students did make up the largest portion of the Methodist total, which is perhaps not surprising as there were significantly more Chinese than Tamils in Singapore and the rest of Malaysia. As Barclay notes, “Oldham was quick to see that the largest educational opportunity in Singapore, as in all of the Straits Settlements, was with the Chinese.”¹⁹

Methodists also started schools for both boys and girls, though it is the boys’ schools which were far more numerous and are the focus of this pa-

¹⁵ W. F. Oldham, *Thoburn—Called of God* (New York: The Methodist Book Concern, 1918), 136-137.

¹⁶ Ho Seng Ong, *Methodist Schools in Malaysia: Their Record and History* (Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Board of Education, Malaya Annual Conference, 1964), 125.

¹⁷ See John Russell Denyes, *The Malaysia Mission of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: Open Door Emergency Commission, Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1905), 18-19.

¹⁸ Letter, B. F. West to J. O. Peck, no date, 2, *Methodist Episcopal Church Missionary Correspondence, 1846-1912, Africa, Europe, India, Malaya, Mexico, Philippines, South America, West Indies* (Madison, NJ: United Methodist Church Archives, General Commission Archives and History of The United Methodist Church [GCAH], 1999), Microfilm, Reel 21.

¹⁹ Barclay, 652.

per. I chose to focus on boys' schools not to marginalize girls' schools, but because the Chinese appetite for boys' schools was much stronger and it is much clearer how boys' schools served as a point of symbiosis for the Methodist missions and the Chinese in Malaysia. The demand for girls' schools was initially much lower, and more research must be done to determine why the Methodists were ultimately successful in starting girls' schools and what that meant for the overall mission.

Chinese Attitudes Towards Western Education

Having described the nature of the Methodist missionary movement with regards to education, I will turn now to the environment into which that movement entered. As stated above, in this paper I will focus on the Chinese portion of this environment. There are a number of reasons to choose the Chinese. They were numerically significant, both within the Methodist church and within the population at large. Much of the Methodist attention in Malaysia was directed towards the Chinese. Perhaps most importantly, though, it was the Chinese who were the most enthusiastic recipients of Methodist educational efforts, at least for boys.

To speak of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya as a single group, however, is to simplify. The Chinese were by no means a single community, being split by language, region of Chinese ancestry, clan, Baba vs. immigrant Chinese, and other traits. Nonetheless, despite this diversity within the Chinese community, all Chinese shared a broad cultural background which included certain attitudes towards education. Therefore, one can reasonably speak of attitudes towards education which characterized the Chinese as a whole even in the absence of a coherent Chinese community in Malaysia.

I will begin by describing Chinese attitudes towards Western education not in Malaysia, but in China. This is a valid starting point, as Chinese attitudes in Malaysia towards many things were determined by Chinese attitudes in China, both because of the large percentage of the Chinese population in Malaysia who were recent immigrants from China and because of the strong ties with China that the Chinese in Malaysia maintained. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that the overseas Chinese in Malaysia closely followed and were influenced by educational developments in China. Clan associations in Singapore and Malaya, according to Yen Ching-hwang, formed modern schools patterned after the modern schools developing in China.²⁰

In China, the traditional Chinese educational system was a literary education built around study of the Confucian classics. This study of the classics was geared towards taking government exams which qualified those who passed to hold government offices. The system was open only to males and essentially only to the upper class. It was a conservative system and focused on the preservation of tradition and traditional Chinese culture. The Chinese held a very strong cultural bias against anything that came from outside of

²⁰ Yen Ching-hwang, *A Social History of the Chinese in Singapore and Malaya, 1800-1911* (Singapore: Oxford UP, 1986), 93 and 300.

China. Thus, the Chinese were not initially interested in Western education and the teachings that missionaries from the West had to offer when they first arrived in China.²¹

This disdain for Western education began to change in the late nineteenth century. There were several reasons for this change, mostly associated with China's political fate at that time. In the late eighteenth century, China suffered a series of military defeats. Western powers were able to use their superior military technology and their knowledge of the Chinese, which was much more extensive than Chinese knowledge of the West,²² as potent weapons to bring the Chinese to their knees in a series of wars. Later the Japanese, who had adopted a Western system of education and Western technology, were able to inflict further defeat and humiliation on the Chinese.

These setbacks to the authority of the Chinese state caused a crisis of faith that extended to the educational system. Marianne Bastid describes this time in the following way:

Chinese officials and scholars aware of China's internal weakness . . . sought to penetrate the secret of foreign strength, to understand its foundations as well as its means and the intricacies of how it worked. In this quest, . . . foreign education was no longer viewed as a simple collection of various kinds of knowledge, some of which could be usefully selected and introduced into China. It was seen as an instrument of intellectual and moral formation which enabled individuals to construct a nation.²³

In the aftermath of this realization, Chinese reformers sought to develop a new educational system that would incorporate Western science and Western methodology in a way that would preserve Chinese culture but strengthen the Chinese state. Although the reformers by and large did not turn to missionaries to lead this new educational system but rather sought to develop a state-controlled system of modern, Western education, this acknowledgement of the value of Western education did much to legitimate missionary schools in the eyes of the Chinese people.

The other result of China's defeat by the Western powers which ended up having consequences for the Chinese attitude towards missionary education was the opening up of the treaty ports in the 1840s and 1860s to Western merchants and missionaries. The presence of Western merchants was just as important as the presence of missionaries for its effect on Chinese attitudes towards education. Trade created a medium for interaction between

²¹ The Chinese had shown some interest in Western learning during the Catholic missions to China under Matteo Ricci and his fellow Jesuits in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Nevertheless, when the Catholics re-entered the country in the nineteenth century after having been expelled and the Protestants entered the country for the first time at the same time, the Chinese were much less receptive of Western ideas.

²² For this insight on the role of Western knowledge of the Chinese, I am indebted to Marianne Bastid, "Servitude or Liberation? The Introduction of Foreign Educational Practices and Systems to China from 1840 to the Present," in *China's Education and the Industrialized World: Studies in Cultural Transfer*, ed. by Ruth Hayhoe and Marianne Bastid (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1987), 7.

²³ Bastid, 9.

the Chinese and Westerners, and it was a medium that greatly favored those who could speak the other's language. Therefore, as John Cleverly explains, "There was a growing demand in the treaty ports for foreign-language teaching which could help well-to-do families in their business dealings with Europeans."²⁴ Furthermore, as J. Dyke Van Putten points out, because it was Protestant countries which did the greatest amount of trade with China, it was Protestant missionary educators who were in greatest demand.²⁵ Thus, trading families began to seek instruction in Western languages for their sons to further their economic prospects. There had always been an element of traditional Chinese schooling which was geared towards financial advancement. The changed political and commercial realities of late nineteenth-century China created a situation in which it was missionary rather than traditional education that held the possibility of financial advance.

Therefore, by the late eighteenth century, attitudes towards Western education in China had changed, at least as regards the education of boys, and Western education was seen as an attractive option for a portion of the population. Rev. Homer Eaton, a missionary (and therefore admittedly a biased source), wrote, "Thus the bright and progressive young men of China are beginning to see, and they are seeking more and more the advantages which foreign schools afford."²⁶ William Fenn, a contemporary scholar, observed, "Generally . . . suspicion [toward mission schools] ebbed and students were attracted by a type of education different from the traditional Chinese pattern and as yet available only in mission schools."²⁷

This change in attitudes trickled down from China to Malaysia. Yen points out one important difference between Malaysia and China, though: overseas Chinese were not able to participate in the Chinese examination system. Thus, traditional education was never a path to social mobility for the Chinese in Malaysia. Yet as Yen writes, "Education in traditional Chinese society was the most important stepping stone to upward social mobility."²⁸ Missionary education, however, could be a path to social mobility by teaching foreign languages for trade. Thus, in Malaysia, missionary education filled a traditional Chinese role for education, but one which traditional Chinese education itself was not able to fill.

The desire for economic advance by learning English was in fact a significant influence which predisposed the Chinese of Malaysia towards Methodist missionary education. The *Malaysia Message* of October, 1909, indicates that graduates of the Methodist schools were able to command

²⁴ John Cleverly, *The Schooling of China: Tradition and Modernity in Chinese Education* (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1985), 32.

²⁵ J. Dyke Van Putten, *Christian Higher Education in China: Contributions of the Colleges of Arts and Sciences to Chinese Life* (Chicago: U of Chicago Libraries, 1934), 6.

²⁶ Homer Eaton, "China: The Field and Its Conquest," in *The Asiatic Fields: Addresses Delivered Before the Eastern Missionary Convention of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Philadelphia, Pa., October 13-15, 1903* (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1904), 37-38.

²⁷ William Purviance Fenn, *Christian Higher Education in Changing China, 1880-1950* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 25.

²⁸ Yen, 92.

higher salaries.²⁹ An oral history account given to Ho Seng Ong by G. H. Goh also demonstrates that economic motivations were important in favoring missionary education:

Once upon a time, not so very long ago, a young Chinese boy [Goh] was sent to the Anglo-Chinese School, Singapore, to study English. . . . The father who had been to an English School for about 4 years was able to earn his living as a tally clerk. With a smattering of English he was very popular with the shipping agents.³⁰

There is also evidence that some Chinese favored missionary education for its moral (though not necessarily religious) component. The moral component of traditional Chinese education was significant, and it seems that some Chinese who valued this aspect of education considered missionary education an acceptable substitute for traditional Confucian education. Another of Ho's oral histories, this one provided by Ong Joo Sun, illustrates this point:

My grandmother was wise enough to realize that a school of that nature ['an old-fashioned Chinese school'] could not build up character or turn out useful citizens. So she took me to the A.C.S. Penang. I soon found myself in a different atmosphere where I was taught discipline, cleanliness, truth, honesty and obedience which were lacking in my previous school.³¹

Chinese Enthusiasm for Methodist Schools

Hence, by the end of the nineteenth century, the Chinese in Malaysia had developed a positive attitude towards missionary education because they saw it as a means by which they could achieve important economic and social objectives. Sng summarizes this point and shows how this coincidence depended upon felicitously good timing by the Methodist mission:

[Methodists'] emphasis on education came at a time when an increasing number of local inhabitants were prepared to send their children to English-language schools. Although Christian missions have been associated with education right from 1819, it was not really until the coming of the Methodists that we begin to see a positive response to mission schools. By then, there was already a sizeable Straits Chinese community who wished to see their sons educated in English.³²

This positive attitude translated into positive actions by the Chinese, who requested Methodist missionary education and generously supported that education where it existed.

Although the Methodists came to Malaysia equipped with a missionary philosophy that stressed education, it was often in response to Chinese requests that the Methodists started individual schools. I have already mentioned how the first school of the mission, the Anglo-Chinese School in Singapore, was set up in response to the requests of several prominent

²⁹ *Malaysia Message* 20 (October 1909), 2.

³⁰ Ho, 207.

³¹ Ho, 206.

³² Bobby E. K. Sng, *In His Good Time: The Story of the Church in Singapore, 1819-1978* (Singapore: Graduates' Christian Fellowship, 1980), 121.

Chinese businessmen. This pattern of Chinese initiative in starting Methodist schools continued throughout the mission. This was true not only in the large cities of the Straits Settlements and the Federated Malay States, but in the hinterlands of the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian archipelago. Abel Eklund spoke of rural West Borneo in November of 1911 and stated that “even here a large number of the people want their children to get an English education.”³³ The demand for Methodist education existed even in areas where there was no mission presence. After an exploratory trip to Java in 1905, B. F. West wrote in a letter, “We found boys of our Anglo-Chinese School at Singapore (graduates) in numbers and they wish the privileges of christian [sic] teaching.”³⁴ Often, Methodist expansion in the Malaysian territories was determined by where there was demand for a school.

Whether schools were set up through Chinese or missionary initiative, the Chinese responded positively to Methodist schools. Oldham wrote, “Most notable has been the welcome given by the scattered Chinese to the teaching missionary who has also been the preaching missionary.”³⁵ The Chinese showed their welcome in two ways: by enrolling their children (mostly their sons) and by donating their money to fund the schools.

Enrollment in the schools grew tremendously. Five years after the first school opened in Singapore, there were 565 pupils who passed through Methodist schools in 1890. By 1905, it was 4,214.³⁶ In 1909, the *Malaysia Message* reported that not only Baba Chinese, but an “increasing number of the children of the immigrant Chinese” were attending mission schools.³⁷ Moreover, it was not just the children of Christians who were attending. Indeed, it could not have been, for the number of enrollees in the Methodist schools far exceeded the number of members in the Methodist church. Thus, the Methodist schools drew in many children of non-Christian Chinese.

The Chinese, both Christian and non-Christian, contributed not only their offspring but their offerings to boys' schools. A group of wealthy Chinese merchants raised \$4,000 for the Anglo-Chinese School in Singapore to build its first school building shortly after it opened. Not only groups of Chinese, but sometimes individual Chinese supported Methodist schools. In Buitenzorg, Java, in 1908, “an old Chinese gentleman [made] himself legally responsible for five years for the support of a teacher, on condition that his four boys shall be specially cared for. This school is thoroughly christian

³³ *Malaysia Message* 22 (November 1911), 11.

³⁴ Letter, B. F. West to A. B. Leonard, August 2, 1905, 2, *Methodist Episcopal Church Missionary Correspondence, 1846-1912, Africa, Europe, India, Malaya, Mexico, Philippines, South America, West Indies* (Madison, NJ: United Methodist Church Archives, GCAH, 1999), Microfilm, Reel 21.

³⁵ Oldham, *Thoburn*, 137.

³⁶ These numbers are from Ho, 36-38. They include Chinese and non-Chinese students, and male and female students, but Chinese boys made up the majority at each of the dates mentioned.

³⁷ *Malaysia Message* 20 (October 1909), 2.

[sic] and evangelical, and the Chinaman agrees to this."³⁸ The Tiong Hwa Hwe Koan offered the followed terms to the Methodist mission in exchange for supplying its schools with English teachers: "They will pay a single missionary's salary and house rent on a contract for five years, and this contract they execute legally and will register it in the proper Courts."³⁹

Success of Methodist Education in Malaysia

This paper has thus far suggested a good symbiosis between the Methodist movement and the Chinese environment for boys' education. It remains to assess how well this symbiotic relationship allowed the Methodist mission to grow and to achieve its ends. In order to answer this question, it is necessary to define what those goals were. The prime goal of the Methodist mission was the conversion of non-Christians and the gathering of them in to membership in the Methodist church. Although this was the primary goal, it was not the only goal. The mission also sought to cultivate the connections, good reputation, and other forms of support necessary to allow it to achieve its primary goal. Finally, the growth of the educational ministry of the Methodist mission could be seen as a goal itself.

On the last point, the record is quite clear: the Methodist movement was very successful in expanding and developing its educational endeavors. The enrollment of the schools grew by an average of 24% a year for the first 20 years of the mission.⁴⁰ Looking back in 1935, H. R. Cheeseman stated, "the growth in numbers and in efficiency of the (Methodist) schools within less than the life-time of one man is almost incredible and may well be regarded as one of the most remarkable educational developments of modern Malaya."⁴¹ Not only did Methodist schools grow rapidly, they came to dominate the Malaysian educational scene. The 1962 *Official Year Book of the Federation of Malaya* remarked, "during this period Mission Schools were chiefly responsible for the rapid advances in English education, and by 1914 some three-quarters of the boys receiving education in the English language were at these schools."⁴²

The missionaries agreed that this significant success in the expansion of their educational endeavors also led to success in gaining access and prestige within the Malaysian community, especially among the Chinese. Oldham wrote, "It is now well known that the schools have softened prejudice and

³⁸ Letter, W. F. Oldham to A. B. Leonard, June 9, 1908, 1, *Methodist Episcopal Church Missionary Correspondence, 1846-1912, Africa, Europe, India, Malaya, Mexico, Philippines, South America, West Indies* (Madison, New Jersey: United Methodist Church Archives – GCAH, 1999), Microfilm, Reel 21.

³⁹ Letter, W. F. Oldham to A. B. Leonard, March 15, 1910, 1, *Methodist Episcopal Church Missionary Correspondence, 1846-1912, Africa, Europe, India, Malaya, Mexico, Philippines, South America, West Indies* (Madison, NJ: United Methodist Church Archives, GCAH, 1999), Microfilm, Reel 21.

⁴⁰ This calculation is based on figures found in Ho, 238, and Oldham, *India, Malaysia, and the Philippines*, 231.

⁴¹ Quoted in Ho, 15.

⁴² Quoted in Ho, 2.

have won their way to the innermost confidence of the most influential people".⁴³ In a private letter, he added:

The influence of this school is very marked. Nothing like it has ever been seen here and we find that our school work opens our way in every other direction. Merchants and officials are astonished to see how influential we are in Chinese circles. The children of nearly all the leading Chinamen of this part are in our school. . . . I gain access through their sons to men I could never dream of reaching otherwise. I have no hesitation in saying this is a Divinely created agency of marked power.⁴⁴

Later historians concurred. Doraisamy stated, "The school provided the open door to homes."⁴⁵ Barclay proclaimed, "The Anglo-Chinese School in Singapore had steadily advanced in enrollment, prestige, and influence."⁴⁶

Despite this obvious growth in "enrollment, prestige, and influence," there was no universal agreement as to whether the schools were the best way to achieve the Methodists' overall goal of conversion of non-Christians and church growth. Certainly, there were those who believed that education was the best path to pursue. Already five years after the start of the Malaysia mission, Thoburn concluded that the Anglo-Chinese School in Singapore had "contributed very much to the success of our Malaysia Mission."⁴⁷ Oldham agreed, "The whole educational movement is profoundly affecting the life of these lands, and the very largest religious results must ultimately be the outcome."⁴⁸ Nor was it missionaries alone who perceived the schools to be the secret of the Methodists' success. Doraisamy relates, "Non-Methodist observers attributed the success of the mission to its schools and women missionaries in comparison with other missions."⁴⁹ Some later scholars have thought so, too. Ho explains, "According to the authors of *The Story of Methodism* [Halford E. Luccock and Paul Hutchinson] the major reason for the success and continuance of the Church was that it united evangelistic Passion to an equally genuine Passion for education."⁵⁰

Others, however, thought that the missionaries could better have spent their time elsewhere. Even Oldham acknowledged that in the early days of the mission, "visiting missionaries and even wandering episcopal stars ventured the opinion that the messengers of the gospel would better be engaged

⁴³ Oldham, *Thoburn*, 137.

⁴⁴ Letter, W. F. Oldham to J. O. Peck, June 19, 1889, 5-6, *Methodist Episcopal Church Missionary Correspondence, 1846-1912, Africa, Europe, India, Malaya, Mexico, Philippines, South America, West Indies* (Madison, NJ: United Methodist Church Archives, GCAH, 1999), Microfilm, Reel 21.

⁴⁵ Doraisamy, *The March of Methodism in Singapore and Malaysia, 1885-1980* (Singapore: The Methodist Book Room, 1982), 32.

⁴⁶ Barclay, 658.

⁴⁷ Letter, J. M. Thoburn to J. O. Peck, April 7, 1890, 2, *Methodist Episcopal Church Missionary Correspondence, 1846-1912, Africa, Europe, India, Malaya, Mexico, Philippines, South America, West Indies* (Madison, NJ: United Methodist Church Archives, GCAH, 1999), Microfilm, Reel 21.

⁴⁸ Oldham, *Thoburn*, 136.

⁴⁹ Doraisamy, *What Hath God Wrought*, 102.

⁵⁰ Ho, 53.

in preaching the New Testament rather than in thumbing schoolbooks.”⁵¹ There were critics internal to the mission as well, such as W. T. Cherry, W. G. Shellabear, and C. S. Buchanan.⁵² Some critics questioned whether the Methodists were left with anything to show for all of their efforts in education. In 1914, the Board of Education for the Malaysia Conference sadly concluded, “It is a matter of deep regret that after 29 years of school work there are not in all our churches in Malaya 50 men and women over 25 years of age who have ever attended our schools. Such are the facts.”⁵³

A final assessment, however, should not rest upon the force of opinion on either side but upon the most conclusive evidence that can be mustered. Unfortunately, the Methodists did not keep regular records of how many of their students were Christian. It is certainly possible to give examples of individual conversions which came about through the missionary schools. The missionaries themselves list several of these, and Ho gives at least one such oral history in his work.⁵⁴ If one looks at conference records, it is evident that although enrollment in the schools was always several times what membership in the Methodist church was, membership in the church always grew at a faster rate than enrollment in the schools.⁵⁵ While these figures do not conclusively prove that growth in membership occurred as a result of the educational work, they do away with the thought that the schools benefited from Methodist work more than evangelism did. In the end, based on the knowledge that conversions did occur in the schools and the fact that church membership grew along with and even faster than school matriculation, it seems safe to conclude that education was an effective strategy for the Methodist mission in Malaysia to achieve its main objective of conversion and increasing membership.

Conclusions

Hence, Hempton’s hypothesis that symbiosis lies at the heart of Methodist success in expansion seems to hold in the case of the Methodist movement among the Chinese of Malaysia as well. Of course, we must not take education for the Chinese as the only reason for the success of the Methodist missions. Hempton himself warns against mono-causal explanations of Methodism’s growth.⁵⁶ Certainly in the case of Methodism in Malaysia,

⁵¹ Oldham, *Thoburn*, 136.

⁵² See Doraisamy, *The March of Methodism*, 34.

⁵³ Quoted in Sng, 155.

⁵⁴ That of Chen Fah Sing, in Ho, 206.

⁵⁵ This conclusion is based on records included in the conference minutes of the Malaysia Conference and covers the years 1896 to 1911. The comparison is between members and total day school students for the year. The number of students for the year is higher than the average attendance, which is also reported, and the number of members does not include probationary members, who are reported as well, or adherents who were not members, who are not reported. See *Official Minutes of the Sixth through Nineteenth Sessions of the Malaysia Mission Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (Singapore: American Mission Press, 1902–1911), Microfilm.

⁵⁶ Hempton, 17.

it was a complex undertaking which reached many different social groups, and thus the story of education or of the Chinese is only one factor. Still, this case study lends further support to Hempton's paradigm of symbiosis between movement and environment (and especially changes in the environment) as the best explanatory framework for Methodist growth.