

Missionary Facilitation of New Movements to Christ: A Study of 19th Century and Early 20th Century China

by *Richard Hibbert*

Missionaries among unreached peoples pray and work to see new movements to Christ among their host peoples. How missionaries respond to and interact with potential movements is the subject of increased attention in our day. It is generally understood that missionary response can impact the early phase of any potential movement in crucial ways, and I believe mission history bears this out. Thus in this article I want to compare the ways in which missionaries came alongside three movements to Christ in Southern China between 1845 and 1910. All three movements took place among the Miao and Hakka minorities, and together provide a vivid comparison of missionary response. I hope that this historical analysis will help missionaries as they consider how best to get alongside potential movements today. Mission and church historians have used the terms “mass movements,” “people movements,” and “church planting movements” to refer to the phenomenon of large numbers of people becoming Christians in a relatively short time. Many church planters have found Donald McGavran’s (1955, 1970) analyses of people movements in India, and, more recently, David Garrison’s (2004) analysis of church planting movements helpful in guiding their approach. Several recent books encourage church planters to follow the principles derived from analysis of these movements (e.g., Ott and Wilson 2011, 65-87; Stetzer 2010, 325-333).

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People Movements as an Interpretive Framework

The dream of winning people groups to Christ rather than a few isolated individuals was memorably articulated by Kenneth Latourette:

More and more we must dream in terms of winning groups, not merely individuals. Too often, with our Protestant, nineteenth century individualism, we have torn men and women, one by one, out of the family, village, or clan, with the result that they have been permanently de-racinated and maladjusted. . . . Experience, however, shows that it is much better if an entire natural group—a family, village, caste, or tribe—can come rapidly over into the faith. (Latourette 1936, 159)

Roland Allen was perhaps the first mission theorist to describe this dream in detail, and to explain the approach that missionaries would need to take in order to facilitate its realization. His experience in China had led him to theorize that “spontaneous expansion” of the church was possible, desirable, and even essential for the church to spread over the six provinces of China in which his Anglican mission agency worked. By spontaneous expansion he meant

the expansion which follows the unexhorted and unorganized activity of individual members of the Church explaining to others the Gospel which they have found for themselves. (1927, 6)

He pointed out key attitudes in missionaries and new believers that would support this aim:

That object could only be attained if the first Christians who were converted by our labours, understood clearly that they could by themselves, without any further assistance from us, not only convert their neighbours, but establish Churches. That meant that the first group of converts must be so fully equipped with all spiritual authority that they could multiply themselves without any *necessary* reference to us . . .

J. Waskom Pickett’s (1933) study of “mass movements” in India seemed to confirm Allen’s theory. By the term “mass movement” he meant “a group decision favorable to Christianity” that includes “the consequent preservation of the converts’ social integration” (1933, 22). He contended that these movements of lower and outcaste (untouchable) Indians to Christ were the most natural way for them to become Christians, that they protected them from social dislocation, reduced the danger of westernization, and were the best way to help the greatest number of other people become Christians (1933, 331–4). He also recommended that mission agencies minister to both physical and spiritual needs, that more missionaries be assigned to areas in

which people movements were taking place, and that better ways of nurturing the new Christians be developed. Commenting later on the criticisms against the idea of rapid accession of new members to the church, he responded that, in his view, “natural, rapid community or group movements to Christian discipleship are more likely to produce a strong, healthy church than are cautiously controlled processes of slow growth” (1963, 11).

Donald McGavran took Pickett’s ideas a step further, developing a theory of what he called “people movements.” He identified the sociological factors involved, and urged missionaries to provide concentrated “post-baptismal care” of Christians, and to use “indigenous church principles”



similar to those outlined by Pickett. These principles include encouraging believers to meet in their homes, training and trusting unpaid leaders, encouraging all believers to share their faith, encouraging churches to plant new churches, and encouraging indigenous patterns of worship (McGavran 1970, 325–7; 336–45). Despite theological, ethical, missiological, and procedural criticisms of some of McGavran’s conclusions (e.g., Rainer 1993, 35–6), the dream of stimulating and nurturing people movements is still held by many missionaries and missiologists. Missionaries are currently being influenced, for example, by David Garrison’s (2004) analysis of “church planting movements,” in which there is a rapid increase in the number of churches

in a given area or population segment. Garrison identifies the following factors as being involved in the growth of each of the movements he analyzed:

- abundant evangelism;
- intentional planting and rapid reproduction of multiplying churches;
- the authority of God’s Word;
- local, lay leaders;
- churches meeting as small groups in homes.

Garrison argues that church planting movements are much more likely to come into being when missionaries work to support each of these factors, and, in particular, do not try to control or even take the lead in new churches, but encourage believers from the very beginning of their Christian lives to share their faith and lead new churches.

Each of these missiologists argue that the way missionaries interact with the first converts in a potential people movement to Christianity has a defining impact on the progress of the movement. Other things being equal, they explain that a movement is more likely to grow faster and lead to multiplying churches when missionaries employ indigenous church principles and when they empower the first converts to do the work of evangelism, discipleship, and leading churches (cf. Ott and Wilson 2011, 65–87).

Facilitating Movements in China’s History

The history of nineteenth century mission work in China provides a vivid microcosm of different approaches to facilitating incipient movements to Christ. Three significant movements involving the Hakka and Miao minorities in South China emerged between 1845 and 1910. The first, the Taiping movement, was initially a quasi-Christian movement that grew to include millions of Hakka, but ended with the tragic failure of the Taiping Rebellion. A much smaller movement that occurred simultaneously was the conversion of

several thousand Hakka in Guangdong province. The third movement involved a sub-group of the Miao people that grew within fifteen years to include more than 50,000 believers and hundreds of new churches. I believe a comparison of the way in which missionaries interacted with the early adherents of these Chinese movements can guide our encounter with potential movements in the 21st century.

First, I will argue that the Taiping movement and the rapid accession of Miao to Christianity were people movements, and that the church growth among the Miao and the Hakka is linked with the Taiping movement by similar ethnic, social, and political contexts. I believe the Taiping rebellion was an early indicator of openness on the part of Hakka and Miao to religious change. Secondly, I will isolate three elements in the people movement among the Miao that are vital to missionary facilitation of people movements: (1) swift response to signs of receptivity, (2) discernment of and adjustment to the socio-political context, and (3) empowering transfer of responsibility for church development and evangelization to new Christians. I will argue that failure in either of the first two elements above makes heterodoxy likely, as illustrated in the case of the Taiping movement, and that deficiencies in the third element can lead to a stifling of growth, as seen in the case of the Hakka.

The Taiping Movement, 1844–1862

The Taiping movement was arguably the most significant Chinese response to Christianity that China had seen up until the twentieth century. Although the degree to which this movement was Christian has been extensively debated—historian Yu-chung Shih (1967, 393) comments that there is “a voluminous literature, offering all shades of opinion”—widespread agreement exists that the early phase was an innovative

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Chinese Christian movement (e.g., Reilly 2004). The movement focused initially on worshipping the God of the Bible based primarily on biblical teaching, even if these teachings were at times misinterpreted. It was a contextualized movement towards Christianity, even though it conspicuously failed to reflect some biblical values (Reilly 2004; Michael 1971, 30). Key elements of the spirit of Christianity were missing, such as love for others and a deep understanding of sin and forgiveness (Boardman 1952). Latourette summarizes the movement in these terms:

Outwardly, then, the T'ai P'ings showed markedly the influence of Christianity, although they had obviously modified what had come from the outside and had made it conform in large part to Chinese practice. Of the inner spirit of Christianity, the insurgents knew little or nothing. (Latourette 1929, 297)

The Taiping movement began when its founder-leader Hong Xuiqiang, from the marginalized Hakka minority, was given a set of tracts by a missionary and his translator in 1836. He became ill and had certain visions, but then recovered. It was later in 1843 that he began reading these tracts and then “was greatly astonished to find in these books the key to his own visions” (Hamberg 1854, 19). Hong began to preach, and converted several friends who then baptized each other. Hong continued preaching to many of his Hakka relatives in Guangdong and Guangxi based on both the tracts and his visions. Several hundred people were subsequently baptized and began gathering for worship using a simple service developed by Hong. They called themselves the “Bai Shangsi Hui,” or “God-worshipping society,” and by 1847, just four years later, they numbered in the thousands (Hamberg 1854, 34).

The movement was marked by its indigeneity: it had unpaid local leaders, congregations were starting new congregations, and these often met outside or in homes (Medhurst 1853).

Hong's first extended contact with a missionary came four years after his exposure to the tracts and eleven years after his visions. He spent three months being taught by Issachar Jacox Roberts, a Baptist missionary from Tennessee. This discipleship process ended prematurely with Roberts refusing Hong's request to be baptized, apparently because Roberts' Chinese assistants envied Hong and negatively influenced Roberts' view of him (Roberts 1862, 67; Hamberg 1854, 31-2). The much-needed nurturing, teaching, and equipping of Hong as the emerging leader of the movement (as well as the essential correction to his understanding of basic Christian truth) was cut short, and this lack of formative discipleship allowed Hong and the movement to drift away from orthodox biblical teaching.

Later attempts to influence the movement were hindered by Hong, who by then was leading a movement of a million Taipings, who had fulfilled their political ambition to capture Nanking and rename it “New Jerusalem.” Hong “would only accept foreign missionaries at Nanking if they acknowledged his claims to special revelation and semi-divine authority” (Gregory 1963, 11, cf. Cox 1862, 62). Several missionaries made brief visits to Nanking, but there was no sustained effort to influence the course of the movement apart from Roberts' unfruitful fifteen-month stay from late 1860 to early 1862. Upon his departure he wrote, “[I] am now as much opposed to them, for good reasons I think, as I ever was in favour of them” (1862, 142).

Any intervention had to contend with a very mature ideology. Taiping theology,

based on a selective blend of Scripture and visions, was by then very well formed. As late as 1861 Griffith John still believed in the potential reform of this movement, but his plea to Protestant missionaries to not abandon the Taipings came too late to change its tragic course. He emphasized that the movement was the “offspring” of missionary efforts, and that it had grown deformed through lack of “parental care.” Rudolph Lechler (1878) similarly highlighted the movement’s openness to new ideas, and lamented the lack of Christian “direction” given to it.

Factors in the Taiping Movement’s Early Growth

The Taiping movement—like the Nian rebellion and popular resistance of the same period—grew out of specific socio-economic and political circumstances. The Hakka, dubbed “strangers” or “guests,” were despised by the majority (Punti) people (Liao 1972, 25). The region’s population had recently tripled and this had led to land and food shortages, price inflation, increased unemployment, and competition for resources between the original Punti settlers, and the Hakka “visitors” (Fairbank 1992, 167-72; Bohr 2003, 5). Many Hakka saw in the Taiping movement a hope for deliverance from the oppression and violence of Punti neighbours.

The Taiping movement’s indigeneity was another key element aiding its rapid growth. The movement’s leaders were unpaid (Medhurst 1853), and congregations that were starting new congregations often met in homes. But, sadly, this “indigenizing principle” was not combined with a second principle, one that Andrew Walls (1996, 7-9) has termed the “pilgrim principle.” The gospel not only allows us to be “at home” in our own culture (an indigenizing principle), but also transforms us beyond any particular cultural inheritance, granting us a new universal identity that has sufficient

continuity with other biblically-based churches (a pilgrim principle). The key reason for a deficient self-determination among the Taipings was the lack of “post-baptismal care” which McGavran (1970) insists is so essential to the quality of people movement churches. Hong’s first significant direct contact with any missionary (and also with the Bible) came four years after his exposure to the tracts he received and eleven years after his visions. His unfortunate interaction with Rev. I. J. Roberts in Canton, which could have led to the intensive discipling, equipping, and further empowering of Hong as the key leader of the movement, ended instead with Roberts’ refusal to baptize him and



Hong’s abrupt departure. Apparently there was a plot to discredit Hong by Roberts’ envious assistants (Roberts 1852, 67; Hamberg 1854, 31-2), but whatever the contributing factors, the loss of an early opportunity to correct Hong’s orientation is clear.

Church Growth among the Hakka in Guangdong, 1840–1910

At the same time as Hong was preaching in the province of Guangxi, the church among the Hakka was beginning in neighboring Guangdong, initially as a result of the efforts of Karl Gutzlaff and his Chinese co-workers, and later as a result of the work of

missionaries from the Basel mission, of which both Theodor Hamberg and Rudolph Lechler were a part. By 1876 there were close to one thousand Hakka church members in Guangdong province, and by 1907 there were more than six thousand. This later growth came at a time of rapid increase in missionary numbers and resources, however, and was less a case of church multiplication than of addition through the establishment of new mission stations. A network of mission stations—with schools and hospitals, and a large number of paid workers (72 Europeans and 271 Chinese in 1913)—was developed (Constable 1996, 161-2).

Early Hakka church growth was connected with the Taiping movement in several ways. It shared some of the same social factors that stimulated and fuelled the Taiping movement. It was built on Hakka exposure to aspects of Christian teaching during the growth of the Taiping movement (cf. Lutz and Lutz 1996, 289). At least one former Taiping rebel became a key evangelist, and Rudolph Lechler and Li Zheng-gao, a Chinese evangelist, preached to many former Taipings in the late 1860s (Lutz & Lutz 1997, 191).

The indigeneity that was a key to the rapid growth of the Taiping movement also characterized the early work among the Hakka in inland Guangdong. Gutzlaff emphasized indigeneity and the rapid transfer of responsibility to Chinese Christians. Convinced that the cultural gap between Western missionaries and Chinese people prevented effective communication of the gospel by all but a few exceptional missionaries, he developed a corps of Chinese evangelists in the early 1840s, and sent at least half of them out to the towns and villages of inland Guangdong. The churches they planted were marked by indigenous forms (Lutz and Lutz 1997, 6).

Abundant evangelism (to use Garrison’s phrase) and training of local

evangelists were keys to Gutzlaff's approach. This approach was later followed by the Basel missionaries Theodor Hamberg and Rudolph Lechler, who arrived in China in 1847 in response to Gutzlaff's request for missionaries, and they began work among the Hakka in the area of Guangdong adjoining Hong Kong (Lutz & Lutz 1998, 6). They focused on supervising, training, supporting, and funding Chinese evangelists who did most of the work of evangelism and itineration from village to village.

Hindrances to Hakka Church Growth

In contrast to the strongly Chinese flavor of the early Hakka churches, missionary input into the Hakka church that commenced in the 1860s emphasized orthodoxy at the expense of growth through empowering local Christians to do the work. According to Jessie and Ray Lutz's analysis (1997, 214), the arrival of the missionaries in inland Guangdong meant that, albeit unwittingly, an imposition of Western forms brought "a reduction in the autonomy of the Chinese evangelists and in the movement towards indigenization." When Basel missionaries heard converts rhythmically chanting the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the Creed, they reacted negatively. The missionaries' arrival also served to identify Christianity with westerners, and their presence precipitated a large increase in persecution of converts (Lutz and Lutz 1997, 215-6).

The direct input of missionaries into the inland Hakka churches, with its emphasis on intensive teaching of converts by the missionaries themselves and their imposition of Western forms, seemed to hinder church multiplication. Had missionaries equipped and empowered local leaders in such a way that they could continue to carry the responsibility and the initiative for evangelism, discipleship, and the planting of new churches, using indigenous

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church principles later articulated by Roland Allen, greater growth might have been achieved. The Taiping rebellion had demonstrated the possibility of mobilizing a large number of Hakka very quickly, but it had also led to an overriding concern for orthodoxy at the expense of transferring responsibility for the church and evangelization to local Christians.

The Hua Miao People Movement, 1904–1910

Like the Hakka, the Hua Miao—a subgroup of the Western Miao who live in Yunnan and Guizhou—were looked down on by the majority people. They were perceived as newly pacified, rootless barbarians on the bottom of the social heap (Diamond 1996, 143). In response to their experience of oppression and major food shortages, the Miao initiated a series of uprisings from 1854 to 1873 known collectively as the "Miao Rebellion" (Jenks 1994, 172). They also became significantly connected with the Taiping movement. Hong, the founder of the Taiping movement, had traveled extensively in Miao territory and, in one episode, left tracts with a responsive Chinese schoolmaster who ran a school for Miao (Hamberg 1854, 27). Tens of thousands of Miao also joined the Taiping movement when one of the Taiping generals, Shi Dakai, led his troops into Guizhou in 1859 (Shih 1967). The Miao resonated with the Taipings' desire for improvement in their social conditions.

James Adam, a missionary with the China Inland Mission, began to evangelize in Hua Miao villages in 1896. They proved responsive, and hundreds were baptized and organized into churches over the next eight years (Clarke 1911, 172-8). Noticing that

many had traveled for several days to get to him from northeast Yunnan, he urged them to visit Samuel Pollard, a Methodist missionary who was living much closer to their villages. On July 12, 1904, four Miao men arrived at Pollard's door. He welcomed them, housed them and began to teach them to read, and also preached and taught some simple songs to them. In the following months over a hundred Miao came to Pollard's house eager to learn. Pollard (cited by Grist 1921, 181) wrote: "They trooped in with their books, begging to be taught. They began at five o'clock in the morning, and at one o'clock the next morning some of them were still reading."

Pollard began traveling to Miao villages with the Chinese ministers Stephan and James Li to teach, baptize and start churches. Within three years more than a thousand Hua Miao had been baptized. Another CIM missionary Arthur Nicholls, working together with the Li brothers, saw whole villages become Christian (Covell 1995, 91). One early observer commented that the movement spread much more as a result of the Miao believers' eagerness to witness to their people than by the traveling and preaching of the missionaries (Clarke 1911, 179). By 1920, there were a total of about 70,000 Miao Christians, with 15,000 baptized (Hudspeth 1922, 702-5).

Missionary Responses that Facilitated Growth of the Miao Movement

The nature of the missionaries' response to the Miao was critical to the healthy development of the movement. First, and most obviously, they responded swiftly to the receptivity of the Miao. They shifted their focus from the majority people, who were then

relatively unresponsive, to concentrate on the responsive Miao. Their mission leaders demonstrated corresponding flexibility. Hudson Taylor, then the director of CIM, allowed Adam to concentrate on the Miao, deviating from the CIM policy of working only with the Han (Adam 1907, 10-15, cited in Covell 1995, 89).

Secondly, the missionaries empowered the Miao in several ways. They baptized them with little or no delay, disciplined them intensively, and transferred to them the sense of responsibility to evangelize their own people (Covell 1995, 98). Pollard's overriding desire was that responsibility for evangelism, teaching, and the church itself be transferred to the Miao as soon as possible. He was always concerned that the Miao might see the church as "an institution belonging to the foreigners and not to them" (Grist 1921, 271). Early on, he devised a simple pattern for training in the form of a quarterly meeting for Miao preachers. They would gather to work out relationship issues, deal with cultural matters, and discuss sensitive issues (Covell 1995, 100). He also refused offers to have other missionaries join him, wanting Chinese co-workers and money instead to train and support more Miao teachers. As a result, within a few years most of the teaching was being done by the Hua Miao themselves (Diamond 1996, 146).

Thirdly, missionaries demonstrated a respect for Miao culture; identified with them by living among them, learning their language and wearing Miao clothing; and adapted their ways of doing things according to Miao culture. Leaving the relative safety of their fortified cities they made extensive trips through the mountains with Miao companions (Lewis 2000, 81), and Pollard moved from the city to a small tract of land near a Miao hamlet in order to be closer to the people (Diamond 1996, 145). The missionaries also identified with the Miao by helping to address social and

physical needs. Along with evangelization they taught literacy, established schools, and gave health care. They also advocated for the Miao with Yi landlords and Han officials, something that impressed the Miao deeply (cf. Cheung 1997). In response to the Miao's desire to read, they quickly began the task of translating of the Bible, and developed a special script for the Miao language. They evidenced concern for contextualization by their careful development of functional substitutes for key Miao festivals (Diamond 1996, 147; Covell 1995, 97), and by their determination to make their teaching as understandable as possible to the Miao (Pollard 1908, 34-36). All this was undergirded by Pollard's adage: "No Europeanizing of the people



but Christianising of them in their own environment" (Lewis 2000, 90).

Conclusion and Missiological Implications

The growth of the Taiping movement, of the Hakka churches in Guangdong, and of the movement to Christianity among the Hua Miao occurred in the context of economic pressure and oppression by the government bureaucracy (cf. Fairbank 1992, 167-216). The two main minority peoples involved in these movements, the Hakka and the Miao, were considered outsiders by the culturally dominant Han, and were consequently open to change that promised a better future.

The people movement among the Miao, in contrast to the devastation caused by the Taiping rebellion, resulted in thousands of Miao coming to faith in Christ and the planting of many churches. The movement illustrates three missionary responses which helped the movement continue to grow rapidly: (1) swift and discerning response to the receptivity of the people to the gospel; (2) an empowering transfer of responsibility to Miao Christians from very early in the process of evangelization; and (3) a sensitive appreciation for adapting to the culture and social context of the Miao. Each of these responses was significant for the healthy development of the movement. Missionaries who want to be effective in their nurture and facilitation of people movements would do well to follow these principles.

Residential missionary work among the Hakka in Guangdong was, in contrast, marked by a disempowering of Hakka Christian workers and by a suspension of responsibilities they had already been fulfilling, such as baptizing and teaching. As part of the mission mobilization unwisely named "Christian occupation of China" in the late 19th century, there was a large influx of missionaries to the Hakka that led to several thousand Hakka conversions. This relatively modest growth in proportion to missionary numbers, when compared to the Miao movement, was perhaps partly due to the disempowering of local Christians. Excessive control by missionaries might have ensured a doctrinally orthodox church, but it did so at the cost of "spontaneous expansion," to use Allen's (1927) phrase.

Taiping "Christianity" failed not because of over-control but the almost complete lack of interaction by missionaries with the movement. The intensive discipling that McGavran (1970) called "post-baptismal care," and which he deemed essential for the healthy growth of a movement, was consequently absent. The swift mission-

ary response to receptivity among the Miao was lacking among the Taiping early on, primarily because close contact with the missionaries was prevented due to their confinement to the treaty ports until 1860. In the later phases of the Taiping rebellion, the movement and its leader were too entrenched in their heterodoxy for missionary input to be able to influence it.

The Taiping movement and the work among the inland Hakka serve as warnings of two dangers for missionaries seeking to facilitate and nurture people movements to Christ: the failure to disciple new Christians and the failure to hand over responsibility and authority to these new Christians. Instead, missionaries should follow the approach of Samuel Pollard who responded to signs of receptivity swiftly, empowered local believers to evangelize, baptize and plant churches, and discerningly adapted his ministry to the culture and needs of the local people. **IJFM**

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