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# Nordic Connections: Norwegian and Swedish Missionaries in Changsha in the 1920s

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the interconnections and relations of Nordic missionaries in early-twentieth-century China. Focusing on encounters in the Hunanese province capital of Changsha in and around the 1920s, it discusses ways in which Norwegian and Swedish missionary workers from four Christian associations made sense of their position as Nordic Lutherans within the international community in Changsha. Using both unpublished and published sources it explores the arrival of the Church of Sweden Mission to China in 1920 and plans to establish a Swedish Lutheran university in China. In conjunction it examines the Nordics as part of the international networks in the city, the evacuation of foreigners in 1927, and the ways in which they were affected by national and imperial ambitions and relations. The exploration of Nordic missionaries as ambivalent actors in a semi-imperial arena contributes to our understandings of the connections, co-operations and power dynamics of the transimperial world of the early twentieth century.

## KEYWORDS

Mission; Lutheran; Nordic; Nordicism; Swedish; Norwegian; China; transimperial; twentieth century

## Introduction

This article investigates how Swedish and Norwegian Lutheran missionaries moved to China and made sense of their roles as Nordic in the local and transimperial landscape of Changsha, the capital of the Hunan province in central China. This region did not allow foreign presence until the beginning of the twentieth century, but by the 1920s it had become the base of four mission associations with strong Nordic connections. This article explores these Nordic relations and interactions during that decade. It focuses on the educational ambitions of the Church of Sweden Mission, on international relations and the evacuations of foreigners following the violence in 1926–1927 in relation to the movements, networks and relations of the Nordic missionaries

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within the international community in Changsha and the ways in which the Nordic was played out in these relations. By exploring Nordic missionaries' relations, this paper contributes to our understanding of the connections, cooperation and power dynamics of a transimperial world.<sup>1</sup>

Nordic missionaries going to China in the early twentieth century did not represent the more influential imperial powers and they were active in a region that was not formally colonised. Their exercise of formal power was insignificant, but their involvement in congregational, commercial, educational and medical work allowed for other forms of influence.<sup>2</sup> They acted within a complex web of social networks and power relations, affected by ideas formulated with reference to, for example, nation, empire and religion. The social relations of Nordic missionaries in China and the situations in which these relations were played out can therefore be used as a prism through which these different webs of relations and ideas are reflected or refracted. As ambivalent actors in a semi-imperial arena Nordic missionaries make an interesting case for analysing the fault-lines, frictions and interconnections of Sino-foreign relations in a transimperial place.

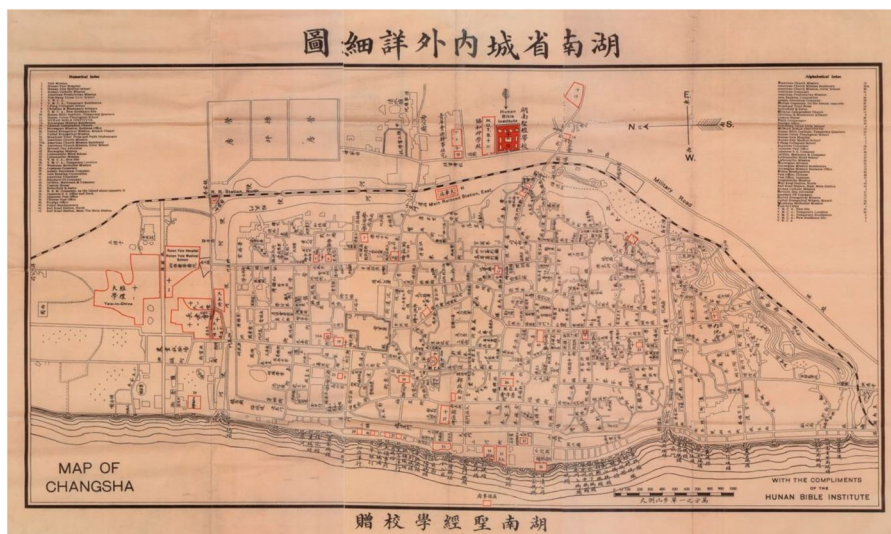
Ballantyne and Burton have reminded us that what empire looks like depends on the point of view.<sup>3</sup> By focusing on those relations and interactions that took place on the margins or outside of the direct influence of colonial rulers and rule, new perspectives can be added to the study of imperial history. Missionaries belong to such groups of tertiary actors moving within and between imperial frameworks. From the late nineteenth century onward missionaries originating from the Nordic countries had a strong presence in China.<sup>4</sup> They were part of a transnational Protestant mission movement that grew stronger in the connected global world of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and in which female missionaries played an increasingly important role.<sup>5</sup> Missionaries moved and connected to each other through professional and denominational networks and thus contributed to forming and spreading knowledge about the world from a missionary point of view.<sup>6</sup> Many missionaries acted in parts of the world that were either directly or indirectly influenced by colonial rule. They interacted with and were dependent on both colonisers and colonised, both rulers and ruled, and could express support for both colonial rulers and nationalist or independence movements.

Recent decades have seen an increasing body of research on missionary perspectives on imperial history, contributing to new ways of understanding the complexities and nuances of global interaction and power dynamics, of contradictory but coexisting perceptions of supremacy and egalitarianism.<sup>7</sup> The mission endeavour worked to convert people to Christianity, meaning they strived to transform people's way of life, thinking and beliefs in foundational ways.<sup>8</sup> This strive can be understood in terms of a 'civilizing mission', described by Stoler and Cooper (1997) as '[t]he intrusion of European models into "private" domains'.<sup>9</sup>

However, as noted by Hedinger and Heé, many mission studies have been carried out within the framework of nation and empire, for example British missionaries in India.<sup>10</sup> By turning the attention instead to the study of an informal empire like China, this study brings into focus a region where missionary dependence on imperial powers took subtler forms and where Nordic missionaries, in contrast with, for example, their British or American counterparts, did not have a political and military state presence in the country. In China, Western powers competed for influence from the late nineteenth century onwards. The country remained formally independent, but through several treaties foreign powers were allowed to wield informal influence and grant extraterritorial rights to their citizens.<sup>11</sup>

### The Missionary Presence in Changsha

To get to Changsha from Shanghai in the early twentieth century, the missionaries travelled inland by boat on the Yangtze River (Chang Jiang) to the city Hankou and then continued south either by boat or train to Changsha. A map of Changsha from the late 1910s made by the China Inland Mission is scattered with red squares (Figure 1). These point out the numerous buildings inhabited by foreigners throughout the city. By the side of the map a list indicates the names of those forty-two premises, including Christian missionary sites as well as mostly British, American, German and Japanese companies, banks and consulates.<sup>12</sup> In the period of this article, 1902–1927, the city went from having barely any foreign presence to a large number of international establishments and around 100 American and European residents. The city lacked an international



**Figure 1.** Map of Changsha by the Hunan Bible Institute. Courtesy of the Biola University Archives <http://digitalcommons.biola.edu>. Contact the Biola Archives regarding reuse.

concession, but whereas many missionaries lived inside the city walls, most other foreigners chose to live on the island west of the city.<sup>13</sup>

Amongst the red squares on the map were a number of buildings associated with the Norwegian Missionary Association (NMS), the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), where several Norwegians and Swedes lived and worked. A few years after the map was printed, in 1920, their presence was complemented by that of the Church of Sweden Mission (CSM), which took up work in the city. The presence of several Nordic missionaries representing different denominations and associations whilst still living and working closely together makes Changsha an interesting place to study.

NMS arrived in Changsha in 1902. This national mission association, established in 1842, had strong ties to the Norwegian Lutheran state church and already had well-established mission work in South-East Africa and Madagascar. It followed in the footsteps of several other foreign missions after Changsha had been forced to accept foreign commercial and religious activities in the aftermath of the Boxer Uprising (1899–1901).<sup>14</sup> The Hunan Missionary Conference was held for the first time in the city in June 1903, when 32 delegates from 13 different Christian missionary associations met to discuss future work.<sup>15</sup> The missions divided the region in spheres of interest, reminiscent of the political 'open door policy' of the turn of the century where China was divided between foreign powers' spheres of influence. Like other foreign presence in China, the missionaries were dependent upon the treaties which allowed them to live and work in China and gave them extraterritorial rights.<sup>16</sup> The conference of Changsha resulted in the NMS being allocated a region including the city of Yiyang where they later came to build a hospital and school. Changsha was considered a common area, where all associations were welcome to settle. Over the coming years, the NMS mission institution grew to include several premises in the city and outside the city walls.<sup>17</sup> Early on these Norwegian missionaries established themselves as important actors in the international community and Norwegian names can be found on boards, committees and events, and in letters of people of different nationalities from the period.<sup>18</sup> Dickson Leavens, a Yale-in-China missionary, gives an example of their role in the community by mentioning attending a music event arranged by the Norwegian missionaries Johan (1872–1955) and Ragnhild Gotteberg (1868–1955): 'Most of the community [*sic*] was there, and it was very pleasant.'<sup>19</sup>

Over the following two decades NMS was joined by others from the Nordic countries. In 1912 two of the Norwegians, Sten Bugge (1885–1977) and Nicolai Kiær (1888–1934), initiated YMCA in Changsha. Five years later Swedish mission secretary Ingeborg Wikander (1882–1941) arrived on behalf of the China YWCA assigned to start up YWCA work.<sup>20</sup> The Changsha YWCA was officially inaugurated in 1919 as the first Chinese YWCA association in

inland China with an all-Chinese board. It had four foreign mission secretaries – three Swedes and one American. The interdenominational associations YWCA and YMCA were hubs of international and Chinese interaction, and the strong Nordic administrative presence affected the ways in which the Nordic missionaries interacted with others in the city. In 1920, the arrival of a delegation of Swedish missionaries led to a new phase of Nordic collaboration in Hunan, as the two Lutheran and the two interdenominational associations came to cooperate in different ways over the following years. The arrival of CSM was a consequence of the home board's decision to initiate mission work in China. Like NMS, CSM was a national Lutheran mission association with strong ties to the Swedish state church. Founded in 1874 it had previously established mission work in South India and parts of Africa. Within a few years they bought property in the centre of Changsha and built a mission station with dwelling houses and a chapel which opened in 1923. A few years later, in 1926, a new church with Chinese architecture was inaugurated.<sup>21</sup>

The period in focus of this article has been known as the Warlord Era between 1917 and 1927. In this period several military conflicts between competing actors broke out in Changsha, and antiforeign sentiments equally sparked outbursts of violence and agitation. National movements like the May Fourth Movement and the May 30th Movement took hold amongst the city's students and led to demonstrations and protests against foreign presence.<sup>22</sup> The budding Communist movement established a stronghold in the city; Hunan was the home province of Mao Zedong and Changsha was said to be the place of his political awakening.<sup>23</sup> By the end of the 1920s, following the Long March, the city became a scene of power struggles between nationalists and communists. A decade later the city was burned down by the Chinese army as a strategy against the arriving Japanese forces during the Second Sino-Japanese War. By mid-century, the foreign presence in Changsha came to an end with the final forced evacuation of foreigners – as well as many Chinese Christians – to Hong Kong, Japan and India.

### **Dreams of a Lutheran University**

Turning to the circumstances of the arrival of the Swedish mission to Hunan, the idea of a Swedish/Norwegian, Scandinavian, Lutheran and Nordic fellowship is accentuated as something distinctly different. In 1920, a small group of Swedes arrived in Changsha, including Gustaf Österlin (1885–1972) and Knut and Ingeborg Westman (1881–1967; 1882–1959). They were there to undertake preparations for an ambitious project to establish a Swedish Lutheran university in China (Figure 2).

YWCA secretary Ingeborg Wikander had pleaded for more people to join her in the work amongst China's educated women and youth and another Swede, Ruth Nathorst, answered her call. Like Wikander had done before





**Figure 2.** Swedish visitors at the Changsha YWCA, spring 1920. Photo unknown, likely Gustaf Österlin. Courtesy of the Church of Sweden Archives, Uppsala, Sweden. (Reuse not permitted.)

her, she stressed the specific responsibility of Sweden to participate in mission work.<sup>24</sup> This belief sprang from the Swedish youth church movement that developed in the early years of the twentieth century, to which they both belonged. This movement stressed the idea of the Swedish state church being a *folk church* where the whole Swedish population was offered the gospel, complemented with the idea of a particular mission from God for each nation. Wikander and her friends from the student church movement understood the Swedes to have a mission to work for a national folk church and a Swedish nation united by Christianity and saw the need for a 'youth crusade' amongst the Swedish youth. Their views also included the obligation to spread education and Christian culture to other nations.<sup>25</sup>

There were already five Swedish mission associations present in other parts of China but none of these, Wikander and Nathorst argued, focused on students and the educated classes.<sup>26</sup> At an Academic Mission Conference in Uppsala in 1917, the Swedish geologist Erik Nyström (1879–1963), who had been involved in founding the University of Taiyuan in Shanxi and appointed professor at the department of geology and chemistry there, talked on the theme 'Swedish university undertakings in China'.<sup>27</sup> From Professor Adolf



Kolmodin came a more clearly-formulated idea that would make it possible for Nathorst to do student-related work: to establish a Swedish Lutheran university in China. The idea was embraced by the Swedish archbishop Nathan Söderblom (1866–1931), and after a reconnaissance tour to China by Nyström, the initiative was backed by the mission board. However, the university initiative was not met by the same enthusiasm from Swedish academic and commercial representatives who were sceptical about supporting a university placed under mission lead. To discuss and anchor the initiative with the Lutheran mission associations in China, the Norwegian NMS medical missionary Jørgen Edvin Nilssen (1871–1922) was invited to Uppsala to discuss the plans and location of a university. Nilssen confirmed the need for a common university and advocated Hankou, the province capital of Hubei, as its location, whereby steps were taken to procure a place for this purpose. The decision to establish a university in Hankou was cabled to China, and it was assumed that it would be received with appreciation and gratitude.<sup>28</sup>

The idea to establish a university in China was far from unique. Many mission colleges and other higher education institutions were established as means of evangelisation by foreign mission associations from the late nineteenth century onwards. Rather than belonging to a common educational institution, however, the mission schools constituted a diverse body based on different denominational and national educational ideals.<sup>29</sup> The ambition of the Swedish endeavour to establish a *Lutheran* university thus followed this trend.

The university initiative rested upon an idea of a special Swedish responsibility to spread the Lutheran faith in the form of a folk church. But it was also a continuation of a grander vision of Swedish influence in China. Högselius and Song have shown how Nyström had cooperated with other Swedish geologists and industrialists for Sweden to seize control over Chinese resources through what the authors call a ‘quasi-colonial presence’. Through stressing their roles as different than the ‘unreliable profit- and power-hungry actors who did not really care about China’s own development prospects’, the Swedes built their position based on distancing themselves from other more influential foreign actors in China.<sup>30</sup> A similar rhetoric could be found in relation to the mission endeavour a few years later. In a speech held at the Nordic Mission Conference in Stockholm 1925 on the characteristics of Nordic missions, Danish pastor Munck argued that the Nordic Lutherans among other things were representatives of ‘small nations without political aspirations, colonies, or imperialist intentions’ and could therefore ‘understand and appreciate the spiritual and cultural values of the coloured people, [...] empathize with them and feel more equated with them.’<sup>31</sup> The university project thus rested on a general idea that they as Swedes, Lutherans and Nordics, were particularly suited for the undertaking due to their unique political position in a region of minor influence in the global imperial landscape

and as representatives of a faith that gave importance to the local language and the individual's relationship to God. So, even though they did not explicitly address 'the Nordic', their regional belonging was not used, in the words of Strang et al, 'as a neutral marker indicating [...] geographical extension', but rather 'to make an explicit claim about Nordic exceptionalism'.<sup>32</sup> Their way of arguing for the righteousness of their endeavour resonates with the idea of Nordic exceptionalism and the self-image of the Nordic countries as being more humane than other countries.<sup>33</sup>

This self-understanding of a particular position of the Swedish, Lutheran and Nordic, was also embraced by individual missionaries, for example in a letter from the Swedish missionary Elfie Källberg (1894–1981) to her family where she expresses critique against the American and British:

They are for the most part very superior to everyone else and it is thought that they look down on the Chinese. It often appears in reasoning and discussions that they like to have political sub-intentions in their missionary work. One probably becomes a little sad to notice that. What would it mean to make China a British colony? We are not thinking of trying to make it a Swedish colony.<sup>34</sup>

In contrast to expectations, however, the university offer was not received enthusiastically by the other Lutheran associations in China. Even though Nyström had investigated the possibilities of a university beforehand, no further contacts had been taken with other missions. The new YWCA secretary Nathorst, who had recently arrived in Changsha, wrote about the ongoing discussions, and encouraged the mission board to proceed cautiously, but her letter to Sweden travelled slowly and decision-makers in Uppsala were eager to proceed. Ignorant of existing tensions, they were therefore unaware of the disapproval with which their 'offer' was to be met. A Lutheran Theological Seminary was already opened in Shekou in 1913 as result of Lutheran cooperation. A common university had also been discussed amongst the Lutheran Churches Council in China but due to disagreement about its location it had not until recently been settled that a university should be established in northern Hubei, and the decision was not unanimous. By sending the message which stated that the Swedish university was to be situated in Hankou, an alternative advocated by the Norwegian mission, and by placing the Norwegian missionary Nilssen on the planning board, the Swedish mission board unknowingly positioned themselves clearly on one side of the conflict, provoking the other parties and causing great irritation. After receiving a critical response from several actors, Archbishop Söderblom and the mission board at last realised they needed to reverse their plans and proceed with a humbler approach. Two Swedish delegates, Westman and Österlin, travelled to China via the United States in 1920 to negotiate plans for a more modest Lutheran university college that would gain the acceptance of the Lutheran churches. In the end, the ambitious plans of a university were partially realised in the form of the

*Lutheran College*, a small college closer to a high school than a university, to which students were sent mainly from other mission schools in the region.<sup>35</sup>

The Swedish CSM missionaries' arrival in Changsha was marked by a combination of the humbleness of newcomers to a foreign country and the idea of a superior mission to fulfil the vocation to spread Lutheran Christianity, science and Swedish values to China, carrying the message of a world assignment from the Swedish Church leadership. The delegation was well received by the Norwegian mission, with whom they shared a Lutheran and the Nordic fellowship, and who had interests in having an educational institution close at hand, providing them with educated personnel to populate their church and mission institutions across Hunan. But whereas the presence of the Norwegian mission in Changsha was crucial to the decision of the Swedes to establish themselves in the city, and they were highly dependent on their relationships with the NMS, the Norwegian mission was already well established in the city and their mission work was independent of the arrival of the CSM. Regardless of this, the bonds between them grew strong. Many of them lived together and played important roles in each other's work and social life.<sup>36</sup>

## Building International Relations

23/1 Sunday. A very skilful sermon by Dzu Chi-wu. Visit by Gogstads. Chinese feast at Li-ang lai-lai.

24/1 Dallands arrived at 9. Negotiat. Visit Miss Villa. This P.M. Sinding. A nice day.

25/1. Tuesday. Little peace to get work done. Dinner at Kiærs. After supper a trip to the Swedish ladies, two of whom were not at home. We only met Miss Wikander; Miss Nathorst had just received a telegram of her father's death.<sup>37</sup>

These notes from the diaries of Johan Torset (1879–1965), a Norwegian missionary stationed in Changsha as acting director of their Hunan mission work 1920–1922, give examples of the daily interactions of the missionaries. Almost daily he mentions visits, dinners, meetings with members of the international and Christian communities of the city. Although not including more than short personal notes, his diaries provide day-to-day maps of missionary mobility in terms of interactions and networks. The interpersonal interactions of the Nordic missionaries in Changsha to a large extent centred around the mission stations, congregations, mission institutions and households. The encounters were of great importance both for the maintenance of already existing connections and the creation of new ones.

Apart from the Nordic common social and religious life and the social and religious life connected to the congregational and institutional work of the mission, the missionaries also met frequently with other foreign missionaries and other members of the international community, Chinese employees, members of the Church and mission institutions and members of the influential classes of the city.<sup>38</sup> These encounters included both formal and informal

gatherings. On the 6th of December 1920, Torset describes a 'particularly pleasant Missionary Association – with Bishop Roots as speaker and Mrs Sinding as president'.<sup>39</sup> The Changsha missionary association was a formal network of foreign missionaries in Changsha which held regular meetings with talks by members and visitors and arranged larger events open to everyone.<sup>40</sup> There were also transnational missionary conferences and committees within the city. Both the YMCA and YWCA-led activities in Changsha were examples of collaborations between different churches and groups in the city.

Interdenominational and ecumenical cooperation in China was a natural part of the missionary work, but despite common arenas denominational differences contributed to fragmentation of the efforts to bring Christianity to China. This denominational fragmentation was a consequence of the wide variety of Protestant mission churches present in China from the late nineteenth century and inspired cooperation, including The National Christian Council of China, created in 1922, and the following establishment of the Church of Christ in China (CCC) which held its first general assembly in 1927.<sup>41</sup> However, the Nordic Lutherans in Changsha did not belong to the CCC but instead to the Lutheran Church of China founded in 1920. It came to include both the Xiang-Zhong synod of the NMS and the Xiang-Bei synod of the CSM.<sup>42</sup>

In this fragmented landscape, the Nordic members had strong ties to the Lutheran church but also to the interdenominational associations of YWCA and YMCA. The Nordic mission secretaries in YWCA had an ambivalent position in between the American, internationalistic and interdenominational interests of the YWCA on the one hand and the Lutheran, Swedish/Norwegian and Nordic on the other. The Swedish women in YWCA were partially funded by the CSM and their personal bonds to CSM were strong. They saw the Changsha YWCA centre as an informal Lutheran and Nordic locus, and their work there as a way to fulfil their idea to educate and disseminate ideals of a Lutheran folk church to Chinese women. There had been an agreement to let the Swedes work together in Changsha and in proximity to the CSM. However, with new American leadership of the YWCA in the early 1920s, it was no longer seen as desirable to let foreign women YWCA secretaries from the same country work together, to avoid national bias. The Swedish CSM leadership on their part was increasingly critical to the educational methods of the YWCA failing to result in any conversions to Christianity. This situation created tensions amongst the Swedes and resulted in a restructuring of work, including both the transferral of two persons from YWCA to CSM and the relocation of one of them, who failed to accept changed working circumstances, to another part of the region.<sup>43</sup>

There were also examples of non-religious collaborations. During the recurrent periods of violence, war and political turmoil of the 1920s, people reached out to collaborate in poverty and relief work which involved both missionary and city representatives. Amongst these were the Famine Relief in Hunan

province, with Xiong Xiling (1870–1937) as director general, 12 leaders including the three foreign consuls in Changsha and a working committee consisting of six foreign and six Chinese delegates.<sup>44</sup> More informal associations also involved Nordic participants, such as the organising meeting for a ‘University Club of men educated in Western Universities’ held at the Yamen,<sup>45</sup> which included a Norwegian and was seen as a good opportunity for foreigners and Chinese to be brought together.<sup>46</sup>

6/3 Sunday. I first held the service at Yale – for the school youth. And eventually arrived at our service, where past. Liang preached. Then I celebrated communion in the afternoon. Was at Gogstads for dinner. From communion I went to the Presbyterians to attend service with Kiær. – A good day – From the Lord.<sup>47</sup>

On Sundays Torset and his missionary colleagues celebrated Chinese church service within their own congregations on Sunday mornings and attended English language mass in the afternoon.<sup>48</sup> The latter was held in one of the larger churches in the city, including Yale-in-China, the Presbyterian Church, or the Bible Institute. Not only the actual English language sermon but also the possibility to meet with acquaintances and socialise outside the church were important functions of the church visits to the international community.<sup>49</sup> The frequent dinners, parties and other social gatherings gave other such opportunities. Upon the arrival of YWCA secretary Ingeborg Wikander to Changsha in 1917 for example, her host, the Presbyterian missionary Annie R. Morton, held what Wikander described as an ‘official reception’ for her and another newly arrived female missionary. She described how she stood posted with Morton in the reception room for over two hours receiving and talking to the 100 invited guests, perceiving them as kind and interested in her and her contribution to ‘the community’.<sup>50</sup>

However, participation in international social life was not always perceived in positive terms. Some of the Swedish missionaries also expressed criticism against other nationalities and denominations than the Nordic Lutheran, positioning themselves as separate from the British and the Americans and more aligned with the Chinese. Recently arrived in Changsha, Swedish YWCA mission secretary Ruth Nathorst (1883–1961) expresses her impressions:

Like the Norwegian Mission best. Seems deepest. It’s probably completely true what I have read at home about the superficiality and ask you – are these missionaries? An intense social life prevails here – ‘the party’ and ‘dinners’ are part of the order of the day.<sup>51</sup>

This disassociation can be understood in relation to the previously mentioned denominational differences and Lutheran unity. The Nordic missionaries worked, dined and lived together, like the three female co-workers depicted in [Figure 3](#). They understood each other’s languages and shared the Lutheran faith and close association with the state church of their home countries. Many of them were personal friends and expressed appreciation of



**Figure 3.** Swedes Elfie Källberg, Willy Stenfelt and Norwegian Villa Vinsnes at the home of Stenfelt in 1923. Photo: unknown. Courtesy of the Church of Sweden Archives, Uppsala, Sweden. (Reuse not permitted.)

each other. Their fellowship seems to have been taken for granted but was not expressed in any static common terms; sometimes they referred to each other as Swedes and Norwegians, sometimes as Lutherans, sometimes as Scandinavians but rarely explicitly described each other in terms of being 'Nordic.' The idea of 'Nordicness' as a kinship between the Nordic countries can be found from the nineteenth century, in the mid century with the Scandinavism movement and from the late century more explicitly in terms of a Nordic fellowship.<sup>52</sup> The Nordic Mission Council was constituted in 1923 as the result of over fifty years of attempts to increase Nordic mission cooperation.<sup>53</sup> The basis of the collaborations and relations within the Nordic community was neither only based on nationality nor only denominational, but a combination of both. That such interchangeability of Nordicness with nationalist identity was common has been noted by Strang, Marjanen and Hilson. In all of them the Lutheran church has played an important part.<sup>54</sup>

## Evacuation

As we have seen, missionaries of different nationalities and denominations belonged to a shared missionary and international community in Changsha. But the foreign community was far from homogenous, and sometimes their internal differences and dependencies stood out clearly. The 1920s, when all four of the Nordic mission associations were active in Changsha, was a turbulent period. The conflicts of the Warlord Era of the late 1910s and 1920s



escalated by the end of the 1926 and early 1927. As the situation worsened, the Nordics as well as other foreigners prepared to leave the interior of China, evacuating to Hankou and then to Shanghai and further. Most mission schools and other Christian institutions closed, and many were occupied by nationalist organisations.<sup>55</sup>

When the situation in 1926–1927 was escalating, the three consuls – Japanese, British and American – sent word that all foreigners should evacuate. Following the American and British citizens in Changsha, most of the Norwegian women and children were evacuated by railroad on the 27th of January. Norwegian missionary Johan Gotteberg was in contact with the Norwegian consul general in Shanghai, Nicholai Aall, who gave advice but left them to make any decisions. It was arranged with the British consul that Norwegian and Swedish missionaries were to travel on a river steamer a few days later and the following months the rest of the Norwegian missionaries and most of the Swedes left Changsha by rail and river steamer. Some of the evacuations of missionaries leaving other parts of Hunan were dramatic, but according to Gotteberg there were no real difficulties to leave Changsha and by 11 April all Norwegian Hunan missionaries had arrived at Shanghai.<sup>56</sup>

Ruth Nathorst and her colleague Willy Stenfelt (1890–1981), two of the Swedish female missionaries, were not amongst those who arrived in Shanghai. They did not follow the orders of the consuls but choose to stay behind, arguing that God had told them to stay.<sup>57</sup> Most foreigners seem to have agreed on the appropriateness of leaving, and Chinese employees were told to have been eager for them to leave.<sup>58</sup> There was disagreement about whether the foreigners staying behind would increase the exposure to harassment and violence of the Chinese Christians, since one of the reasons behind the aggressions were their connections to foreigners, or whether their presence could provide some protection. Although Nathorst didn't openly criticise other missionaries for leaving, she seems to have disagreed with their decision:

It was also emphasized the wish of the Chinese that we should travel so that, if persecution against the Christian Chinese broke out, this would not be due to the presence of the foreigners. This view, however, does not seem to have been shared by all, for in many places the Chinese have wanted the foreigners to stay.<sup>59</sup>

The ways in which the Nordic missionaries related to the evacuation orders of their own and other consuls underlines the ambivalent position of the Scandinavian missionaries' relations to the Sino-foreign community in inland China. As Swedes and Norwegians, they had a relative independence in relation to the orders of the greater powers, but at the same time they were dependent on the foreign powers with their gunboats on the Yangtse to protect their extra-territorial rights. The examples brought forward here indicate how complex decisions were to be made in a hurry with consideration of personal, religious and political preferences and motives, and that the ways in which different

dependencies and relations played out varied both in relation to the information available and the individual and collective choices.

## Conclusion

The Nordic missionary presence in the Hunanese province capital Changsha was strong. Beginning with the establishment of NMS in Hunan in 1902 and ending with the last Swedish and Norwegian missionaries leaving around 1950, it at the most involved the active presence of four missionary associations with Swedish and Norwegian representation (NMS, CSM, YMCA and YWCA). Beginning in the late 1910s and continuing into the late 1920s these four associations interacted intensively with each other, other foreigners and Chinese in the city.

The missionaries came to the city at different times and with different motives and purposes but were united by their Lutheran faith and their Nordic identity. Upon arrival in China, the NMS took part in the process of dividing the province between the missionary associations and established itself as a strong missionary agency in the city. Whereas the YMCA was initiated at the Norwegian's initiative and already from the start was well integrated in the Changsha Christian community, the YWCA secretaries came to Changsha on behalf of the national Chinese association but came to build up strong networks. Both were active in community initiatives and provided forums where international and non-Christian Chinese groups could interact. When CSM arrived in 1920, they came with grand plans and a self-image of the Nordic as exceptional, but in the end became only a minor actor in terms of size and influence. Their arrival was strongly dependent on the already existing Norwegian mission and the Swedish presence of the Changsha YWCA. On the contrary, the Norwegian mission bonds to the Swedes rested more on strong personal ties and cooperation than on foundational dependency. But even if the dependence was unbalanced, the different missions were never solitary. Even though there were tensions within the Nordic community there are several examples of the Nordic relations being prioritised and more valued than those outside of this group. The Nordics in Changsha shared both a common language and a common Lutheran faith, and sometimes also a common history within the church movements in the Nordic countries.

The common identity of the Nordic missionaries was rarely explicitly referred to as 'Nordic' and the word was used interchangeably with Swedish/Norwegian, Lutheran and Scandinavian, which is in line with what has been discussed by Strang, Marjanen and Hilson in relation to the idea of Nordicness.<sup>60</sup> These terms were used to describe the practical collaborative work of a common Lutheran fellowship and a fellow Scandinavian linguistic community and paired with the understanding of a common regional-religious Nordic and Lutheran mission in the imperial world. The boundaries of this

fellowship were accentuated with reference to other surrounding groups. Nordic missionaries actively positioned themselves, in contrast with British and Americans, as non-imperial actors without imperial ambitions and, as such, siding with the oppressed. As such they downplayed or failed to see the imperial implications of their religious and educational endeavour to influence people and society. The perceptions of innocence and humanitarianism feed into the established self-image of the Nordic countries as a collective 'humanitarian superpower'.<sup>61</sup>

The 1920s was a turbulent period. Internal political struggles as well as anti-foreign sentiments provoked conflicts and outbursts of violence. Even though China was formally independent, it was forced to protect foreigners and their rights through the treaties, and British and American gunboats were present to enforce these rights. The positions of the Nordic missionaries were ambivalent, being dependent on colonial powers to defend their rights, but at the same time distancing themselves from colonial rule and encouraging increased local independence. The examples from the forced evacuation of 1927 show that even though there was some allowance for the Nordics to make independent choices, such choices were always made within a context of dependency towards the imperial powers and an expected alignment with their demands.

The Nordic missionaries strived to spread Lutheran faith amongst the Chinese and thus competed with other denominations, but simultaneously cooperated with them to strengthen Christian and Western modes of thinking and acting, and to navigate the cultural, social and political networks and ways of life in the Hunanese city. Through their interdenominational collaborations within YMCA and YWCA and the educational ambitions of the Lutheran college, they tried to find different ways of influencing Chinese with Christian thoughts and Christian faith. As noted by Peter Tze Ming Ng, the educational endeavours developed in response to the Chinese context and developments, which included an adaption to Chinese educational traditions and political demands.<sup>62</sup> The examples brought forward in this text give evidence of the ways in which the Nordic missionaries participated in the co-creation of imperial knowledge and practices by navigating the interdenominational and (inter)national landscapes in China. Even though they were not bound to a single empire or imperial power their networks crisscrossed throughout the imperial and global world of the early twentieth century. Their practice and their ideas were hybridised forms where Nordic, Lutheran, Christian, Western, imperial and Chinese understandings of the world co-existed to varying degrees. Through their ambivalent positions and roles, the Nordic missionaries can be used to target 'the "in-between" spaces of imperial history', as suggested by Hedinger and Heé, reminding us that there was never one such thing as a solid 'the Nordic' or 'empire'.<sup>63</sup> Instead, they played active parts in a complex web of relations and preferences. From their Nordic and missionary perspectives, they drew from and contributed to the 'shared reservoir of knowledge' Kamissek and Kreienbaum have described as an 'imperial cloud'.<sup>64</sup>

## Notes

1. Hedinger and Heé, "Transimperial History"; Banerjee, "Transimperial," 926.
2. Brautaset, Gregersen, and Skeie, "Møter med Kina."
3. Ballantyne and Burton, *Empires and the Reach of the Global*, 21.
4. Tiedemann lists a total of 15 Norwegian (or Norwegian/Chinese), 11 Swedish, 5 Finnish and 3 Danish Protestant societies. "Appendix, Table 4". On previous Nordic mission work in China, see Steen, "Norwegian Mission Agencies in China"; Skeie, "Gender, Mission and Work"; Sidenvall, *The Making of Manhood*.
5. For research on Nordic missions to other parts of the world from a gender perspective, see for example Okkenhaug, *Gender, Race and Religion*.
6. Tyrrell, *Reforming the World*; Nielssen, Okkenhaug, and Skeie, "Introduction".
7. Vallgård, "Were Christian Missionaries Colonizers?" See also Nielssen, Okkenhaug, and Skeie, "Introduction." 4–6; Cox, *Imperial Fault Lines*; Etherington, *Missions and Empire*; Porter, *The Imperial Horizons*.
8. Huber and Lutkehaus, "Introduction," 23.
9. Stoler and Cooper, "Between Metropole and Colony," 32.
10. Hedinger and Heé, "Transimperial History," 429.
11. MacMurray, *Treaties and Agreements*.
12. According to Reed, "Changsha and the Chinese," 247, Changsha by 1916 had 13 missions and 17 firms from Germany (7), Britain (5) Japan (2), America (1), Belgium (1) and France (1). For influential foreign mission institutions, see for example Chapman and Plumb, *The Yale-China Association*; Bible Institute of Los Angeles, *Biola in China*.
13. Nield, *China's Foreign Places*, 49.
14. Changsha was made treaty port through the Commercial Treaty of Shanghai with Great Britain in 1902, and the port was opened within six months of ratification of the Sino-Japanese treaty of 1903. MacMurray, *Treaties and Agreements*, 349, 414; Nield, *China's Foreign Places*, 49–50; Bugge, "Det norske misjonsselskaps historie," 199–201. On the Boxer uprising, see for example Westad, *Restless Empire*, 126–30. The Norwegian missionary Anna Jakobsen Cheng, who had been excluded from the China Inland Mission (CIM) when marrying Cheng Xiuqi spent two years in Hunan before the Boxer uprising. Brautaset, "Anna Jakobsen og Cheng Xiuqi."
15. Christian and Missionary Alliance, China Inland Mission, Cumberland Presbyterian Mission, London Missionary Society, Mission of the Presbyterian Church of the U.S.A, Mission of the Reformed Church in the United States, United Evangelical Mission, Methodist Protestant Mission, Wesleyan Mission Society, Finnish Mission Society, Norwegian Mission Society, Church Mission Society, American Church. All but the last had foreign residents in Hunan. The Finnish Mission Society carried out work in the Northwest part of Hunan and did not work in Changsha. "The Report of the Hunan Missionary Conference"; Juntunen, *Borrowed Place*, 11.
16. Wang, *China's Unequal Treaties*. For a reference to the missionary dependencies, see Boyd, *Emissaries*, 58.
17. On the history of the NMS in China, see Bugge, "Det norske misjonsselskaps historie".
18. See "Changsha Community Vesper Service in the Yale Chapel", FFP, YDL; Greene, *Hsiang-Ya Journal*.
19. Letter from Dickson Leavens to family, Changsha 1909-12-12, DLP, YDL. The Leavens often mentions Gottebergs in their social activities and dinners, see letter from Dickson Leavens to family, Changsha 1910-01-02, 1915-10-31, 1915-11-28, 1916-08-27, DLP, YDL.
20. For an overview of Wikander's first years in China, see Gregersen, "Weaving Relationships."

21. Österlin, *Korstågen till Kina*, 245–79.
22. The May Fourth Movement in spring 1919 started with students protesting against the Treaty of Versailles, which led to further protests and demonstrations all around China. On 30<sup>th</sup> May 1925, police in the international concession in Shanghai opened fire and killed eleven Chinese student demonstrators, which led to demonstrations and strikes around China. See Bays, *A New History*, 107; Westad, *Restless Empire*, 161.
23. Snow, *Red Star over China*, 95, 135.
24. Nathorst, *Sveriges världshistoriska uppgift*.
25. Brohed, *Sveriges kyrkohistoria*, 26–33.
26. Alm, “Svenska Kyrkan och mission i Kina.”
27. The university was founded in 1902, partly based on funds from the Boxer’s indemnities. “Program för den akademiska missionskonferensen”; Högselius and Song, “Extractive Visions,” 162; Nyström, *Femtio år i Kina*, 15–17, 43–44.
28. Brundin, *I hjärtat av Kina*, 24–33; Jonson, “Svenska planer”; Österlin, *Korstågen till Kina*, 149–206; Jonson, *Missionärerna*.
29. Ng, *Chinese Christianity*, 94; Bays and Widmer, *China’s Christian Colleges*.
30. Högselius and Song, “Extractive Visions.”
31. Westman et al, *Nordisk Misjonshistorie*, 22.
32. Strang, Marjanen, and Hilson, “A Rhetorical Perspective on Nordicness,” 8.
33. Palmblad, “The Nordic Colonial Mind”; Ipsen and Fur, “Introduction”; Höglund and Andersson Burnett, “Nordic Colonialisms.” For a Swedish perspective, see Fur and Hennessey, “Introduction.”
34. Letter from Elfie Källberg to Emanuel, 1921-02-07, EKC, SKMA (my translation).
35. The curriculum was in Chinese, and the employed teachers were of Swedish, Chinese, Norwegian and German background. The College closed down permanently in 1930. Brundin, *I hjärtat av Kina*, 34–43, 59–61, 125; Österlin, *Korstågen till Kina*, 149–205.
36. Referat fra konferensen paa Taohwalun; Holthe, “Fra Taohwalun,” 330; Österlin *Korstågen till Kina*, 255–259.
37. Johan Torset, Dagbok 1920–1922, 1927, NMS, MDA (my translation).
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid (my translation).
40. Constitution and bye-laws of the Changsha Missionary Association, YCA, YDL; Johan Torset, Dagbok 1920–1922, 1927, NMS, MDA; Torset, “Evangeliet til hvert hjem i Hunan.”
41. Tiedemann, “Comity Agreements and Sheep Stealers.”
42. Jonson, *Lutheran Missions*, 8; Tiedemann, “Protestant Missionaries,” 537.
43. Brundin, *I hjärtat av Kina*, 71–72; Ingeborg Wikander WSCF, YDL. For a similar discussion concerning the relationship between NMS and YMCA, see Klaveness, “Sekretærmissionens ordning.”
44. Gotteberg, “De hungrende i provinsen Hunan.” In connection to the Sino-Japanese war the Changsha International Relief Committee was formed in 1938. It consisted of Chinese and foreign members, including both Norwegian and Swedish Report of the Changsha International Relief Committee, YCA, YDL. Other relief committees included the Red Cross cooperation.
45. The governmental office.
46. Letter from Dickson Leavens to family, Changsha 1915-11-28, DLP, YDL.
47. Johan Torset, Dagbok 1920–1922, 1927, NMS, MDA (my translation).
48. When the church of CSM was founded, the two Lutheran churches alternated their Chinese church sermons every fortnight. Källberg, *Bilder från Kina*, 21.
49. Letter from Ingeborg Wikander to Lurre, Changsha 1917-10-06, IWC, SKMA.

50. Ibid.
51. Letter from Ruth Nathorst to Johannes and Märtha Lindblom, 1918, LC, LUB (my translation).
52. "Nordisk"; Strang, Marjanen, and Hilson, "A Rhetorical Perspective on Nordicness."
53. Sundkler, "Nordic Missionary Council."
54. Palmblad, "The Nordic Colonial Mind," 35; Strang, Marjanen, and Hilson, "A Rhetorical Perspective on Nordicness," 14–15.
55. "Meeting the present situation"; Bickers, "To Serve and Not to Rule," 214.
56. Gotteberg, "Redegjørelse for missionsfeltets evakuering"; "Referat fra N.M.S. konferens," 48–49; "Telegram"; Brundin, *I hjärtat av Kina*, 112–13.
57. Letters from Willy Stenfelt to Gustaf Österlin, 15 May 1927, 2 June 1927, 27 July 1927, ÖC, LUB; Brundin, *I hjärtat av Kina*, 112. See also Gregersen, "Perceptions of protection," 392–394.
58. Gotteberg, "Redegjørelse for missionsfeltets evakuering," 37.
59. Nathorst, "Från Changsha," 184 (my translation).
60. Strang, Marjanen, and Hilson, "A Rhetorical Perspective on Nordicness," 14–15.
61. Ipsen and Fur, "Introduction"; Höglund and Andersson Burnett, "Nordic Colonialisms"; Fur and Hennessey, "Introduction."
62. Ng, *Chinese Christianity*, 94.
63. Hedinger and Heé, "Transimperial History," 440.
64. Kamssek and Kreienbaum, "An Imperial Cloud?," 166.

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