

The Missionary Journey of John and Lillie Benson in China (1914—1954)

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Ellis Benson

“Come my friends, it’s not too late to seek a better world.”

In August 1914 five young new missionary couples left by ship from San Francisco for China. These adventurers were Gustaf and Ida Carlberg, Nels and Minnie Benson, John and Selma Lindell, David and Lily Vikner, and John and Lillie Benson. These five men had recently graduated from Augustana Seminary and been ordained on calls to China at a ceremony in Minneapolis. They were accompanied on their journey by Dr. and Mrs. Daniel Friberg and their small children Daniel and Margaret and also by Sister Ingeborg Nystul. All these latter had been on furlough in the U.S. and were now returning to the mission field.

John Benson had come to America from his native Sweden at age 16, only 14 years earlier. He had worked his way through high school, Upsala College, and Augustana Seminary. Lillie was the daughter of N. P. and Hilda Starbranch, also Swedish immigrants. John and Lillie were married in her home church, Bethesda Lutheran Church in New Haven, Connecticut just one day before they left for San Francisco and China.

What impelled these five young couple to go to strange, distant China? In John Benson’s case it was due in part to his active membership in the Student Volunteer Movement. There he heard John Mott’s earnest appeal: “The world evangelized in our generation!” I feel sure the others received and were moved by similar summons.

On arriving in China after a pleasant two-week Pacific Ocean crossing, the group of new missionaries went to Kikungshan, a mountain community in central China 1,000 miles

from the coast. There they spent their first year studying Chinese language, history, and customs under the tutelage of A. W. Edwins, the pioneer Augustana missionary in China. There were some fun-filled times, but the group also worked hard to understand this strange land, its people, and their ways—and most of all their language and its weird, mystifying but intriguing written forms, its ideographs.

After a year of study, the couples proceeded to their assigned stations in various cities on the Augustana mission field in Honan province. Honan is a large populous province in north-central China. It is made up largely of the broad north China Plain through which flows the great meandering Yellow River, often called “China’s sorrow” because of its frequent disastrous flooding. The Augustana mission field stretched out just south of this river. Bordering the field on the south was that of the Lutheran United Mission (LUM), the mission of several Norwegian-American Lutheran churches.

John and Lillie were sent to Hsuchow (later called Hsuchang), a day by mule cart south of the river, mule cart being the standard means of travel in this part of China. Here in Hsuchow they took up their work under the guidance of missionary Edwins. After a year, Edwins departed for his own station, and John and Lillie were on their own. What was this like? Imagine being on one’s own in a strange land amid a sea of very strange people with customs, outlook, history, and especially language so very different from one’s own. The Chinese were predominately Buddhist. They viewed newcomers and their message with wonder. The newcomers’ light skin, eyes, and hair were ascribed to excessive milk drinking. The Chinese did not drink milk after infancy. Also the foreigners were often *called* “*Tabizha*” (Big noses). Plus factors for John and Lillie were the Chinese natural friendliness, tolerance, curiosity, and general good will, perhaps gained from their Confucian background.

John and Lillie started their work by trying to make friends with individual Chinese, talking, listening to them and in a friendly way introducing them to the message and life of Jesus. John's Chinese was halting, but Lillie's was quite good. She had a gift for languages. After a while, they were joined at Hsuehchow by Dr. and Mrs. Lindorf, and now medical aid was added to the message.

John and Lillie were soon gathering groups of potential believers together to tell them more of the gospel message. They also spoke in the streets to passersby and curious groups that would cluster around them. In this way they were able to bring together a band of believers and form a church, which presently had its own place of worship. They began to train Chinese men and women as evangelists, deacons, Bible teachers, and other church workers. John and Lillie's growing and deep love for the Chinese helped them in their work.

They first organized elementary and middle schools for boys and girls. The school that Lillie organized and led (the Emmy Evald School) was the first school for girls in all of Honan province. These schools gradually became staffed by Chinese teachers. A full curriculum was provided in addition to Bible study and Christianity.

John and Lillie had a long and fruitful missionary experience in China. There were many interruptions. More than once they had to flee from bandits (who not uncommonly kidnapped foreigners for ransom). They had to leave the field twice, once because of civil war, and once because of the Japanese invasion.

Finally the Communist takeover brought about the explosion of almost all missionaries, including John and Lillie. At this time (1950), they moved to Hong Kong and continued their work there. After a term in Hong Kong, where they helped organize the Lutheran Church of Hong Kong, they retired (1954) and returned to America.

My wife, Ann and I went to China in 1983 and again in 1992. What did we find there? First of all, a thriving Christian community. When my brother, David, his wife, and the two of us visited Hsuchang in 1992, we attended the church my father, John, founded there. It was filled with worshippers, and there were many waiting outside. As we passed through the throng, many older Chinese reached out to us with tears in their eyes and called out John and Lillie's names (*"Peimushi & Peissimu"*).

I am told that there are seven times as many Christians in China as there were when the missionaries left in 1949 and 1950. This has occurred despite decades of persecution that ended only fairly recently.

What are the enduring fruits of the missionary effort in China? First of all, a vibrant, unified indigenous Christian church, healthy and growing. One Chinese woman pastor told us, "Soon we may need to send missionaries to America."

Second, the mission schools have helped greatly to provide a strong foundation for China's educational system from elementary schools to universities. Many of the faculty in the medical schools, for example, received their education up to and including medicine in mission-founded schools.

Finally, Western medicine was introduced to China by the missionaries. Now it stands beside the traditional Eastern Chinese medicine health care system.

The Augustana missionary effort shares with other Lutheran and Protestant missions a rich heritage of achievement. Its devoted missionaries are among its foremost heroes.