The Canadian School–A School in Sichuan for Missionaries’ Children

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Key words: the Canadian School, school for missionaries’ kids, the Canadian Methodist Church West China Mission, the United Church of Canada West China Mission

Abstract: This paper aims to study the historical context, evolution and characteristics of the Canadian School, a school established in Sichuan, China by the Canadian Methodist Church West China Mission for its missionaries’ children. Located at Chengdu, Chongqing, and Renshou respectively at different times, the School provided hundreds of western pupils with quality primary and high school education that matched the Canadian standards, but to our regret, exercised a separation policy during its operation. A study of the School will help illustrate the Christian missionary enterprise in China and facilitate China-Canadian relationship.

Introduction

The second Saturday of each October sees a gathering of a group of alumni at a Chinese restaurant in North Toronto to commemorate the “good old days” they had in the Canadian School in Chengdu, Chongqing, or Renshou of Sichuan Province of China decades ago. This Canadian School Reunion (Shortened as CS Reunion), first called “West China Club”, was started in 1936 by the Canadian Methodist missionaries Lewis Walmsley, Leslie G. Kilborn, and Earl Wilmott when they returned to Canada from China for furlough. The Canadian School was established in Sichuan particularly for the education of missionaries’ children. The collection Canadian School in West China (Canada: The Canadian School Alumni Association, 1974), edited by Brockman Brace, included about 40 short essays written by the alumni of the School. The essays in this collection are about some episodes in the school history or the life experience of some alumni in Sichuan, but fail to present a comprehensive introduction to the School. This paper will have a thorough introduction to the context and development of the School and delve into the characteristics of the School within its historical context.

I. Origin of the Canadian School

Up to about 500 Canadian missionaries were sent to Sichuan between 1892 and 1952. Years after they launched the mission, some missionary families began to have children in Sichuan and the education for their children came to be an eminent problem. Given that a number of missionaries’ children had already reached their full school age, the Canadian Methodist Church West China Mission Council of 1903 proposed to its home church to send a teacher to Sichuan and start primary day school work there for the children. The Council of next year urged the home church to open a boarding school in the near future. [1]p.29-30 But the home church did not take any action, and the Canadian missionaries in and around Chengdu had to send five of their children of school age to Chongqing (a city in east Sichuan, about 160 miles east of Chengdu) to attend a school for missionaries’ children. The trip to Chongqing would then, however, take a 10 day journey by sedan chair, the best transportation between the two cities.
then and therefore the Canadian missionaries earnestly want to have a school for their children in Chengdu. Eventually, the home church agreed in 1907 to establish a school and recommended the Mission Council to “make a thorough investigation into the whole question, preparing a careful estimate of the probable cost of land, building, etc… and all other particulars that they may deem necessary.” As a result, the Mission Council set up a special committee to consider the question of a school for missionaries’ children and the committee submitted to the Council a report that stressed the indispensability of such a school. Based upon this report, the Council of 1908 made to the home church recommendations on the particulars of the School, especially the need of a teacher and the cost of running the School.

The home church subsequently sent Miss Lela A. Ker to Sichuan, who arrived in Chengdu 5 March 1909 and opened a school at the back of the church near the Mission compound at Sze Shen Ts’e, Chengdu, a few days later on March 9. There were 5 pupils—James Endicott, Norman Endicott, Edna Ewan, Douglas Ewan and Joyce Canright, among whom James Endicott became an internationally well-known peace messenger later. Miss Ker was the first teacher and the first principal of the School.

II. History of the Canadian School

In the history of the School, it was forced to change location a few times and its development can be accordingly divided into the following periods: Chengdu Period, Chongqing Branch Period, Renshou Period, and Terminal Period.

1. Chengdu Period (1909-1938)

When the School opened in 1909, it did not offer accommodation for pupils. It was not until 3 September 1910 that the School provided residence for 3 girl boarders. The School began to have a matron in 1910 to be in charge of the pupils and the property after school hours, especially of the boarders. In the beginning, there was only one teacher, i.e. Miss Ker, and the second teacher Miss Mary Laura Perkins came in 1910. But soon came the Revolution of 1911 which compelled missionary families to leave Sichuan for the sake of safety and forced the School to close between December 1911 and April 1913. The number of teachers remained between 2 and 3 until 1918 when the School moved to a site on the campus of the West China Union University. Besides the teachers, some of the missionary wives would also come to help with some teaching and operating service for the School if necessary.

The Council of 1914 laid down the following policy for the School concerning such essential matters as its name, course of study, terms, fees, management, enrollment, etc.:

1. Name: The name of the institution shall be “The School for Missionaries’ Children of the Canadian Methodist Mission in West China”, abbreviated title for correspondence, etc., to be “Canadian School.”
2. Course of Study: The course of study to be in general that of the Public Schools of the Province of Ontario, Canada…
6. Management and Control: The school shall be under the control of Council…
8. That the school age be 7 to 12 …

This policy set essential rules and regulations for the operation of the School. With the increase of the student body, their health became a matter of concern. The Council of 1916 resolved to appoint a Medical Committee for the School, consisting of 2 medical men and 1 dentist to take care of the health of pupils.

The increase of the student body also required more facilities. In order to provide better facilities for the students, the School moved into a permanent building on the campus of the West China Union University in 1918. After the School moved to the new site on the University campus, the number of students increased rapidly and reached nearly100 in 1920, with the prospect of more, and the parents of students began to think in terms of a High School department. With the help of several experienced high school teachers among the wives of
missionaries in the community, the first High School, consisting of 8 boys and girls, was inaugurated in 1922.\textsuperscript{[2](p.80-81)}

At the end of 1926 and in early 1927 there was a general evacuation of missionary families out of Sichuan, and the School was closed temporarily, to be reopened in the autumn of 1928. There were very few students when it was reopened, and therefore the School was held in one of the small buildings near the Mission Press on Sze Shen Ts’e, not in the property on the University campus, before it moved back to the campus in 1929.\textsuperscript{[6](p.46)}

Ever since the middle of 1920s, the Canadian missionaries began to feel that the situation in China was ambiguous and therefore decided to restrain missionary activities. The Canadian School began to shrink accordingly and never resumed its scale as in early 1920s. When Communist activities had been increasing and the Communists were imminent to converge on Sichuan in 1935, a number of families left for Leshan (a city about 60 miles south of Chengdu), and Chongqing, and Miss Money opened a small school in the former city. A little more than 2 weeks later, the School reopened in Chengdu, but the small school in Leshan continued for a couple of months. During the summer of 1937 when the Sino-Japanese War broke out, the number of students was between 40 and 50.\textsuperscript{[2](p.87-88)}

2. Chongqing Branch Period (1922-1935)

In the beginning of the 20th century, the Friends’ Missionary Society of England operated a school for missionaries’ children and five of the Canadian children schooled there in 1905. As there had been no school of their own for the Canadian missionaries’ children until 1922, the Canadian children of school age in east Sichuan had to receive their education by home schooling, but this kind of education was not systematic and therefore it appeared necessary to have a school for the Canadian children in Chongqing. In 1922 the home church appointed Miss Edith Tufts as the first teacher at the Chongqing Branch of the Canadian School on the south bank of the Yangtze River in the suburb known as Ya Er Dang (the Duck Pond). In order to help with the school operation, the mothers of the pupils took turns living there as matrons.\textsuperscript{[7](p.93)}

In the beginning, the Chongqing Branch had only one classroom, with about a dozen pupils in residence. It mainly enrolled Canadian children in east Sichuan, but the children of western business families other than the Canadians formed part of the school community.\textsuperscript{[8](p.97-98)} The student body increased later and during 1929-1934, it remained around 30 pupils.\textsuperscript{[9](p.101)} Like the School in Chengdu, the Chongqing Branch also remained closed between 1927 and 1929 due to the anti-foreign sentiments of the Chinese and general evacuation of the missionaries.\textsuperscript{[7](p.95)}

By 1935 transportation in the province of Sichuan had improved so much that the students could go to the Chengdu Canadian School for education and the Chongqing Branch was closed as a result that year.\textsuperscript{[7](p.96)}

3 Renshou Period (1939-1943)

In the spring of 1939 when the Japanese invaders bombed Chengdu frequently, thus posing a great threat and danger to the pupils, it was decided that the School be closed early that year and the school members get off to Mt. Omei (a mountain about 60 miles south of Chengdu) summer resort and continue classes there for part of the summer. It was difficult to return to Chengdu in the fall under existing condition, nor would it be possible to remain at Mt. Omen indefinitely because none of the houses or cottages there was winterized and none had adequate heating facilities. As a result, another site should be secured for the School. Quite a number of the Canadian missionaries felt that Kaoshih T’i, a summer resort about 90 miles southeast of Chengdu would be a suitable place, and Renshou, a Mission Station (about 40 miles south of Chengdu) where the medical work and the main part of a missionary property had closed, was also suggested. It was decided that Renshou, with its unoccupied hospital building and a large school property, would be the most suitable situation for the Canadian School.\textsuperscript{[10](p.105)}
September 1939 saw 75 staff and students going to Renshou. The facilities there were obsolete and needed fixing, without any recreation or entertainment. A courier service was kept to Chengdu every week for the 4 years of the School there, bringing down special food, clothing, and other supplies. Life there was steeped with difficulties, situations in which the students had to pitch in and resolve. At times, in order to preserve daylight, the students had to arise 2 hours earlier than standard time. As a result, those Renshou years were considered as one of the finest, most creative periods in the history of the School because the students had to be responsible for their entire life. [10](p.107-108)

In 1943 it became clear that the Canadian School could not continue to operate in China due to the spiraling cost of living and runaway inflation and it was closed that year until 1947. On the last day of school there the students performed a “solemn” ceremony of the burial of the time-table, and built a giant bonfire in which to burn their notebooks before they got on a truck back to Chengdu. [11](p.116) The closing of the School in Renshou resulted in the students being scattered. Some along with part of the staff went to Woodstock school in Mussoorie, India; some were taught in small groups in Sichuan; others returned to the homelands of their parents. [12](p.118)

4. Terminal Period (1947-1950)

In late autumn of 1947 the School was again opened in Chengdu when the Walmsleys returned from furlough. With them came a new teacher, Miss Marion Donald and an alumna of the School, Miss Mary Jolliffe, as matron and assistant in the High School section of the Canadian School. The students numbered 20, of them 4 High School students and 12 boarders. In the spring of 1948, Lewis Walmsley decided to accept a position in the Department of East Asian Studies at the University of Toronto and in the fall that year, Ervin E. Newcombe took over as the principal. The number of the student body increased a little that year. The increase was partially due to the arrival of some missionary families from Xi’an, Shanxi province, and the pulling-out of numerous United States Army personnel. The latter had been at the school for a short time. [12](p.118,125)

Domestic wars were in rampant progress at that time and the missionaries realized that the eventual fall of the Nationalist government was just a matter of time. The social unrest in China triggered the missionaries to gradually withdraw from China. Therefore, the School was kept in a limited size. The People’s Liberation Army of the Communists had crossed the Yangtze River and taken Shanghai, and it was only a matter of time before The Nationalist Government Party was destroyed. With the rice riots, the increasing oppression of the Nationalist agents on the University campus and in the city, the ever-advancing People’s Liberation Army forces, “the reality of China seemed unreal, distant from their happy round of square dances, games and lessons.” The missionary families began to make plans to leave China and most of them had left by the summer of 1949. By the fall of that year, the student body was reduced to 10 children and they moved into the recently vacated Stinson house on the University campus. The school closed its doors forever in June 1950. [12](p.126-127)

III. Characteristics of the Canadian School

During the decades of its history, the School provided indispensable education for the missionaries’ children and exerted great influence upon their life. The standards of education and the qualification of the staff were well recognized by both the children and their parents, but regretfully, it exercised a separation policy against Chinese children during its operation.

1. Standards of Education

The School tried to keep the features of public schools in Ontario, Canada in every possible way. “Adjustable desks and adjustable seats, brought from Canada, gave the children a most comfortable position and a modern appearance to the schoolroom...Beds and bedding for
boarding pupils’ rooms, cutlery, china and glass for the dining-room, and all kitchen furnishings were also brought from Canada for the boarding department.”

Without the modern logistics available today, it is hard to imagine how difficult it was to transport all those facilities from Canada to such an inland province of China as Sichuan. In order to provide the pupils with a Canadian feature, however, all these difficulties were overcome. And the School “was very British, with the Union Jack flying over the entrance and the British consul as its much-admired patron,” as Canada was a member of the British Commonwealth.

The standards of operation and curriculum ran parallel with those of public schools in Ontario, Canada. It was “an Ontario school”, following the Ontario curriculum and with students writing the Ontario exams and getting the results 6 months late because of the time the mail took to reach Szechwan. It even mailed some exam papers written by the students back to Toronto to be marked. The standards of education at the School compared well with the best Ontario schools. A case in point was that when Ted Jolliffe returned to Canada at age 17, he had no difficulty getting into the University of Toronto and later he was the Ontario Rhodes Scholar for 1931. Besides, the School also attached great importance to a comprehensive development of the students. “In all teaching the emphasis is placed, not so much on the amount of knowledge imparted or acquired, as upon the degree of development attained in the art of acquiring knowledge.” It also taught Latin and the students, like their peers back in Canada, performed Gilbert and Sullivan pantomimes. The students “returned to Canada to do well… are at the top, in terms of occupations,” as the alumnus Don Willmott observed. Some students worked hard to improve China-Canadian relationship and rose as key persons for the relationship, with one as the ambassador to China. Those who chose politics usually had a left-wing nature.

The reasons for the good education of the School and the success of the students, as the missionary and alumnus William Service summarized, would include the dedication and professionalism of the parents, multicultural context of the students and the staff, as well as the opportunity for the students to travel around.

2. Separation Policy

Despite of the quality education provided by the School, it was operated in a manner separated from its local context and consequently failed to make the best use of its Chinese context. During the decades of its operation, the students were not encouraged to fraternize with the Chinese inside or outside the school. As the missionary and alumna Katherine Hockin observed, “Once at boarding school, we had no Chinese contact.” The alumnus Bill Willmott also recalled quite regretfully, “Although many of us spoke colloquial Chinese, learned as infants, our contacts with our Chinese peers were almost nil in those days.” The School enrolled almost no Chinese students and employed no Chinese staff, thus making it an “exclave” in Sichuan. As a result of the separation policy, the students failed to develop a qualified cross-language and cross-culture ability upon graduation from the School, which could have been achieved otherwise. This policy probably had to do with a sense of superiority on the part of the missionaries to the local Chinese and their expectation that the students would eventually go back to Canada anyway, hence their consequent hesitation to involve their children with their Chinese peers.

Summary

The Canadian School was established in Sichuan to provide primary and high school education for the Canadian missionaries’ children in line with Canadian standards. In the historical context of Sichuan, it was operated in Chengdu, Chongqing, and Renshou respectively at different times. Though located in Sichuan, it failed to make the best use of the local culture to
cultivate the students’ cross-cultural communication competence but exercised a separation policy instead, which might be a most regretful policy in its operation.

Acknowledgement

This research is funded by Sichuan University (skqy 201315 and skzx2015-gb72).

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[3] The United Church of Canada Archives, fonds 14/3/1, 78.096C-Box 1, Minutes of the 13th Annual Council of the Canadian Methodist Mission West China, Chengtu [R], Feb. 5th, 1908, p.19.


