The Legacy of Rudolf Christian Friedrich Lechler

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During the second half of the nineteenth century, the name of Rudolf Lechler (1824–1908) became almost synonymous with the Basel Hakka Mission in Guangdong, China. Unlike most Protestant missionaries in China in the mid-nineteenth century, Lechler had a long career, spending fifty-two years as evangelist and mission administrator. He mastered the Hakka dialect and trained a circle of Chinese coworkers who were responsible for the initial conversion of a high percentage of the Basel Christians. He worked closely with his Chinese assistants, becoming deeply attached to some of them.

Residence in a different culture was a learning experience for many missionaries, one that frequently opened up a gap between the home board, which was primarily interested in conversion statistics, and field missionaries, who were seeking to make Christianity relevant to the needs and interests of the populace. As Lechler acquired greater appreciation for China’s cultural heritage and a deeper understanding of the difficulties faced by Chinese converts in China’s non-Christian society, he became a voice for moderation. Often he urged tolerance on the part of the Basel Mission Board, as well as by newly arrived missionaries ignorant of Chinese social mores. When Basel forbade child betrothal by Christians, Lechler explained that impoverished Hakka parents could not afford the bride price and dowry expected if they waited until the marriage partners came of age. Placing a girl as a little daughter-in-law in the home of her future husband was an economic necessity designed to assure both sets of parents of a mate for their child at minimum expense. When an ardent new missionary insisted that Christians abstain from every aspect of village and lineage ceremonies deemed superstitious, Lechler wrote that he saw no harm in Christians eating the meat distributed after the festivities so long as they took no part in the rituals. Meat was a luxury to be relished only on special occasions. He protested Basel’s attempt to substitute transliteration for Chinese characters in Basel middle schools. A Chinese evangelist, he explained, would not be accorded respect if he were not literate in Chinese characters and lacked acquaintance with the classics. Despite the heathen connotations of the Confucian classics, they were essential knowledge for an educated man in China.

Lechler initially was overshadowed by his Basel colleague Theodor Hamberg, who studied with him at the Basel Mission School and traveled with him to China in 1846–47. Hamberg was five years older, came from a cultured and sophisticated background, and was considered more gifted intellectually than Lechler. But Hamberg lived only seven years in China, and much of that time was devoted to language study; he died in 1854 just as he acquired real facility in the Hakka dialect. Many of the other German missionaries to China also had brief careers. It was Lechler, therefore, who provided continuity to the Basel Mission during the second half of the nineteenth century and who gained status in the eyes of the home board so that it respected his recommendations on mission policy. Aiding him, especially in contacts with women and children, was his second wife, Marie. She worked with him as evangelist and educator for thirty-nine years, and her assistance in the conversion and education of Christian wives and mothers contributed greatly to the establishment of Christian families, the backbone of stable Christian congregations.

Early Years

Rudolf Lechler was born in 1824, the third son of Gottlob Lechler, a pastor in the small town of Hundersingen in the Danube valley of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen. Rudolf was reared in a deeply pious and conservative family. Their Christianity was evangelical and pietistic, and missionaries frequently visited the home. When Rudolf was ten years old, his mother died, leaving eight children; two years later his father married Elisabeth Bauman, also a devout, evangelical Christian. Educated at home by his father, Rudolf studied Latin, Greek, French, and above all the Bible and church history. Rudolf was said, however, to be no great student, a source of frequent conflict with his father. Shortly after confirmation, Rudolf was apprenticed to Ludwig Schmidgal, a merchant in Breilstein.

In November 1842, as Rudolf was completing his four-year apprenticeship as a merchant, he became gravely ill and went through a conversion experience. He determined to become a missionary and on January 1, 1844, entered the Basel Mission School, joining Hamberg there. By this time Karl Gützlaff, the first German Protestant missionary to China, had publicized the China cause in Europe, England, and America and was calling for Western recruits to supervise and instruct his Chinese evangelists of the Chinese Union. Basel heeded this call, selecting Rudolf Lechler and Theodor Hamberg as its first missionaries to China. At Lechler’s ordination service, Gottlob Lechler spoke of his joy over Rudolf’s decision to become a missionary. As a minister, he said, he had contributed to missions for over twenty-five years; as a father, he was now offering his own flesh and blood. Rudolf Lechler and Theodor Hamberg sailed for China in November 1846. Simultaneously, the Rhenish Mission Society, in Barmen, answered Gützlaff’s call and commissioned Ferdinand Genähr and Heinrich Köster to assist Gützlaff and the Chinese Union. The four arrived in Hong Kong on March 19, 1847.

Introduction to China

Gützlaff was overjoyed that his pleas for China missionaries from Europe had finally been answered; he looked forward to great things. The day after the missionaries’ arrival, Gützlaff escorted them to their rented rooms in the China quarter, had them don Chinese clothes, and instructed them to adopt Chinese cuisine and lifestyle. Each was given a Chinese name, and each was assigned a language tutor and assistant, Hamberg studying the Hakka dialect, and Lechler studying Hoklo. In the belief that a Westerner learned spoken Chinese best by interacting with the populace, Gützlaff informed them that they were to accompany their Chinese assistants on a preaching tour the following Sunday, and they were to take up residence in the Chinese interior as soon as possible. Their letters to Basel could not hide their

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cultural shock, though they were still buoyed by the dream that the Gospel of salvation would soon be carried to every Chinese province.3

By the autumn of 1847 both Hamberg and Lechler had become much less sanguine about prospects for evangelizing all of China via the Chinese Union. Their attempts to reside at Tanshui, north of Kowloon, had stirred up strenuous local opposition, and during one boat trip they had been attacked by robbers, who stripped them of their clothing and valuables. Clearly, China was not open, as Gützlaff had so often pronounced. Residence outside the treaty ports by foreigners aroused such antagonism as to be hazardous. Chinese who rented or sold property to Westerners were attacked or even imprisoned. Both Basel missionaries, furthermore, had become convinced that many of the Chinese Union evangelists were not believing Christians, indeed, that they had professed Christianity only in order to secure employment and travel money for alleged itinerations into the interior. Attempts to inform Gützlaff of the true character of the Chinese Union workers were rebuffed, and relations between Gützlaff and the Basel missionaries became decidedly cool.4 Though both Hamberg and Lechler continued to employ Chinese Union members, they insisted on further instruction of their assistants, and they attempted to supervise them closely. Those who faltered were quickly dismissed. Unlike Gützlaff, they permitted only ordained ministers, not Chinese assistants, to baptize converts. They nevertheless continued to operate on the premise that Chinese evangelists would make most of the initial contacts and that the rural interior was the most promising milieu for evangelism. They thus built on and also modified Gützlaff’s mission methodology.

The Shantou Experience

In accord with Gützlaff’s original assignment, Lechler left Hong Kong on May 17, 1848, to establish a mission among the Hoklo in the Shantou region. Three Chinese Union assistants and a servant accompanied him. Since marauding pirates made travel on a Chinese junk highly risky, Lechler took passage on the only Western vessel available, an opium smuggler, and he landed six days later at Nanao, a major opium depot. He was repeatedly rebuffed in attempts to rent a residence and had to take refuge with the captain of the opium ship.5 His Chinese assistants advised returning to Hong Kong. Luckily, Lechler met a former Chinese Union member identified only as Old Kong or Khong-lan. Kong had originally been baptized by Gützlaff and sent to northern Guangdong to proselytize, but Kong, Lechler wrote, was not truly converted and was now engaged in his family, and he ultimately succumbed to constant pressure to baptize converts. Asked from his family. When his wife died and his family demanded a Qi (Lim A-Kee). Lin, however, was the only Christian convert in his family, and he ultimately succumbed to constant pressure from his family. When his wife died and his family demanded a traditional funeral, he agreed and returned his Bible, catechism, and hymnal to Lechler.6 Lin admitted to Lechler that he had done wrong, but he expressed the hope that God would forgive him as God had forgiven others. Lechler concluded that Lin was not a true “born again Christian.” Yet, when the English Presbyterians entered the region some years later, Lin and Old Kong requested that a missionary be sent to their villages to instruct them. Lin eventually became a church elder, and his son became a pastor. One wishes for Kong and Lin’s definition of Christianity. Had they considered themselves Christians throughout the interval of isolation from Westerners?

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Work with the Hakka and Taiping Christians

In 1853 Lechler’s sister came out to marry Genähr, and in 1854, through the mediation of Hamberg, Lechler also acquired a wife, Auguste Nordstadt, from Sweden. Unhappily, she died of dysentery on April 17, 1854, only forty days after their wedding. Lechler suffered a further blow with the death of Hamberg the next month. Sustaining Lechler was an unquestioning faith in the truth of Christianity as he understood it, the elemental evangelical Christianity of nineteenth-century German pietists. Despite adversity and his own bouts of illness, he remained convinced of the higher wisdom of God. He lamented the paucity of his converts and the frequency of their apostasy and moral lapses, but he never seems to have doubted the universal, unique truth of Protestant Christianity or the sanctity of the mission enterprise. He was, furthermore, interested in Chinese society and culture. Sprinkled through his correspondence are comments on Chinese beliefs regarding creation, a description of a dragon boat festival, a discussion of the practice of selling civil service titles, and so forth. His remarks are critical, but not harsh and censorious. For him, China had become home.

During the 1850s the Taiping movement (1850–64) became an important concern of Christian missionaries. Was it the prelude to the Christianization of all China? Or was it simply a Christian heresy? Was it primarily a political rebellion against the Manchu dynasty? At first, many missionaries were optimistic, ready to embrace the Taipings as Christians who would complete the task that they themselves had begun. When it became known, however, that Hong Xiuquan believed that his revelation superseded that of the New Testament, many Westerners turned against the Taiping Christians. Since the Basel Mission concentrated on the Hakka community in its work and since most of the early leaders of the Taiping rebellion were Hakka, it was natural that Taiping members should seek out Hamberg and Lechler when fleeing to Hong Kong for refuge. Li Zhenggao and Hong Rengan, nephew of Hong Xiuquan, were among these. Hong Xiuquan had converted the two to Taiping Christianity and had baptized them, but they had failed in attempts to unite with the Taiping forces in Guangxi and were being hunted by imperial authorities. They made their way to the Basel Mission in Hong Kong, where Hamberg and Lechler instructed them in Christian doctrines and rebaptized them. Hong Rengan for a time worked with James Legge of the London Missionary Society (LMS), but eventually joined the Taipings at their capital in Nanjing. Li, who had become convinced that Taiping Christianity was a distortion of true Christianity, became Lechler’s most trusted and valued Chinese associate.

After the defeat of the Taipings, Li Zhenggao and Lechler itinerated among former Taiping followers in Hong Xiuquan’s home region, the Hua and Qingyuan districts of Guangdong. Because Li had many kinfolk there and because of his earlier
association with the Taipings, he and Lechler were able to enter homes and villages ordinarily closed to outsiders. Contrary to the impression that Taiping Christianity disappeared without a trace, they found individuals who secretly prayed to God (Shangdi); they and others proved receptive to the Protestant Christianity preached by Li and Lechler.13

Home Leave and Marriage to Marie Stotz
When the Anglo-French War with China began in 1856, Lechler and other Basel missionaries retreated from the mainland to Hong Kong. There, Lechler worked with the local Hakka Christian community and assisted Dr. J. H. Hirshberg of LMS in St. Paul’s Hospital. The medical knowledge that he gained later assisted him in offsetting antiforeign sentiment and securing an audience on his itinerations. Illness necessitated his return to Germany in 1858 for recuperation.

Missionaries on furlough were expected to visit churches and speak to congregations and mission societies in order to popularize missions and inform potential supporters about their field. Through such contacts and also their reports and correspondence with the home front, China missionaries became the principal conduit for information on China generally among Westerners. Eight of Lechler’s lectures were published in 1861 as *Acht Vorträge über China*. For Lechler, as for most Protestant missionaries of his era, Western Christendom was the norm against which other cultures were judged. China must accept Western science, technology, and concepts of international relations along with Christianity. The lectures reveal as well Lechler’s interest in Chinese culture and his appreciation of China’s heritage. While Lechler laments the Chinese oppression of women, he finds their respect for elders and their loyalty to family praiseworthy. A final chapter on Christian missions relates many of his personal experiences as an evangelist, including a repetition of a frequent theme: lack of a sense of sin among Chinese is the major obstacle to Christian evangelism.

While in Germany, Lechler also acquired a new wife, Marie Stotz, from the Neckar region near Württemberg. She shared in his mission work until they retired from China in 1899. Often she accompanied him and his Chinese assistants on itinerations in the interior, thereby making access to women and children more possible. While the men preached in public, she joined the women and children in the inner quarters. Not having children of her own, she devoted herself especially to the girls’ school she founded in Hong Kong. Acting as a go-between for her graduates, she arranged marriages with Chinese evangelists and other Christian converts, thereby helping establish the Christian families so important to the durability of Christian communities. Education was a means of social mobility for the orphans, beggars, and unwanted daughters Marie was able to enroll. Having acquired literacy and acquaintance with Western culture, they married up, in some cases to overseas Chinese businessmen. Other graduates
Notes

1. Lechler to Inspector, Hong Kong, December 5, 1863, Archives of Basler Missionsgesellschaft, A-1.5, #10. Unless noted otherwise, subsequent archival references are all to materials in the Basel Mission archives. The transliteration system employed by nineteenth-century German missionaries differs from pinyin; to assist in locating the sources in the Basel archives, I have retained the German transliteration in endnotes.

3. Lechler to Inspector, Victoria, March 22, 1847, A-1.1, #4; Hamberg to Inspector, Hong Kong, March 27, 1847, ibid., #6.
10. In the belief that a wife and family detracted from the dedicated, sacrificial life expected of a missionary, the Basel Society required a missionary to work in the field for five years before marrying. This rule was soon abandoned as it became evident that women were needed to contact women and children in Chinese society, where separate social relations for sexes were the norm.
11. The contacts between Hamberg and Hong Rengan were the basis for Hamberg’s Visions of Hung Sit-Tshuen and the Origin of the Kwang-si Insurrection (Hong Kong: China Mail, 1854), still an important source on the early Taiping movement.
14. This was generally true of the graduates of parochial girls’ schools. See, for example, the report of the Berlin orphanage in Hong Kong, Findelhaus Bethesda auf Hongkong (Berlin: Selbstverlag des Berliner Frauenmissionsvereins für China, 1910), pp. 32–37.
16. Philipp Winnes to Inspector, Hong Kong, January 14, 1861, A-1.4, #14; Lechler to Committee, January 10, 1862, ibid., #19; Lechler to Inspector, “Erster Quartalbericht,” April 1868, A-1.6, #5.
17. Schlatter, Rudolf Lechler, pp. 183–87. Accompanying the Lechlers were two girls who had been affianced to Hawaiian Christians.

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Works About Rudolf Lechler


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