

# Hangchow Rotarian Revd. Robert Johnston McMullen American Missionary served refugees relief in Wartime China

By Herbert K. Lau (劉敬恒) (Rotary China Historian)

1 May 2016



This small photo is illustrated by a piece of very short news reported in the Page 52, September 1938 Issue of 《The Rotarian》 Magazine: “In the fore front of relief activities, among 26,000 refugees, in Hangchow, China, are these seven Rotarians --- members of the Hangchow Rotary Club.”

The news line is rather brief that readers may not be able to learn about what exactly is the story. In the photo, sitting in the center is Revd. Dr. Robert Johnston McMullen (明思德牧師), American Presbyterian missionary and President of the China Red Cross in Hangchow; at his right arm is Revd. Dr. Stephen Douglas Sturton (蘇達立醫生), British missionary, Secretary of the Hangchow Red Cross and Superintendent of Church Missionary Society (CMS) Hangchow Hospital (廣濟醫院); and at McMullen’s left side is Edward Hyers Clayton (葛烈騰校長), American Baptist Foreign Mission Society in charge of Wayland Academy (蕙蘭中學). Also in the front row left-1 is Tian Hao-Zheng (田浩征) who was a member of the Hangchow Red Cross and an executive secretary of the CMS Hangchow Hospital.

Hangchow (*Hangzhou*) (杭州) was captured by the Japanese army in December 1937, soon after the Battle of Shanghai (淞滬會戰) of which was the on-going aggression by the Imperial Japan to China since 18 September 1931 commencing in Shenyang (瀋陽), northeastern China. A large number of citizens were relocated before the Japanese troop arrived, leaving less than 100,000 people in the city, according to historical documents. The Rotary Club of Hangchow (杭州扶輪社) was also broken leaving the “magnificent seven”, as shown in the photo, stayed behind joining a Red Cross organization which was comprised of local Hangchow citizens and foreigners who helped shelter the remaining citizens, especially women and children during the devastating war. Hospitals (including the CMS Hospital led by Sturton), churches, and schools

built by Great Britain, the United States and France --- countries which were neutral that yet to declare war against Japan --- provided the main shelters for the war refugees.

Robert J. McMullen (*Classification: Institutions & Hospitals*) was the charter president of the Hangchow Rotary Club which was admitted to Rotary International on 23 June 1932. The Club was the first Mandarin speaking Club in history, located in Hangchow (*Hangzhou*), capital city of Chekiang (*Zhejiang*) Province of the Republic of China (中華民國浙江省省會杭州市). Stephen D. Sturton (*Classification: Hospitals*) was one of the 24 charter members. He was the Rotarian who rejuvenated the broken Rotary Club of Hangchow after the victory of the Imperial Japan's surrender in 1945, and then served as its Club President in 1947-1948.



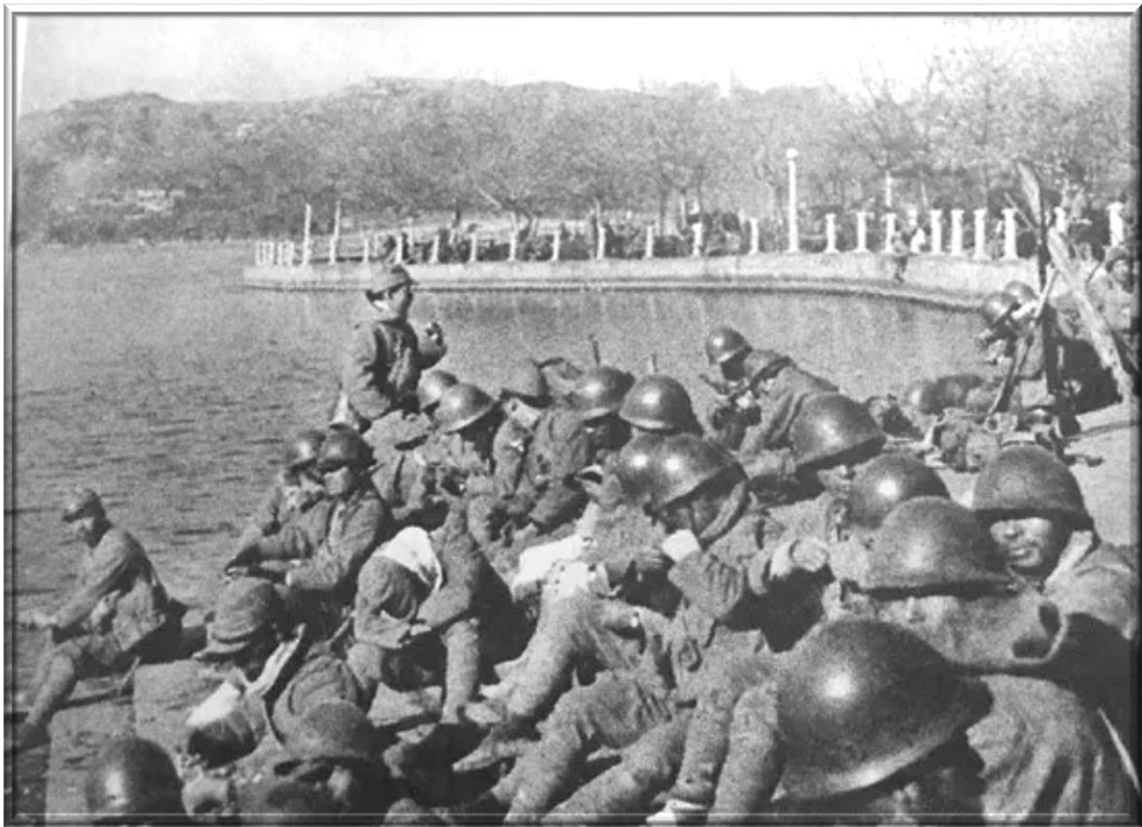
*The 1938 Gum, Inc. 《Horrors of War》 #41 – Chinese victims of war*



*The 1938 Gum, Inc. 《Horrors of War》 #60 – American homes looted at Hangchow*



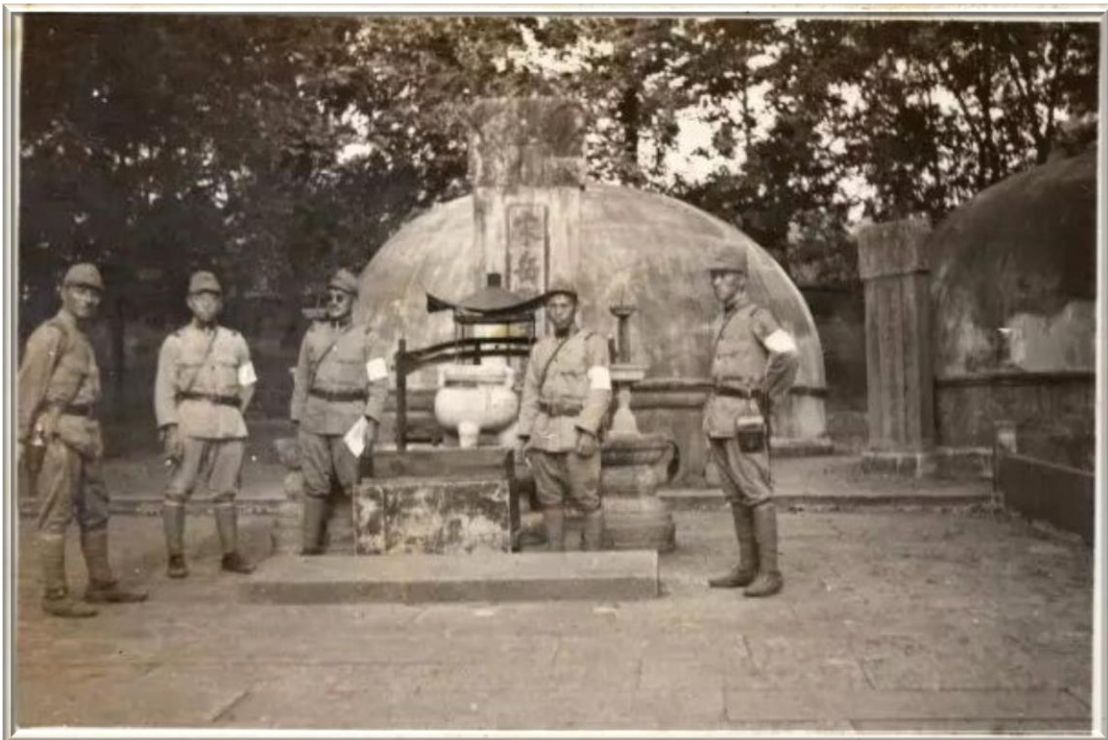
*The Imperial Japan's aggression to Hangchow in 1937 – photos taken at West Lake*



*The Imperial Japan's aggression to Hangchow in 1937 – photos taken at West Lake*



*The Imperial Japan's aggression to Hangchow in 1937*



*The Imperial Japan's Aggression to Hangchow in 1937*

## The Story of Robert Johnston McMullen



*Robert Johnston McMullen  
Charter President 1932-1933 of the Rotary Club of Hangchow, China*

Reverend Dr. Robert Johnston McMullen, *HonDDiv*, EdD, PhD, MA, BDiv, (牧師明思德博士) (18 May 1884 – 26 October 1962) was an American pastor, missionary, and academic administrator. A graduate of Centre College and Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, he was licensed to preach in April 1909 and soon left the country to begin a period of more than thirty years in Hangchow (*Hangzhou*) (杭州), Republic of China (中華民國). He worked as a Presbyterian missionary from 1911 to 1932 before joining the faculty of Hangchow Christian College (之江大學) and eventually becoming the College's president for four years. After a seven-month detainment in a Japanese prison camp, McMullen returned to the United States in 1943 and was elected president of his alma mater the next year.

McMullen was born on 18 May 1884, in Blackstock, South Carolina, to Henrietta Johnston and John Calvin McMullen, and raised in Kentucky, United States. His father, John Calvin McMullen, served as pastor of the Midway Presbyterian Church in Kentucky from 1893 to 1905 before moving on to Mississippi. Located on the main rail line from Lexington to Frankfort and Louisville, Midway was in the heart of “bluegrass country” and was well connected with the rest of the State. In 1901, the younger McMullen enrolled in Centre College, a Presbyterian institution in nearby Danville which drew the bulk of its students from central Kentucky and prepared many of them for the ministry. McMullen was a “joiner” in college, belonging to a fraternity and debating society, managing the baseball and football teams, and becoming a leader of the campus Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). It was at a regional Y camp in North Carolina during the summer of 1902 that he wrote his father about the “sweet fellowship” and “Christian spirit” of the gathering and declared, almost in passing, that “I now am almost decided to enter the ministry.” McMullen graduated in 1905. After a year teaching high school in Stanford, Kentucky, McMullen enrolled in the Presbyterian Theological Seminary at Louisville,

where he was ordained in 1909. He graduated with a Bachelor of Divinity degree from Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary in 1909 and later earned a Ph.D. from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and two degrees, a Master of Arts and a Doctor of Education, from Columbia University in New York. He was also a graduate of Princeton University in New Jersey. He was licensed to preach by the West Lexington Presbytery on 7 April 1909.

McMullen married Emma Hadassah Moffett the next year, and in January 1911, the newlyweds set off for China and a life in the mission field, with McMullen taking the Chinese name *Ming Si-De* (明思德).

## Missionary Career to Eastern China

The year after getting married, McMullen and his wife left for mission work for the Presbyterian Church in the United States (commonly the “Southern Presbyterian Church”) in the Chinese city of Hangchow. When Robert and Emma McMullen arrived in Hangchow in 1911, there were some 3,500 Protestant missionaries operating in the whole of China, with an estimated 172,000 Chinese Protestant Christians. The Northern Presbyterians (美北長老會) had 290 missionaries in 8 fields and 18,470 organized congregants. The Southern Presbyterians (美南長老會) had a much smaller operation with 2 adjacent fields inland from Shanghai (上海), the Mid-China Mission and the North Kiangsu (*Jiangsu*) (江蘇省) Mission, on either side of the Yangtze River (長江); in 1912, there were 128 missionaries doing evangelical, medical, and educational work and only 2,500 congregants to show for their labors. In Hangchow, then a city of about 300,000, there were 6 organized Presbyterian churches with about 500 adherents, or less than 0.2% of the city’s population. Seen in a broader context, after nearly a century of missionary effort, the number of Chinese Protestants of any denomination remained dismally small.

As seen in the large, by the time the McMullens arrived, missionaries in China were effectively grappling with 4 key challenges that Christian missionary work in general faced: they had established geographical spaces, known as “fields”, that organized their work and kept their efforts from direct competition; they had devised social structures (chapels, clinics, and schools) that served these efforts by both delineating a district Christian community and yet remaining open to the inclusion of new communications; they had figured --- and were figuring --- out means of study and reflection (schools, Bible study, prayer meetings, and rituals of worship) that promoted the subjective transformation of individuals in a Chinese context; and they had begun to tackle the complex question of indigenization that was posed by the simple fact that the long-term success of the missionary effort depended on a growing number of Chinese Christians.

The early career of McMullen is known very little. Like all newcomers to the mission field, the McMullens were plunged into intensive language study upon arrival. The Mid-China Mission had only recently adopted a new six-part program spread over six years, and for the first three years of residency, newcomers did little else but work on the language. As often happened, Emma McMullen developed spoken proficiency as much from managing the kitchen and household staff as in formal study, while Robert McMullen --- unlike many others --- plunged into a ferocious pursuit of linguistic mastery, taking on additional tutors and extending his lessons well beyond the prescribed program --- becoming, by several accounts, quite fluent. Gradually, the McMullens began to put their shoulders under the load. Over the next dozen years, McMullen’s work was in keeping with an evangelist’s job description. He began itinerating



to various churches and outstations in the surrounding countryside, developing the familiarity with local geography. He began visiting the Tehtsin (*Deqing*) (德清縣) county about 40 km north of Hangchow on the way toward Mogan Shan (莫干山), gradually assuming more of the pastoral work there; he took charge of an outstation in Yuhang (餘杭縣) county and organized a church there, as well as Xinmin Society (新公社) chapel and clinic just beyond the north gate of the city.

Overseeing construction was a recurring theme in these years. McMullen was involved in the building of the Union Girls' School (弘道女校) in Hangchow during 1915-1916 and in 1916 spent a lot of time in the planning for the Stuart Memorial Church (湖山堂), where troubles with contractors and with finances caused a headache. He was also instrumental in building up a congregation for this new in-town church --- largely through teaching English at a government commercial school, one of the three state institutions in the city, where he was able by persistent personalizing and close contact with the students to draw some of their number to Bible classes and Sunday services --- demonstrating in the process that pursuit of individual salvation that was at the heart of missionary evangelism. By the mid-1920s, McMullen's work among students had grown until it had become necessary to get someone to help him with this work.

Time constraints increased, too, as McMullen became the Mid-China Mission's point man on various boards (for the Nanking Seminary, the Hangchow Christian College, the National Chinese Christian Council, and the Board of Managers of the Shanghai American School) and in the work of flood relief --- spending half his time in 1923 overseeing more than a thousand of the poorer men in rebuilding dykes injured by the flood last spring and summer resulting in the entire destruction of crops in many places, especially in the Yuhang District which was under the care of McMullen. This relief work recurred several times in the 1920s, culminating in McMullen's service for the national government's Flood Relief Commission convened in response to the giant Yangtze flood of 1931. The variety, and also the often incidental nature of this work, was characteristic of missionary life, making it anything but settled and routine --- and this was quite independent of the larger upheavals going on in the Chinese context of missionary life during these years.

## Responding to a changing Chinese context

A bare outline of activities, drawn from bland and ever-hopeful annual reports, captures none of the dramatic revision of the Protestant missionary project in China that was taking place in the early decades of the twentieth century. Nineteenth-century American missionaries, to copy a stereotype only too often seen, had come to China contemptuous of a heathen culture that was, in their view, trapped in sin and moral depravity. They saw little of value in China's traditions, weighing in against its family system's treatment of women, its benighted educational and political institutions, and above all its idolatrous religious practices. They carried with them an absolute certitude of Christian faith and an unyielding confidence in the superiority of Western civilization, because it was Christian. They measured their own achievement in terms of the spread of these values to China, and any seeming resistance to the "Word" among the Chinese only served to rekindle the missionary zeal to save souls, most especially when periodic Chinese violence against foreigners made missionaries martyrs of their faith. This insularity of outlook congealed into a kind of permanent foreignness that isolated many missionaries from the reformations going on around them and registered change almost entirely in terms of their spiritual mission. Such a caricature certainly gives a biased picture of a more complicated company, and it should not obscure the fact that even the most dogmatic missionary

denunciation of superstition, foot binding, and opium consumption was in some alignment with the self-strengthening goals of Ch'ing-era Chinese reformers. But this was an alignment, not an alliance, and by the 1920s, Chinese Christians often complained that the very insularity of the missionary message ensured its incompatibility with Chinese culture and marked Chinese converts as cultural renegades or servants of imperialism.

It has long been a familiar trope of historiography to see American missionary work in China as an instrument of Western imperialism, and for many younger missionaries of McMullen's generation this was a disturbing association as they grappled with changing Chinese realities during the 1910s and 1920s. It can already be seen the generational tension among the missionaries at the Hangchow station in their responses to the Xinhai Revolution of 1911 (辛亥革命) that overthrow the Ch'ing Empire (大清帝國). All applauded the change and saw it as "Christianity's opportunity in China," but they did so in markedly different registers. To a younger generation, like McMullen and his close friend Eugene Barnett, the Revolution raised hope for a "new China", with a government responsive to human needs and pursuing social reforms, sanitation, poor relief, and economic development. To McMullen and the missionaries' greatest fear, it was the unchristian attitude of foreign nations in refusing to help the new government. And indeed it was precisely the refusal of the major powers to renounce extraterritorial treaty rights and their high-handed dismissal of Chinese claims to sovereignty at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 --- allowing Japanese territorial encroachments and shattering the Wilsonian moment in Asia --- that produced the angry cacophony of new intellectual and political currents known as the May Fourth Movement (五四運動), so named for the movement in 1919 when China's international humiliation became public. The heterodox calls among Chinese intellectuals and political elites for a new culture and a new literature and for a more affirmative orientation to modernity, dispensing with a defense of the traditional and the outmoded and embracing a modern worldview, all combined to shift the ground under the missionary project.

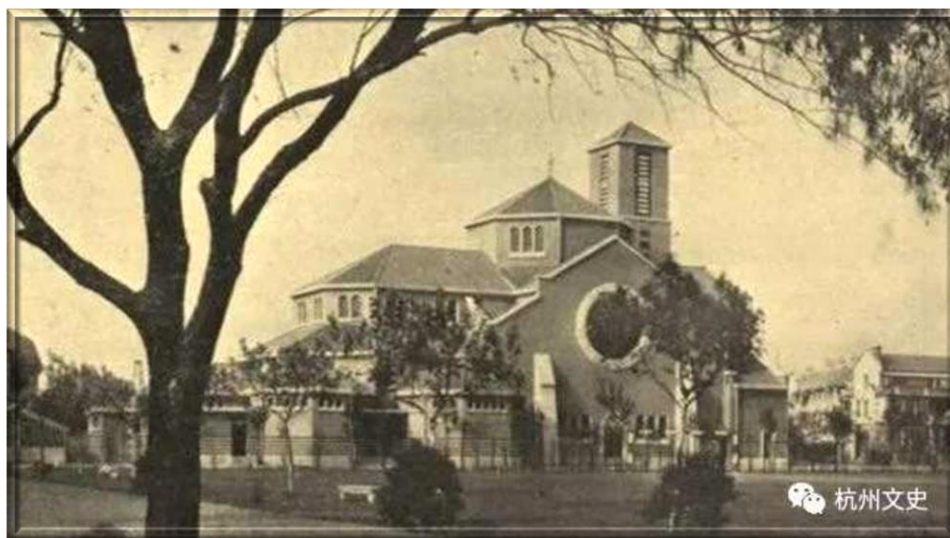
Here were the two universes of engagement and dispute that would occupy McMullen in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Among foreign missionaries, the editorial board of the *Chinese Recorder* in 1929 drew an explicit contrast between the "primitive missionary", serving one country, representing a single culture, and "troubled little, if at all, with any differences in economic levels of 'sending' and 'receiving' human improvement, searching for a blend of culture, even a "world-culture", and working with the Chinese as "*colleagues ... in search of a new and wider culture or civilization permeated by the spirit of Christ*". Within the various networks of foreign missionaries in China, this tension --- which was both generational and ideological --- would be played out in the doctrinal conflicts among missionaries during these years in both the United States and China. At the same time, among Chinese intellectuals and within the Christian Church of China, the tension was more between a view of social reform from the top down, emphasizing individual character, exemplary leadership, and a Christian moral compass, and the need for more radical social reform from below, based on collective action, structural renovation, and Chinese autonomy. These issues would play out in debates between foreign missionaries of the "modern" variety and their Chinese Christian interlocutors over such issues as education, national leadership, and the role of the Christian Church in China's future as an independent nation. Across this broad spectrum of discussion, McMullen's evolving views always placed him in the more "liberal" camp among his Christian contemporaries, but never without regard for both more conservative and more radical opinions. McMullen was certainly



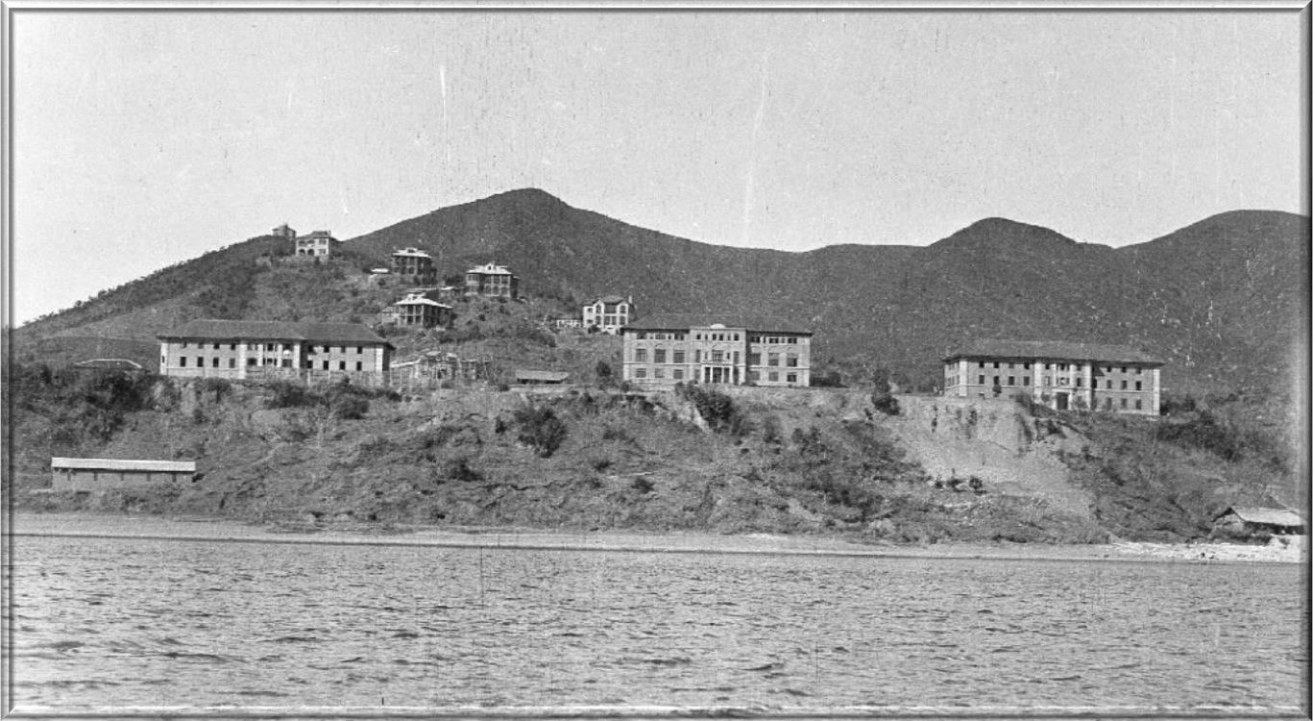
In a letter of inquiry to the Union Theological Seminary in New York in 1934, McMullen wrote: *“I am a missionary and a citizen of the world, or at least two countries across the world from each other.”* The telling connection between global citizenship and missionary work, in which two countries become co-equals beside one another beneath the universal umbrella of the church under which both Western and Chinese Christians found a voice, gave expression to the new missionary position that was emerging in the interwar period, and at the same time it became more locally grounded as it proved more responsive to Chinese conditions and tool on board indigenous voices. From this could grow a more sympathetic, even cooperative encounter between the aspirational efforts to build a “new China” and the missionary effort to proselytize a more inclusive faith. Here the older narrative of Chinese history that saw missionaries as part of outside forces imposing a cultural imperium upon China, thereby explaining anti-foreign attacks on missionaries --- whether by Nationalists or Communists --- as a necessary part of China’s own modernizing self-transformation as a nation, needs amendment. As with the issue of collaboration, recent scholarship has preferred to see both external pressures and internal self-renewal --- missionaries and Chinese reformer --- as caught up in a cultural exchange of mutual engagement across a more mixed and muddled middle ground: hearing, debating, using one another and becoming in the process both agents of a particular kind of global modernity in the early 20th Century and themselves also the early products of its emerging hegemony.

The detachment of the faith from a purely Western idiom made Christianity less imperial and more of a global project. This entailed two key corollaries for foreign mission work. First, it made necessary the indigenization of the Christian Church in China, and second, it accelerated the turn of missionary efforts toward education and a wider agenda of social service as part of Christian witness and Chinese self-improvement. Both turns were already taking shape in the first decade of the new century and became central tenets of mission work and its institutionalization in the interwar period. McMullen was very much a part of these currents, sometimes at their forward edge, but always representative of an evolving understanding of the intent and profession of Protestant missions at work in a changing China.

### Moving into Higher Education



Hangchow Christian College 之江大學



*The Hangchow Christian College (之江大學) campus established in 1911 at Tsien Tang River (錢塘江畔二龍頭).*



*Severance Hall (慎思堂), main building of Hangchow Christian College (Hangchow University) (之江大學)*



*Bell Tower & Economics Faculty Building (同懷堂--經濟學館), Hangchow Christian College (之江大學)*



*Tooker Memorial Chapel (都克堂), built in 1917-1919, was a landmark in the Hangchow Christian College.*

When the Northern Expedition (國民革命軍北伐) of 1927 and the Nanking Incident (南京事件) forced the mass exodus of missionaries from the field, McMullen, who was due for a furlough, was sent home a few months early. He spent the next year in Louisville earning a master's degree in theology (religious education) at the Presbyterian Theological Seminary and a Ph.D. in New Testament studies from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary just down the street. Upon his return in September 1928, the upheaval in China had permanently shifted McMullen's own center of gravity in the mission field from evangelical work to education. While in China, McMullen was awarded an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree by Centre College.

The educational project he now entered had begun at the end of the 19th Century as an attempt to foster a Christian community in China by providing first elementary and then middle and high school education for the children of Christian families. As their numbers grew and the children matured, the next logical step had been to provide college training for Chinese Christians who might then take up leadership roles in the Chinese church, including service as elders or in preparation for the ministry. This turn to Christian education, especially after the turn of the century, was confirmed in the parallel movement toward building an autonomous Chinese church, and it meant that by the 1920s a significant proportion of Chinese Protestant church members were also students and that the educational level of the Church of Christ in China was significantly higher than that of China as a whole. The Burton Commission of 1922, reviewing this evolving effort, had endorsed interdenominational co-operation in higher education, downplaying doctrinal purity of faculty or even the explicit Christian content of curriculum in favor of an education "*which is conducted in Christian spirit and which aims to exemplify and impart that spirit.*" While this might include non-Christian students, the report continued to stress the importance of nurturing "*the Christian community, increasing its numbers through evangelism, and developing its strength by training clerical and lay leaders.*" Developing theological seminaries was the next logical layer of this mission project, training future pastors and theologians for the Church of Christ in China and thereby ensuring doctrinal continuities --- even policing deviations in belief and practice --- while also equipping the Chinese church on evangelize the nation and build an autonomous, self-guiding church. McMullen was, as noted, already involved in the affairs of the Nanking Theological Seminary (金陵神學院) as early as 1922 and 1923, and he was a familiar figure on the campus of the Hangchow Christian College throughout the 1920s. Upon his return from furlough at the end of the decade, he was invited to join the Nanking Seminary faculty as a professor of the New Testament. Such a move would have been a natural extension of the McMullen's own commitment to building indigenous Christianity in China and in keeping with the broader turn from evangelism to education in the nature of building an indigenous church --- all in keeping with mainline Protestant mission work in this period.

It was not to be. The move to Nanking (*Nanjing*) (南京) was interrupted by the so-called registration controversy, as the national government tried to assert a set of regulations for Christian schools and colleges. These had first been formulated in the mid-1920s, at the height of anti-foreign and anti-Christian agitations which had been especially potent among students at mission colleges, but the bid to being these independent institutions to a Nationalist heel had proven unenforceable until after the Northern Expedition. But in 1928, having settled its capital in Nanking, the new government promulgated requirements that all foreign educational institutions must register with the new Ministry of Education under certain stipulations: the heads of all schools and a majority of their governing boards were to be Chinese, religious courses

could no longer be required in the curriculum, the attendance at religious services had to be made voluntary, and the open propagation of Christianity on college campuses was restricted. Mission colleges were to have an educational purpose, expressed in educational rather than religious terms. While the regulations did not explicitly ban Christianity from campus, the limits on proselytizing set off a fierce debate among missionaries in the educational field. While Chinese Christians, including many instructors at the colleges themselves, strongly favored registration, the general inclination among missionaries, at least initially, was to refuse the terms imposed, and this was supported by institutions back home. The plain facts of mission schools --- that they were incorporated under American state laws (the Hangchow Christian College charter was under the laws of the District of Columbia) and endowed with substantial property. A key question here sharply posed: should being Christian require these colleges to continue depending on the American sources of the faith. The obvious alternative was to move toward further indigenization --- relying more heavily on student tuition for revenue and Chinese elites and alumni as donors. Tapping into this much more limited source of funding also meant expanding the curricular offerings that Chinese students wanted, thus orienting the appeal of these colleges toward more practical or utilitarian applications that would, arguably, come at the expense of their Christian character. Many warned against a creeping secularization of the mission college, a co-operation into the Nationalist project of education at the expense of the Christian ministry, and a permanent departure from the initial purpose of training leadership for service in the Chinese Christian church.

Educators on the spot, like McMullen, might argue that government registration only meant that college should have an educational purpose, expressed in educational terms; he could go on to contend that such a stance did not preclude the teaching of courses on religion or voluntary Christian activities and Bible study. In this perspective, the challenge was to develop new ways of teaching and witnessing Christianity in a modern university context. But if responding to a growing student body, mostly non-Christian and clamoring for a “modern” education, meant teaching more science or engineering, this was bound to promote standards of instruction more in keeping with the professional academy than with an evangelical orientation. Arguably such instruction would necessarily bracket, at least partially, the truth claims of Christianity in favor of more scientific, comparative, or empirical inquiry. What looked like creeping secularism was also, more profoundly, a process of educational professionalization. Christian content gave ground; McMullen pursued advanced degrees in order to keep up with developments in the fields of education and psychology and thus to meet higher professional standards. At the same time, he fully expected the propagation of Christianity to continue on campus, but not in the classroom or in the requirements for graduation. In McMullen’s view, the education offered by mission colleges could remain in accord with the ethical universe of a “new” China because there was no fundamental conflict between the goals of Chinese self-strengthening and Christian church building. Nation and church were not the same thing, but they were on parallel tracks, working together --- with many cultural blinkers abiding, to be sure, but able to act *as if* they were on the same page. Yet, for such a modus vivendi to hold, mission colleges had to invest in up-to-date buildings and facilities and expand their faculties in order to reach a larger number of students to higher academic standards. This entailed heavy financial burdens and tended to increase reliance on American funding and church supports, raising new obstacles in the path of further indigenization while reinforcing the continuing critique of some Chinese Christians about the insularity of foreign institutions.



McMullen grappled with these issues head-on in his doctoral dissertation at the Columbia University Teachers College. His focus was on the viability and future sustainability of the six mission colleges in the lower Yangtze River valley, citing the relative “congestion” of facilities in the region and the implicit redundancy of their effort. Although the average enrollment in each of the six had risen from around 150 to over 550 in 15 years -- an utterly unanticipated expansion --- a careful analysis of their finances, (the average cost per student, the proportion net by students fees [about one-third], and the shrinking prospect of additional fund from American mission sources) led him to the conclusion that none of these schools would be sustainable in the long run. As demands on faculty and facilities for a more specialized curriculum and professionalized instruction intensified, cost would surely outrun resources. Mission colleges could not expect enlarged subsidies either in China or in America, either individuals or boards, Christian or otherwise, to be sufficient to maintain, let alone improve, the quality of instruction all around. The uncertainties of the “Japanese situation” and the continuing global depression made the prospects, both immediate and long term, even bleaker. Ultimately, paying for the necessary faculty, laboratory facilities, classroom space, and libraries would strain the finances of each institution individually. For all six to pursue the same course, each on their own, would only deepen redundancies and promote wasteful competition among them. Proceeding separately along autonomous paths guaranteed that all six would stall out and fail together.

The solution he offered was a consolidation of efforts and a coordination of curriculum to maximize efficiencies, sustain professionalization, and allow specialization of instruction within a more-or-less steady state of resources. In his thesis, McMullen carefully reviewed these recommendations as well as the obstacles --- institutional jealousy, doctrinal differences, alumni loyalty, fear of layoffs, inertial complacency, and distance --- that had thwarted cooperation and lulled individual colleges into the belief that “in some way they can secure the funds, provide the equipment, gather the staff, and offer the courses desired” on their own. His approach was to proceed, not from the point of view of the distinct colleges, their supporting institutions, and denominational differences, but from the point of view of China’s needs and the specific functions that mission colleges might contribute to meeting those needs. Doctrinal differences need not foil educational innovation, he argued. Small mission colleges could serve China by offering a distinctive kind of learning along the lines of American liberal arts institutions.

To attempt such a progressive program of education, McMullen conceded, was beyond the means and resources of any one of the six colleges. But coordination might make it possible. Full scale mergers --- even a general move to a common campus --- might be the ideal path, but McMullen recognized that such institutional consolidation posed formidable difficulties. He argued for a more gradual plan: moving toward a coordination of the curriculum for first- and second-year students at separate institutions that would ensure programs “identical in quality and quantity” which could, in turn, enable students to transfer, without handicaps, to other institutions for their upper-level years; the colleges could then begin coordinating different campuses according to different lines of specialization, which could promise a richer offering for advanced study on separate campuses where faculty with appropriate skills and training could be congregated. Such a scheme developed over time, he argued, would allow for both a more efficient (and combined) deployment of resources, with less redundancy and greater concentration, and a far more modern, progressive educational program for students seeking to become productive citizens in the new China.

Whether such a scheme could have resolved the financial bind confronting the mission colleges --- and whether institutional and curricular coordination could have been combined with the kind of progressive overhaul of instruction that McMullen envisioned --- may be debatable. There is little doubt that his plan aimed to bring to the small bubbles of Christian education in China a renewed sense of purpose on a broader national landscape. Small, specialized colleges, embodying Western practices in education, were placed squarely within the Chinese nation-building project. Embracing a top-down approach to building a “new” China, McMullen sought to find a convergence of purposes in higher education: China wanted an efficient educational system, guided by high standards and capable of producing future leaders; the mission colleges had the same objective but pursued it in a Christian spirit expressed not in proselytization but by example. It was through demonstrations of service and witness --- not indoctrination and curricular requirements --- that the mission college would model a way of life and offer students the moral as well as the practical skills necessary to meet China’s needs. It was through this emphasis on the positive --- the compatibility, even synergy, between national and religious ambitions --- rather than the negative, what was banned or lost, that McMullen, like other educational missionaries of the mid-1930s, sought ways to bring the propagation of the faith and the building of a new nation into alignment with each other. Neither goal necessarily negated the other. The nation and the church had similar aims, albeit pursued by different means.

Whatever its feasibility --- in the abstract or in the condition then prevailing in China --- the approach McMullen formulated on furlough in New York became his main project as he returned to China in 1937. His vision of mission education in China was, to his mind, entirely compatible with his work as a Christian missionary, his main vocation, because his principal purpose was to secure a future for Christianity in Nationalist China. By finding a convergence of Christian and Chinese purposes, he found a better way to serve God in China. It also expressed his personal reading of faith.

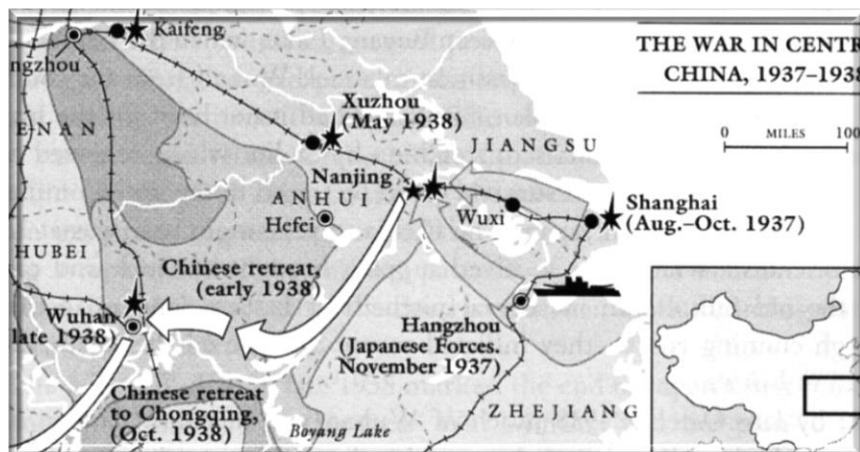
### Capture of Hangchow by Imperial Japan’s Forces and the War Refugees Relief

In September 1937, the Imperial Japan extended the naval blockade to include the entire Chinese coastline with the exceptions of Tsingtao (*Qingdao*) (青島), Canton (*Guangzhou*) (廣州), Hong Kong (香港) and Macao (澳門). These ports were not blockaded out of consideration for foreign powers with treaty rights to these ports. After the fall of Shanghai on November 9th, the Imperial Japan’s forces continued their advance westward and captured Soochow (*Suzhou*) (蘇州) on November 20th. The Japanese then mounted a vigorous campaign up the Yangtze River towards central China. Japanese air attacks on Chinese cities outraged world opinion. In light of the rapid Japanese advances in north and central China, the Nationalist Chinese government moved their capital from Nanking (*Nanjing*) (南京) to Chungking (*Chongqing*) (重慶), although executive power was temporarily based at Hankow (*Hankou*) (漢口). After heavy fighting, on December 13th, the Japanese occupied Nanking and Japanese soldiers committed horrible atrocities against the Chinese civilians (known as the “Rape of Nanking”). Then, the Japanese captured two major cities in central China: Hangchow fell on December 24th and Tsinan (*Jinan*) (濟南) surrendered to the Japanese on December 27th.

Robert Johnston McMullen had lived in Hangchow for a quarter century when war came in 1937; he was fluent in the language and well known to and acquainted with other missionaries,

foreign residents, local elites, and ordinary people in the city. He was associated with a half dozen Presbyterian churches in Hangchow and surrounding towns, acquainted with their Chinese pastors, and familiar with the challenges these congregations faced. He was provost and comptroller of the Hangchow Christian College (HCC) as it was then called, a union school of the Northern and Southern Presbyterian missions, which by the mid-1930s ordinarily enrolled around the 500 students and carried some 50 faculty and staff, mostly Chinese. When teachers and students scattered in the face of the Japanese advance, causing its president, Baen Elmer Lee (李培恩) (Hangchow native, also a charter member of Hangchow Rotary Club), to close the College. McMullen remained behind, responsible for the buildings, libraries, and equipment of the institution, along with as many as 100 people – staff, retainers, locals, and their families on and around the campus. In early December 1937, McMullen was elected chair of an International Committee in Hangchow that sought to mediate between Japanese and Chinese forces to protect the city from destruction. He was also president of the local branch of the China Red Cross, which set up and provisioned refugee camps for those displaced by the fighting or terrified of the invading soldiers. There was the fear that anticipated the Japanese troop arrival, which came on Christmas Eve 1937, and the killing, looting, and raping that followed --- as well as what he and other foreigners tried to do to stop it. McMullen then spent 8 months wrestling with the novel uncertainties of the Japanese occupation of Hangchow before being recalled to Shanghai in August 1938.

In early September 1937, as McMullen returned from furlough in the United States and made his way, alone, through the war zone in Shanghai and then by train to Hangchow, the old imperial capital some 100 miles southwest of Shanghai. Once back on the College Hill campus about 5 miles outside the city, overlooking the Tsien Tang (*Qiantang*) River (錢塘江), he wrote regularly, twice a week. The letters unfold in the shadow of the atrocities at Nanking in late 1937 and early 1938. Yet until Japan opened a wider war in the Pacific and the United States entered it as Japan's main adversary, foreign nationals in China could claim neutral status in the Sino-Japanese conflict, as well as protection under the extraterritorial protocols that were the legacy of the imperial era and could now be redeployed in the context of the imperial expansionism of Japan. Missionaries were victims of this aggression, to be sure; some were injured, and many had their homes and life's work destroyed. Most were in solidarity with the Chinese cause, and some thought that a full alliance between Christian ministry and Chinese nationalism was at last being annealed in war. But they were not themselves Chinese, and they enjoyed a certain leverage and mobility not available to Chinese nationals under occupation.



Initially it was still possible for foreigners like McMullen to imagine a truce being worked out between the warring parties around Shanghai, as had happened in 1932. It was his hope for an early return to normalcy that led the faculty and the staff of HCC to open the College as usual for the fall term. Thus McMullen's preoccupations in the first weeks after his return in early September 1937 were with making arrangements for the resumption of classes and for the lodging of students as they found their way to campus. He was clearly anxious to learn where other missionaries were and what the war was doing to other mission stations, and he expressed recurring frustration with American foreign policy, especially its weakness in the face of Japanese aggression. In the backgrounds of the bombing, McMullen was busy in filling sandbags, stockpiling medical provisions, and digging air raid shelters to protect students and staff should the Japanese commence dropping bombs in Hangchow, as he knew they were doing elsewhere. He made an inventory of College property, equipment, and library books on the assumption that, if the Japanese did bomb the campus, it would be in error, and would pay for itemized damages. In his close observations of bombing raids along the river, especially of the railway yards and electric power stations at Cha Kow (*Zhakou*) (閘口), just off the campus. Convinced initially that the greatest danger was inaccuracy and collateral damage to innocent people, McMullen only gradually came to realize that the Japanese were actually very precise in their aim and that the bombing of civilians was deliberate and designed to terrorize the population. The anger and alarm that came with this discovery went hand in hand with his hesitant confidence -- even pride --- in the tenacity of Chinese military resistance around Shanghai and a guarded, ever skeptical hope that the powers might arrange a political settlement.

At the end of October, the Chinese retreat at Cha Pei (*Zhabei*) (閘北), north of Shanghai, suggested that the stubborn standoff in the city was about to break and raised the prospect of a Japanese advance on and even occupation of Hangchow. On November 5, a surprise Japanese amphibian landing at Hangchow Bay (杭州灣), south and east of Hangchow itself, enabled Japanese forces, advancing north along a line to Chia Hsing (*Jiaxing*) (嘉興) and Sung Kiang (*Songjiang*) (松江), to cut off and surround Shanghai. The Chinese army was forced to abandon its defense of the city. A strategic retreat soon turned into a rout. While the main fighting moved north, up the Yangtze toward Nanking, Hangchow was now completely cut off. Bombing raids in the vicinity subsided as the fighting moved inland to the north, but McMullen was quite aware of the aerial destruction raining down on Soochow and Nanking --- both also homes to Presbyterian mission colleges --- and of raids on the mission stations and his friends at Chia Hsing and Kiang Yin (*Jiangyin*) (江陰) --- all in the path of the Japanese advance. A fear of general collapse sowed panic in the city of Hangchow, prompting a mass exodus of people fleeing upriver or into the countryside; a prewar population of 500,000 fell to about 100,000 by the time Japanese forces arrived. Churches lost pastors, elders, and monied congregants; some were shuttered, and mission work was disrupted. At the College, a meeting of students, faculty, and staff decided against McMullen's advice to abandon the campus and move to Tun Ki (*Tunxi*) (屯溪) (about 200 km to the west). Considering the search for an alternative site and the problem of organizing the move, an orderly evacuation proved impossible and soon unraveled. The College never managed to reassemble and was forced to suspend operations within a few weeks. McMullen was left alone on an empty campus.

Yet almost immediately, McMullen was drawn into preparations in the city for what was now an imminent Japanese occupation. The foreign community in Hangchow, faced with the Japanese military advance in November 1937, took up a neutral stance of protection for non-

combatants and civilian refugees. A Red Cross committee was formed to organize what was initially expected to be temporary refugee camps with provision for three or four days to care for those (mostly from surrounding areas) who were displaced by fighting. McMullen was elected its president. He also oversaw an ecumenical charities committee and chaired the ad hoc group of foreign residents who assumed new and more complicated roles of intercession with the conquerors.

As McMullen became the spokesman of these groups, he was aware of the efforts by the International Committee in Shanghai, led by Jesuit priest Father Robert Jacquinet de Besange (饒家駒神父), to establish a safe zone for refugees in that city, next to the French Concession. Opened in early November 1937, after weeks of laborious negotiation with both Japanese and Chinese combatants, the Jacquinet Safe Zone soon took over 250,000 refugees crowded into a narrow enclave, with battle raging all around. In mid-November, a similar International Committee in Nanking tried to follow the Shanghai model as the Japanese offensive closed in. But Japanese commanders, bent on a decisive victory and facing a determined Chinese defense of the national capital, refused to guarantee a safe zone inside the city. A de facto zone for refugees was recognized by Chinese authorities before they abandoned Nanking, but a last-ditch effort to get both sides to declare a three-day truce that would have allowed Chinese troops to leave before the Japanese entered got nowhere. Once inside the city walls, Japanese military units routinely violated the safety of the refugee zone on the grounds that fleeing Chinese troops, trapped on the city, were hiding among the civilians; over the next several weeks they hauled out thousands of what they claimed were “plainclothes” soldiers and killed them; raping, looting, and terrifying civilians as they went. McMullen and other foreigners in Hangchow may not have known of these developments.

It was the experience of Shanghai, not even in Nanking, that led the International Committee in Hangchow to pursue a different strategy in early December. While the creation of a safe zone for refugees inside the city was discussed and shelters of refuge were established in foreign mission schools, churches, and private residences, the Hangchow Committee quickly moved to try and get Hangchow treated as an open city, appealing to the Japanese through their consul and to Chinese military commanders through the local chamber of commerce to spare destruction of this ancient and beautiful city. As meetings grew longer and tasks more complicated, tensions mounted and bickering could be detected among the foreigners remaining in the city, leading to an angry flare-up between McMullen and Dr. Robert Ferris Fitch (費佩德博士) (also a charter member of Hangchow Rotary Club), another Presbyterian missionary and President 1922-1931 of HCC, in early December over the measures to be taken. In the event and without certainty until the very last minute, a tacitly negotiated agreement enabled Chinese troops to pull out of the city before the Japanese entered, unopposed. While the sequel was ugly nonetheless, the mass murder of suspected Chinese soldiers did not take place in Hangchow as it had in Nanking. The critical difference in this case was probably the success of the International Committee in getting Chinese forces to leave the city without a fight and convincing the Japanese that no defense of the city was intended. Not only were the foreigners totally unable to guarantee that this would be so, but months of bitter fighting had left little ground for understandings, however tacit, between the combatants. It was a close-run thing, and other factors were undoubtedly in play: Hangchow was a secondary objective to Japanese commanders as they concentrated on Nanking, and it did not have the military significance of the capital, while the Chinese army lacked the means for a full defense of the city and many officials shared

a sentimental attachment to the old imperial capital --- known to all in the familiar adage, “Heaven above, Soochow and Hangchow below” (上有天堂，下有蘇杭). This allowed a singular use of neutral mediation in a contingent set of local circumstances.

## Being Neutral and to Service Above Self

Once an occupation regime was established, neutral intercession took on murkier moral dimensions. While maintaining an emotional alignment with the Chinese, the handful of foreigners remaining in Hangchow were drawn into an engagement with the conquerors that left them griping for ways to comprehend the new situation and its implications for their work. As research has shown, the kinds of Chinese collaboration that emerged in this context typically congealed at the local level and in response to immediate need --- arranging food supplies, organizing transportation and sanitation, and ensuring day-to-day security --- the sorts of matters that local elites and local officials had to solve under any political dispensation. State central authority had always been remote in China, outside of localities, and its wartime collapse meant that collaboration with occupation authorities was never top-down --- puppet regimes distilled by the Japanese all lacked reach and legitimacy. Instead it arose close to the ground in pragmatic negotiation and deal making that served the self-interest of some, registered the civic responsibility of others, and allowed for the exploitation of power vacuums by criminal gangs and profiteers as well. In all this activity, there was little or no sign of ideological alignment with Japan.

At the same time, McMullen literally “lived” the military stalemate itself. The Tsien Tang River just below the College campus where McMullen resided became the front line of war after the occupation of Hangchow. Having blown up the bridge across the River in retreat, Chinese forces dug in on the south bank, firing at anything that moved on McMullen’s side. In response, the Japanese deployed troops and gun emplacements around the campus and its environs. There was constant, largely inconsequential shooting back and forth for months thereafter. Aside from the dangers involved in this sporadic fighting, there were now thousands of Japanese troops constantly cutting across the campus, often prowling about for removable goods and threatening the wives and families of College employees. There were many looting and raped among McMullen’s neighbours, and again and again he was called upon to intervene. Trying to manage everyday life at the College under these conditions required McMullen to engage more fully with the occupiers: regarding all Chinese on campus with the authorities, getting permission for his trips into the city, securing the buildings and facilities of the College against looting, and curbing drunken and unruly behavior by Japanese soldiers in the vicinity. All of the entailed negotiations with the Japanese authorities in the city and with military officers garrisoned in the vicinity, conducted through personal visits, exchange of gifts, tours of inspection, and the occasional dinner party. In time, McMullen became acquainted and in a few cases quite friendly with the occupation forces and alert to changes when leaves or troop movements brought new officers or units onto the scene. The arrangements, understandings, and even standoffs that McMullen arrived at in these negotiations succeeded in creating a de facto safe zone on and around the campus.

Its maintenance required his presence. As an American he could offer some protection and, feeling responsible for those needing protection, he became more reluctant to leave the campus for any extended period of time. The gradual routinization of the Japanese occupation in the city, the (partial) restoration of order, the slow scaling down (but not closing) of the refugee

camps, and, with it, a lessening of his duties on various committees meant that by late February he was going into the city once a week. More confined to the College campus, McMullen's attention was drawn to ordinary chores: assembling food supplies, securing empty buildings, auditing the books, counting broken window panes, fixing the roof, planting a garden, and organizing a dairy herd. These themes deepened with the supervision of tea picking on campus in April. For several weeks, McMullen was out in the patches with the pickers --- mostly women and children --- mainly acting as a buffer against constant harassment by Japanese soldiers. The fear that these intruders evoked among the villagers bore witness to the collective trauma that ordinary people around McMullen had undergone --- and several of his accounts of dealings with drunken soldiers gave some indication of the dangers he ran by getting in their way. But behind this ongoing and tiresome problem, there were also further signs of a growing accommodation to an unpleasant reality. To pick the tea required official sanction; the pickers themselves were all registered and given badges; McMullen was able to use the tea, once roasted, as gifts to Japanese officials and as an income-generating product for sale in the city, along with the milk from the now recovered dairy herd --- all done with official approval.

McMullen also made his efforts to work with the Chinese puppet government in the city to resolve food supply and public health problems. Some of his closest Chinese associates were actively seeking ways to carry on --- with a cholera clinic or a secondary school --- under conditions of long-term occupation, while others considered these efforts to be treasonous. Extended occupation compromised the solidarities of collective resistance. And McMullen's repeated attempts to delimit Red Cross activities, as its money ran out, also marked an effort to negotiate some distinctions between emergency relief work and the continuing and increasingly brutal hardships of everyday survival that confronted most Chinese under occupation and which McMullen felt were the responsibility of the puppet regime to tackle. By stages he was coming to terms with the continuation of the war and a permanent Japanese presence in Hangchow, he was getting used to using his status as an American and the American flag to protect himself and others, and his war-weary pacifism was becoming more expressive, rooted now in his reading of several books about the "merchants of death".

The clear pro-Chinese patriotism of earlier months yielded to a general hatred of war and its devastation as well as a certain lateral sentimentality McMullen shared with Japanese soldiers about being far from home and missing loved ones. He never abandoned the advantages of the middle ground that protected him as a foreigner and as a neutral. Working with the Japanese was always in the mind, an expression of his national neutrality. He did so as an American, to be sure, although not without considerable skepticism about United States isolationism, which in his view and that of other missionaries was allowing Japan to maul China. Taking his position did not, however, lead to a call for any kind of military interventionism but instead fueled a peacemaker's pacifism aiming to end aggression against China. Yet in standing up for China and protecting his friends, colleagues, and dependents on the campus and in the city, McMullen had to operate at some distance from the "cause" of China --- not as a betrayal, but in the name of doing what he could within a limited purview. In this context, collaboration was for a moral good, not a national interest.

Then too, by the spring, McMullen was far more isolated --- no longer the center of activities running a college or organizing relief work in a city under occupation. In his relative marginalization, he would rather return to pastoral work: visiting the sick, helping individuals with troubles, organizing Bible study, and sometimes preaching on Sunday. Getting the Stuart

Memorial Church reopened, reorganizing the Hangchow Presbytery, and dealing with individual Chinese pastors trying to hold congregations together was too less consequential work, perhaps, but being a missionary had always been central to McMullen's life, and such pastoral work now helped, perhaps, to center him. This return to ministry amplified in these months as travel permits between Hangchow and Shanghai became more routinely available and McMullen was able to reconnect with the fellowship of missionaries and Christian congregated there. In the spring, he was reporting the return of various missionaries to their stations in Kiang Yin and Chia Hsing. He was also fully informed of efforts by the president and some HCC faculty to reassemble the College in Shanghai and, together with several other displaced mission colleges, to re-open as a collaborative project in the Shanghai International Settlement (上海公共租界). In April came the first indication that McMullen might be transferred to Shanghai as interim president while Baen Elmer Lee took a leave in the United States. This opened the prospect of a reunion with his family, and McMullen was able to imagine some kind of future in the reconstruction days ahead, returning to more familiar mission work in education. After all, over his career, he had met many masters --- emperors, warlords, Nationalists, Japanese conquerors, (and later Communists) --- rendering into Caesar without compromising Christian work. Missionaries had always found ways to accommodate these changing, earthly winds and align themselves to new conditions. And so it was again.

This should remind us that, ultimately, McMullen was acting in the service of another kingdom altogether. His was not a primary attachment to any nation, whether Chinese or American. The Kingdom of God was eternal and would triumph in the end --- of that, McMullen never doubted. This was always his earthly anchor and moral compass as he sought a pathway through war and occupation, without, as he often put it, "abandoning God or China". What the war was doing to God's children and to the Christian mission of a lifetime in China were concerns that conditioned all the copious and precise descriptions of battles and bombings, the anguish over suffering and destruction, the challenges of running a college or a refugee camp, the instinct to root for the Chinese side while maintaining a principled pacifism, the intricacies of opening sustained working relations with the Japanese, the manifestations of Christian solidarity amid the bickering and failings of the small communities of believers, and above all the pre-occupation with both material matters (buildings, supplies, inventories, and college accounts) and spiritual matters (preaching, Bible study, prayer, and pastoral concerns). All this pivoted on the war, its directions, its consequences, and its meanings. Yet it was precisely because these larger matters beyond his control or clear comprehension, had to be addressed in a very local and quotidian context that the dialogue between purpose and practice --- between, in McMullen's terms, God's will and human effort --- was constantly running in his daily life.

## [Return to the United States](#)

McMullen became the President of Hangchow Christian College in 1938 and held the position until 1942. During various times, he was also the College's provost and comptroller. After spending seven months in a Japanese prison camp during that country's occupation of China, he returned to the United States in December 1943 aboard MS Gripsholm. The voyage was reported in the March 1944 issue of 《The Rotarian》 magazine, pages 38-39. He later gave several addresses about China and his time there, including one shortly after his return and several more in January and March 1945.

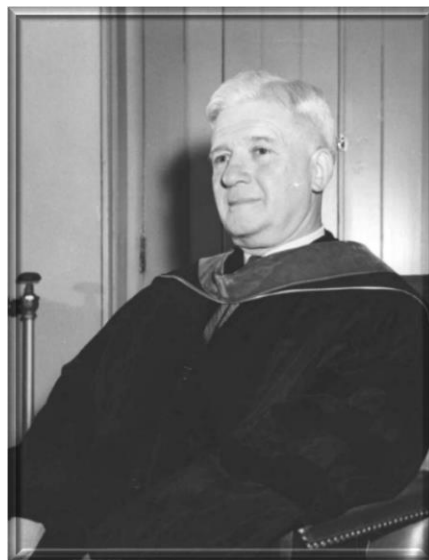


McMullen was elected president of Centre College in June 1944, filling a vacancy created two years prior when President Robert L. McLeod obtained a leave of absence in December 1942 to serve in the United States Navy as a chaplain. The need for a co-president was said to be that those at the college desired an “active official at the school”, in the words of the chairman of the board of trustees. James H. Hewlitt had taken the role of acting president at the time and held it until McMullen's arrival, at which time he returned to his position as dean and a professor of English.

McMullen arrived in Danville on 24 August 1944, and began his term as President of Centre College on September 1, holding the position along with McLeod. He was not formally inaugurated until 26 May 1945. Despite his title as co-president, his position involved the full duties of the office. During his short presidency, renovations began on Breckinridge Hall, a campus dormitory building, as well as on several buildings on Centre's women's campus. He also began hiring more faculty in anticipation of a post-war enrollment boom; this plan was continued by his successor, Walter A. Groves. After the conclusion of the 1944–1945 academic year, eight Centre faculty members pursued further studies at various universities. During his presidency, he delivered commencement addresses at Danville High School, Nicholasville High School, and what is now Western Kentucky University.

McMullen submitted his resignation on 9 November 1945, to take effect on 1 October 1946. McLeod resigned five days later, effective immediately, leaving McMullen to lead the school as its sole president for the following eleven months. After leaving office, Centre College awarded him another honorary degree. McMullen went to New York to be the executive secretary of the United Board for Christian Colleges in China (中國基督教大學聯合董事會) --- the governing body of the 13 Christian colleges/universities, where he worked until 1952. He was the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, for a short time in 1953 before he retired that same year.

Revd. Dr. Robert Johnston McMullen died on 26 October 1962, aged 78, in High Point, North Carolina, U.S.A.



*Robert Johnston McMullen  
President of Centre College, Danville, Kentucky, U.S.A., from 1944 to 1946.*