

## Article

# Central Hunan Lutheran Church's Progress toward Self-Reliance (1902–1951): A Study Based on the Archives of the Norwegian Missionary Society

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**Abstract:** In 1902, the Norwegian Missionary Society (NMS) sent its first missionaries to central Hunan, China, to preach and set up a local Lutheran Church. Missionaries in China traditionally had a sense of religious superiority. At that time, Chinese Christians were experiencing a series of national crises, and their desire for self-reliance correlated with a rise in the national consciousness. Hunan's Christians demanded autonomy for the Church, causing tension with the Western missionaries' sense of superiority. The Central Hunan Lutheran Church realized a balanced transfer of authority through contradiction and dialogue. The establishment of a Chinese and Western Council aided gradual realization of Hunan Christians' demand for self-reliance, and in 1922, the rise of an anti-Christian movement with strong anti-imperialist sentiments triggered further moves toward Church independence. However, local churches faced many difficulties and progress was slow, owing to the economic situation, the lack of material foundation, local Christians' weak theological foundation and a highly mobile population. This article examines how Christians in Hunan responded to the huge gap between their own will and the conditions they faced, illustrating the historical process of cross-cultural cooperation as cultures collided.

**Keywords:** Central Hunan Lutheran Church; Norwegian Missionary Society (NMS); self-reliance; national consciousness; mission; sinicization of Christianity



**Citation:** Zhou, Wuna. 2023. Central Hunan Lutheran Church's Progress toward Self-Reliance (1902–1951): A Study Based on the Archives of the Norwegian Missionary Society. *Religions* 14: 1135. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14091135>

Academic Editor: Tiangang Li

Received: 21 July 2023

Revised: 17 August 2023

Accepted: 30 August 2023

Published: 4 September 2023



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## 1. Introduction

From the late Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China, Western missionaries changed and restructured social relations in China. In the process of Church formation, power was transferred from Western missionaries to local Christian communities. The Norwegian Missionary Society (NMS; Det Norske Misjonsselskap in Norwegian) was founded in Stavanger, Norway, in 1842. In 1902, the first missionaries, Nils Arnetvedt (原明道), Johan Gotteberg (戈德白), Ragnhild Botner Gotteberg (戈本普) and Dr Jørgen Edvin Nilssen (倪尔生), were sent to Hunan, China, to preach. In the ensuing 48 years, the society sent more than 100 preachers to central Hunan, including to Changsha, Ningxiang, Anhua, Yiyang, Taohualun, Xinhua, Dongping and Yuanjiang, and they established a local Lutheran Church. This was combined with a social ministry, as the mission set up nurseries and schools for blind and visually impaired children, which impacted significantly on local society.

Western research on the NMS has tended to focus on its missionary activities in Africa (Simensen 1984; Mikaelsson 2003; Hovland 2006; Nyhagen Predelli 1998; Tjelle 2014; Rosnes 2019), discussing the missionaries' interactions with African people and the mission's social impact. However, one collection of works (Engelsviken et al. 2015) focuses on Norwegian missions in China, including case studies of missionaries such as Lars Ivarson Bjørsvik (贝世伟) and Marie Monsen.

With regard to power relations in the Central Hunan Lutheran Church (湘中信义会), the two groups, the Norwegian missionaries and the Hunan Christians, played different social roles. The focus of most previous studies of missionaries in China has been on missionary discourse, since Chinese materials were largely lost during that turbulent historical

period. However, in the NMS archive in Stavanger, Norway, a trove of Chinese primary sources have been uncovered, which were brought back by the missionaries when they retreated from China. In this article, the commentary draws on both Norwegian and Chinese primary sources, and both perspectives from Norwegian and Chinese sides are taken into consideration.

The people of Hunan were renowned for their resistance to Christianity and foreigners. According to Fairbank (2006, p. 223), violent Hunanese resistance to Christianity can be traced back to the Taiping Rebellion in the mid-nineteenth century: “Especially among Hunanese who had resisted the ‘Christian’ Taipings, a militant anti-Christian movement organized ideological defenses and fomented violent action”. The journey for some Hunanese to accept Christianity and then demand to run the local Church independently was undoubtedly arduous.

This article seeks to answer the following questions. When the missionaries and indigenous people met, how did they initially perceive each other? How did these encounters change both the missionaries and the local Christians? How did the missionaries adapt to the local Christians’ demand for self-reliance? Was progress towards self-reliance a planned process or a series of unexpected incidents? For the indigenous people, what was the purpose of being a Christian? This article explores the Norwegian missionaries’ awareness of and attitudes to the Chinese Christians’ demand for self-reliance, drawing mainly on speeches and books written before and during their time in China. It is also examined how the local Church proceeded toward self-reliance based on letters and minutes written in Chinese by local Christians in Hunan. In order to gain stability, the Chinese Church needed competent Chinese priests and a large number of devout local Christians.

The NMS archives in Stavanger hold not only mission records but also many handwritten letters sent by Chinese Christians to Norwegian missionaries. The author, who has learned Norwegian and lived in Scandinavia for some time, carefully checked and sorted through the materials during three visits to the NMS archive. Drawing on these letters, reports of meetings and other first-hand materials, the author investigated the transfer of authority and close interactions between foreign missionaries and local people and analyzed how the church in Hunan grew and became independent. A field trip to several counties and villages in Hunan was conducted. Dialogue was built from both Norwegian and Chinese perspectives. This article discusses the specific difficulties and problem-solving styles in communications between NMS missionaries and Hunanese people and analyzes the sinicization of Christianity based on cross-cultural cooperation.

## 2. The Beginning of the Transfer of Authority from the Mission to the Church

The NMS missionaries, like most Western missionaries, came to China with a strong faith to convert Chinese people to Christianity, which they believed would lead the local people to a better and more spiritual life. Hunan province opened up to foreigners relatively late. In fact, in 1902, the year the first NMS missionaries arrived, a horrifying incident occurred in Chenzhou, Hunan, when two British missionaries, J. R. Bruce and R. H. Lewis, were murdered as “rumors spread that they were responsible for the cholera epidemic at the time” (Lian 2004, p. 857). Changsha, the capital city of Hunan, had earned the nickname “iron-gate city” at that time, and many missionaries used this term to characterize the difficulties of entry. Marshall Broomhall (1866–1937), a British missionary in the China Inland Mission, referred to Changsha as “the city of iron gate” as early as 1907 (Broomhall 1907, p. 210). Other missions, including the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, also observed this trait of Changsha, which Findlay (1921, p. 497) claimed arose during the Taiping period, owing to the local people’s relentless resistance to the Taiping troops. According to Findlay, local people were quite proud of this reputation and the distinctive character it implied. Some missionaries even compared Hunan with Tibet and the Forbidden City, describing Hunan as “one of the few places in the world where foreigners dare not enter” (Platt 2015, pp. 25–26).

This reputation is also reflected in the fact that Hunan was always in the “national spotlight” and at “the forefront of reform as well as revolution” from the mid-nineteenth century onwards (Zheng 2008, pp. 1135–36). The NMS missionaries are likely to have encountered external obstacles, such as dialects and food, but the inner ambition and aggressiveness in the local society were far more daunting for foreigners living in Hunan at that time. According to Sven Nilssen (倪卫顺), the son of Dr Jørgen Edvin Nilssen, the Hunanese were proud of this reputation and disdained associations with the “yangguizi”, a pejorative term for foreigners (Nilssen 1942, p. 157).<sup>1</sup> At that time, Chinese Christians were experiencing the homeland crisis, and their desire for self-reliance correlated positively with the national consciousness. With the outbreak of the revolution in 1911, the contradictions of civil war escalated. Then, triggered by major events such as the anti-Christian movement and the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War, the national consciousness strengthened, and the Christians in Hunan also demanded autonomy for the Church. The Central Hunan Lutheran Church accomplished a transfer of authority, and consensus was reached through dialogue. Thus, at the beginning of the transfer of the Church’s authority, the trend was towards balance, for example with the emergence and development of a Chinese and Western Council, which reflected gradual realization of the Hunan Christians’ demand for self-reliance.

### 2.1. NMS Missionaries’ Preconceptions of China

The nineteenth century marked the peak of the Christian missionary movement. Across oceans and continents, missionaries regarded their work as the call of God. The roles and behavior of missionaries adhered to Biblical paradigms, such as Peter preaching the gospel and Paul as an apostle to the Gentiles. Missionaries crossing national boundaries to preach were also following Jesus’ advocacy of preaching to and serving the Gentiles, even though they were despised by the Jews. The missionaries who traveled across the ocean took Jesus and the apostles as their model for preaching and the Biblical tradition of preaching as their spiritual pillar. Latourette (2009, pp. 26–27) observes that “active fraternity” is rooted in the Christian faith and that the missionaries’ understanding of human society was to bring it closer to the “Kingdom of God”, as was evident in the NMS’s mission activities.

The NMS missionaries to China regarded themselves as apostles serving their faith and following their inner call. Andreas Fleischer (傅乃士, 1878–1957), one of the earliest missionaries sent to China, made two speeches at the Norwegian mother church before his departure and received warm responses from the audience. In one speech, published in a pamphlet, he used himself as an example to stress the importance of missionary work: “As a missionary who will be sent to China in September this year, I want to tell you from the bottom of my heart... Missionary work is the most fundamental and necessary element of Christianity” (Fleischer 1904, p. 3). In his opinion, there was no essential difference between Christians who remained in Norway and the missionaries abroad, because they were all disciples of Jesus. Even Christians who stayed in Norway had a missionary duty to imitate Jesus Christ. He described missionary work as “responsibility to God and pagans” (Norwegian: “Ansaret for Herren og for Hedningerne”), a responsibility entrusted by Christ to every Christian.

Fleischer also listed the deeds of Xi Shengmo (席胜魔, 1835–1896), a Christian in Shanxi Province, China. Formerly known as Xi Zizhi (席子直), he was admitted as a scholar following success in the imperial examination. He then became addicted to opium, but he finally converted to Christianity and abandoned his drug habits. He changed his name to “Xi Shengmo” and became not only a devout Christian but also an active preacher. He preached mainly to people addicted to opium in the villages and towns of Shanxi province and set up rehabilitation centers for them (Fleischer 1904, pp. 4–5). Given the date of Fleischer’s speech, his knowledge of Xi Shengmo is likely to have come from the biography by Geraldine Howard Taylor, a missionary from the China Inland Mission (Taylor 1900). In his speech, Fleischer pointed out that the widespread use of opium was a serious problem in local society in Hunan and Hubei. He made an appeal: “Now more and more pagans

are still crying silently, and their hearts have an unprecedented desire: ‘come and help us! Don’t you care that we are suffering?’” (Fleischer 1904, p. 6).

Prior to arriving in China, most Western missionaries had only a vague impression of the country’s social conditions. China was depicted as a vast, mystical country with a high population density, making it a desirable destination for the mission. Fleischer mentioned in his speech that there were more than one billion pagans in the world, while the population of China was more than 400 million, so China was an essential destination for missionaries from around the world. He called the Chinese “the largest ethnic group” and identified “a huge gap between God and mankind” that would be “insurmountable” (Fleischer 1904, pp. 6–7), apparently predicting that the journey to China would be arduous. To take responsibility for preaching overseas, missionaries must be devout Christians with a concrete faith and piety. Compared with other missions from countries such as Britain and America, whose mission work was undertaken by different denominations, the Norwegian missionaries were far more homogeneous (Aase 2022, p. 46). Therefore, they were more likely to have been deeply influenced by the lectures delivered in the mission.

Although Fleischer sympathized with the Chinese with universal love, he also looked down on them, offering salvation to the pagans. He was not the only missionary who held this view. The content of his speech reflects that when the Norwegian missionaries arrived in China, they still had a dualistic view of Eastern and Western culture, barbarism versus civilization, and paganism versus orthodoxy. This fits with Edward Said (1979, p. 63) in his *Orientalism*: “dramatic form and learned imagery”. The views presented in Fleischer’s speech also foreshadowed the tensions that the NMS missionaries would encounter in Hunan province and its capital city known as the “iron-gate”.

Opium was indeed a serious problem in Chinese society, and Fleischer’s description of China as poor and weak was not an entirely inaccurate depiction of national conditions at that time. However, before leaving Norway, he already regarded missionary work as a kind of benevolence, somewhat reflecting superiority in his Christian stance. The relationship of authority between missionaries and local Christians seemed bound to be unequal before the missionaries had even entered China. Missionaries from other countries held similar views. Wu Yixiong concludes that in protestant missionaries’ writing, the “Celestial Empire” was presented as an “autocratic, xenophobic, weak and poor country” (Wu 2022, p. 378). As Cheng (2018, p. 48) observes, “even if the missionaries were in China, China in their eyes and writings was not a natural existence, but a discourse constructed in the process of imperial expansion”. In fact, even after living in China for some time, many missionaries still retained a psychological superiority in relation to the religious, cultural and social aspects of the country.

## 2.2. Tensions Raised with Hunan Christians’ Desire for Independence

With the NMS’s entry into Hunan, the Norwegian missionaries were the deliverers of faith, and the Chinese Christians were the receivers, resulting in an unequal relationship of authority. Throughout the nineteenth century, Chinese Christians were “weak” in comparison with the Western missionaries who continued to dominate the Chinese Church. Almost all churches were “mission Churches” without a real “Chinese Church” (Liu 2006, p. 112).

The Hunan Christians’ desire for autonomy in Church affairs was closely related to the trend for excluding foreigners from Hunan at that time. Only four years after entering Hunan, the Norwegian missionaries had noticed this, and at their 1906 annual meeting, they began to discuss how to localize the Church. Gotteberg, who came to China as one of the first NMS missionaries in 1902 and later worked as the general supervisor of the NMS in Hunan for a decade (1918–1928), believed that the root cause of the conflict was that the NMS was still regarded as an intruder, a view commonly held by both the people in Hunan and Christians within the Church. However, the missionaries had no clear understanding of what motivated Chinese Christians to participate in managing the missionary work. Gotteberg speculated that the Christians in Hunan believed that “Christianity here must

have a more national character" (Norwegian: "Kristendommen her mere skal antage et nationalt præg"), and therefore misunderstood the missionaries' purpose, regarding them as outsiders (Referat fra Konferents 1906, p. 31). Many Chinese mistakenly believed that the NMS was a political institution, whereas Gotteberg said "we are here for the sake of our livelihoods" (Norwegian: "Vi altså er kommet for levebrødets skyld"). In fact, the Norwegian missionaries realized at the very beginning of their entry into Hunan that Chinese converts would inevitably join in the management of Church affairs and that it was imperative to transfer authority to local Christians:

*Like the political situation, the Chinese are also very eager to gain independence in Church affairs. It will be futile to keep Christians away from the Christian movement in these countries. The more we try to prevent it, the result will only be that they will eventually leave the Church. How can we make them [in the Church] achieve independence? We must let them share the responsibility and lead together. Now there are many objections to foreign missionaries, because some missionaries still regard them as subordinates even if they let the Chinese share the responsibility and leadership of church affairs. (Referat fra Konferents 1906, p. 31)*

Gotteberg believed that since the Norwegian missionaries had been discussing issues around the table between themselves, the Chinese might feel intimidated and might even be scared off. In order to solve this, he proposed the establishment of a special committee consisting of Chinese Christians to give them a platform to express their views. At the same time, he clearly recognized the necessity of independence for the Chinese Church: "but this must be only the preparatory step towards the formation of a local Church" (Norwegian: "Dette må dog kun være et forberedende skridt til endog at få en indfødt synode"; Referat fra Konferents 1906, p. 31). His proposal was not unanimously approved by the other missionaries. Reichelt felt that the Christians in Ningxiang whom he had contacted would be happy to have such an association, but the current situation was still fine. Nilssen believed that they should be cautious about this matter and that they should consult other missionary friends (Referat fra Konferents 1906, p. 32). Therefore, the proposal was put on hold. However, this discussion was very significant, since it was the first time that the issue of an indigenous Church had been tabled as a special subject at the conference. Related issues, such as indigenous staff training and the hospital's native junior staff, were also brought to the table.

This conference was held in 1906, which also saw the outbreak of nationalism in China. The Qing dynasty was weak and incompetent and had almost become an agent of imperialism in China. The reform of "preparatory constitutionalism" (预备立宪) started in the same year, but the Qing government's efforts were unable to reverse the situation. Many Chinese people of vision were deeply worried about the country's future. With the outbreak of the 1911 Revolution, nationalism gradually deepened and matured, and the national consciousness reached a climax. This also affected all aspects of the NMS's work in Hunan. For example, shortly after 1911, many teachers and staff in schools run by the NMS left their positions to join the revolution (Myklebust 1949, p. 214). Witnessing the great changes in Chinese society, the NMS had to respond quickly. The 1906 conference was a preliminary step in its response to the wave of nationalism.

### 3. Chinese and Western Council Pushed Forward with Great Difficulty

At the 1912 annual conference held in Changsha, the Norwegian missionaries set up a special discussion of the situation in China. Nilssen pointed out bluntly, "we are now in a new China" (Referat fra Konferents 1912, p. 15). The changing situation led the missionaries to reconsider and approve the proposal to establish a local Christian committee, although they did not determine specific steps to achieve this. Instead, only a vague conclusion was recorded in the conference report:

*The detailed rules of this will be issued when you hear the results of the committee being established. Initially, only as the number of catechumen grows should a reasonable*

*sharing of work between foreign and Chinese workers be made. (Referat fra Konferents 1912, p. 20)*

Although the NMS missionaries realized the situation in China was developing towards different directions, they did not make any clear instructions of new adaptations towards self-reliance.

### *3.1. Realizing Transition of Authority in Contradiction and Reaching Consensus in Dialogue*

The Norwegian missionaries' implementation and handling of the self-reliance issue were less rapid and efficient than their construction of churches, schools and hospitals. The committee did not really take shape until several years after the meeting, reflecting their dilemma in dealing with the Chinese Christians' demand for self-reliance. On the one hand, they delayed the administrative process toward Church self-reliance; on the other hand, they clearly recognized and admitted that cultivating Chinese missionaries to develop and expand the Church would be a long-term solution, because Chinese missionaries would be able to communicate more easily with their compatriots and would be more likely to inspire them with words and feelings. There were many reasons for the Norwegian missionaries' delay in establishing self-reliance, one of which was their unwillingness to give up their authority over the Church. The establishment of a committee of native Chinese Christians would mean giving up part of their voice and decision-making power in the work of the Church, and the realization of self-reliance would make it more difficult for foreign missionaries to maintain their legitimacy in Church work in China.

Gotteberg, who had first raised the issue of a local committee, held the most positive attitude toward the independence of the Church in Hunan. He had initially expressed concern that local Church independence would be a double-edged sword, pointing out that if leadership and responsibility were transferred to the Chinese, it would "make ourselves redundant" (Norwegian: "at gjøre os selv overflødige"). He also saw a deeper involvement of Chinese converts in Church work as a way to distract them from other temptations in society, rather than giving them true management and decision-making power: "It would be good if we could make the Chinese so strongly involved in our own congregation that they do not fall into the trap of getting caught up in the many currents of time" (Norwegian: "Godt er det, om vi kan gjøre chineserne så sterkt optaget i vor egen menighed, at de ikke falder på at lægge sig opi de mange tidsstrømninger"; *Referat fra Konferents 1906*, p. 32). However, he gradually developed a more positive view and admitted that local Church independence would mean ultimate success for the NMS mission. In 1912, he wrote to a Norwegian doctor friend, "we just help the Chinese to establish an independent and viable church, and then we will go; but the country's own sons and daughters, with hearts filled with the love of Jesus Christ, will lead the Christian judgment to victory in China" (*Gotteberg 1912*, p. 44).

It was not until the 1917 meeting that the NMS unanimously approved a relatively mature scheme for an independent committee. This gave the NMS the right to elect an advisory council composed of Chinese representatives from each parish and the same number of Norwegian missionaries. The main function of this advisory committee was to discuss or negotiate specific work in the Church, such as Church organization, self-reliance, literacy ministry, work with local Christians and seminary student selection. It was agreed that the general supervisor of the NMS should coordinate the Council and the elected Chinese leaders and that the Council should elect one Chinese and one Norwegian vice president and a secretary from each side (*Referat fra Konferents 1917*, p. 56). This committee was a preliminary step toward a Chinese independent Church. However, more than a decade had passed since Gotteberg's proposal to establish a "Counselling Committee" in 1906.

### *3.2. Emergence and Development of the Chinese and Western Council*

The newly established Chinese and Western Council held its first meeting in Yiyang in 1919. The chairman was the Norwegian missionary Gotteberg, and the vice chairman was the first Chinese pastor, Liang Jiashi (梁家驷). There were fifteen members, seven from

China and eight from Norway. The numbers of representatives from China and the West were thus roughly balanced, although the Norwegian missionaries were in the majority. In 1920, at the Council's second meeting in Changsha, the issue of Church self-reliance was explicitly discussed. The conclusion of the meeting focused on the realization of economic self-reliance and asked for Chinese fellow believers' active contributions. It clearly stipulated communion recipients' obligation to donate: "As for the fund-raising law within the Church, those who receive communion must make annual pledges (students and followers can make temporary or special donations), and all female believers in the Church should organize a needlework club" ([Resolution of the First and Second Chinese-Western Conference of the Chinese Lutheran Association of Hunan Middle Road 1919–1920](#)).

The Chinese and Western Council formed the rudiments for a local Church. Local Christians began to have a right to speak on major decisions of the Church and were able to discuss with the Norwegian missionaries important matters such as priests' salaries, fellow believers' marriages and funerals and elections of seminary students. A distinction was still made between the two Chinese concepts of "synod" (Norwegian: "synode") and "mission" (Norwegian: "Mission").<sup>2</sup> Chinese Christians referred to the Central Hunan Lutheran Church as a "committee", referring to the local churches in Hunan. The Chinese Christians' Conference Report called the NMS the "mission", referring to the Norwegian missionary group who had come to Hunan.

Following its establishment in 1919, the Chinese and Western Council met once a year. The report of the fourth meeting in October 1922 stated that the mission must gradually transfer its responsibilities and powers to the association:

*When the Chinese Church was still dependent on foreign funding, the functions of the general affairs office and the chief pastor had to belong to the mission and the chief pastor of the mission, and the affairs and the role of the president of the council and committee had to belong to the mission and their associate staff. However, with the development of the Chinese Church, the responsibility of the mission, gradually shifted to the association. When the transition occurred, the missionary administration had to adjust its measures to the time, so as not to suppress the development of the independence of the Chinese Church. ([Minutes of the Fourth Annual Meeting of the General Affairs Department of the Chinese Lutheran Association 1922](#))*

Self-reliance of the Chinese Church was the ultimate goal, but in the early stages, authority was still distributed according to economic conditions. While the Chinese Church still relied on financial support from the NMS, the Norwegian Missionary Council had more power than the committee. The emergence and development of the Chinese and Western Council reflected the gradual realization of the Hunan Christians' demand for independence from the mission. In short, the Church's progress toward self-reliance could not be achieved in one step. From 1906, when the Church's call for self-reliance was first discussed at the conference, to 1917, when the plan for a self-reliant committee was adopted, and the ensuing meetings in 1919 and 1920, the Chinese and Western Council, which was an embryonic form of a local Church, pushed forward through various difficulties and conflicts. Thus, the localization of Christianity was a complex process, and both the Norwegian missionaries and the Hunanese converts encountered hardships and troubles in its development.

#### **4. Why the Central Hunan Lutheran Church Encountered Difficulties in Moving towards Self-Reliance**

Hunan is a province with a long tradition of reforms and revolutions. It is distinguished as a "red province" and was an important revolutionary base throughout the twentieth century. Local people living in Hunan are also renowned for being brave and daring. Mao Zedong originated in Xiangtan, Hunan, and initiated a series of revolutionary movements while studying in Hunan. In fact, the local government publicizes this "Hunan spirit" even now. For example, in 1995, more than 10,000 Changsha residents voted for the "Changsha spirit" with the motto "Concerning the world, daring to be the first" (心忧天下,

敢为人先).<sup>3</sup> This slogan was spread widely in elementary and high schools. Thus, Hunan province held a special place in Chinese history, and the NMS missionaries had to adapt to this unique context.

#### 4.1. External Reason: The Outbreak of the Anti-Christian Movement as a Trigger

In 1922, the Chinese and Western Council proposed that power and responsibility should be formally transferred to the local Church. That year, the anti-Christian movement invoked a strong anti-imperialist atmosphere. The Hunan Christians' desire for self-reliance began around the founding of the Chinese United League (Tongmenghui), echoing the nationalist emotion that had burgeoned before the 1911 Revolution. Following the founding of the Republic of China, the Norwegian missionaries were pushed into deciding that the Chinese and Western Council must be established to give Chinese Christians a say in Church decision making. Thus, the desire for Church self-reliance correlated positively with the national consciousness. Triggered by a series of historical events, including the founding of the Chinese United League, the 1911 Revolution and the anti-Christian movement, the national consciousness strengthened and gradually reached a climax throughout the country, while the Hunan Christians called ever more strongly for Church autonomy.

The NMS had realized the necessity for the local Church to be self-reliant soon after its arrival in Hunan. After its initial achievements in mission work, it started to consider training Chinese co-workers to share the burden. With regard to encouraging Church self-reliance, it took the lead among other missions in Hunan. In July 1904, just two years after the arrival of the first missionaries, Gotteberg wanted to train the local people who were the first to convert to Christianity to "work for the way of God" (*Det NMS Årsberetning 1904*, p. 128). In 1908, he opened the first co-worker training course in Changsha and proposed the concept of "self-support". He proudly stated: "we are very lucky to be able to notice this problem now. Although we have not achieved our goal, we are already the leader among other missionaries in Hunan Province" (*Det NMS Årsberetning 1908*, p. 13). The National Christian Council of China (NCC) issued a "Declaration of the Church" in Shanghai in 1922. It sought to "coach the current Church and become the Church with Chinese characteristics" and put forward the "three-self" concept of "self-governance", "self-support" and "self-propagation".

The year 1922 was a historic year for the Chinese Church's self-reliance. Many discussions were held on localizing Christianity in China, and some strategies proposed preaching the gospel in the countryside, resulting in a big step toward self-reliance (*Duan 2017*, p. 251). The Chinese Church regarded the "three-self patriotic movement" as a milestone because it sought to cut the Chinese Church free from Western imperialism. Thus, Christianity was no longer a "foreign religion" but was being transformed into an indigenous religion (*Zhang 2011*, p. 8). However, the implementation of the "three-self" concept was not smooth. According to Changsheng Gu (2013, p. 269), the concept was no more than a slogan and had not really been implemented by 1949. Some conservative church representatives regarded it as another anti-Christian movement. However, recent scholars conceive the "three-self" concept as a bridge between Church and government, which may have been advantageous for the development of Christianity in China (*Shen 2004*, pp. 354–55). As early as 1906, the NMS missionaries had proposed an attempt toward the self-reliance of the Church in Hunan. In 1922, their self-reliance plan had achieved a basic form, echoing the NCC's declaration. The mission strategy and self-reliance concept of the Lutheran Church in Hunan seem to have had epochal characteristics.

Although the Hunan Christians' appeal to establish the Chinese and Western Council had been realized, progress toward full self-reliance remained difficult and slow. Five years after the Council's establishment, the Central Hunan Lutheran Church believed that self-reliance must start at the grassroots level, because "if the parish church is weak, all other organs and organizations will not be strong". However, it failed in all parish churches. According to the report of the 1924 Chinese Conference:



*Our goal should be to build spirited, lively and continuous parish churches. In order to achieve this goal, we need the help of the mission. Indeed, our urgent task is to achieve the goal that all parish churches can stand on their own two feet. Also, according to the current situation of the parish churches, there are few hopes of such success in recent years. (Minutes of the Second Conference of the Chinese Lutheran Association 1924, p. 17)*

The Hunan Christians put forward a series of requirements to the mission through the Chinese and Western Council. At the fifth meeting in 1923, they proposed modifying the association's constitution adopted at the first meeting because "the constitution is set up for the Church to be completely self-supported. Now the Church has not separated from the mission, so the constitution cannot be applied" (*Resolution of the Fifth Chinese-Western Conference of the Chinese Lutheran Association of Hunan Middle Road 1923*, p. 8). Shortly thereafter, they revised the articles relating to the selection process for the general pastor: "Delete the sentence that Chinese can be the general pastor or the general deputy pastor and replace it with the sentence that the general pastor of the mission will be the general pastor of the association without election" (*Resolution of the Sixth Chinese-Western Conference of the Chinese Lutheran Association of Hunan Middle Road 1924*, p. 6). In other words, the mission and the association were originally managed by the same Norwegian supervisor, and the original articles of the association allowed a Chinese head of the association. This revision stipulated that the top management of the mission would also supervise the association of the Central Hunan Lutheran Church.

At the sixth conference in 1924, the issue of safeguarding rights and interests was raised from the perspective of Chinese co-workers. The mission's budget committee office was asked to consider "increasing the salaries of clerks within this year", and priests everywhere were required to have half a month or 20 days of retirement time per year "to rest and improve their abilities" (*Resolution of the Sixth Chinese-Western Conference of the Chinese Lutheran Association of Hunan Middle Road 1924*, pp. 10–11). Another demand was that the budget should be open and transparent with Chinese participation. However, they soon found that the early fantasy of the Church's complete independence was unrealistic. At this time, the Church had achieved only tentative self-reliance, and the supreme leadership was still held by the Norwegian supervisor. Thus, the move toward Church self-reliance was a difficult game between the Norwegian missionaries and the Christians in Hunan, and progress experienced ups and downs.

The Central Hunan Lutheran Church's progress toward self-reliance was undoubtedly difficult. The historical data indicate that, even at the end of the 1940s, the level of self-reliance was still low. In 1948, Yu Yun (喻筠), general director of the association, was still calling for more help from the Norwegian missionaries "[we] need more missionaries from the missions to actually assist the work of the Church" (Yu 1948). The difficulty of self-reliance was indeed closely related to the external environment, and China's political situation was turbulent, with frequent wars. Hunan province was also frequently hit by floods and natural disasters. These historical and geographical factors were external reasons for the slow progress toward self-reliance but were not the focus of discussion in local Churches, which were facing many difficulties. This case also illustrates the historical process of cross-cultural cooperation in Christianity in China as different cultures collided.

#### *4.2. Internal Reason from the Church: The Economic Situation*

The first obstacle to the local Church standing on its own feet lay in the financial situation and the lack of a material base. The primary task for Christians in Hunan to achieve Church independence was to make the Central Hunan Lutheran Church economically independent of the NMS. However, the economy of Hunan lagged behind coastal areas, and most people in Hunan were relatively poor at that time. Most Norwegian missionaries were preaching to people at the bottom of society, with no stable source of donations to the Church. In annual reports sent back to Norway, the missionaries often regretted that

they could not confidently entrust Church management to the Christians in Hunan because the parish churches could not support themselves economically.

After several years of self-reliance, the Church's level of self-support was very low. Around 1926, the anti-Christian movement intensified, leading to the closure of several NMS schools, including Yiyang Lutheran middle school (信义中学). Other institutions were also affected, and Church income was negatively affected. In 1929, the Changsha headquarters church stated that although the work of self-reliance was developing, little effort could be invested. However, the self-support work of the Yiyang headquarters church had developed very weakly because Church members were always very poor. The independence work of the Taohualun headquarters church had also made little progress, and work responsibilities and obligations had not been transferred to Chinese co-workers (*Det NMS Årsberetning 1929*, pp. 70–72).

The Church was unable to support itself and was financially dependent on the mission's support. Therefore, the predictable result of reducing the mission's support would be an immediate hindering impact on the development of local churches. In fact, for quite a long time, the NMS missionaries had been struggling with the decision of reducing budgets from the mission. On one hand, they worried that the reduced budget would make the situation of the synod even more difficult; on the other, the financial pressure may also activate the local congregation to contribute more. We can see this radical move of reducing funds in the discussions recorded in the conference minutes of corresponding years, 1928 in particular. Gotteberg said in the opening of the conference: "It is then very important that each congregation decide how much they can contribute... This year the budget has been handed over to the councils" (*Referat fra Konferents 1928*, p. 10). This decision could be regarded as a milestone in the history of the Church's self-reliance. The NMS missionaries intentionally reduced the budget because they intended to let the local Christians to support themselves. This act was just like a parent stopping paying for their sons and daughters, expecting them to stand on their own feet. However, the outcome could not be simply described as "good" or "bad". Some NMS missionaries also argued on opposite stands.

Among the attendees of that conference, Marius Bendik Nøbling (林受祐) offered some crucial opinions. He worked in Hunan from 1915 to 1930 and was in charge of the budget committee of the NMS in Hunan since 1924. He pointed out that it was necessary to "take such a strong stand" (Norwegian: tar saa kraftig), because then the congregation would "really feel that it is serious" (Norwegian: virkehg föler at det er alvor), and he mentioned that the NMS was just following the trend led by other missions (*Referat fra Konferents 1928*, p. 68). His implication was that this strategy could boost the extent of the self-reliance of the synod.

Indeed, the mission reduced the budget immediately after the conference. However, it is hard to compare the exact amount of funds, because they only specifically listed the missionary's budget without specifying the synod's budget of this year. Without mentioning the specific amount of reduction, it was clearly stated that "the contribution from the mission to the synod must decrease from year to year" (*Referat fra Konferents 1928*, p. 118). The recorded budgets after 1928 excluded the salary and expenses on the mission side, and it only showed the expenditure of the synod. The budgets before 1928 all included the missionaries' budgets, which accounted for a large part of the overall cost.

However, from the archival materials in Chinese language, the difficult economic situation continued until the NMS missionaries' final departure. Some missionaries also repeatedly complained that the Chinese converts did not donate to the best of their ability. Some missionaries also reported that if the Christians were faced with higher requirements for personal contributions, they would start to give up, as was the case in several churches in Yiyang (*Det NMS Årsberetning 1937*, p. 92). Einar Emanuel Smebye (石城基), who was the supervisor in Hunan from 1929 to 1938, also pointed out that the synod could not afford to hire enough full-time Chinese workers, which resulted in many unorganized Christian groups, and most Chinese evangelists had to travel from long distances between congre-

gations ([Referat fra Konferents 1938](#), p. 56). However, regardless of the negative impact on the church development, his conclusion was that the mission should get used to the circumstances without adopting the standard set in the old times.

The problem of insufficient donations within the Church continued until 1948: “The believers are not conscientious in donating. And the poor have insufficient spare to donate, while the rich can donate but refuse to donate” (Yu 1948). The preacher’s life also needed to be supported by the mission, and Yu Yun asked the mission to provide financial support to overcome the current difficult situation (Yu 1948). As a matter of fact, in 1951, Yu’s last request to the NMS was still about the money issue. On 28 January 1951, Yu wrote to missionary Lars Ivarson Bjørsvik, who worked in Hunan from 1935 to 1951, expressing his concern about the lack of funds and asking the NMS to send the budget for the last time ([Handwritten Letters n.d.](#), NMS Archives).<sup>4</sup> The last budget was supposed to be mainly spent on local workers’ salaries. It also indicates that the lack of funds had been a longstanding issue for the Chinese co-workers.

In the 1940s, war raged in China, prices soared and the currency depreciated, resulting in stronger calls for higher pay for the Christians in Hunan, but the missionaries did not always meet their demands. Around 1943, nine Christians from Church hospitals wrote jointly to the mission’s general supervisor, Erling Gilje (吉利烈), and the hospital’s president, Volrath Vogt (符克德), to express their dissatisfaction with their salaries, complaining that the mission had ignored their requests for a salary increase. Actually, the relationship between the two missionaries and the local Christians was presumably quite close, due to their working experiences in Hunan. Vogt came to Hunan in 1909 and left in 1945; Gilje also spent three decades in Hunan (from 1919 to 1950). However, the Chinese Christians did not show much respect to the two old friends. The tone of the letter was quite fierce, and they used the expression “Stir-up trouble” (闹) to describe their own behavior:

*I think you have heard how high prices have been recently. Now one yuan can only be worth a small fraction of the original value. In name, we have dozens of yuan a month, but in fact now it is worth only about a few yuan per month. We cannot buy anything at all... But until today, nothing has happened.* ([Handwritten Letters n.d.](#), NMS Archives)

The Chinese Christians had still not taken leadership of the hospital, and communications with the missionaries remained limited to economic concerns. The tone of the letter is of an appeal by subordinates to superiors. In the final analysis, the Norwegian missionaries had always been in the position of managers because of the financial support from the mission.

Not only did the Central Hunan Lutheran Church always need financial subsidies from the mission for its operations, but its affiliated institutions, such as hospitals with better income, also depended heavily on the mission. In relation to education, even the most successful Yiyang Lutheran middle school, which was run by the Central Hunan Lutheran Church, was no exception. In July 1929, Chen Kaiyuan (陈开源), the school’s principal, announced a three-point reform plan, stating that “The funding of the school is quite difficult due to the suspension of subsidies by the NMS. For the sake of relief, three measures are now decided” ([Handwritten Letters n.d.](#), NMS Archives). Yiyang Lutheran middle school had always given preference to admitting Christian children of the Church, and tuition fees were commonly postponed. The new measures proposed by President Chen Kaiyuan reduced the special treatment enjoyed by these Christians. His three measures were the recovery of tuition arrears for children of the Church, the payment of their tuition fees in a lump sum if there were no special difficulties in the future and the raising of their eligibility threshold for exemption from tuition fees: “only those whose conduct ranks first class, with an average academic score of more than 75 and whose family is poor” could be exempted from tuition fees ([Handwritten Letters n.d.](#), NMS Archives). This undoubtedly made it more difficult for Christian families to send their children to school and increased the economic burden of most Christian families. Therefore, their enthusiasm for donating to the Church would be further reduced. In the 1935 report, Racin Kolnes (孔赖策), who worked in Hunan from 1925 to 1947, mentioned that tuition was an important source of

income for the Church, but when the tuition fees were relatively high, “many Christian children do not go to school because of tuition fees” (*Det NMS Årsberetning 1935*, p. 80). Therefore, not only did the Church rely on help from the mission, but the work of other affiliated institutions was also seriously hampered by their relationships with the mission. When the mission’s financial support was reduced, or even stopped, the local Church’s progress toward self-reliance would also be curtailed.

#### 4.3. Internal Reason from Local Christians: Weak Theological Foundation

The second difficulty in the Central Hunan Lutheran Church’s achievement of self-reliance lay in the weak theological foundation of the local Christians. Hunan’s Christians relied on the Norwegian missionaries in all aspects of life and especially in terms of financial and material dependence. This led them to pursue the practical benefits of being close to Christianity and to neglect to study doctrines and theories. The theological foundation of most believers was still relatively weak. The Norwegian missionaries often used the terms “tepid” (Norwegian: “lunkne”) and “lifeless” (Norwegian: “døende”) to describe the local Christians. In the eyes of the missionaries, the Hunan Christians’ faith was not solid, and the changing situation made “their enthusiasm for Christianity and the pursuit of spiritual life retrogress”. In this regard, the missionaries often hoped that the situation would improve and that “after the situation returns to normal, they can also return to the right path” (*Det NMS Årsberetning 1927*, p. 32).

Furthermore, many Chinese Christians had joined the Church for practical purposes. They always turned to the NMS missionaries when they were caught up in bad conditions, such as financial dilemmas and health issues. Some Chinese co-workers asked the missionaries to pay their salaries in advance when they were unable to get by. For example, Deng Zanzun (邓赞勋) asked for two months’ salary in advance because “the prices are getting so high” (*Handwritten Letters n.d.*, NMS Archives). Pastor Hu Zhihua (胡治华) from Anhua district had a more heartbreaking reason: his wife had a serious illness, so he had no choice but to ask for an advance of salary (*Handwritten Letters n.d.*, NMS Archives). The Chinese Christians might not have been able to pay the missionaries back since they already owed so much money. Chinese pastor Xiao Hanfan (萧翰藩) once wrote to Nils Kolberg (柯理白), who came to Hunan in 1919 and worked as a teacher in the mission schools, to apologize that he was unable to pay the money back, since he “could not even pay for his meals every month”. An even worse case was that of Zhan Laifu (谌来福), who did not even have trousers to wear. He wrote to Kolberg for help:

*The previous time I was blessed by your grace to receive a pair of trousers from you. I can't thank you enough. But the problem of clothing has not yet been solved, and now that summer is near, it is getting hot and I cannot take off my clothes. Please help me to give me a garment to cover my shame and adorn my appearance, and then your grace will be complete. Unfortunately, I have not recovered yet, and I cannot work at all. I beg you to continue to help me with a month's ration. I beg you not to refuse these two requests, for you are returning to your country anyway, and I am leaving Huangshaping as well. I will not ask more from you, no matter if I die or live afterwards. Pastor Kolberg is my saviour. This is my last request, please have mercy on me. (*Handwritten Letters n.d.*, NMS Archives)*

These handwritten letters contain desperate requests from the Chinese Christians. They always wrote to the missionaries for help and relied heavily on the missionaries for financial and medical support. When they asked the missionaries to pray for them and their families, they listed difficulties such as illness and lack of food. The Chinese Christians did not seem to discuss spiritual, theological or biblical questions with the missionaries. They regarded the Church more as a solid rock to rely on rather than a spiritual space offering transcendent experiences. The missionaries also noticed this. In contrast to the spiritual pilgrimage they had hoped, or perhaps even expected, to witness, they claimed that most people converted for so-called “dishonourable motives”, such as free rice, free education, a job at the mission station or support for legal cases (*Dalland 1927*, p. 88). The preaching tra-

dition was also found in some Catholic missionaries' practices. If the missionaries aimed to convert more local people, "accommodations had to be made", and "the priests had to offer their converts what they need" (Menegon 2005, p. 219). Obviously, the local people were approaching the missionaries mainly for practical purposes, not spiritual cravings.

The Chinese Christians' belief in Christianity was unstable and loose, which resulted in a cold atmosphere across the whole Church, and the number of "capable coworkers" in the local Church was insufficient to support its steady development. In the 1930s, the missionaries even reported occasional rebellions within the Church (Det NMS Årsberetning 1932, p. 78). Although the Christians in Hunan began to have a "strong spiritual awakening" (Det NMS Årsberetning 1933, p. 78) in 1933 and a "spiritual movement" appeared within the Church in 1934 (Det NMS Årsberetning 1934, p. 40), these did not last for long. In 1948, Yu Yun reported that "the spiritual weakness of the believers and the lack of vitality of the Church" was the number one disadvantage of the Central Hunan Lutheran Church at that time. In addition, "the rural district meeting did not hold examination and worship, so few students were baptized each year. Even if some were baptized, they did not understand the truth". He also hoped that the missionaries could continue to help "cultivate missionary talents" (Yu 1948). It can be seen that the lack of spiritual cultivation of Christians in Hunan province contributed to the Church's inability to generate new missionaries from within and achieve sustainable development.

The congregation's lack of theological accomplishment not only affected the cultivation of local evangelists who could go out to approach local people and preach but also seriously affected the Church's realization of self-reliance. As previously mentioned, the spiritual lives of the congregation were cool and lifeless, and their lack of theological understanding and spiritual empathy for Church offerings led to a lack of self-support and the local Church's lagged economic development. The lack of active offerings from fellow Church believers in each district affected the Church's income. Herlof Andersen, a missionary working in Yuanjiang district, reported to the NMS that most people had little understanding of the Church's operations. Four meeting places did not use their own church donations to hire evangelists but wanted to secure more financial help from the mission and evade their responsibility for donations (Det NMS Årsberetning 1938, p. 93). In addition to the economically disadvantaged fellow believers of the Church, there were also "rich Christians who can contribute but refuse to" (Yu 1948). Thus, the theological knowledge of Hunan's Christians also related to the Church's economic progress toward self-support. The Christians had a relatively shallow understanding of Christianity, which not only directly affected self-propagation but also indirectly hindered the realization of self-support.

According to Matthew Douthitt (2016, pp. 102–3), the Chinese Christians "downplayed Christ's divinity and redemptive abilities" and sometimes portrayed Jesus merely as a Chinese sage. The proletariat and peasants in China may have found Mao's theoretic system more appealing, especially in Hunan province, which had a reputation as a revolutionary region, as discussed in the next section.

#### *4.4. Historical Limitation: High Population Mobility in the Area of the Central Hunan Lutheran Church*

The high population mobility in the area where the Hunan Church was located brought many difficulties for its self-reliance. From the founding of the Republic of China to the People's Republic of China, Hunan experienced frequent wars and social unrest, leading many farmers, handicraftsmen and the poor in cities to flow to the military class. In addition, the Hunan people had a tradition of joining the army. For example, there is a Chinese saying that "Without Hunan there will be no army" (无湘不成军), implying that the proportion of soldiers and generals from Hunan was quite considerable. Indeed, many military generals originated from Hunan, including Zuo Zongtang and Zeng Guofan. The Xiang Army (湘军), led by Zeng, was the majority force that defeated the Taiping troops. This tradition continued into the early half of the twentieth century. According to Zheng

(2008, p. 1135), “Hunan remained the source of military recruits”, and of a total of 57 generals, 19 (33.3%) were from Hunan. Thus, the Hunan people were a dominant force in the armies of both the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party. During the Second Sino-Japanese War, Hunan was the province with the second largest number of conscripts in the country (Chen 2005, p. 56) The collapse of social order brought about by the war, coupled with frequent floods, inevitably led to a surge in social mobility in Hunan. Norwegian missionaries recorded the population flow in Changsha:

*The flow of people in Changsha is the largest... Our difficulties largely belong to the problem of big cities. Many members of the Church have had to move from one side of the city to the other, and many people have also moved to other parts of the province. In recent years, some people have even moved to other provinces. During the storm, many people have joined the Kuomintang army, some have become Kuomintang officials, and then spread to all parts of China. Although many people have still kept in touch with their churches, or written letters or sent greetings, many people have lost the news since then. Maybe the faith of some was not as strong anymore, and some of them were completely away from Christianity at that time. (Det NMS Årsberetning 1928, p. 74)*

This population flow reached its peak after the outbreak of the war of resistance against Japan. Following repeated air strikes, many refugees fled Hunan province. The Norwegian missionaries described the scene in 1937 as follows:

*The unseen sufferings and torture in the war are the hallmark of this year. The enemy has been pressing on step by step. Hundreds of thousands of young Chinese fell on the front line, and millions of people were forced to leave their homes, migrating to the west and becoming displaced. This year was packed with pain and suffering, in which the sadness and loss people experienced were completely indescribable. In Hunan, the situation was tense in the summer, because Jiujiang had fallen into the hands of the Japanese at that time [the NMS had a holiday resort in Lushan]. To make it worse, Guangzhou and Hankou were also occupied in late October. When the enemy moved southward from Hankou to Hunan, the whole city of Changsha fell into panic. On the night of 13 November, the whole city was burned down by Japan, leaving no houses or anything of value. (Det NMS Årsberetning 1938, p. 90)*

During the war, local residents fled, and Christians were also very mobile. Many people moved from the headquarters churches to other places:

*When the fire broke out in Changsha, Yiyang and Ningxiang were also bombed several times, and these towns became empty. Christians scattered all over the country, and primary schools were forced to close, as were girls' schools. And some students from the boys' middle school moved to Dongping. The Bible school was closed, and the students of the school for the blind and visually impaired were sent to the auxiliary station, and the girls of the nursery were sent to Dongping. (Det NMS Årsberetning 1938, p. 91)*

Missionary Samuelson lamented: “The war is like a curse. The number of people who came to the church in Changsha reached the lowest in history. Most Christians left and many Christians were homeless” (Det NMS Årsberetning 1938, p. 92). The suffering of the war of resistance continued. According to the records of the Norwegian missionaries, there were often several air raid sirens a day in Yiyang City in 1939. The local people were terrified, and many people evacuated during this period. The work of the Church “did not make progress in the first half of the year” (Det NMS Årsberetning 1940, p. 39).

To achieve self-reliance for the Church, the NMS had to cultivate a stable group of co-workers among the Christians in Hunan. The Central Hunan Lutheran Church sought to take root in Hunan, while the Christians were always faced by other temptations. The same applied to the Catholic missionaries' work in China. The missionaries were preaching in a very competitive market, since the local people were always tempted by ancestor worship, folk religions and so on (Menegon 2010, p. 68). In addition, the NMS was also facing the “flock stealing” of the Catholic and other Protestant missions, and the Norwegian missionaries had to “struggle hard to maintain their influence in Yiyang, Ningxiang, and Xinhua”

(Aase 2022, p. 69). In fact, the period of the NMS's activities in Hunan presented even more temptations, such as calls for nationalism and to join the revolution. The social disorder caused by war and evacuation affected the Church's development. The high mobility of the population in Hunan not only made it difficult to gather a stable group of believers but also led to the intermittent training of local Church leaders by the Norwegian missionaries, and progress toward self-reliance was frequently interrupted by external forces. Overall, the Hunan Christians demanded self-reliance but lacked ability and an economic basis to achieve this. The biggest difficulty in achieving self-reliance was the huge gap between the will of Hunan's Christians and the actual conditions at that time.

From this perspective, the Central Hunan Lutheran Church's progress toward and level of self-reliance also represented a historic step in the sinicization of Christianity through cross-cultural cooperation. This process began when the missionaries entered China. Each missionary or religious group took its own unique path toward sinicization. Christianity had historically been criticized and excluded as a "foreign religion", and the ultimate goal of sinicizing Christianity was to redress this view so that the local Christians could regard it as their own religion. For the foreign missionaries, cultivating local Churches with the ability to support themselves and allowing the local Christians to achieve dominant positions and play dominant roles were milestones in the achievement of sinicization. The missionary community of the NMS clearly understood this from the outset of their entry into Hunan, so they were willing to promote progress toward self-reliance and establish a Central Hunan Lutheran Church belonging to the people of Hunan. However, owing to the limitations of that historical period and the regional situation, the Norwegian missionaries and Christians in Hunan still encountered many difficulties in realizing local Church independence in the NMS's process of truly transferring authority.

## 5. Conclusions

Having proposed the concept of Church independence, missions generally started to cultivate Chinese pastors and evangelists. Therefore, foreign missionaries were often committed to establishing missionary schools and selecting excellent graduates as missionary assistants. They then took assistants to open new parishes, trained them to be qualified priests through theoretical and practical training and handed over the management of newly opened regional branches to these Chinese priests. Finally, prestigious Chinese religious leaders or leaders of the Chinese Church were selected. The strategies of the NMS missionaries adhered to this development model, which was also adopted by other missions in China during that period. For instance, the North American Presbyterian Mission in Hangzhou and Ningbo followed this model. Other Christian organizations, such as the YMCA, focused on more practical activities and transformed from "social service" to "social transformation" (Zhao 2008, p. 7). The uniqueness of the Hunan context brought specific difficulties for the NMS missionaries, yet they spared no effort in accommodating to this red province.

Lin Meimei uses two terms, "inculturation" and "indigenization", to interpret the case of the Episcopal China Mission. In this case study of the NMS's activities in Hunan province, it is also observed that there existed a transformation from "inculturation" to "indigenization". The former refers to the process of missionaries conveying messages of Christianity through Chinese converts into the Chinese cultural system, whereas the latter refers to Chinese converts taking the initiative to integrate Christian thought into the Chinese culture (Lin 2011, pp. 280–90). The NMS started with a series of educational, medical and charitable organizations to establish connections with local people, stepped into the process of "inculturation" and then nurtured batches of Chinese co-workers to spread the gospel in Hunan. The particular character of Hunan also raised challenges for the NMS missionaries, yet the "daring to be the first" spirit accelerated the process of "indigenization" in Hunan.

As Lian Xi points out, in early twentieth-century China, many independent churches were driven largely by "political, social, national, and environmental crises—including

warlordism, banditry, Japanese invasion, civil war, natural disasters, and the resulting hardships” (Lian 2004, p. 856). This rule also applied to the Central Hunan Lutheran Church’s progress toward self-reliance. The tension between nationalism and resistance to imperialism was certainly a challenge, but it was also an opportunity for the local Christians. When the NMS missionaries had to retreat from Hunan during the anti-Christian movement, the local Church workers were pushed into positions of authority. Although the Chinese Christians made no obvious move to seize the initiative to run the Church during all of these crises, they had no choice but to take responsibility and make sure the Church could continue to function while the NMS missionaries were away.

Please refer to Table 1 for the statistics. As a matter of fact, it is shown in the overall data through the Central Hunan Lutheran Church’s development that the number of newly baptized local people reached its peak in the decade between 1920 to 1930; nearly 6000 people were converted. This time period also marked a milestone in the Church’s self-reliance progress. Afterwards, in the two decades from 1930 to 1950, the number increased steadily as the extent of self-reliance developed.

**Table 1.** Data of Central Hunan Lutheran Church’s overall development<sup>5</sup>.

Time	Baptized People in the Year			Cumulative Number of Baptized People	Number of Active Members in the Congregation	Number of Catechumen This Year
	Adults	Children	Total			
1910	130	43	173	724	608	396
1915	310	121	431	2565	2178	1222
1920	756	255	1013	6506	5558	-
1930	140	142	282	12,181	6794	764
1935	222	182	404	14,045	6524	983
1940	403	275	678	17,058	8190	1080
1948	382	193	575	20,452	8746	978

It is noteworthy that the number of baptized people in 1930 almost dropped back to the level between 1910 to 1920. This article has already discussed that the NMS missionaries agreed in the 1928 conference that the budget should be reduced in order to force the Chinese Christians to be self-reliant. This radical move resulted in heavier financial burdens on the Chinese congregations, and the decade from 1930 to 1940 was the pivotal period for the Central Hunan Lutheran Church’s self-reliance. It could also be concluded that the indigenization process does not necessarily go hand in hand with self-support, because the Chinese synod continued to ask for financial support from the mission until 1951. It had not fully realized self-support by the time of the NMS missionaries’ final departure.

To evaluate the level of self-reliance of a specific church or Christian organization, we must not only examine the subjective will and cooperation of the missionary community and the local Christian community but also consider many historical and environmental factors and recognize that the local Church’s progress toward self-reliance required difficult trade-offs. Primary sources, such as handwritten correspondence between the NMS missionaries and local Christians, reveal that the local Christian community cultivated by the NMS was vivid and diverse. While gradually absorbing the theological concepts taught by the missionaries, the local Christians also drifted and struggled with social trends and crises. We must consider the self-reliance process at both “local and non-local levels” (Chambon 2022, p. 14), since the local Christian communities were driven by various factors, including Hunan’s “historical legacy” as a military province, the NMS’s “missionary action” as a homogeneous Lutheran group, ethnicity and migration.

In assessing a religious phenomenon, whether from a historical or contemporary perspective, its general development must be recognized. Christianity went through a process



of localization and contextualization, which enabled it to flourish in different countries and cultures. The sinicization of Christianity fitted into this global trend in its development (Zhang 2021, p. 22). Native Chinese Christians accumulated self-confidence step by step, fought for the right to speak, adapted their Church activities to the local culture of Hunan and were ultimately appointed to managerial positions. This case may be typical of the gradual process of sinicizing Christianity. The schools, hospitals, nurseries and other social service institutions established by the NMS in central Hunan also effectively facilitated cultural acceptance of Christianity by the local society, which greatly benefited the progress toward self-reliance.

Drawing on first-hand accounts, this study investigated the Central Hunan Lutheran Church's progress toward self-reliance and may also provide a reference for the further sinicization of Christianity. Today's local Churches also need to listen to the needs of local Christians, base themselves in the local society and regional culture and carry forward the social service that has been traditional since Christianity's entry into China in order to accelerate the process of sinicizing Christianity.

**Funding:** This research was funded by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (grant number: 20YJC730009) and Hunan Foundation for Philosophy and Social Sciences (grant number: 20YBQ040).

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Sven Edvin Wisløff Nilssen, son of Dr Jørgen Edvin Nilssen, travelled to China in 1936 and was one of the last missionaries to leave in 1950. His book commemorating the centenary of the NMS (Nilssen 1942) was used as a handbook circulated among local Christians. The Chinese translator used colloquial Chinese, including the pejorative slang "yangguizi" (洋鬼子) for foreigners, which has xenophobic connotations, illustrating the prevailing xenophobia in Hunan, even in Church publications.
- <sup>2</sup> In the Chinese archives, there are two equivalents of the Norwegian concept "synode": the "general Church" (总会) and the "public Church" (公会). Both expressions refer to the synod of the Central Hunan Lutheran Church, which was located in Changsha and functioned as the headquarters. According to Jiafeng Liu (2006), foreign missions commonly started with a "mission Church" and then gradually developed into a "Chinese Church". The "Chinese Church" was supposed to be independent of the mission. Its ability to function on its own was seen as evidence of the missionaries' effective work in cultivating the next generation of evangelists and co-workers. In Hunan, the expressions "general Church" and "public Church" indicated that the local Christians had started to consider their own congregation as the main body of the Church, and it was not subject to the mission. This was the beginning of the Chinese Church's self-reliance in Hunan.
- <sup>3</sup> The first half of this motto was taken from Zuo Zongtang's couplet: "The body doesn't have half an acre, the heart is concerning the world; read through thousands of volumes, communicate with the ancients spiritually" (身无半亩心忧天下, 读破万卷神交古人). The second half was from *The New Hunan* (新湖南) by the revolutionary Yang Yulin (杨毓麟), in which he observed that the Hunan people have a unique cultural character, daring to be the first in a changing world.
- <sup>4</sup> This handwritten letter was originally in the Chinese language. Yu Yun expressed their fear and concern of the future, since they had to be on the way to "complete self-support". He also made a list of all the purposes of spending the money: 1. An annual allowance of the Church. 2. One year's salary and miscellaneous expenses of the preacher. 3. The mission will pay the real-estate tax (roughly pre-notified) on all real estate and a small part of the necessary repair costs. 4. An allowance for the Presbyterian Youth Bible reading class. 5. An allowance for the school for the blind and visually impaired.
- <sup>5</sup> The statistics are from the NMS's annual reports of the corresponding years. The five years (1910, 1920, 1930, 1940 and 1948) were chosen to show the dynamic development and changes through the NMS's five decades of work in Hunan.

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