
Book Reviews

Myrrl Byler, *Crossing the River by Feeling for the Stones: Mennonite Engagement in China, 1901–2020*, Masthof, Morgantown, Pennsylvania, 2024. 457 pp. \$20.00. ISBN: 978-1601269355.

Can an unexpected opportunity bring diverse Mennonite mission and service organizations into a long-term, cooperative partnership? What if that opportunity is basically *presence*? And what if such presence cannot aim for systemic change but is simply an open-ended commitment to fostering individual friendship and trust? These are some of the questions raised in this intriguing history of China Educational Exchange (CEE), renamed Mennonite Partners in China (MPC) in 2006. The book has, in some ways, the feel of an insider memoir, but the story it tells deserves much wider consideration and reflection.

In 1979, following a visit by Goshen College President J. Lawrence Burkholder to the People's Republic of China, Chinese provincial officials extended an invitation to develop an exchange program in which North Americans would teach English in China and Chinese scholars would spend time on Mennonite college campuses. The arrangement soon expanded to include a wide range of Mennonite organizations. CEE formally organized in 1982 with the Commission on Overseas Mission, Eastern Mennonite Missions, Mennonite Board of Missions, Mennonite Brethren Missions/Services, Mennonite Central Committee, and for a time, most of the Mennonite-affiliated colleges in the US and Canada.

CEE emerged in the early months of China's so-called "reform and opening" period, which had been announced in late 1978 by China's paramount leader Deng Xiaoping. The era marked a dramatic turn from the isolation that had limited China's engagement with the West since 1950 and especially during the Cultural Revolution of 1966 to 1976. In the heady days of the early 1980s, Deng had said China would approach the future experimentally, "crossing the river by feeling for the stones."

Deng's metaphor also aptly describes CEE and its evolution. The program's emphasis on mutual exchange was pioneering. But that novelty came with a host of possibilities for misunderstanding, given cold war political sensitivities and China's decades of isolation. Meanwhile, the cooperating Mennonite agencies behind CEE had diverse and shifting agendas, the Chinese social and economic landscape was transforming with astonishing speed, and the aims of Chinese government bodies—often opaque to Westerners—were evolving and diverging. All these factors made it necessary for CEE to perpetually recalibrate expectations,

communication, and policies. Remarkably, despite all this, over the course of four decades CEE/MPC arranged for some three hundred Chinese scholars to come to North America and placed more than three hundred English teachers in China.

Author Myrrl Byler, with his wife, Ruthie, was a CEE teacher from 1987 to 1989 and then served as CEE/MPC's director from 1990 until 2020. Byler's deep and long-term involvement in the program means the book includes important details and stories otherwise unavailable in published records. At the same time, the frequent use of first-person and some references to individuals and places without much contextual explanation can make the book feel at places like it was written for CEE/MPC alumni. I wish one of CEE/MPC's sponsoring agencies had paid to create an index for the book. I fear those without much background or unfamiliar with pinyin names will have trouble making connections from chapter to chapter among all the people, places, and events that surface episodically but provide critical through-lines in the story.

The book has four sections. The first, "Following the Call," provides a concise overview of Mennonite mission work in China from 1901 to 1951. Part 2, "Opening the Doors, 1980–1990," and Part 3, "Breaking Down the Walls, 1990–2006," narrate the origins and development of CEE in considerable detail. Each section has chapters on the experiences of teachers in China, Chinese scholars in North America, the program's organization and funding, and relationships with the church in China and with other institutions. Each chapter includes numerous examples, insights, and cautionary tales. Among the overarching themes are CEE's wrestling with equitable and meaningful exchange, in which both sides learn from the other. Another theme is the way CEE worked with Chinese churches, navigating the registered/unregistered ecclesiological landscape in China and relating to Christians for whom Western denominational categories made little sense.

CEE's focus on individual relationships made it an outlier among Mennonite efforts. By 1982, Mennonite service work had become thoroughly oriented toward effecting systemic change. Yet systemic change was off the table in China, preemptively ruled out by the party-state. Instead, CEE focused on presence—year after year, notwithstanding the political unrest of 1989 and the SARS epidemic of 2003, in modes of work that Chinese partners largely dictated. Outcomes were rarely quantifiable, apart from tallying friendships with students who cycled through classrooms. But even that measure bothered some results-oriented Mennonite observers, who complained that English teaching helped the aspirational middle class and did not address basic human needs.

Then, in the wake of a quarter century of persistent presence, the story shifts. And in the years after about 2006 (covered in Part 4 of the book), an amazing array of unlikely, unpredictable, and unprecedented developments come to life. Chapters 19–21 offer one striking story after another of connection, opportunity, and surprise as MPCers and their Chinese friends are invited to

discuss peace theology with leading Chinese academics; build bridges among East Asian youth primed to see one another as enemies; empower a Chinese-led counseling center; facilitate a homegrown network of Chinese pastors under the name “China Vision”; partner with government social service providers who would otherwise never link arms with a foreign NGO; communicate a distinctive Anabaptist ecclesiology that Chinese church leaders indigenize and share; and much more. To mention but two individuals: (1) today, the national head of the China Christian Council is Rev. Wu Wei, who graduated from Eastern Mennonite Seminary (Harrisonburg, VA), and (2) Yao Xiyi, a former scholar at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, is an Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary alum and professor at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (Hamilton, MA).

These developments after about 2006 did not replace the work of English teaching and hosting Chinese scholars, which continued through 2019 and 2020. Rather, it seems clear that this explosion of activity could not have been strategized or planned and was possible only because of the trust engendered by the quiet but steady decades of presence that had preceded it.

After forty years, MPC came to an end, most immediately because the COVID pandemic closed all foreign exchanges with China in 2020. But changing geopolitics and North American perceptions of China had already resulted in a decline in exchange participation before 2020.

MPC’s closing seems especially poignant, coming at a time when the West seems bent on something like a new cold war with China. The book’s conclusion quotes CEE administrator Ann Martin, who once noted that “friendship and connections made” through CEE/MPC “are fragile and can appear to disappear without a trace” if teachers and students lose contact. Yet, she believed, “such investments [in relationships] multiplied by many people over several generations are enduring” (401).

CEE/MPC’s forty-year story is remarkable. Whether something like it resurfaces (in China or in another context) may depend on whether Mennonites who prioritize systemic change and measurable outcomes can muster the patience required for a long-term ministry of presence with few goals beyond cultivating friendship and trust—and then waiting to see what happens.

STEVEN M. NOLT is director of the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietists Studies at Elizabethtown (PA) College. In 2008 and 2014 he and his family lived in Nanchong, China, where they worked with Goshen College student groups. During these times, they came to know MPC teachers and MPC’s Chinese partners in Sichuan Province. Steve is a member of Akron (PA) Mennonite Church, which is part of Mennonite Church USA.