

**Stanton Lautenschlager: Huntington College Professor,  
Pastor of College Park Church, Friend of Chinese Communists?**

**Presented to Huntington University Center for Non-Western Studies**

**October 24, 2023**

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My primary research interest has been the United Brethren missionary work in China around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This research has involved some extensive work in the United Brethren archives housed here at RichLyn Library on the campus of Huntington University. As I have looked through historic records related to my primary research interests, I have been intrigued by a figure who stands off in the periphery of my research focus. His name is Stanton Lautenschlager. You may have seen his picture on one of the 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary banners as you have walked through the center of campus. I want to share a few glimpses of his career because of his connections to Huntington University and his work in China as a Presbyterian missionary during a very complex period of political and social transition.

According to census records, Stanton Lautenschlager was born on April 21, 1888 in Waterloo Township near Kitchener, Ontario, Canada into the home of Isaac and Mary Ann Lautenschlager. In 1891, the census record reports the family's religious affiliation to be Lutheran. By 1911, census records indicate that Lautenschlager's religious affiliation was United Brethren (Waterloo Region, n.p.). This would explain how Lautenschlager came to enroll at Central College (now Huntington University) in Huntington, Indiana. Huntington University records indicate that Lautenschlager completed a program in oratory at Central College in 1915 (Huntington College, March 1961, p. 50). He received a Master of Arts degree at the University of Michigan in 1919 and did further study at the University of Chicago and the University of Toronto (Lautenschlager, 1941 Far, p. 2). He returned to Huntington to teach English

and Philosophy for the 1919-20 academic year. During that same year, Lautenschlager pastored College Park United Brethren Church.

In the fall of 1920, Lautenschlager and his wife, Sarah Herner, also a Central College alumna, traveled to China as missionaries with the Presbyterian Church. In China, the Lautenschlagers first studied Chinese in Beijing. After less than a year of language study, they moved to Yantai in Shandong Province where Lautenschlager taught at Cheeloo University (founded by American Presbyterians and also known as Shantung Christian University). Initially, he taught English, but as his interests expanded, he transitioned to the role of associate professor of political science. For a brief period during the Japanese occupation, he taught at Canton Christian College (now Zhongshan University) in Guangzhou before resuming his service to Cheeloo University at their wartime location in Chengdu in Sichuan Province. Lautenschlager visited Huntington on furloughs during his more than twenty-year missionary career.

The years that Lautenschlager spent in China were turbulent years of political and ideological change. These years included the founding of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1921, the death of Sun Yixian (Sun Yat-sen) in 1925, the ascension of Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kai-shek) to leadership of the Kuomintang (KMT), ascension of Mao Zedong to leadership of the CCP, civil war between the KMT and CCP, Japanese incursion into Manchuria in 1931, the Long March of the CCP in 1934-1935, full scale Japanese invasion of China's major urban centers in eastern and central China in 1938, the United Front beginning in 1937 during which CCP and KMT forces joined together in a tenuous cessation of civil war hostilities to cooperate in the war effort against Japan. Subsequent to the Lautenschlagers' departure from China, the Japanese surrendered in 1945, the United Front dissolved, and the civil war between the CCP and the KMT was reengaged. The CCP victory of the civil war resulted in the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and the retreat of Jiang Jieshi and the KMT to Taiwan to establish a government in exile as the Republic of China.

Lautenschlager was well-placed to interact with leaders on both sides of the civil war in China. His role as a teacher in a Christian university in Shandong Province and with the national YMCA movement in China apparently offered him the status of a statesman of sorts. There is evidence in his writing that he was acquainted with Jiang Jieshi, Zhou Enlai, who became the first premier of the People's Republic of China after the Communist Revolution of 1949, General Zhu De (Chu Teh), leader of the Communist Eighth Route Army which became the People's Liberation Army after the Communist Revolution of 1949, and leading westerners, both political leaders and humanitarians, who were also present in China during this period.

For the rest of this short paper, I want to focus on two sources to explore Lautenschlager's perspectives on this period. The first source consists of several letters written by Lautenschlager and one letter written by Sarah which appeared in *The Missionary Monthly*, published by the Church of the United Brethren in Christ. The second source consists of a small book published in New York by Friendship Press in 1941 under the title *Far West in China: Communists, Cooperatives, College*. The first extended section of this booklet was also published the same year by Edinburgh House Press in London under the title *With Chinese Communists*.

The very first letters written by the Lautenschlagers indicate that they were intentional about communicating positively about their experiences in China. In a letter dated December 7, 1920 from Sarah Lautenschlager to a Mrs. Walter Ware of College Park, Indiana, Sarah wrote briefly about the difficult ocean voyage to Shanghai, and then she wrote glowingly about their visits to Yantai (Chefoo), Tianjin (Tientsin), and Beijing (Peking) during their first months in China. In an indirect reference to the more difficult experiences they might have faced, she wrote, "Not everything here is pleasant to look at . . ." (Lautenschlager, April 1921, p. 12), but then she continued to write positively about their sense of God's calling and the opportunities for service in China. She made two positive comparisons which were directly related to the City of Huntington. Reflecting upon their first visit to Yantai, she wrote,

“The hospital is splendid and well equipped, even better than the one at Huntington, Indiana” (Lautenschlager, April 1921, p. 12). In the same letter, she spoke of a rickshaw excursion to a school about twelve miles out from Beijing. Again, referencing our community for comparison, she wrote, “At present there is under construction one large Auditorium, about the size of the one in Huntington High School” (Lautenschlager, April 1921, p. 12). The school she referred to was located on John Street between Byron Street and Guilford Street at the current site of the General Slack Park.

Stanton Lautenschlager’s letters reveal little about his work as a teacher at Cheeloo University in Yantai. Rather, he seems most interested in reporting his observations about the plight of rural Chinese peasants and Christian participation in famine relief or flood relief efforts in various parts of China. Within a year of their arrival in China, a major flood of the Yellow River deluged parts of northwest Shandong Province. On March 31, 1922, Lautenschlager wrote about the heroic efforts of local officials and foreign Christian organizations to provide flood relief in Shandong contrasted with the apparent apathy of the national and provincial Chinese government. “The Chinese official help from Peking or Tsinanfu (Capital of Province) was nil. One is tempted to think that official China careth not that her people perish. The sum of all help given by official China amounted to less than one meal per family” (Lautenschlager, June 1922, p. 6).

In a letter dated November 5, 1922, apparently influenced by missionary statesmen including renowned international evangelist Sherwood Eddy who traveled through Chefoo on an evangelistic tour, Lautenschlager offered poignant illustrations of the exploitation of child laborers by unregulated capitalist industries – owners of factories and mines which he refers to as “money kings” (Lautenschlager, January 1923, p. 6), an insightful play on words referencing the popular Chinese legend of the Monkey King. Eddy was as much a reformer as an evangelist. His message to Chinese leaders was that they must “. . . give justice before the people in wrath rise up and take more than justice” (Lautenschlager, January 1923, p. 6). Lautenschlager reported that, “Dr. Eddy came to Chefoo especially

to get our Chamber of Commerce to agree to a program of honest fair business and to lead the way as the first city in China to adopt the program set by the great National Christian Conference in Shanghai for industry in China” (Lautenschlager, January 1923, p. 6). Eddy succeeded in persuading industrial leaders in Chefoo to three conditions for labor:

- (1) Use no children less than twelve years of age.
- (2) Have a rest day, one day in seven.
- (3) Have good conditions of labor, ventilation etc., and protective devices for machinery.

(Lautenschlager, January 1923, p. 6)

By 1925, Lautenschlager’s correspondence took a decidedly political turn. He was apparently aware of criticism at home and in China that one cause of the growing political unrest in China was the progressive education offered by missionaries in schools such as Cheeloo University. Displaying an awareness of workers’ movements in other parts of the world, including the United States and Europe, Lautenschlager supported the workers’ calls for economic reform in China. An extended quote from his letter dated July 1925 reveals his perspective.

That wealth alone should control the conditions of labor, should have the power to break up labor unions, to close factories at will, starving the workmen into submission, or to keep the wages so low that the children of the workmen generation after generation will be virtually at the mercy of the rich, this is what is meant by the evils of capitalism. Here Chinese capitalists are in the same boat as the foreigner and we should work together to change the spirit and system of the industry. Industry in China on an unselfish basis may mean the economic development of China and untold good to millions of people. On a basis of profit alone it means the exploitation, not only of the material wealth but of the people of China. We need co-operation in seeking solutions and in making rapid progressive reforms. There must be proper returns for capital invested and the risks of industry, and there must also be a living wage and

humane conditions for the workers, as well as a share on the part of the workers in the control of the industries. We do not wish to destroy but to reform society. Reaction on the one hand and radicalism on the other can only succeed in wrecking the social order, causing rich and poor to perish together. (Lautenschlager, September 1925, p. 2)

As the letter continued, it became apparent that Lautenschlager was developing an empathic perspective for seeing capitalism through the lens of the exploited Chinese masses and had perhaps begun to borrow some of the language of socialism. Another extended quote may illustrate this perspective.

Thus capitalism, as seen by its enemies, means economic exploitation. Imperialism then means protection of the so-called exploiter and his system by outside governments which use military force to the advantage of the exploiter. To many it seems, that some of the treaties made between the foreign powers and China during the last one hundred years are decidedly to the advantage of such exploiters and of foreign governments and to the disadvantage of the development of Chinese home industries and detrimental to the economic freedom of China. These are the so-called "Unjust and unequal treaties." [That] some clever minds claim they have traced the origin of these terms to the Bolsheviks means little. We are concerned not with the origin of terms but with the results of facts. The question is do these terms represent a fact. (Lautenschlager, September 1925, p. 2)

In 1934, Lautenschlager wrote of economic and working conditions which were causing people to turn to communism.

In the districts where Communism has flourished, the rich rice-lands are owned by the landlords and the peasants must pay  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the crop to the landlords and 36% a year (3% a month) interest on loans. Industrial exploitation also forces the factory workers into the radical camp. In North China, I saw naked boys, 14 years old, working in the coal mines, crawling in and out of the

mines, with ropes around their waists, tied to baskets of coal, puffing like animals. They were dragging the coal out of the mines, crawling on their hands and knees, twelve hours a day for ten coppers a day. I was told the capital in this mine was half British and half Chinese.

(Lautenschlager, October 1934, p. 7)

In the same letter published in the October 1934 edition of *The Missionary Monthly*, Lautenschlager calls on Christians in the West to rethink their “. . . cozy, smug, middle-class Christianity . . .” (Lautenschlager, October 1934, p. 7) and to produce ideals “. . . at least as high in justice and in social passion as the Communists” (Lautenschlager, October 1934, p. 7).

Pushing his point further, he wrote, “The greatest challenge of all comes to us not from China but from Christ himself. Long before there was a Karl Marx, or a labor union, the carpenter’s son, said, ‘Woe unto you rich for you have had your joy – happy are you poor for the new social order belongs to you’” (Lautenschlager, October 1934, p. 7).

Further exploration of Lautenschlager’s letters might reveal a more nuanced view of his evolving economic ideology, but these few excerpts at least provide a preliminary sense of the development of his thought.

Now I would like to move on to a brief interaction with Lautenschlager’s more formal writing, the booklet that was published after Lautenschlager’s fall 1940 tour of communist territory. Along with visiting numerous industrial cooperatives, he spent a week in Yan’an (Yenan), the region in Shaanxi Province where Mao’s Eighth Route Army set up base after the Long March, and which served as the de facto communist headquarters from 1936 to 1948.

One of the criticisms in North America of Westerners in China during this time period was that they were complicit with the Communists in perpetuating something referred to as the Agrarian Reformer Myth, the idea that “. . . the Chinese people’s movement was not Communistic, but a social and ‘agrarian’ reform movement” (Shewmaker, 1968 *Agrarian*, p. 66). There were those who believed

that “. . . nearly every Westerner who had a first-hand encounter with China’s Communists as an insidious propagandist linked with an international conspiracy” (Shewmaker, 1968 Agrarian, p. 66). In an article entitled The “Agrarian Reformer” Myth which appeared in *The China Quarterly* in 1968, Kenneth Shewmaker challenges this myth and suggests that there were at least three perspectives held by Westerners living in China. First, Shewmaker writes, “There were, of course, first-hand observers who described Chinese Communists as either agrarian reformers or some comparatively innocuous species of political moderates . . . At the other extreme, some Western reporters were persuaded that the Chinese Reds were truly Red (Shewmaker, 1968 Agrarian, p. 67). He follows, “A third school of thought, comprising the majority of informed Far Eastern observers, straddled the issue. The writers in this category expressed views that fluctuated uncertainly between the two polar appraisals (Shewmaker, 1968 Agrarian, p. 67). Later in his essay, Shewmaker places Lautenschlager in the third category.

In the booklet, entitled *Far West in China: Communists, Cooperatives, Colleges*, Lautenschlager describes his visit to Yan’an from November 10 to 18, 1940 (Stanley, 1987, p. 29). While he did not meet with Mao Zedong who was reported to be ill during Lautenschlager’s visit to Yan’an (Lautenschlager, 1941 Far, p. 24), he appears to have been hosted by Mao’s top military advisor, the aforementioned General Zhu De (Lautenschlager, 1941 Far, p. 13), who was commander in chief of Mao’s Eighth Route Army who wore KMT uniforms but were commanded by Mao Zedong and loyal to the Chinese Communist Party.

Lautenschlager describes the scenes as he approached Yan’an in idyllic terms. “Late in the evening, about an hour after sunset, when the light of the glorious Shensi moon was making the mountain peaks still more beautiful and fantastic, we suddenly saw about a mile ahead of us a tall graceful pagoda glittering in the moonlight. It marked our arrival at Yen’an” (Lautenschlager, 1941 Far, p. 10). In similarly glowing terms, he described his impressions along the road to Yan’an. “The road followed the river all the way to Yen’an, and the scenery was lovely. Flocks of wild pheasants could be



seen in the fields . . . On the road, I talked to a friendly peasant. 'Isn't this Eighth Route territory?' 'Yes,' he answered, perfectly at ease and unafraid. 'How are conditions here?' 'Much better.' 'How better?' 'Taxes are lower, it is more peaceful, and our children are in school.' 'Don't the soldiers ill-treat you?' 'No, they help us.'" (Lautenschlager, 1941 Far, p. 9).

Lautenschlager described housing, communal dining, schools, medical care, the selflessness of Communist Party members, and the equality of men and women and of officials and laborers. He offered numerous illustrations of an orderly and harmonious society in which there was adequate employment and virtually no crime. He sought to dispel rumors about the atrocities of communism as when he wrote about nurseries for the children of young married medical students, ". . . student mothers take turns in caring for their own children and those of their schoolmates while the rest study and work. The babies are scientifically cared for. The school gives help but the mothers must take responsibility for their own infants. The government supports the students and the babies, but the babies are in no way considered nationalized. Family life seems natural and happy in Yen'an" (Lautenschlager, 1941 Far, p. 16).

As for economic policy, Lautenschlager writes,

Landlords who fled during the days of land revolution in 1925 can return and receive back 80 per cent of their land. The other twenty percent is given to landless peasants. The landlords must, however, reduce land rents twenty-five per cent., but this still allows them a very reasonable rent. After deducting 400 pounds of grain per head per annum for each member of his family, the peasant pays five percent on the remainder as a tax to the government. The landlord is paid his rent in grain, but his tax is seven percent on the grain received over and above four hundred pounds per person in his family, because the landlord lives on the toil of the peasant renter and not by his own work (Lautenschlager, 1941 Far, p. 19).

Lautenschlager described Yan'an as moderate in terms of its implementation of socialized industry, open to ongoing cooperation with Jiang Jieshi and other KMT leaders under the United Front Treaty, and willing to cooperate with Christians who were interested in helping China. He quotes a regional communist leader as saying, "Christians and communists have not understood each other. Christians often supported reactionaries, but the communists realize the contributions of the church and appreciate the work of the missionaries" (Lautenschlager, 1941 Far, p. 23).

Lautenschlager claimed that Zhou Enlai, then leader of the Communist Party in Chongqing who later became the first Premier of the People's Republic of China in 1954, encouraged him to start a YMCA in Yan'an. When Lautenschlager asked if they would welcome Christians, Zhou responded, "Certainly, we welcome all who have a contribution to make to China" (Lautenschlager, 1941 Far, p. 23). Communist General Zhu De offered Lautenschlager any piece of land in Yan'an to rebuild the Christian church that had been destroyed by the Japanese bombers (Lautenschlager, 1941 Far, p. 24).

Just when one might think that Lautenschlager had simply been brainwashed or been overcome by liberal idealism, he ends the narrative of his visit to Yan'an on a less optimistic note.

Some say that Yenan's present welcome of religion is only a change of policy and not a change of heart, and that if ever the communists came into power they would become anti-Christian again. It is reported that Mao Tze-tung said that one cannot be both a Christian and a communist. If it is true that a Christian cannot join the party and that on becoming a Christian a communist must leave the party, then the communists must consider that there is an irreconcilable conflict between communism and Christianity. In this case communism in power would likely become anti-Christian again . . . No doubt Yenan now welcomes Christians to convince the Christian world that Chinese communism is no longer anti-Christian. Whatever the motive – self-interest, or freedom, or truth – I can only report that the Chinese communists

whom I met on this visit showed that they wanted Christians to be their friends and not their enemies. (Lautenschlager, 1941:24-25)

In early 1943, back in North America, in a broad-ranging address to the Presbyterian General Assembly, Lautenschlager offered very optimistic words regarding the possibility of Christian and communist cooperation in China, and he encouraged mission organizations to send personnel to Yan'an and surrounding regions in northwest China.

Here missionary boards should co-operate in sending several score of socially minded missionaries while the door is still open and the welcome warm. Here a string of Christian Missions, influencing Communism and being influenced by it, might mean a Christian socialism dominant in North China, influencing Soviet Russia for Christ, instead of an anti-religious Communism perhaps driving the Church out of these areas. (Lautenschlager, July-August 1943, p. 2)

Lautenschlager's younger brother, Roy Lautenschlager, was also a graduate of Central College. He too lived in China, from 1921 to 1951. He and his family served at Hangzhou Christian College. In his memoirs, published in 1970 with the benefit of hindsight on this era, the younger Lautenschlager offered a brief reflection on his older brother's sociopolitical views and his trip to Yanan.

Stanton always lived on the frontier – be it social and theological concepts or in circumstantial situation. In his wide range of influence among Chinese students, he preached a gospel of spiritual regeneration and Christian socialism. It was not surprising, then, that he should attach some hope to Chinese Communism and be one of the few missionaries to visit their headquarters in the caves of Yanan (North Shensi) . . . To me, who from my narrow confines had tended to idealize the Free West, his direct report regarding both Communists and Nationalists raised the question whether some of us might not have been misjudging the intentions of the former and overevaluating the performance of the latter. No doubt, the responsible National[ist]

Government, under overwhelming economic strains, must have seemed to be failing the people while also exercising excessively bureaucratic powers. (R. Lautenschlager, 1970, pp. 129-130)

According to research done by Margaret Stanley and published by the University of Kansas in 1987, Lautenschlager's visit to Yan'an in 1940 was the last such visit made by a westerner into the Eighth Route Army Region until at least 1944 (1987:29). Lautenschlager was invited to speak to the Rotary Club here in Huntington in June 1943 (Missionary, June 1943, n.p.) and to the Huntington Kiwanas Club later that same year in November (Lautenschlager, November 1943, n.p.). Huntington College awarded the Doctor of Humanities to Lautenschlager at their 1944 commencement ceremony (Huntington College, March 1961, p. i).

To those who would be inclined to uniformly dismiss Lautenschlager's perspectives as naïve, I offer his own words from a letter written in 1925.

"In every great question there must be two sides, so let us examine carefully the present situation for real solutions and not content ourselves with mere preachments on one side or the other.

'The toad beneath the harrow knows

Exactly where each tooth point goes.

The butterfly beside the road

Preaches contentment to that toad'"

(Lautenschlager, September 1925, p. 2).

I like to imagine that Lautenschlager's choices both to quote Kipling and to think broadly about economic policies in China were informed by the education he received in classrooms here at the north end of College Avenue in Huntington, Indiana. There is much left to explore in this little arena of research, not the least of which is the work of Roy Lautenschlager in Hangzhou and Shanghai that extended beyond the Communist Revolution in 1949. I have not explored Presbyterian missionary

archives which would undoubtedly include additional correspondence and shed light on Lautenschlager's educational and evangelistic work. Unanswered questions abound. But, for now, this is the story of a Huntington-educated pastor who became something of a friend of Chinese communists.

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