INTRODUCTION

In 1920, after several years of study, the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) decided to send its first overseas missionaries to China. When it came down to a choice between establishing a mission in Africa or China, the synod chose China, in part, it said, because “the conservative, intellectual spirit of the Chinese is more in harmony with our people.” The synod’s delegates believed that through their “many points of contact” with the Chinese people they would have the best opportunity to transplant their distinctively Reformed faith on foreign soil. A few months later, three Christian Reformed missionaries and their families departed for Shanghai. The next year they took over a section of the mission field of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. (Southern) in Rugao County of northern Jiangsu Province.¹

¹ When the CRC missionaries were in China during the first half of the twentieth century, English-speaking foreigners used the Wades-Giles system of Romanization for transcribing Chinese characters into English writing. Thus, the capital of China was “Peking,” and the province and city where the missionaries worked was “Jukao, Kiangsu Province.” Today the Chinese-devised pinyin system for transcribing Chinese characters into
For the next thirty years, the Christian Reformed Mission worked to plant a church in Rugao, until the last missionary was forced out of the country in early 1950. This book is the story of that attempt to plant a church in Rugao with Reformed characteristics.

I will argue that the Christian Reformed missionaries went to China because they believed they had “many points of contact” with the Chinese; yet their own cultural and theological perspective, combined with their inexperience and unrealistic expectations, clashed radically with the reality of Rugao. Ironically, what they originally thought of as “many points of contact” turned out to be one fundamental point of contact in covenant theology, which connected with the culture, worldview, and social needs of Rugao. Indeed, in the upheaval of China’s Republican Era (1911–1949), when almost every aspect of traditional society was under siege, covenant theology, as a way to preserve family and form new communities, proved remarkably resonant with the times. Moreover, though conflict and negotiation were parts of the process, the cultural translation that took place in Rugao actually seems more like discovery, both by the missionaries and by the Chinese.

This narrative tells the story of the Christian Reformed Church’s China mission, beginning with the choice of China as the first overseas mission of the denomination and ending with the closing of Rugao church after the missionaries had left at the outset of China’s Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution in 1966. This account does not, however, chart every event during the period under discussion or include every person (American or Chinese) who served in Rugao. Instead, the story focuses on the effort of the Christian Reformed Mission to translate its version of the Christian faith in one county during one of the most tumultuous periods in Chinese history.

Any portrayal of mission work in China in the first half of the twentieth century must be placed in the context of the massive upheavals taking place there during the 150 years between the beginning of the nineteenth century and the middle of the twentieth century.

Roman letters is used in China and in most other parts of the world. Thus, I use “Beijing” and “Rugao, Jiangsu Province,” and for writing most other Chinese words, only using Wade-Giles for commonly accepted names of historical figures and places such as Chiang Kai-Shek, Sun Yatsen, and Canton.

For a list of Americans and Chinese who served in the Rugao mission between 1920 and 1952, see Appendix.
At the end of the eighteenth century, the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) stood at the apex of its power. Under the sage guidance of the early Qing emperors, China had expanded its territory to historic proportions, created a vast infrastructure that contributed to peace and a state treasury overflowing with silver, and obtained new heights in the arts and the traditional crafts of China. Westerners coming to China were impressed with the greatness of the country and, lured by the possibility of selling to millions of Chinese, wanted to tap into its markets. The Middle Kingdom, however, had no need of contact with or goods from “barbarians,” and the Westerners were turned away at the door.

If Qing China had reached a pinnacle of power and wealth in the eighteenth century, it experienced precipitous decline during the nineteenth century, largely due to the inability of a series of weak emperors to handle surging foreign and domestic pressures. From the outside, foreigners began knocking with increasing regularity and intensity at China’s doors. Although British attempts to open the China market had failed earlier to balance trade, by the early decades of the nineteenth century the British had swung the balance of trade in their favor by importing opium from their Indian colony. Using opium to balance trade unfortunately created millions of Chinese addicts and resulted in deep social problems and political crisis. The Chinese and British went to war over opium in 1838, and following China’s defeat in the First Opium War in 1842, foreigners claimed the right to occupy five treaty port cities along China’s east coast. Less than twenty years later, China suffered a second defeat in another war fought over opium, and this time the country was flung open to the outside world. These outside pressures from foreigners intensified various internal pressures that resulted in several ethnic and religious rebellions, the most disastrous being the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864), in which as many as thirty million Chinese may have died and which almost succeeded in toppling the Qing dynasty. By the end of the nineteenth century, China was exhausted and on the verge of collapse.

Though the Qing dynasty frantically tried to save itself and the country through a series of modernizing reforms at the end of the nineteenth century, its attempts were too little too late: In 1911, after two thousand years of holding the country together, China’s imperial
system of government collapsed. The crumbling of this ancient pillar of China’s stability produced a chaotic heap of social, political, and cultural rubble. Following this collapse, while the Chinese struggled to find a new way of rebuilding their country and their culture, foreigners carved China up like a watermelon, creating spheres of influence in large swaths of the country and in important cities, such as Shanghai and Beijing, where they took control of important sectors of China’s legal and economic systems. China was being dragged willy-nilly into the modern world. Out of the chaos, the ever-resilient Chinese began to reinvent themselves and to reorganize their country; from the New Culture Movement and May Fourth Movement of the 1910s came important political, linguistic, social, educational, and cultural changes and resources for rebuilding the nation. As the country’s confidence grew, the Chinese began to stand up to the foreign powers.

By the end of the 1920s, Chiang Kai-shek and his Nationalist government had taken back much of the country from warlords, established a new capital in the ancient city of Nanjing, and set the country on a path to becoming a modern nation state. But the so-called “Nanjing Decade” (1928–1937) came to a sudden halt with the Japanese invasion in 1937 and the onset of World War II. For the next twelve years China was plunged into war, first with the Japanese, and then in a brutal civil war between Nationalist and Communist forces fighting for control of the country. When the Communists defeated the Nationalist armies in 1949, Chiang and his government fled to Taiwan, and Mao Zedong stood on the rostrum at Tiananmen Square in Beijing and proclaimed that with the founding of the People’s Republic, an old world had passed away and a “new” China had been born.

The Christian Reformed missionaries came to China in 1920, when the country was in the throes of trying to stabilize and reorganize itself. Protestant missionaries had already been in the country for about eighty years. First they had set up mission stations in the five treaty ports opened after the First Opium War (1838–1842), where they built missionary compounds, churches, schools, and hospitals. Not until after the Second Opium War (1856–1860) was the country opened for missionaries to bring Christianity to the interior regions. The advance of the Christian faith in China was often hindered by the opposition of China’s intellectual elite, because Christianity was perceived to have played a role in tearing down the ancient structures of Chinese society and competed with China’s traditional values. The faith grew slowly and sometimes was used by Chinese converts as a way to advance, enhance, or protect themselves through association with foreign privilege. At the
end of the nineteenth century, Chinese anger at foreign intrusion was unleashed in the Boxer Uprising of 1900, when almost twenty thousand Chinese Christians were killed along with several hundred foreigners. When the Qing dynasty fell in 1911, however, many educated Chinese saw Christianity as a potential resource for rebuilding the country, and during the second decade of the twentieth century missionaries and Chinese Christians played an important role in helping sort out the chaos. But the Chinese felt betrayed following World War I, when the allied forces handed most of Shandong Province to the Japanese. Christianity became once again embattled in the country. After eight decades of missionary presence, there were perhaps 300,000 Protestants in the country.⁴

It was into this setting that the Christian Reformed missionaries came to plant a Reformed church.

⁴ For information about the state of Protestant Christianity in China in 1920, see Milton Stauffer, ed., The Christian Occupation of China: A General Survey of the Numerical Strength and Geographical Distribution of the Christian Forces in China Made by the Special Committee on Survey and Occupation, China Construction Committee, 1918-1921 (Shanghai: China Continuation Committee, 1922), 38.