

Occasional Papers in History and Theology, No. 24.

ROSA LAVINIA TONKIN

PIONEERING MISSIONARY TO SHANGHAI



By **Julia Gilchrist**

FEBRUARY 2022

The Churches of Christ in NSW will consider for publication short papers on historical and theological topics relevant to the development of Churches of Christ. The publication of a paper does not constitute an official endorsement of the views expressed therein.

Rosa Lavinia Tonkin (1863-1940)

Rosa Tonkin was the first Australian Churches of Christ missionary to Shanghai in 1901, uplifting Chinese women and girls from poverty to promise.

Born on 27 July 1865 to Rebecca Butcher and John Tonkin, blacksmith, Rosa was raised with her five siblings, William, Elizabeth Ann, Mary, Louisa and John, in Strathalbyn South Australia. The Tonkins were lifelong members of Grote Street Church of Christ in South Australia.ⁱ Deeply invested in the development of a sustainable youth ministry, Rosa helped establish Christian Endeavour in that state alongside her duties as Sunday School teacher.ⁱⁱ Qualifying as a teacher in 1880, the South Australian Department of Education endorsed Rosa to work at North Adelaide Model School, Moonta and Flinders St (City) schools.ⁱⁱⁱ When she was 37, Rosa's professional experience and decade-long tenure as Secretary of the SA Foreign Missions Committee saw her elected as the pioneering missionary to China in 1900.^{iv}

Rosa was deeply motivated by her own desire to communicate Jesus' teachings following Acts and Paul's journeys: "*From my earliest years the movements of missionaries in foreign lands had a special interest for me.*"^v However, she was just one of nearly 80 per cent of female volunteers worldwide bound for China, fed by a growing awareness of the need for ministry to Chinese women.^{vi} James Ware, British sailor-businessman who in the mid-1870s had turned to missioning in China with his wife,^{vii} was Rosa's supervisor. He said:

"Events in China are far from peaceful. In the north there is widespread brigandage, and murders are being daily perpetuated. In fact, there is really a reign of terror throughout the province of Chi li, where thousands of 'Boxers' are preparing for fresh outrages. In the south and in mid-China, floods have swept away towns and villages, with their inhabitants. Harvests also for hundreds of miles have been destroyed, so that the prospects for the coming year are very black. The whole creation seems to be groaning and travailing in pain. Pray for us!"^{viii}

Rosa lived at the inner-city Shanghai Mission in the British concession:^{ix} "*...it is a little chapel, seating about 130 people, with vestries and classrooms and small garrets, every available space being utilised for some purpose or other.*"^x Her first year was spent acquiring language and dialect skills,^{xi} enabling strong relationships. Rosa developed a distinct passion for arresting the harsh lives

of downtrodden women and girls.^{xii} A daily reckoning was the squalid living and working conditions. Travelling from Hong Kong to Shanghai, she saw the silk and cotton mills in which 40,000 women and girls from as young as eight worked. One mill, half a mile from her residence, that employed 6,000, was her field of operation.^{xiii}

Rosa was occupied with teaching, visiting and helping orphaned children, women and girls and her letters home, republished in the Australian Christian, brought to life a lively, hard-working woman both dedicated to and passionate about her Chinese flock. The American Society recognised Rosa's value to the Shanghai mission early on:

“Miss Tonkin's devoted spirit was revealed in her zealous attention to language study that she might more quickly be useful. She had charge of a school for children in the cotton mills district and gave time to evangelistic work and teaching among women. Hesitant women under her kindly, understanding guidance learned to read, to follow the Christian way, to share in evangelistic service. she worked with the other missionary women, with Chinese Bible women, or alone, as circumstances dictated, and her yearly reports revealed a steady growth in the work.”^{ix}

It was extraordinarily difficult at first for Rosa to teach the Gospel alongside literacy, numeracy and crafts skills to Shanghai's women and girls. Widescale poverty meant most Chinese families were unable to pay for the education of anyone beyond the brightest male child^x and Chinese women endured great neglect of their physical, emotional and spiritual needs. In 1907, the Adelaide Advertiser said:

“... the Chinese women were, as a rule, much neglected, and were looked upon as chattels. They have no voice in the selection of a husband or in domestic matters and were at the bidding of their husbands. If a man thought his wife should go to work, he sent her, and she had to submit. Their lot was very sad. But China was waking up and schools were being opened for the education of women. There were some splendid colleges connected with the mission work at Shanghai. It was felt that education was the only way of getting hold of the people.”^{xi}

Rosa deployed trained working-class women to visit poorer families to evangelise and provide support where middle-class ladies were less welcome.^{xii} Rosa welcomed Australian-Chinese woman, Miss Ah-Gan in 1902 as a support worker^{xiii} and through educating married Chinese women to undertake Bible woman's work, welcomed Mrs Li in 1910 to assist her as a trained

evangelist.^{xiv} Rosa also used her influence to encourage Chinese mothers it was their ‘Christian duty’ to undo the foot-binding of their daughters.^{xv} In 1911, Mr T.B. Fischer, South Australian missionary said:

“... Miss Tonkin is labouring effectively among the factory girls of Shanghai and... years ago, found a girl (Lai Pao)^{xvi} whose feet had been bound so tightly that they had dropped off. When that happened, the parents cast the little one out to die. The missionaries mentioned the case to their friends in Australia... and money was supplied to obtain for the girl a pair of artificial feet from America... with her artificial feet, she was able to move about freely, and Miss Tonkin said it was a joy to see her when she was first able to walk without aid.”^{xvii}

By 1913, James Ware had established the *Door of Hope Mission* to support and rehabilitate Chinese girls sold into prostitution,^{xviii} and asked Rosa to teach the young girls to make, sew and embroider dolls for sale to support the missions.^{xix} Rosa’s passion for Chinese arts and crafts saw her use her collection as props for public speeches in Australia, and in 1918, she adopted the London Missionary Society’s method of teaching children and their parents about the importance of missionary work through children’s plays,^{xx} exemplified in the WA Annual Children’s Day play, “*Shanghai’s Salvation*,” which dramatised Rosa’s work in speech and singing.^{xxi}

Protective of many young women and girls, Rosa was parent to six adoptive children. In 1914, she wrote:

"My family has been increased by two girls—Phoebe and Hannah. Hannah is 15 years old: she is worse than any orphan to our way of thinking. She has been in the mills all her life, and since 8 years old has worked in them. About 18 months ago she got her arm caught in the machinery, and the elbow was badly smashed. She has thus lost the use of her right arm, and then she worked holding the work with her teeth and using her left arm, but her mouth all broke out in sores, and she couldn’t do it. Then her relatives wouldn’t feed her; they were going to sell her for immoral purposes, when an old Chinese woman brought her to me; they let me have her, and were glad to be rid of her. So now I have three little daughters.”^{xxii}

Rosa didn’t attend the 1914 Annual Conference because “*the American brethren are sending delegates to China this year, and she did not wish to be absent when they were there,*”^{xxiii} reflecting concerns that the Americans planned to withdraw and which they did in 1915.^{xxiv} Initially in limbo, a Mr and Mrs W. S. Cameron promised to supervise Rosa’s work.^{xxv} However, the American Society’s

decision created a distinct financial impact and Rosa had to find and finance new premises,^{xxvi} the rent costing £300 annually. Opening a second centre in Canton was considered, but there were no missionaries available to support it. The Mission continued to experience financial difficulties and in 1916, the Shanghai mission site was offered for sale. Undeterred, Rosa and James Ware prioritised a response to the extraordinary poverty of their Shanghainese charges, building extensions, short-term accommodation and facilities onto the original chapel and surrounding lands at the Shanghai mission so they had a place of rest. In addition, private letters, news reports, and public speeches fed a growing awareness of the need for ministry to women in China. Fundraising in Australia also led to £2,208 being sent to the mission; the Foreign Missions Committee embarking on a drive for more young women and men to train for the field.

In Rosa's 1917 annual letter to the Australian churches, she referred to the high numbers of British men leaving China to serve in the First World War, showing its impact far beyond the traditionally recognised theatres of war:

"We have a large number of young men going to the war front and many have gone. It is said that nowhere in the Empire has more been done in men and money, and in preparation of clothing and socks than the English colony of Shanghai. An association has been formed to take charge of small amounts and to buy war bonds. From September to December 20,000 pounds was subscribed, and in January another 20,000 pounds. It is marvellous what has been done. I have helped a little. I have a Chinese girl knitting, and between us we have made 16 pairs of socks. During the Chinese New Year holiday, I have assisted at the War Dressings Department. They are dark days for missions. Our exchange for money has dropped seriously. Last week when I banked my last draft, the clerk said: 'It's bad for you just now, Miss Tonkin, and I am afraid it's going to be much worse before it's better.' It is predicted that we shall only have \$5 to the pound, and maybe \$4. What to do I don't know. Everything has risen in price. Am straining every nerve to make the work self-supporting, but the rent, of course, has to be paid. I know there is now work of similar size and with the same number of workers, where there is less expense. This winter has been so bitterly cold. For the first time for 50 years the river was frozen over, and the boats were unable to go out of the Soochow Creek. We are going on nicely with the work. The services are well attended by Christians on Sunday afternoons. The chapel is open all the week. Both schools reassemble two days from now, and we shall have a large number of children to teach."^{xxxvii}

Rosa made three trips home to Australia during her 19 years of mission in Shanghai. A confident and compelling speaker, she was recognised by the Australian newspapers as “... *our living link*” *between the Australian and American churches... her services are very highly spoken of by the Americans with whom she is associated.*” Using these occasions to educate audiences on the needs of Chinese women and drum up financial support it was reported that:

“Miss Tonkins (sic) gave a splendid address on “Missionary Life in China,” dwelling upon China’s need of the Gospel of Christ, and its transforming power upon the lives of those who had accepted it. The illustrations in connection with Chinese worship and customs of living, the idolatries and superstitious practices, also the wonderful changes from darkness to light wrought by the power of the Gospel, were all apt and very telling, revealing both an intimate knowledge of the subjects treated and no mean ability on the part of the speaker. Quite several visitors were present from the surrounding districts, including a party from West Hardon. On Monday night Miss Tonkins (sic) gave an address in the Mount Whitestone Church of Christ. The incidents related were very touching and will be long remembered by the listeners.”

In 1920, Rosa was very unwell. Aged 57, the changed political environment in China may have been the circuit-breaker to justify her leaving Shanghai for Adelaide, her home town. The following year, Rosa celebrated her 23rd year of service to the Federal Foreign Missionary Board of the Churches of Christ in China in Adelaide, and at the 20th Annual Sisters Conference (1921), she was elected Vice President of the Women’s Conference (South Australia) co-leading in the role with Mrs Thomas Hagger. Rosa was also Home Missions Superintendent and a Committee member of the Foreign Missions Committee with Mrs G.T. Walden appointed Superintendent. She continued to speak at various public events in Australia in support of continuing donations and interest in the Chinese missions and at a Foreign Missionary Demonstration, she “...*appealed to the people for their sympathetic help for Chinese missions.*”

Continuing in various senior roles with the SA Churches of Christ, Rosa continued her passionate advocacy for the Shanghai mission and its children, and this was particularly evident in 1925 when Rosa lent to an exhibition of paintings and art works her collection of fine art, needlework, cloisonne, inlaid stone carvings and more to the Church of Christ School Hall, Unley with the sale proceeds funding Chinese missions.^{xxvii} The Adelaide Chronicle

writing an update to the health of the Shanghai Mission in 1929 since Rosa's retirement nine years earlier:

“In addition to four churches with 200 members, there is a large Sunday school and Christian Endeavour Societies. There is a flourishing mission in the poor part of Shanghai. A large boys' and girls' school, with Mr Hu Siu Wu, B.A., as headmaster and seven teachers. There are 240 scholars in the school, which is so popular that it has a large waiting list for vacancies. The Chinese parents, though they know their children have daily Scripture lessons, prefer to send them to this Christian school rather than to the Confucian schools in Shanghai. When Miss Tonkin left Shanghai, Mr. and Mrs. W.M. Cameron became honorary missionaries. These four churches are all indigenous, and control their own work, and supply most of the money needed. The Australian Board supplies the money for the rent of a building, the support of a Bible woman, and of some orphans, a total expense to the Australian Board of \$324 pounds a year. As an indication of the esteem in which this work is held, no part of the mission suffered any hindrances during the four years of Chinese war.”

Rosa Tonkin died aged 76 on 14 May 1940 at her home in 15 Northgate St, Unley Park, South Australia. Her legacy in China is rich, large and inspiring, and the 1925 Sisters Conference articulated the key principles and core motivation behind Rosa's work:

“The spirit of the work in the churches found much of its force and stability in the contribution made by women... “back to the Bible, back to the old paths” was their slogan... India, China, and the New Hebrides were, today scenes of unselfish labours on the part of women missionaries, and such self-sacrifice indicated that the missionary “would pay any price to help any people” to know the sweetness of home life in which the spirit of Christ dwelt. In truth, the sweet and wonderful spirit of missions was the touchstone to a woman's heart. Such a spirit must never be quenched but helped, as they told the message of redemption at home and abroad. The flippancy and materialism of the age was a menace, but they would go forward trustingly in the spirit of Christ.”^{xlv}

ⁱ Australian Christian 43.25 (19 June 1940) 395. Andrew C. Rankine.

ⁱⁱ Evening Journal (Adelaide). Wed 13 Mar 1901, p4. Christian

ⁱⁱⁱ The Adelaide Evening Journal, Friday 21 May 1880, p2. Amusements

^{iv} Evening Journal (Adelaide). Wed 13 Mar 1901, p4. Christian

^v Australian Christian 4.22 (13 June 1901) 267.

^{vi} Ian Welch. Women's Work for Women. Missionaries and Indigenous Culture in Nineteenth Century China. Australian National University (ANU). Canberra: 2015, 3.

-
- vii The United Christian Missionary Society. *They Went to China: Biographies of Missionaries of the Disciples of Christ*. Stone-Campbell Books. Indianapolis, IN: 1948. Abilene Christian University (Digital Commons). James Ware was Field Director in China, Foreign Christian Mission Society.
- viii Australian Christian 4.37 (26 September 1901) 453. Extract, letter from James Ware. From 1899-1939, the Chinese experienced the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901), Nationalist Revolution (1911), 1920's Restoration of the Republic campaign, a Nationalist purge (1927), the Japanese occupation of Manchuria (1933), Japan's invasion in 1937 and the Pacific War (WW2) from 1941.
- ix The United Christian Missionary Society. *They Went to China: Biographies of Missionaries of the Disciples of Christ*. Stone-Campbell Books. Indianapolis, IN: 1948. Abilene Christian University (Digital Commons). Rosa L. Tonkin, p26.
- x Ian Welch. *Missionaries and Indigenous Culture in Nineteenth Century China*. ANU. Canberra: 2015, 7-8.
- xi Advertiser (Adelaide, SA : 1889 - 1931), Wednesday 3 July 1907, page 8. Church Intelligence: A returned missionary.
- xii Welch: 2015, 7.
- xiii The Register (Adelaide). Wed 10 Sept, 1902. P3. Afternoon Session. Foreign Missions. Miss Ah-Gan was commissioned by the 1902 Conference to go to Shanghai as a support worker.
- xiv Adelaide Observer. Sat 1 Oct 1910. P 41. Churches of Christ
- xv Ian Welch: 2015.
- xvi Australian Christian. 14.16 (20 April) 257
- xvii The Adelaide Register. Wed 20 Sept, 1911, 12. A Gift of Feet.
- xviii The United Christian Missionary Society. *They Went To China: Biographies of Missionaries of the Disciples of Christ*. Stone-Campbell Books. Indianapolis, IN: 1948. Abilene Christian University (Digital Commons) James Ware, p15-16.
- xix Doll Collectors of America: "The doll's head, hands and arms to the elbow were made of carved Chinese pearwood and are smooth as satin and unpainted or varnished. The hair, eyes and lips are painted, and the body is made of cloth stuffed with raw cotton. The girls of the mission made by hand each doll's clothing; an exact replica of clothing worn by the Chinese people."
- xx Sue Gronewald. *A New Family: Domesticity and Sentiment among Chinese and Western Women at Shanghai's Door of Hope*. 284. In Hyaeweol Choi & Margaret Jolly. *Divine Domesticities: Christian Paradoxes in Asia and the Pacific*. ANU: 2014.
- xxi The Northam Advertiser, WA. Sat 9 Nov 1918, 2. Local and General News.; Shih-Wen Sue Chen. *Paradoxical Performances: Cruel Constraints and Christian Emancipation in 19-20th Century Missionary Representations of Chinese Women and Girls*, in *Divine Domesticities: Christian Paradoxes in Asia and the Pacific*. Hyaeweol Choi & Margaret Jolly. ANU. Canberra: 2014, 364. Churches purchased the script for a nominal fee, receiving instructions for props and costumes including Chinese-style wigs, clothes, shoes and makeup. Storylines focused on orphaned Chinese children, their transformation of life following conversion to Christianity captured in one girl character's name change from 'Little Bitterness' to 'Little Happiness.'
- xxii Australian Christian. 14.1 (5 Jan 1911), 8.
- xxiii Daily Herald (Adelaide). Thur 17 Sept 1914, p 8. Church of Christ Conference.
- xxiv Beginning work in China in 1890, the American Society decided to refocus on the China Inland Mission (a non-denominational enterprise) in western China by 1915, pulling out of Shanghai.
- xxv This role was later performed by Dr Carleton Lacy and others. With the American Society, during the years of depression, the Chinese church community purchased the building and relieve the home board of financial strain. Eight hundred pounds was thus credited to the West China mission. Unfortunately, this property was destroyed by the Japanese in 1937, and the Christians scattered. Scant news was received of them from the beginning of the Pacific war, 1941-1945. Since the cessation of hostilities, however, word has come through former friends of the American Society, that the church is now meeting in two separate places in Shanghai, and is still carrying on a successful work. Thus, Rosa Tonkin's years in China were not given in vain, and many of her spiritual sons and daughters rise up and call her blessed.
- xxvi The Advertiser (Adelaide). Thur 20 Sept 1917, p7. Churches of Christ
- xxvii Adelaide News. Fri 14 August 1925 p5. Paintings and Art Works