

BOOK REVIEW

Developing Mission

Hong Guo and Xiaoyang Xiao♦

Joseph W. Ho. *Developing Mission: Photography, Filmmaking, and American Missionaries in Modern China*. United States, Cornell University Press, 2022, 324 pp. ISBN: 978-150176-095-2

Abstract: Joseph W. Ho's *Developing Mission* makes a unique contribution to visual studies by taking a distinctive approach. The book examines how American missionaries in early to mid-twentieth-century China used photography and film to shape transnational ministry, construct cross-cultural identities, and capture the traumas of wartime. Ho's in-depth critical analysis of these visual practices raises important questions about preservation and accessibility, while also charting a new course for future research. His work offers a fresh and compelling perspective, opening up intriguing avenues for further exploration in the field.

Keywords: Filmmaking, Mission, Photography, Techno-Mission.

Joseph W. Ho explores the pivotal roles of views, lenses and frames in missionary visual media, highlighting their significance

♦**Hong Guo** is from College of Art, Northeast Agricultural University, China.

♦**Xiaoyang Xiao**, the corresponding author, is affiliated with the School of Drama, Film and Television at Shenyang Conservatory of Music. This work is supported by the Heilongjiang higher education teaching reform research key project titled "Research on Innovation of Personnel Training Model in the Media-Integrated Era" (SJGZ20200022) and the Heilongjiang arts and science planning project "Research on Micro-Image Creation Practice of the New Rural Image in Northeast China" (2023A026).

within American and Chinese communities for both fundraising and Christian media outreach. These images, heavily utilized in mission efforts, were designed to evoke spiritual, emotional, and financial reactions. While "techno-mission" played an integral part in these contexts, Ho notes that its impact cannot be precisely measured. He argues that these methods reshaped how individuals perceived both China and missionary work, extending beyond mere institutional branding (1-24). Additionally, Ho examines how missionaries strategically used photographic and film technologies to solidify modern Christianity in a globalized world during the first half of the twentieth century. He stresses that media creations like photographs, albums, color slides, and amateur films were not simply tools but crucial assets. These visual aids allowed missionaries to document and promote their efforts more effectively, thereby increasing their outreach and securing greater support.

The more secularized missionaries involved in education and medicine continued to rely on traditional methods like preaching, teaching, and providing medical aid. However, they discovered that visual media brought new success from different perspectives. This new approach allowed missionaries to engage in their work more effectively as Americans and the British began recognizing each other as equals. Through visual mediums, missionaries emphasized teaching the appreciation of Chinese communities and geographies in America. This not only advanced their primary goal of evangelization but also fostered cultural understanding, thereby increasing engagement with mission activities among local populations (25-58).

According to Ho, the American missionaries in Shunde, North China, utilized imaging technologies during the 1920s and 1930s. This missionary practice sparked fundamentalist struggles against modernists within the American church. Fundamentalists focused on conservative doctrines and the sharing of faith, while modernists leaned toward humanitarianism and liberal theologies (45). This raises the question of whether any conflicts arose during missionary discourse when using these supportive tools. Indeed, such conflicts emerged in the public arena of

missions, as missionaries faced criticism from both external sources and their home church. Nevertheless, missionaries shared a common goal of Christening, emphasizing religious activities alongside charitable work in schools, hospitals, and churches (93). In Ho’s doctoral thesis, he highlights how Presbyterian missionaries, including Harold Eugene Henke, Jessie Mae Henke, and Dr. Ralph C. Lewis, employed photographic technology to showcase and publicize the cooperation of Chinese Christians, thereby underscoring this dynamic (24).

Alongside these developments, He explores how these missionaries utilized photography to engage with local communities and churches in West Hoboken, New Jersey. The act of capturing images during this period, including baptism portraits, served both as documentation of conversions and as a symbol of the Chinese Catholics’ connection to their faith. Through these photographs, Ho highlights the theological and cultural intersections that defined this transpacific exchange.

Further, Ho examines how American missionaries used film to bridge the cultural divide between China and the United States. He analyzes the impact of vernacular filmmaking on missionary efforts, examining its content, transnational production contexts, and audience reception. A significant milestone occurred in the 1930s when missionary films depicted global missions, showcasing a medical missionary family’s use of film to represent Indigenous Chinese identities (95-140). The study also emphasizes the missionaries’ roles during the Second Sino-Japanese War, particularly their documentation of events such as the Nanjing Massacre and the Japanese occupation from 1937 to 1945. In this context, missionary visuals sought to counter propaganda, shape international opinion, and support the Nationalist cause. Ho illustrates how these visual narratives influenced public perceptions of China post-1945.

Ho investigates the effects of wartime events on missionary visual practices from 1937 to 1945, revealing the challenges they faced in accurately portraying the realities of war through images and artifacts, which highlighted the disturbance and ambiguity caused by violence (141-184). He emphasizes the enduring power

of photographs and films to convey stories and emotions across generations, addressing themes such as the intersections of scientific thought, Marxism, Christian doctrines (223), and imperialism (235-236). In the epilogue, the book examines latent images and the influence of collective and personal memories on missionary visual methods.

Though the book provides fresh insights by employing visual studies to explore the missionary discourse in China, the book also has some limitations. For instance, it primarily focuses on the experiences of American Protestant and Catholic missionaries, potentially disregarding the perspectives of Chinese Christians. Second, the heavy reliance on the discourses of missionary photographers may introduce biases and hinder a nuanced understanding of visual representations. Third, the book's academic tone and extensive use of historical and visual analysis might also limit its appeal to a broader audience. Finally, Ho does not fully address the importance of preserving history. Meeta Rajivlochan and M. Rajivlochan (2017) discuss the role of archives in social research, noting that old records with memories unveil the transition from formal institutions to documents, films, photos, and digital formats due to their accessibility (256-257). They argue that historical data and information often overlooked by historians can be valuable for social research. To gain a comprehensive understanding, researchers must explore archives (259-261). Despite these limitations, Ho's book makes a substantial contribution to the reader's understanding of China's evolving mission. It serves as a valuable resource for historians, academicians, and researchers interested in Chinese history from the perspective of missionaries.

References

- Ho, Joseph W., "All Things Visible and Invisible: Photography, Filmmaking, and American Christian Missions in Modern China." PhD dissertation, the University of Michigan. 2017.
- Meeta Rajivlochan and M. Rajivlochan, "Use of Archives in Social Research," Chapter 12, in *Knowing the Social World: Perspectives and Possibilities*, N Jayaram (ed.), Orient Blackswan, Hyderabad. 247-262, 2017.