CHAPTER THREE

EXTENDING A MALE PRIVATE SPHERE—OTTO ÖBERG, 1869–1917

Elisabeth told me that while she sat with the women and spoke [with them] they said: “How can she understand us so well?” One of them explained this remarkable problem in the following way: “She is so kind towards us and is like one of us since she is a Chinese foreigner and not a foreign foreigner who rebel and wage war against us.”

It was with apparent amusement that Otto Öberg, one of Bingmark’s companions, recorded this incident in his diary. Elisabeth [née Jacobson] had for a few months been his wife and together they had worked at the mission station at Fengzhen in Inner Mongolia. It is also evident that Otto was not only entertained by such a gifted blending of categories as the one produced by this un-named Chinese woman; he was pleased to see that at least one section of the local population had discerned his, and his wife’s, attitude towards missionary work. They had come in peace to live among the Chinese as one of them. Since they had a different errand they were not like other foreigners. The first, and perhaps most difficult, step had been taken on the long way that needed to be traversed before the men and women at this location could receive the Gospel. When placed next to Bingmark, this man seems to be the very opposite; as this Chapter will demonstrate, these two activists displayed two different ideals of missionary work. In this respect Öberg appears to be more in line with what is commonly believed about faith mission men, but, as we are about to see, these two men had also much in common.

In this Chapter we will come closer to the mundane world of this missionary company. Its empirical foundation consists of the diaries

Otto Öberg kept, with only minor periods of silence, from his departure from Sweden in 1896 until his death in 1917. Unlike Bingmark’s letters, where relevant information often has to be extracted by a good deal of ‘reading in between’, these are sources that pay minute attention to detail. Most of the entries deal with his missionary work, sometimes these remarks were written as memorials to be used when later composing letters to supporters back home, but these diaries also reveal a writer with a keen eye not only for religion but also for ordinary events and decisions. Undoubtedly, the domestic world that we encounter in Öberg’s diaries was a domain that was shared by all of these missionaries (at least as an ideal) and of which Bingmark (and the two men we will encounter in Chapters Four and Five) also took part. This Chapter will therefore reveal the contours of an every-day world, not easily perceived in other sources, and thereby also outlining the basic grid which supported the masculinity of all of these men.

I

Otto Öberg was born at Rudskoga in the southernmost parts of the Province of Värmland in Central Sweden in 1869. His father was forty-one at the time of Otto’s birth; Otto was born as the forth child. At Rudskoga his father worked as a tenant farmer but already before the third birthday of their youngest child the family was on the move. Otto’s father had been born at the village of Ödeby, close to the extensive mining districts of Central Sweden; this village was less than thirty kilometres away from the town of Lindesberg where the Öberg’s now took up residence. Here Otto’s father began working in the mining industry as an unskilled labourer. When Otto was eleven his mother died and his father, now aged fifty-two, continued life as a widower. The family was further diminished between 1883 and 1885 when all the three eldest children left Sweden for the US. Otto however was to remain with his father. According to the church records he stayed within the parental household until 1890. Even though it is not possible to ascertain his occupation during this period of his life, we may safely assume that it was not spent in idleness. It is quite likely that he was working in the mining industry together with his father. In terms of religion this

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2 Växjö, Emigrantinstitutet. Microcards, 18302 and 18300.