CHAPTER FIVE

EDUCATION AND THE PROBLEM OF MISSIONARY SELF-MAKING—ALFRED FAGERHOLM, 1871–1923

To travel to the missionary field a second time is in many respects different. To the inexperienced all voids could be completely filled with a burning enthusiasm during the first journey. The bright hope of the imminent conversion of the heathen to the teaching of the Gospels was almost the pillar of fire after which one marched. Parents, siblings, friends and a beloved fatherland did not, at that time, occupy a large space in one’s emotional world, for the predominant feeling of zeal for the conversion of the heathen filled one’s soul. On the second journey one have a more sober perception of missionary work and the circumstances under which one lives.¹

In Chapters Two and Three we met men who, in spite of hardships and missionary failures, were successful in creating a way of life in China that was in conformity with their modest ambitions while living as IMA/C&MA missionaries. Alfred Fagerholm, who wrote the epigraph, was one of those who failed in that regard. Several of the men and women who had gone out as ‘Franson missionaries’ in connection with the IMA were later to complain greatly about the conditions under which they had been forced to live; most of them would blame the Americans for failing to provide them with what they saw as rightfully theirs. Even though the way in which Bingmark and Öberg managed to live seems to suggest that this critique may have been at least exaggerated, we should bare in mind that Bingmark gave a polished picture of life in China to his sisters and Öberg’s diaries decidedly have their blind spots. Events that may have seemed disturbing—such as the illnesses

that affected the missionaries and disasters that took the lives of countless men and women in northernmost China—were not mentioned. Hints they gave about financial troubles are in reality forceful reminders of the strained relationship between these missionaries and their New York based financiers. In 1899 the annual report of the C&MA acknowledged that:

Some misunderstandings have arisen during the year, chiefly in regard to the question of allowances, but these have all been amicably settled by a conference with a representative from the mission who visited us last October, and the relations between the mission and the Board are harmonious and satisfactory.²

Undoubtedly, several of them, most likely those without a family to support, would at that time have lived of an income that did not enable them to live comfortably. Yet, the complaints on the part of the Swedish missionaries may have sounded strange to the leadership of the C&MA; like all other faith missionaries they were expected to trust that ‘the Lord will provide’. To speak of due wages in such an environment was an infringement of a silent understanding.

Just like the Öbergs, Fagerholm returned to China during the early 1900s, but unlike the Öbergs he chose to abandon the faith mission world and instead joined the SMC. What is of particular interest here is the way in which he criticised the kind of self-making that we can find in Bingmark and Öberg but also, at the same time, explored some of its underlying tendencies while composing his autobiography.³ This document was composed sometime before that commencement of the Great War (possibly in 1913), written when Fagerholm was in his early forties.⁴ Like most other Evangelical autobiographies this text was written as an account of a spiritual journey where the experience of Divine grace at conversion and a subsequent calling to become a missionary are important landmarks. As a description of missionary activities and personal life during his time as an IMA/C&MA missionary, this account leaves much to desired. Yet, Fagerholm’s autobiography is a

³ A first brief autobiographical presentation was written already during the late 1890s and inserted into Trosvittnet, 1 January 1899, p. 5.
⁴ Since this document suddenly comes to a stop, after having gradually been transformed to resemble diary notices, in 1913, it seems reasonable to assume that it was composed about that time.