Local Voluntarism: 
The Medical Mission of the 
London Missionary Society in Hong Kong, 1842–1923

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The chapter examines the genesis and development of the medical mission of the London Missionary Society in Hong Kong. It is divided chronologically into three major sections; namely the initial period during the 1840s to 1850s, the revival in the 1880s, and the subsequent consolidation of the mission after 1900. It argues that local voluntarism through the support of missionaries, affluent merchants, social leaders and senior government officials provides the key to understanding why and how the medical mission prospered from the 1880s onwards, and it examines the ways in which its independence became possible in the 1920s.

In its medical work in Hong Kong, the London Missionary Society (LMS) depended very strongly on local voluntarism. Its medical mission was inaugurated in Hong Kong in 1842, languished in 1853, restarted in the 1880s, and from 1924 began to be handed over to a local committee. By the latter date, the Hong Kong mission was considered one of the most successful of all of the LMS medical missions. Local voluntarism was the key to this success.

The LMS, which was established in 1795, was an interdenominational organisation supported by the Church of England and by Methodists, Presbyterians, Independents and other Protestant bodies. Being interdenominational, the LMS recruited its missionaries from various denominations. The drawback was that it lacked any persistent denominational support. It was therefore necessary for it to seek as many sources of support as possible. As the scale of its work expanded, the number of directors increased from thirty-four in 1796 to three hundred (excluding honorary directors) in 1890. This in itself created administrative problems. There were also inevitable differences between the directors, who were anxious about expenditure – between 1796 and 1895 the LMS experienced
forty-six years of budget deficits— and the missionaries in the field who demanded better funding for their various local needs. Disputes between the two could sometimes be very bitter.

The LMS always evinced a keen interest in its work in China, but its actual support varied considerably over time. In 1844, for instance, John Morison (1791–1859), a board member of the LMS, stressed that the wrongs that the British did in the Opium War (1839–42) might be redeemed in part through the activities of the LMS China missionaries. He stated: ‘The war with China, in itself a great evil, has been overruled for much good, in opening portions of that vast Empire to the labours of missionaries.’ Its funding for this work was, however, circumscribed by continuing financial deficits. Many LMS missionaries complained that they received inadequate financial support from the society. As Frederick Storrs Turner (1834–1916) – an LMS missionary in Canton and later in Hong Kong – lamented:

I am not alone in feeling very serious dissatisfaction with your management of the great concerns committed to your charge. Your proceedings in respect to our Chinese Mission have been long characterised by painful inefficiency.

This led to pressures from the LMS on its missionaries to develop local sources of funding as much as possible. In a major LMS text – titled *Missionary Principles and Plans*, Joseph Mullen (1820–79) – cited a resolution adopted by the Board of Directors on 11 November 1867 that focused on the need to reduce the budgets of its ‘Eastern Missions’. Mullen had been an LMS missionary in India for twenty-one years before he became the foreign secretary of the LMS, and well knew the consequences of financial cuts for local work. Only because the deficits were so serious at that time did the directors demand such cuts. They encouraged the missionaries to seek support from British administrators and local well-wishers. Mullen cited cases of local support in China, writing that the LMS ‘has met with many similar friends, and especially in Hong Kong, Amoy, Shanghai, and Hankow, our missionaries speak with gratitude and affection of the help and sympathy they have received in their labours.’ Merchants and professionals – both British and non-British – as well as military officers had provided such support in the British colony of Hong Kong, and in treaty ports such as Shanghai and Hankow.

As a result of such voluntary support, ‘China quickly became the most widespread medical field of the Society [LMS].’ By 1915, there were already fourteen LMS hospitals in China, four of which were in Hong Kong. These were the Alice Memorial Hospital (founded in 1887), the Nethersole Hospital (founded in 1893), the Alice Memorial Maternity