During the nineteenth century, medical missionary work was very strongly associated with evangelising, and medical missionaries were expected also to take part in evangelising activities. In the early-twentieth century there was an influx of more experienced doctors who were concerned first and foremost with the medical side to their work. Another important development was an opening up of funding for this medical work by the Rockefeller Foundation. This chapter examines these issues in the context of the mission station at Weixian in China. It looks at problems that the professional staff at the hospital experienced in establishing modern and professional medical care, examines the role of the Rockefeller Foundation in the establishment of the Shadyside Hospital, and considers issues raised when secular medical concerns gained a greater weight within missions. Finally, it reflects on the importance of these changes for rural hospitals.

Whereas there has been considerable research and writing on mission-based systems of education in China, medical mission work has remained a neglected field of study. It is generally agreed that missionary work in education had a deep impact on China, as it provided a new model for primary, secondary, and university education that was widely extended in the post-1911 period. Missionaries also promoted education for women in both urban and rural areas, and they took part in the movement against foot binding. By contrast, we know little about the impact of the medical missionaries. It has been argued that this was greatest in the rural areas where there were little or no alternative forms of medical treatment available to the people. This is, however, disputed by C.C. Chen (Chen Zhiqian), who argues that their greatest influence was in the treaty ports and large urban areas. This study will seek to shed light on the matter through a study of the medical work of the American Presbyterian Mission at Weixian, in the interior of the Shandong province. It will focus on the conflicts and
problems encountered by these medical missionaries in this rural setting between 1890 and 1920.

The American Presbyterians in China and Shandong

The American Presbyterians eventually became one of the largest mission groups active in China, and their methods had a profound impact on those adopted by other societies. In the beginning, however, their work was very uncertain. G. Thompson Brown has analysed the debates between two main Presbyterian tendencies. On the one hand, there was what he defines as the ‘Old School’, which believed that it was the responsibility of the Church to organize and support foreign missions; on the other, there was the ‘New School’ that believed motivated individuals should organise the necessary work without any formal backing from the Church. Several attempts were made by the Old School between 1812 and 1831 to establish a Foreign Missions Board under the General Assembly. After one such effort had failed in 1831, some of its supporters set about establishing their own board called the Western Foreign Missionary Society. Between 1832 and 1837 this society sent out sixty missionaries to work among native americans in the United States, to Liberia, and to India. The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church formally approved the establishment of a Foreign Missions Board and incorporated the organisation and missionaries of the breakaway group in 1837.

The first decision the Board made was to concentrate its efforts in China. China was seen to be a large and important area for mission work that had the advantage of having a single written language, with a people who were considered to be ignorant of the ‘true God’, and ready and willing – so it was believed – to accept Christianity. In December 1837 the Board appointed Reverend John A. Mitchell, and Reverend Robert and Mrs Eliza Carter Orr to open the mission. Their initial job was to locate an area for a base of operations. According to G. Thompson Brown they ‘desired…a place that was healthy, where people and property would be protected and where there was a goodly number of Chinese.’ As part of their work they were to establish schools, begin printing Christian literature, and spread the word of God. As was the case with other missionary groups at that time, the first missionaries did not settle in the Chinese Empire. Rather, they established a residence in Singapore and began to work among the local Chinese. The early pioneers were plagued by ill health. Mitchell developed a fever and died in October 1838, and in 1841 Orr was forced through illness to return to the United States. In 1840, Reverend Thomas L. McBryde, Dr J.C. Hepburn, and their wives reinforced the group. However, the climate was not suitable for their health and the mission could not be put on a stable footing.