Resisting what is happening locally, and in places where your congregation may travel for business and tourism. The book as a whole is readable, practical and Biblical.

Byun spends several chapters spelling out the Gospel, and how God’s character and love for people leads to God’s passion for justice and the church’s calling to speak and act for justice. He probably spends too long doing this, especially considering who his readers are likely to be, but it is emotionally compelling material — good source for sermons and bible studies. There are useful appendices with lists of organisations, resources (not surprisingly nothing Australian) and case studies.

I found the book a bit irritating in the way it focused so much on Byun himself, and his own feelings and actions. I have my own criteria for books:

Would I buy this book for my own library with my own money? No
If I had free access to this book, would I keep it in my library? No
If I had a copy, would I give or lend it to someone? Yes
Would I encourage the church to buy copies for group study and discussion? Yes

If your church does not already have a social justice activity of some kind happening (don’t spread yourself too thin!) I could recommend this book as way to inform, challenge and lead to action as a whole congregation or in a small group.

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View from the Faraway Pagoda by Robert & Linda Banks Acorn Press 2013 Also available as an eBook. ISBN 9780987132956. Reviewed by Peter Schendzielorz

View from the Faraway Pagoda recoverts the life and missionary service of Sophie Newton (the grand-aunt of Robert Banks), who served in south-east China from 1897 to 1931. Her work in establishing schools and training local Christian women happened amidst events like the Boxer Rebellion, the nationalist Revolution and other local conflicts. The book captures Sophie’s trust in God in serving abroad and is an encouragement and challenge considering the ongoing gospel needs and conflicts in the world today. As a biography, it’s encouraging to read of an Australian missionary. Anyone familiar with Sydney suburbs such as Newtown and Burwood, or country areas like Katoomba, Singleton and Yass will find an identification with Sophie’s journey. CMS Summer School events are mentioned regularly as missionaries report back and are recommissioned after furlough. These references in particular give insights into the priorities and mission of the Church Missionary Society (formerly Church Missionary Association) that continue today, and the role of local churches in sending and supporting missionaries. The book is an easy, engaging read. Historical events are interleaved with personal reflections and reconstructions based on journals and letters. This balance of details and facts alongside emotion create a sense of connection and empathy with the events that are taking place. It’s also interesting to read about some of the conflicts and opportunities present in China over time, particularly in understanding the openness of the past, and in understanding the challenges since.

It’s somewhat surprising to read of the effectiveness of communications and committees despite not having instant means of sharing information as we do today. The book makes reference to mail arriving in Sophie’s location every 2 weeks. Yet she was able to achieve much in the space of 3 years in preparing to serve abroad.

Another insight the book gives is to Sophie’s reliance on God, particularly in her scripture reading and prayers. A motivating text for Sophie is Psalms 37:4: “Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart,” which impacted her life in preparation for mission, and also her reluctant (and short lived) retirement.

Her reliance on God is also reflected in the value placed on the prayers and partnership of others, despite the geographical distance separating them. There seems to be a knowledge and support of mission (and Sophie) that many churches or missionaries would be envious of today. A passion and concern for those they support, and a longing to hear from them that is perhaps less prevalent today despite easier means of communication.

As a model of ministry, Sophie’s emphasis on equipping local people for ministry (an approach that sometimes put her at odds with other missionaries) has left a legacy in the areas she served. Her impact was efectual to the extent that on her final retirement (having had an interim retirement due to poor health) the local church requested that CMS send a replacement to continue her service.

View from the Faraway Pagoda isn’t just a good book to read for those connected with China. I’d recommend it to anyone considering long term ministry or mission particularly in the way it portrays a life of service to Jesus.