Pastoral Agriculture: John B. Griffing, Agricultural Missionaries, and Transnational Agricultural Development

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Abstract

This report examines the life and career of John B. Griffing to understand the larger transnational project of rural development in the twentieth century. Griffing had an eclectic career that took him to various parts of the United States, China, and Brazil. While Griffing’s papers are scattered across multiple institutions and countries, collections from the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) were particularly useful in tracing the evolution of Griffing’s ideas about rural development over time. At least two themes emerge when studying his career. The first is his views on religion and rural development. As the son of a small-town dairy farmer and grandson of a Methodist minister, Griffing found a way to blend these two influences by working as an “agricultural missionary” where he promoted agricultural improvement as a tool for spreading Christianity in China. His later work in Brazil focused less on proselytizing but he continued to champion the rural church as an effective center for agricultural change. The second theme is Griffing’s emphasis on extension work and the importance of reaching rural youth through programs such as 4-H clubs. For Griffing, club work (which focused mostly on boys) was an effective way to cultivate a form of rugged masculinity, while also spreading new agricultural crops and practices to their parents.
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John B. Griffing (1885-1962) had a diverse career that was in many ways shaped by the dual influences of his upbringing as the son of a small Kansas dairy farmer and the grandson of a Methodist minister. After graduating from Kansas Agricultural College at the age of 19, he was encouraged by his mother to become a minister. He enrolled at Drake University, only to realize that he did not have the personality for formal preaching. His wife, whom he had met at Drake, encouraged him to pursue teaching as a career instead. He subsequently worked in administrative positions at high schools in Idaho and Oregon for a couple of years after graduation. Griffing then pursued graduate training at Columbia University and the Union Theological Seminary in 1912, which he later stated was driven by a desire to work in China. Before going to China, however, Griffing first moved to Arizona in 1913, where he accepted a position as head of the Department of Agriculture at Tempe Normal School and even spent time surveying local agricultural conditions for the local census and conducted work for the Firestone Tire Co.

In 1919, his chance to go to China finally arrived when he was hired by a private Christian school, University of Nanking, to head cotton improvement and extension work. In China, he began to blend his family influences of farming and preaching to become an “agricultural missionary.” Political unrest in China during the fall of 1926 forced his family to return to the United States and necessitated a further career change. For the next six years, Griffing taught at San Bernardino Valley College, even serving as president from 1929 to 1933. Declining health due to the financial stresses of the Great Depression led him to switch courses once again to work as an educational advisor for the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). In 1936, he left this post to join a Rockefeller...
philanthropic endeavor, the American International Association (AIA), to work on agricultural improvement efforts in Brazil. From 1940 to 1941, his family temporarily returned to California to allow Griffing to complete a Ph.D. from the University of Southern California. His dissertation was titled “A Comparison of the Effect of Certain Socioeconomic Factors upon size of Family in China, Southern California, and Brazil.” Griffing continued his work in Brazil during the 1940s and early 1950s, before settling down in Columbia, South Carolina, where he advised agricultural work in Brazil remotely. Griffing passed away from a heart attack in 1962, at the age of 76.

Griffing’s expansive career poses a problem for historians; he did not leave behind a centralized collection of papers. Rather, traces of his career need to be pieced together from scattered collections around the globe, housed in institutions like Drake University, Arizona State University, the Second Historical Archives of China, Yale Divinity School Library, San Bernardino Valley College, the National Archives, and the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC). Griffing certainly is not unique in this regard. But given the struggle of piecing together disparate archival sources for individuals like Griffing, it is difficult to access exactly how representative his career was of the larger circulation of developmentalist ideas and practices.

Still, Griffing’s career can tell us much about the transregional nature of agricultural development in the twentieth century. It further highlights Anna Holdorf’s conclusions regarding how closely the Rockefeller Foundation worked with religious institutions in its international development efforts – along with how the Rockefeller Foundation recruited former agricultural missionaries such as Griffing.¹ It also touches on the role of interwar China in shaping the emergence of a postwar “American style of modernization,” as argued by David Ekbladh.² Although Griffing was not directly employed by the Rockefeller Foundation during his time in China, much of his work resembled the larger rural reconstruction movement taking place during that time – and he would later reflect on his experiences in China to inform his work in Brazil. Griffing’s career also has the potential of placing other organizations and parts
of the United States within the larger history of international development, such as the Civilian Conservation Corps, or perhaps even his work in Tempe, Arizona.

This report pieces together different archival sources to highlight two aspects of Griffing’s career. The first is his views on religion and development. As mentioned above, Griffing was not a conventional missionary. Instead, he believed that agricultural development provided the opportunities for spreading Christianity and that the rural church could be an effective center for development. The second is Griffing’s emphasis on extension work and the education of future farmers through programs such as 4-H clubs. Archival holdings from the RAC were particularly important in understanding Griffing’s later work and exploring the evolution of his thinking over time.

**Agricultural Missionaries and the Rural Church**

One Saturday afternoon, while enrolled at Drake University, Griffing realized that preaching was not for him. He had worked his way through school taking on jobs such as furnace firing, dishwashing, and housecleaning. With encouragement from others, he decided to try preaching, as well. “On a Saturday afternoon,” he later recalled, “I boarded a train for the southern part of the state and reached a village by horse and buggy connection from the railroad. Never did I pray more fervently for rain. Torrents fell and I was saved, the service had to be canceled. Although a few requests came to give another trial demonstration, I declined and returned to my ashes.”

At some point, Griffing discovered an alternative approach to missionary work that did not require formal preaching. His introduction to agricultural missionary work and to China likely first came through Joseph Bailie. When and where they met is unclear, but Griffing would later recall that “It was through Joseph Bailie that I became interested in taking up work at the University of Nanking,” a private university in China founded by American missionaries in the late nineteenth century. Originally a professor of
mathematics, Bailie became interested in improving rural conditions throughout China. To Griffing, Bailie “was a most intriguing character, bearing no resemblance to a traditional missionary but rather to a back country farmer. Through his activities which seemed unorthodox and at times eccentric, he gained a reputation throughout China and even Manchuria as a leader in trying to solve the problem of human subsistence in famine ridden China.”

Joseph Bailie was part of a larger social gospel movement that began in the late nineteenth-century United States and was led by Protestant missionaries who sought converts through social reforms such as schools and hospitals. By the early twentieth century, missionaries began to see agriculture as an important medium of social and spiritual change. Bailie was among the earliest of these agricultural missionaries in China, but he was not alone. Others included John Lossing Buck, who was the husband of Pearl S. Buck (author of *The Good Earth*) and one of Griffing’s colleagues and neighbors at Nanking. More importantly was John Reisner, Griffing’s boss at Nanking who would go on to help establish Agricultural Missions, Inc. in the 1930s, after returning to the United States.

Griffing’s personality, combined with his rural background and scientific training, seems to have made him more amenable to this pastoral approach as opposed to formal proselytizing. His own views on agricultural missionary work were best exemplified in a short essay he wrote in 1925 titled “One of the Least.” In the story, he describes a poor Chinese farmer who lived with his family in a time of famine, where crops had dried up and soldiers robbed them of their belongings. One day, a “superior man” with soft hands and fancy clothing passed by inviting the farmer and his family to church, with the farmer dismissing him as “a crazy teacher... telling of some foreigner who died and lived again.” Several days later, another man with delicate hands and clean clothing arrived to write a report on rural conditions. After being mistaken by the farmer as a tax collector, the man clarified that he was a teacher and had opened a new school in town where the farmer’s son could attend for five dollars a semester. Although education was the surest way to social mobility, the farmer had no money to invest in his son’s education. After barely surviving the winter, a third man came to the home in early spring who had rough hands and darkened skin
from the time he had spent in the sun working. The man was knowledgeable about agriculture and was able to provide the poor farmer with disease-free silkworm eggs and improved cotton seed which could be paid for after harvest. Several months later, the same man returned to check in on the farmer whose silkworms and cotton crop were doing well. Gaining the trust of the farmer, the man then invited his son to a school that he was organizing, which the farmer could now afford, and which would not prevent the son from helping around the farm. He also invited the farmer to attend night classes to learn how to read.

“Good teacher, you are, indeed, too kind,” the farmer exclaimed, “Tell me, why is it that you do this? For whom are you working?” Smiling, the teacher exclaimed that he worked for a “Master” who commanded him to clothe, feed, and care for the poor and sick. After expressing a desire to learn more about this Master, the man invited him and his family to church on Sunday, which the farmer gladly agreed to attend with his wife and son.7

Griffing’s later writings were not always as explicitly religious as when he lived in China. Perhaps, this was because his future work primarily took place in the United States and Brazil, where the majority of the population was already Christian. Griffing’s writings in Brazil show his willingness to work across denominational divides to engage with Catholic and Protestant churches. His social gospel work in Brazil was focused less on winning converts and more on encouraging religious leaders to play a part in rural development. “Unfortunately,” Griffing would bemoan in the early 1950s, “religious leaders tend to stress better living in the next world rather than improvement of this vale of tears here below.” Subsequently, Griffing and his colleagues “made it our business to awaken religious leaders to something of social consciousness.” The response was encouraging. Some groups of rural padres took courses on rural work at state agricultural colleges, some held weekly courses on “gardening and rural problems,” and regional special conferences were held providing field trips and demonstrations. One such initiative, the Instituto Metodista of Santo Amaro, focused on training women in social service activities and even some agricultural training for work in the rural church. These efforts, Griffing pointed out, “have promoted in the most interior communities such innovations as hybrid corn, trench silos, ant control, cattle spraying, compost making and
Towards the end of his career, he was even working on a book manuscript titled “The Pastor and Agricultural Extension.” The final product was projected to be around a hundred pages with plans to produce English and Portuguese editions. It is unclear whether or not this project was ever completed, and I was unable to find drafts of the manuscript, but the existence of this project towards the end of Griffing’s career demonstrates the ways in which he continued to see religion and rural development as interconnected.

Aligned with his push for agricultural missionary work was Griffing’s apparent skepticism of government and the drive to “accomplish much for little.” While working in China, he was often critical of state-led efforts to improve agricultural conditions. Griffing reported that farmers in some regions were hesitant and even resistant to receiving free seed. Farmers viewed these extension workers “with suspicion as being agents of scheming officials attempting to work some new ruse for extorting money,” as previous government improvement schemes “turned out to be a forerunner of a special tax collection.” Instead of working with local governments to prevent these abuses from occurring again, Griffing argued that “the county mission station” was “the most hopeful channel of extension work” due to missionaries’ enthusiasm for crop improvement and the service that these stations provided the local population during times of famine. Similarly, in a 1953 document titled “Theory and Practice in Rural Improvement,” Griffing discouraged “model” programs that were commonly promoted by the government. He instead emphasized the importance of working with “existing agencies, rather than by creating new bureaucracies and multiplying the number of government functionaries,” and stressed that programs should be educational and “operate on the principle of helping the rural man to help himself.”

Around the same time, Griffing authored an essay to a friend where he reflected on his career and further emphasized many of these ideas. When discussing his work in a village in rural China, Griffing mentioned that the original purpose of their cotton improvement work was “to discover how much we could accomplish with how little, and thus create an example of a movement that might become wide spread and indigenous.” The problem was that over time,
the project became so successful that “the powers that were felt the village needed a staff of specialists.” Subsequently, “Future plans for village work were drawn on such an elaborate scale that they could never be made general or indigenous, but could only exist as an expensive service pinned on with the aid of outside resources.” China was not unique in this regard. Later while working in Brazil, Griffing “fought a continual battle for ‘Much for little to the many’ as against a few ‘Big shows for publicity purposes, with many jobs for workers’.” A “few instances of agricultural mission work,” and medical missionary served as counter examples to the “megalomaniac trend” in international development. Yet according to Griffing, the tendency towards large scale and expensive improvement work was a “virus” that affected improvement work in various parts of the world.13

Griffing’s later comments in the 1950s were written at a time of broader reflection in American society regarding the dangers of large-scale development projects. As Daniel Immerwahr describes, by the mid-twentieth century, “many people had come to feel that social institutions had somehow grown too large to be managed,” with world leaders launching “community development” schemes that – at least in theory – served as an alternative developmental path to the top-down modernizations programs of the time.14 For Griffing, agricultural missionary work and the rural church represented an alternative to the expensive large-scale (and often government-led) development projects. During his time in China, Griffing’s locally-oriented approach would arguably alienate him from the larger networks of agricultural improvement.15 But this approach reflected Griffing’s emphasis to think small when it came to rural development and how philanthropic organizations, such as the Rockefeller Foundation, could tap into existing institutions to accomplish much for little. His social gospel mentality informed his life’s work as his “prime concern ... throughout his career as an educator, has been with the rural dweller, teaching him to help himself with modern techniques.”16
Education and Agricultural Clubs

Not all of Griffing’s work was explicitly religious. While once a self-proclaimed “agricultural missionary,” much of his career was spent as that of an educator at the secondary and tertiary levels. In addition to working at rural schools in Idaho and Oregon at the beginning of his career, in 1913 he accepted a position as head of the Department of Agriculture at Tempe Normal School. We do not know much about Griffing’s time in Arizona, but in his letter of application for work in China, he highlighted that he “organized the first Boys’ Cotton Club in the State and was offered the position of state leader for Ariz. of Boys’ and Girls’ Clubs” along with “similar positions in Idaho and North Dakota.” 17 (He apparently declined these offers.) The clubs that Griffing formed were part of a larger movement in rural education taking place throughout the United States that would later be formalized as 4-H Clubs. These clubs were shaped by John Dewey’s education philosophy emphasizing pragmatism and learning by doing. Where other youth organizations such as the YMCA/YWCA targeted leisure activities for reform, 4-H clubs centered on what they viewed as a more efficient and scientific management of the rural farm (boys) and home (girls). As historian Gabriel N. Rosenberg summarized, these clubs “concentrated their efforts on improving the agricultural practices of rural boys and the homemaking of rural girls, operating under the theory that even if adults dismissed their lessons, youth would adopt them and create healthy and attractive households where the previous generation had failed.”18

Griffing’s work in China continued to emphasize Dewey’s pragmatism. After arriving in Nanking, Griffing brought together a dozen or so college students to assist him in his work, a group which he would call the “Cotton Club.” The number of students was larger than he originally planned. To weed them out, he took them out to the field and even marched them up a local mountain. “I was hoping to kill them off and keep the fittest that survived,” he wrote playfully to his boss John Reisner. “I lost two with heart failure shortly after a scientific experiment on weeds with hoes followed by an afternoon walk to Purple Mountain and back.”19 The students who remained would go on to have highly
productive and important careers in agricultural science, some of which became leaders in the Chinese agricultural science community.\textsuperscript{20} In addition to working with college students, Griffing also set up short courses for local farm boys. As *The Drake Alumnus* would report about Griffing, “One of his particularly worthy pieces of work has been the installation of short courses for the farm boys. These are patterned after the American college short courses and have done much to train the boys to be better farmers. It also attracts boys who would ordinarily receive no schooling.”\textsuperscript{21} Griffing would also travel around rural China with his Cotton Club, giving presentations on different agricultural practices such as growing upland American cotton or distributing disease-free silkworm eggs.\textsuperscript{22}

Back in the United States, Griffing contributed to the growth of San Bernardino Valley College for several years before becoming an educational advisor for the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in 1933. The CCC was influenced by the Boy Scout movement in introducing urban youth to the wonders of nature. Running from 1933 to 1942, the CCC shaped the lives of around three million young men who helped plant two billion trees (which mitigated soil erosion on as much as 40 million acres of farmland), developed 800 new state parks, and prepared (both physically and mentally) the young men to serve in World War II.\textsuperscript{23} In the CCC, Griffing served as the camp educational adviser of the Ninth Corps Area which included California, Oregon, Washington, Nevada, Utah, Idaho, and Montana. He was responsible for 297 camps and around 60,000 boys, the majority of which were between the ages of 18 and 25.\textsuperscript{24}

At the CCC, Griffing similarly emphasized his hands-on approach to education stating that every aspect of the camp experience should be educational. He would even stress that the educational process “approaches the idea of John Dewey by working largely though life activities.” For Griffing, this included gaining a greater appreciation for nature, building strong muscles and healthy habits, and socialization through working together. Similar to his work in China, Griffing emphasized an element of rugged masculinity when stating that “more important than any of these is a knuckling down to hard work and liking it, with the development of a social approval of the man who can ‘take it,’ and of
group disapproval of the ‘gold-brickers’ or ‘pansies.’” A high priority was given to vocational training both on the job and after work. Evening classes could vary from lectures by “distinguished biologists and geologists” or vocational courses where “boys have an opportunity of working with their hands” in “improvised shops strewn with radio parts and engines from junked cars.” The overall goal was therefore to prioritize the physical, intellectual, and mental development of youth in order to make them more employable and “useful” citizens.25

Agricultural club work was not a new idea to Brazil by the time Griffing arrived. But he did critique club work for not achieving its goals to train future farmers and introduce modern agricultural practices to their parents. Greater adaptation was needed. Reflecting on adapting US institutions to Brazil in a 1952 presentation titled “Clubs for Rural Youth in Brazil,” Griffing recalled his earlier experience in China where he “became acquainted with the process of readjusting” American agricultural practices. “Passing from North America to China was like entering another world. We, from the United States, were profoundly concerned in discovering what elements could be drawn from our own culture and how they could be modified to become useful under such vastly different conditions.” An example of this was the use of farm machinery which was not suitable for the small plots of land that Chinese farmers owned. Griffing contrasted this with entering Brazil: “From the United States to Brazil, the traveler meets no such shock of cultural differences as he faces in entering China. Except that signs over the stores are in the Portuguese language instead of English, a city in Brazil seems similar to any North American city.” Despite such similarities (including the use of tractors in both settings), local adaptation was still essential, especially when it came to agricultural club work given the different education institutions in the United States and Brazil. Griffing concluded that transplanting institutions like 4-H or Future Farmers of America “would be comparable to the introduction of milking machines to the Chinese farmers who have no cows but extract milk from soy beans.” By the 1950s, Griffing highlighted that more than three thousand agricultural clubs had been established but most of these were organized at town and city schools with a focus on communal projects such as planting a school garden. They also tended to serve more financially stable households. Other examples included
“Practical Agricultural Schools,” but the problem here was that these functioned as boarding schools with training in agricultural practices taking place far away from home. Such issues prevented new agricultural practices from being introduced to parents.26

Beginning in 1948, the AIA began working with the Department of Agriculture of the State of Sao Paulo to introduce agricultural clubs. Instead of going through rural schools, however, these clubs were led by agronomists associated with AIA and the State Extension Service. Moreover, rather than planting a communal garden at a school, club members were to start individual projects at home with an initial focus on hybrid corn clubs or garden clubs. At the end of the harvest, they would hold exhibits and award the best with modest prizes. While initial growth was slow, the clubs expanded over time so that around 1952, there were 22 hybrid corn clubs and 28 garden clubs with nearly 500 total members. The results were even more impressive as “production records [for the individual projects] have exceeded those of any of the farmers in the community.” By starting individual projects at or close to home, they also had the effect of influencing their parents: “before the organization of the clubs, there was almost no interest whatever in hybrid corn. Now, nearly all farmers plant it.” As one parent confessed, “I certainly have learned how to plant corn from my children.” Griffing concluded that agricultural club work is “one of the most effective means of introducing new ideas and better methods” not only to the future generation of farmers, but also to their parents.27

Conclusion

This report drew from records at various archives, including the RAC, to explore the work and thought of John B. Griffing. Two aspects, in particular, were emphasized. The first was the place of Christianity and the rural church in agricultural development. Griffing’s career as an agricultural missionary in China and his later work with the rural church in Brazil highlight the close relationship between religious institutions and international development in
the twentieth century. The second is the importance of youth education through initiatives such as 4-H clubs. Griffing was deeply influenced by John Dewey’s emphasis on pragmatic and hands-on education. This belief led him to be an early promoter of boys’ agricultural clubs in the United States and China, to stress the idea of practical training and education as an advisor in the CCC, and to help adapt agricultural clubs in Brazil as a part of AIA. This recognition of local adaptation was informed by his earlier work in China where he experienced the difficulties of exporting US models abroad.

4 Griffing to Rev. Corbett, October 22, 1954. RG 11, Box 60, Folder 850, Yale Divinity Library.
5 As Buck explained, “the whole idea of such work was to use agriculture as a practical way to teach Christianity and as a means of making friends. With an improved agriculture, economic conditions would be bettered, Christian farmers would be more able to support the church and non-Christians would be more willing to listen to the teachings of Christianity.” See J. Lossing Buck, “Missionaries Begin Agricultural Education in China,” Millard’s Review 6 (September 14, 1918), 78.
6 Holdorf, “Heavenly Harvests” (RAC Research Reports), 5.
8 John B. Griffing, “Air View of the Forest” (p. 16-17), American International Association for Economic and Social Development (AIA) records, General, Series 1, Box 2, Folder 12 (“Articles – Griffing 1953”), Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC).
9 Martha Dalrymple to Howard N. Knowles, December 18, 1958, Rockefeller Family Public Relations Department papers, Articles and Books Correspondence, Series 8, Box 64, Folder 670 (“John B. Griffing 1956-1960”), RAC.
10 John B. Griffing, “Theory and Practice in Rural Development,” AIA records, General, Series 1, Box 2, Folder 12 (“Articles – Griffing 1953”), RAC.
12 Griffing, “Theory and Practice in Rural Development.”
13 Griffing to Rev. Corbett, October 22, 1954. RG 11, Box 60, Folder 850, Yale Divinity Library.

Martha Dalrymple to Claude Harper, July 13, 1955, Rockefeller Family Public Relations Department papers, Administration and Staff, Series 3, Box 35, Folder 347 (“John B. Griffing (1) 1951-1956”), RAC.

Griffing to Swingle, March 22, 1919, 649-2723, Second Historical Archives of China.


These included T.H. Shao, Chow Ming Yi, Chang Wuen-wei, C.W. Chang, and later, T.H. Shen.


Griffing to Rev. Corbett, October 22, 1954, RG 11, Box 60, Folder 850, Yale Divinity Library.


Ibid.

John B. Griffing, “Clubs for Rural Youth in Brazil,” Rockefeller Family Public Relations Department papers, Administration and Staff, Series 3, Box 35, Folder 347 (“John B. Griffing (1) 1951-1956”), RAC.

Griffing, “Clubs for Rural Youth in Brazil.”