Were Christian Members of the Yenching Faculty Unique?: An Examination of the Life Fellowship Movement, 1919–1931

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The May Fourth Movement and the later Anti-Christian Movement of the 1920s posed severe challenges for the Christian church in Republican China. The major elements in that context—science, anti-imperialism, and nationalism—exerted a strong impact on the indigenous Christian community, causing its members, both individually and collectively, to reexamine their respective positions. Christian intellectuals and educators encountered difficulties in that they were obliged to accommodate the conflicting demands of science and Christianity, while also having to deal with the differing demands of loyalty both to the nation and to their religion, whether adopted or inherited, which seemed in the eyes of their contemporaries to be imbued with imperialist values. This latter problem was especially acute in the larger cities and on the campuses of Christian colleges which often became centers of anti-Christian sentiment.

The Life Fellowship Movement and Christian Members of the Yenching Faculty

Because of its location in Peking, the epicenter of student radicalism, Yenching was one of the first Christian universities in China to face these challenges. Realizing that the New Culture Movement was becoming increasingly popular among college-age students and that it contained elements of agnosticism and anti-Christian sentiment, YMCA secretaries in Peking and Christian intellectuals on the Yenching campus, among others, came together to defend their religious beliefs and to propagate the Christian message. The name chosen to identify their fledgling organization, Zhengdao tuan, has been variously translated into English as “The Peking Apologetic Group,” “The Group of Truth Wit-

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ness,” or “A Union to Witness the Truth.”¹ While it is difficult to determine when they first met, in 1919 or 1920, the Peking Apologetic Group, the forerunner of Shengming she (Life Fellowship Society), was clearly intellectually and apologetically oriented.²

By September 1925, the Peking Apologetic Group had changed its name to Life Fellowship Society to accord with the name of its house organ. An examination of the list of its founding members reveals that Yenching University Christian faculty members and local YMCA secretaries played leading roles in the organization and that, in fact, these two institutions shared an intimate relationship in this respect.³

The Peking Apologetic Group formally introduced itself to Christian circles on 12 May 1920 when Xu Baoqian addressed an International Christian Fellowship meeting in Peking. On that occasion, he used the term “Christian Renaissance” to designate this movement, which he asked members of the audience to join. Frank Rawlinson, editor of the Chinese Recorder and a founding member of the group, published Xu’s speech in the July 1920 issue of his journal.⁴ Two months later, an article entitled “Chinese Renaissance in China—Statement of Aims of the Peking Apologetic Group,” was translated into English by Zhao Zichen, a founding member who later moved to Yenching University from Soochow University in 1925.⁵

With respect to Chinese-language publications, the sixth issue of Zhonghua jidujiaohui nianjian (China Church Year Book), which appeared in 1921, carried an article by Xu explaining the purposes and plans of

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¹ There are three different translations for the name of this group. When Zhao Zichen translated the public statement of this group into English, he used the name “Peking Apologetic Group,” but he also stated that its title “may be translated 'the group of truth witness.'” T. C. Chao, trans., “Christian Renaissance in China—Statement of Aims of the Peking Apologetic Group,” Chinese Recorder, September 1920, 636–37. The Life Fellowship once published an article in its official organ, Shengming (Life), giving its English name as “a union to witness the truth.” “Our Special Number,” Shengming (hereafter cited as SM), March 1922, 10.

² On one occasion, it was stated that this group was formed in 1919. See “Our Special Number,” 10. However, according to Xu Baoqian, the apologetic group was formed by several prominent Christians on 28 January 1920, who met to discuss the Renaissance movement. Hsu Pao Ch’ien (Xu Baoqian), “The Christian Renaissance,” Chinese Recorder, July 1920, 460. Fifteen years later, Xu stated it was founded on 14 March 1920. Xu Baoqian, “Ershinian xindao zishu (xu)” (My twenty years’ religious experience [continued]), Zhenli yu shengming (hereafter cited as ZLYSM), May 1934, 81.

³ At this time, the Peking YMCA and Yenching enjoyed a close relationship, with many individuals holding joint appointments. In 1930, “twelve of the senior Chinese faculty had served as YMCA officers or secretaries, while many more than that had been longtime participants in YMCA activities.” Philip West, Yenching University and Sino-Western Relation, 1916–1952 (Cambridge, Mass, 1976), 118.
