The American Social Gospel and the Chinese YMCA

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"The bad name missionaries have been given in popular American lore was at least partly earned for all of them by those who were barren-minded, the devotees and bigots, who were often immensely shrewd but were seldom immensely intelligent. 'How could a Protestant God have stomached such stupid enthusiasts?" So said David Treadup, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) hero in John Hersey's book, The Call.¹ Unlike the evangelical missionaries who went to China to save "the heathens from damnation," the YMCA secretaries (or administrative officers) went primarily to reform the social order. The YMCA story breaks many of our deeply held stereotypes about Christian missions in China.² While most missionary groups tended to exercise a strong sense of paternalism, the YMCA group of nondogmatic and service-oriented men preached the earliest spirit of racial equality among their own ranks. Contrary to popular opinion that foreign missions were financed and remote-controlled from the home boards, the YMCA movement transformed itself quickly into an indigenous movement supported and managed by the Chinese. And unlike most Christian missions, which were spreading the gospel of Western Civilization, the idealistic Association men strove to

The Journal of American-East Asian Relations, Vol. 5, Nos. 3-4 (Fall-Winter 1996)
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2. There is a voluminous body of literature on Christian missions in China. Examples include Edward V. Gulick, Peter Parker and the Opening of China (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), a study of one of the missionary pioneers of medical work in China; Valentin H. Rabe, Home Base of American China Missions, 1880-1920 (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), an analysis of the support system in the United States for China missions; Sidney A. Forsythe, American Missionary Community in China, 1895-1905 (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), a systematic examination of the lives of over a hundred American missionaries active in northern China at the turn of the century; Paul Varg, Missionaries, Chinese, and Diplomats: The American Protestant Missionary Movement in China, 1890-1952 (Princeton, N.J., 1958), a broadly conceived, revealing study of the difficulties of exporting American ideology to the alien Chinese cultural milieu; and Jane Hunter, Gospel of Gentility: American Women Missionaries in Turn-of-Century China (New Haven, Conn., 1984). For additional bibliographical information, see John King Fairbank, The United States and China (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), 533-34. As Fairbanks noted rightfully, in the vast literature on individual Christians and churches, Chinese Christian leaders and institutions were largely neglected. This study intends to correct this phenomenon.
conform to Chinese sensibilities, emphasizing continuities rather than disruptions between their own values and those of the Chinese.

The YMCA's cross-cultural experiment, though small in scale, became disproportionately influential for a number of reasons. First, most of the YMCA Chinese leaders were educated in American universities or mission schools in China. This Western training provided them with both a proficiency in Western culture and a much needed eloquence that made them the most articulate spokesmen. The YMCA housed some of the leading Chinese Christian intellectuals, such as T. C. Chao, Y. T. Wu, T. Z. Koo, L. C. Wu, and P. C. Hsu. Also, Yenching University, a YMCA stronghold, served as the perfect forum for their cosmopolitan ideals. In 1930, twelve of the senior Chinese faculty had served as YMCA officers or secretaries, while many more had been participants in YMCA activities. The YMCA's leadership at developing a fusion of Chinese and Western culture was also greatly boosted by its close relations with the Republican government. Many former YMCA Chinese leaders and associates became government officials. In 1927 when Chiang Kai-shek's cabinet was named, seven out of ten members were either former YMCA leaders or activists.

However, this liberal trend, taken by the YMCA and supported by the National Christian Council headed by David Yui, general secretary of the YMCA in China, prompted an outburst of protests from the conservative ranks within the missionary community in China. In 1927, Martin P. Simon, a Lutheran, angrily asked:

Why should I read what people may think China has to "contribute to religion," when I know that the true religion is completed in the Bible, and cannot be improved or augmented? What business has the church, which Christ entrusted with the Gospel, to cooperate with Peasants' and Laborers' Unions? Why should I wish to lower the office of a missionary to be merely one who "exchanges ideas?"

He insisted that "I am sent neither to abrogate the 'unequal' treaties, nor to engage in 'social uplift,' nor to install flush toilets. I am assuredly here to preach Christ-crucified." Eugene Barnett, former YMCA secretary in China and later general secretary of the International Committee (1937–41), recalled in his memoir, "inside the Church Christians locked horns in a Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy which swept the country. . . . Much of its attack however was leveled at the 'Social Gospel'—a bad word in their vocabulary—and in this attack

3. Dwight W. Edwards and Y. P. Mei, both former YMCA secretaries, wrote a history of Yenching University, Yenching University (New York, 1959); see also Philip West, Yenching University and Sino-Western Relations, 1916–1952 (Cambridge, Mass., 1976).