

China Missions and the Perils of Benevolence

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Not long ago if you mentioned to academic acquaintances that you were studying China missionaries seriously, the response was one of surprise and a quick change of subject. In the world of China analysts, missionaries were dismissed as a horde of fanatics or as a club of well-intentioned but impotent meddlers.

Today, as more attention is paid the transnational influence of service organizations, China missionaries are, if not precisely in vogue, becoming a respectable field of academic inquiry. In January, 1972, the Committee on American-East Asian Relations of the American Historical Association sponsored a conference in Cuernavaca, Mexico, on China missionaries. Assorted historians gave papers on theology and American foreign policy, the corporate structure of the missionary movement and its influence in China, theories of missionary imperialism or lack thereof, among other topics. (The papers are to be published by Harvard in a book edited by John K. Fairbank, organizer of the proceedings.)

With only eighteen participants, the conference had its limitations. One of the most obvious was the neglect of Catholic missionaries, largely because American Catholic archives have been relatively inaccessible and almost no historians seem to have worked in them—a situation calling for remedy. Nor were all Protestant denominations examined. Whole new areas of study were suggested in the course of the conference—the need, for instance, of something that went by the unnerving name of prosopography, which seems to mean collective biography. Nevertheless, there was more than enough to discuss. Being a conference and not a trial, the meeting reached few tidy conclusions. There is a lot more to be learned about an enterprise that covered a century

and a half, involving thousands of people and millions of dollars. A continuing study of missionary activities will reveal a good deal we have not understood before about the American experience in China; much of the revelation will not be about the Chinese but about ourselves. As study proceeds, American boosters will have less cause for rejoicing, but cynics too have some surprises in store. There may even be a moral. Beyond the past, beyond the churches, beyond China, the record of American benevolence abroad raises questions likely to leave us uneasy about the future.

The outpouring of American church money, emotion and personnel to China is an extraordinary phenomenon, part of the expansion of American missionary activity throughout the world that started early and boomed between the 1880's and the early 1920's. Fueled by revivalist spirit, it engaged the commitment of thousands of young Americans to a life overseas. It is a large, undigested slice of our history.

One start toward understanding the missionary movement is to understand missionaries themselves. We know less than we think. They tended to be young, middle-class, small-town men and women, first from the Seaboard but, by the turn of the century, more often from the Middle West. On the surface they were the quintessential WASP, that success-oriented, self-assured figure upon whom so much intellectual disdain is lavished. They differed from others, however, in that they were not primarily interested in making money, and instead of staying home they went abroad. Why did they go? Their professional applications and memoirs, especially in this century, often say they were "called." Sometimes the call expressed itself as a clear religious conviction that Christianity was unique, universal, and necessary for the salvation of mankind, demanding, in A. T. Pierson's phrase, the evangelization of the world in this generation. Sometimes the call came as a need

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to serve mankind through humanitarian works. It seemed almost a hunger, a compelling belief that there was a greater need to serve outside the United States than within.

A call is a difficult thing to define, and I certainly do not deny the validity of the concept, yet the missionary urge involves layer upon layer of complexities. Why was the call usually for a lifetime commitment? And why to China (or India, or Turkey) and not to the next county? For male missionaries, ordained or unordained, the stimulus sending them abroad was not a search for upward mobility. The average male missionary was a college graduate, member of an educational elite in the United States, with good enough prospects in his own country. Some were outstanding. M. Searle Bates (a participant at the Cuernavaca conference) was a Rhodes Scholar before going to China. John Ferguson, Leighton Stuart, and Eugene Barnett were thinkers and administrators who clearly could have sold a million dollars a year in insurance if it had occurred to them to try. Though not all male missionaries were so able, the picture is not one of social misfits seeking escape. If anything, they radiated the same sheen of optimism that characterized their fellow middle-class Protestants.

Was it then religious pressure in their homes or colleges, or relatives already abroad who furnished an example? Was it a sense of adventure spicing the religious temperament? The lure of the frontier pulses within Americans, whether it be to the West, to China, or to the Moon. Was there a psychological need to be with people seen as inferior? Whatever the motivation, it set the missionaries apart from their fellows. I remember one young missionary on leave from India to finish his A.B. at my own undergraduate college, Bates, which had been sending a stream of Baptists to the Orient since the Civil War. A tanned and balding man in his twenties, he preached in the country churches on Sundays, conveyed me about town on the back of his motorcycle, and believed with all the fervor of his Maine soul in the therapeutic value of work. He was not, heaven knows, an intellectual, but he could fix his motorcycle, mobilize a crew to shovel snow, and stay grimly with books that did not interest him, not in the name of progress or profit but in the name of the Bible. In the unfocused world of a college campus he stood out as tough in spirit and clear in motivation. Even as his religious fervor astonished me, his single-mindedness and pragmatism impressed me. Many of the missionaries I have since met remind me of him—sometimes brighter, sometimes less intelligent, but with the same air of getting at an important task without delay. Their motivation calls for a kind of psycho-history of missionaries, for in a secular America they may still have their counterpart.

For the women it is easier to formulate a workable hypothesis. The work of women received at best only courtly mention from most of the conference participants, including this writer, yet more and more they seem compellingly important to the story. Eventually they made up sixty per cent of the American workers in China, going places where men could not go and bringing to Chinese women their first glimpse of Western ideas and institutions. The type of American women who went abroad obviously influenced what they did. Some went as wives who "got China" along with their husbands. Other wives, but particularly the unmarried women, chose missionary service on their own. For them, upward professional mobility may have been the factor that focused or even produced their call. The American female missionary often consciously rejected her constricted sphere of opportunity in this country; she was, in short, a feminist. This was particularly true of women physicians, who, while in great demand overseas, were often treated with arrogance and contempt at home. Many of the teaching missionaries were rural women from large families, often not quite young, to whom overseas work presented an alternative to a lifetime of labor in a one-room country schoolhouse. Even the women in more hospitable areas had visions of opportunities elsewhere. Women's colleges urged students into missionary work. (Two of the many Mt. Holyoke graduates who went to China became, respectively, the president of Ginling College for Women and Dean of Yenching Women's College.) Paid less than their male colleagues, usually pledged to remain unmarried, often living lives of loneliness and drudgery, these women teachers and doctors nevertheless found an outlet for their talents larger than they expected to find at home.

Missionaries, like the rest of us, were pinned in space and time. They exported, along with their religious fervor, bits of Maine sturdiness and Massachusetts feminism. Recognizing this diversity is a necessary antidote to viewing missionaries as a stereotype or judging the whole movement as a monolithic event. Not only in psychology and practice, but also in the message conveyed, the missionary movement appears varied and even improvised. There was no single "theology of missions" apart from the admonition of Christ to go and preach to all peoples. Sometimes the core of the Christianity to be exported was an imminent second coming, sometimes a reverence for personality, sometimes the gospel of self-sacrifice. The lack of any single doctrine, any unwavering theological trajectory, is striking. In part this reflected the doctrinal fragmentation in the United States, not only among denominations but also between Fundamentalists and Modernists. In part it reflected the active rather than speculative nature of many missionaries and their necessarily pragmatic adaptation to other

societies. What went overseas was not a rigid ideology but an ambiguous, improvised, often greatly modified body of belief, joined to equally varied ideas about how to embody Christianity in social change, schools, and international relations. The home front was never united on what it wanted, and indeed had little control over what was said or done in the field. Such looseness, while it has great practical advantages, encourages internal contradictions and portends unpleasant surprises at later dates. China was to be no exception.

Whatever the confusions, money to support the missionaries poured in, a penny a week from ladies' society members and millions from the Rockefellers. The missionaries opened churches, started dispensaries, established schools, founded printing presses, published magazines. The material services they provided were needed and often requested by the Chinese: the start of modern school systems, medical education, public health programs, agricultural experimentation, industrial and commercial education—the list is long. For a time, many of the social services available in a China demoralized and trying to reconstruct herself were provided by missionaries, European as well as American, Roman Catholic as well as Protestant.

The ideas were as important as the services, for the package of American values that missionaries brought was a sackful of dynamite. They preached the dignity of the individual and the glories of self-government. They campaigned against opium smoking, foot binding and child marriage. They advocated community organization and social responsibility based on units larger than the family. They inveighed against concubinage. The YWCA organized women factory workers in the sweatshops. The effect of these beliefs was to introduce new ferment into an already troubled China. Protestant missionaries attacked societies and ideas of which they did not approve, and in China, as elsewhere, their presence was revolutionary.

Some call it imperialism—cultural, theological, and/or psychological. Perhaps it was arrogant racism. After all, China had not asked them to come; they were present by virtue of an imposed and hated treaty system. That there were elements of arrogance and cultural snobbery in the movement is undeniable. As Professor William Hutchison of Harvard has remarked, we have found it impossible to proclaim the superiority of the American religion without proclaiming the superiority of us. The literature yields occasional examples of terrible, roaring, militant missionaries who disliked the Chinese so much it is difficult to see why they stayed in China. Temperaments differed, but most missionaries knew that arrogance was self-defeating in China, where missionaries could merely cajole, not command, allegiance.

How "successful" the enterprise is another question. China became neither Western nor Christian. In the end, her revolution was highly indigenous, far different from the vision of missionaries or of any other foreigner, Stalin included. Materially, it is true, the missionary movement provided a temporary structure of humanitarian services when the Chinese were unable to do so alone. Intellectually, missionaries introduced Western ideas into the treaty ports. China was not a society to be easily molded by a band of foreigners. She possessed huge reservoirs of resistance, of Chineseness, through which Chinese exposed to American/Christian thinking filtered only what they wanted. Chinese themselves served as mediators of foreign ideas and institutions to their own culture, in the process transforming them and conforming them to other influences. Outsiders could bring revolutionary ideas, but they could not determine the way they were interpreted or used. Americans established colleges, but by the 1930's Chinese gained administrative control and changed the liberal arts orientation to programs of intense political direction. If and when theology was considered, it emphasized Jesus as social critic and even as nationalist. The Christian idea of man as individualist soon merged into the Chinese faith in man within society. The theoretical structure of democracy, always built of matchsticks in China, soon crumbled to reveal the solid traditional understructure that valued social goals more than political freedoms.

Missionaries brought a grab-bag from the West, and the Chinese took only what they wanted. Except under rigid regimentation or the crushing impact of war, and perhaps not even then, societies resist imposed changes. It is easier to build a road than to modify a marriage pattern, simpler to change a government than to unbind a foot. Even in China today, Madame Sun Yat-sen complains that women are not yet treated as equals in the countryside. Lacking the powers and indigenous authority of a Mao, the China missionary's touch was like a feather; he was asking for frustration. This is not to say that as an individual or on a short-term basis the missionary made no difference. Indeed, it was notable that the one Chinese participant at the Cuernavaca conference spoke quite tenderly about the work of American missionaries. But in the long run what made the real difference in the transformation of China was the incredible vitality and hard work of the Chinese themselves. This too seems inevitable.

The major missionary impact was on the United States; here the missionary movement was an industry of the emotions, a theological-commercial complex that transformed the China work into an epic of Christian sacrifice and turned the missionaries into saints and martyrs. The American churches were sold missions. Although mission-

ary work already existed, it really boomed with the organization of women's mission boards in the 1860's and the subsequent release of their considerable energies into raising money and supplying personnel for overseas. According to the mission historian, Pierce Beaver, the church was (and is) a "bastion of male arrogance and power," with men reluctant to share control with women. By forming their own foreign missionary societies, notes Professor Beaver in his book *All Loves Excelling*, women were able to obtain a role in policy-making and administration.

Their success was astonishing. They operated with volunteer workers and shoestring budgets, often making their contributions to the movement from the household money or by holding bake sales or selling emotional leaflets. By 1910 there were in the United States forty-four women's societies that raised four million dollars a year and supported almost two thousand unmarried women in stations overseas. In addition, women gave generously through the regular mechanisms of the church. They were so effective that there was considerable and sometimes successful pressure from the male-managed mission interests to take over the women's work, especially the money part of it.

The emotional content of the women's effort is remarkable. They cultivated the interests of children and young girls through bands called Busy Bees, Carrier Doves, and Snowflakes, who promised to pray each day "for the salvation of the heathen." Letters from overseas female missionaries were widely circulated and the women were hailed as heroines: "a broad hearted woman, with a heart full of tenderness and sympathy," was a typical remark about young Dr. Eleanor Chesnut, murdered during the Boxer Uprising. An entire emotion-laden industry was built around merchandising the Southern Baptist, Lottie Moon. What a topic for a psychological study—the missionary woman as cult object! How they shone in the dreams of the church women at home—adventurous, noble, self-sacrificing, bringing light to the downtrodden woman and neglected child of the Orient. Behind the passions of the missionary movement we perceive the dream life of American women in search of heroic self-projection.

By the early twentieth century the mission movement had become a transoceanic industry, what one conference participant termed a mission trust, now run by men with the executive talents of steel barons. As in all bureaucracies, growth became a goal in itself, and an ideal turned into a vested interest. Emotions were harnessed to fund-raising techniques: to withhold a dollar was to condemn a soul to perdition or a baby to starvation, or break the heart of a woman laboring in the vineyard of the Lord. To desert China, roared ed-

itorials in the nationalist upheavals of the 1920's, was to betray Christ. Only a minority of churchgoers responded to these appeals, but there were enough of them to keep the movement huge. Missions were a big American success story. With the insecurities and frustrations over the years and the occasional eruption of violence in China, the movement had moments of indecision and doubt. But it was caught in its own self-woven net. The church had proclaimed its destiny inseparable from that of missions, and now it could not let go. With the increasing secularization of America, it sometimes seemed that the mission movement was the glue that kept the churches from disintegrating. Perhaps American Protestantism needed a movement abroad in order to justify its very existence.

But abroad, particularly in China, the recipient did not always respond properly. China had become an Object of Concern, viewed as a child by its fond American parents. China was not always grateful and rarely said thank you. In the 1920's, Nationalists and Communists often poured threats and vituperation upon foreigners, and missionaries inevitably felt the whip of hostility, now leaving the country, now returning, until finally expelled by the present regime. The churches at home, pouring out their money and emotions, wavered between commitment and retreat, affection and anger. Quite understandably, the frustrations of the situation were finally turned against the Chinese; instead of worthy Orientals awaiting the word of God they became monsters of evil and ingratitude. The awakening in the United States was late but harsh. Many Americans nurtured on mission leaflets have nursed a sense of betrayal ever since.

The important question is how much this organized outburst of American Protestant fervor permeated our general thinking, both in the pro- and anti-China epochs. It is one thing to say that American politics or foreign policy was moralistic, and another to say that the church-missionary movement ran the State Department, as one sometimes hears. The Cuernavaca papers indicate that the missionaries were not successful in influencing America's China policy in the touchy 1920's. However, influence wears many masks. The degree to which assumptions were unconsciously shared in State Department and pulpit, or even the degree to which missionary-connected people served in politically influential positions, is an area that needs close examination. How much influence was exerted by ex-China missionary Walter Judd, who, as a Congressman, was a staunch defender of Chiang Kai-shek? What role did China missionary son Henry Luce play in shaping public opinion? It is a fascinating, tantalizingly difficult theme to trace, and because it lends itself so easily to conspiracy theories and witch-hunts it calls for sober study rather than speculation.

Beyond historical curiosity, a study of the China missionary experience raises persisting questions about American life. In a February 17 column in the *New York Times*, the Reverend Malcolm Boyd scathingly denounced Mr. Nixon's rhetoric on the eve of the China trip as a "cult of the Potomac," presided over by Billy Graham and concerned with bringing a second white Christ to the Orient. Boyd came out instead for the Jesus of the streets and the commandments of the Torah, calling for Jews and Christians in America to share in suffering everywhere in the world. One does not confuse Graham and Boyd. And yet they have in common the need to take on the whole world, whether its soul or its sores. Their attitudes generate not only battalions of righteous warriors but also the

Peace Corps, the ship *Hope*, international rescue missions, revivals in Djakarta, traveling choruses for democracy—a mixed bag. In the streets or in the pulpits, Americans seem stuck with an urge to dispense advice and benevolence on a wide scale. Maybe we Americans are simply unable to stay at home.

Our need for an heroic self-image led us in the past to excesses of hope about China and to excesses of anger when that hope was dashed. Our feelings may be hurt again, in China, and elsewhere. It is dangerous for us to see ourselves as a nation of misunderstood saints. There may seem to be little possibility of that at the moment, but our compulsion toward heroism remains. It is no more useful than our compulsion toward self-immolation.