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BOOK REVIEWS

CONFRONTING CHINESE CULTURE: THE TRANSFORMATION OF AMERICAN PROTESTANT MISSIONARIES, 1850-1950

Wayne Flynt and Gerald W. Berkley, *Taking Christianity to China: Alabama Missionaries in the Middle Kingdom, 1850-1950* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press 1997). Pp. xiv, 424. \$34.95US. ISBN 0-8173-0833-4

Lian Xi, *The Conversion of Missionaries: Liberalism in American Protestant Missions in China, 1907-1932* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press 1997). Pp. xiv, 247. \$38.50US. ISBN 0-271-01606-X

By the mid-twentieth century, Protestants from the United States had been conducting missionary activities in China for almost 130 years. The "foreign devils" faced numerous obstacles. Especially problematic was the fact that Christianity, despite its origin in the Middle East, was believed by the Chinese to be a religion of the West. The Chinese had good reasons to be suspicious of anything linked to the West, given that

few Westerners had appreciated that China, fed by Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, represented "one of the richest cultural traditions in the world." Before the conquest by Communist rule in 1949, under the direction of Mao Tse-tung, there were predictions that the demise of Christianity in China would occur. But what happened in China? How has Christianity fared in China since the mid-19th century?

Taking Christianity to China: Alabama Missionaries in the Middle Kingdom, 1850-1950 authored by Wayne Flynt and Gerald W. Berkley and *The Conversion of Missionaries: Liberalism in American Protestant Missions in China, 1907-1932* by Lian Xi focus primarily on the missionary experience of Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians in China. Both reveal much about a missionary experience that underwent a transformation as missionaries sought to transform China into a Christian nation. Flynt and Berkley maintain that change led to evangelistic growth in China whereas Lian Xi claims that change resulted in the growth of liberal Protestantism in China as well as in the United States.

Without turning a blind eye to charges of cultural imperialism, *Taking Christianity to China* offers a sympathetic assessment of 47 Alabama missionaries, many of whom maintained the importance of preaching a gospel message, even as they broadened their approach. Flynt (the major author) and Berkley claim that Alabama missionaries, initially guilty of imposing self-righteous American ideals, learned to embrace and respect Chinese civilization, and consequently the result was a American/Chinese synthesis or third culture. They effectively argue that China profoundly changed Alabama missionaries and the transformation was positive in the short and long term; the remarkable growth of Christianity in late 20th-century China (some estimate that China is home to 100 million Christians) suggests that the missionaries were not the failures that historians have judged them to be.

In the well-written introductory chapter, the authors outline features of American and Chinese culture and how both United States ("New Zion") and China ("Middle Kingdom") were similar on the basis that they perceived themselves as an advanced civilization. Three broad epochs of Protestant missionary efforts, the years 1810-1880, 1880-1920, and 1920-1950, are discussed in the context of political,

economic, and cultural developments. The chapter concludes with a concisely written historiographical assessment of missionaries in China.

The aim of the authors is to test the "two cultures" interpretation which argues that aloof, repressive, and unyielding American Christians "often attacked Chinese culture and its value system" (p17).

The following chapters are mainly organized topically but chronology is used within each chapter. There is a discussion of American evangelical culture, including the racism that permeated Alabama religion, and the social, religious background of Alabama missionaries as well as their preparation in the United States. In the chapter that examines first contact in China, Flynt and Berkley highlight the difficulty of language training and acknowledge that Alabama missionaries initially reacted critically to Chinese society. The temptation to fuse Western ideals with the gospel was an ongoing battle and there were continuing examples of "patronizing arrogance," but over time more missionaries embraced a cultural sensitivity for Chinese ways, demonstrating that change occurred in both directions (the change-agents themselves were changed). The missionaries, in their medical, educational, and evangelistic roles, still preached Christ, but far less attention was paid to "unnecessary" Western customs. As Martha Crawford (1852-1909) explained: "We tried to make the New Testament Christianity our model rather than its modern type"(p86).

The essential place of women missionaries receives treatment throughout the study, but one chapter focuses solely on woman consciousness among Alabama missionaries. The role of missionary women was essential due to the Chinese cultural restrictions that forbid Chinese women to converse with males. Chinese women were also expected to accept the practices of foot binding, concubinage, and arranged marriages. As it turns out, the first generation of female missionaries imposed Victorian models of womanhood and gendered notions of Christian submissiveness on Chinese females which "inadvertently reinforced patriarchal Chinese values" (206). It was subsequent generations of female missionaries, as Flynt and Berkley demonstrate, that would play an important role in integrating Chinese women into a modernizing China.

The final three chapters centre on theological disputes between evangelicals and liberals that undermined an ideal representation of the

Christian faith, how politics and warfare "allowed a bonding between missionary and Chinese" (p319), and the legacy of missionaries, including the impact of the expulsion of missionaries from China between 1949 and 1952. Marxism/Maoism closed the door to missionaries, yet there has been a resurgence of Christianity in recent decades in China, with the 1990s showing Christianity as "expansionist" (p341).

The book succeeds in offering a fascinating and convincing portrayal of the tribulations and victories of missionary life. Yet, there are a few notable shortcomings. Some are minor such as when the authors introduce the term "Bible woman" without explaining until later in the book that they were Chinese converts who assisted missionary women with evangelistic efforts. A more significant weakness is the lack of attention and development, throughout the book, to the theme of the so-called third culture. Finally, Flynt and Berkley use social history to effectively capture the temper of missionary life, but the issues of poverty and exploitive colonialism and capitalism do not receive the treatment they deserves. Was not the rugged individualism of conservative missionaries challenged, especially when they advocated the model of New Testament Christianity? The authors were reluctant to explore why socialist ideas took root as easily as they did among the Chinese.

The strengths of the study are many. The authors succeed in bringing their subjects alive with intimate portrayals. Whether it is the fatal hardships of the T.W. Ayers family (p120) or the marital difficulties of the Crawfords (p219), the reader cannot help but feel a closeness to the missionaries. The task of writing a collective biography is a difficult one, yet the authors do a praiseworthy job with clarity and organization. Useful sub-titles are used throughout the chapters. Included for each missionary, who receives substantial treatment, are bracketed dates of service in China. Photographs are strategically situated throughout the book to closely correspond with the subject matter. Another good feature is the missionary biographies located in nine pages of appendix. Drawing on a rich source of personal papers and files, Flynt and Berkley say much about Southern Baptist missionaries, but the authors also provide balance with substantial Methodist and Presbyterian content. Overall, the study convincingly

shows that the Alabama missionaries, despite all their worldly shortcomings, accomplished more than they and others had realized.

Rather than applauding or exonerating the efforts of conservative evangelical missionaries, Lian Xi provides a sympathetic assessment of liberal missionaries in *The Conversion of Missionaries: Liberalism in American Protestant Missions in China, 1907-1932*. Seeking to better understand "the change toward a broad theological and cultural liberalism in American Protestant missions" that has largely escaped historians' notice, he develops the irony of a "reverse missionary impulse" in which 20th-century missionaries, specifically those whose idealism and humanitarianism diluted their religious zeal, were "converted" by the Far East - a case of "syncretism" (pxii,13). Lian Xi sees the beginning of liberalism in the American China missions with the Centenary Conference of 1907 and the "symbolic climax" in 1932, the year of the Laymen's Foreign Missions Inquiry that "essentially rejected proselytization as the goal of missions" (p16).

Lian Xi begins with an introduction describing 19th and early 20th-century American missionary exploits. For him, it was the vitality of Oriental traditions more than the "xenophobic Chinese opposition to the Gospel" that undermined the sense of purpose of American Protestant missions (p10). In the first part of the book, he focuses on medical missionary Edward H. Hume, evangelical missionary/journalist Frank J. Rawlinson, and educational missionary/author Pearl S. Buck as they moved from embracing to rejecting missionary goals. According to Lian Xi, both Chinese culture and nationalism had hastened this transformation. Liberal missionaries were eager to formulate a religious and cultural synthesis that united Christianity and the religions of China.

Judging his earlier missionary role as intrusive, Hume stated the year after his resignation that the new generation of representatives (he avoided the term missionaries) "must share consciously with their Oriental brothers in a co-operative search for Eternal Truth" (p54). While Hume professed to remain a Christian, Rawlinson and Buck would renounce much more. As his appreciation for Chinese culture grew, Rawlinson found it possible to reject the deity of Christ. For Buck, who was born of pious missionary parents, the virgin birth of Jesus would eventually arouse in her nothing less than "anger and indignation" (p120).

In the second half of the book, Lian Xi undertakes a broader examination of liberalism in China. He traces the development of a union or federation movement "which sought to co-ordinate and unify missionary work of different denominations in China" (p132). For conservatives, the movement went too far in embracing theological openness with Chinese religions and became a threat to theological orthodoxy. For liberals, the transformation of their religion, including greater emphasis on social gospel ideals, provided them with the necessary justification to continue their work. Whatever their differences, both liberal and conservative missionaries "were willing to cut the umbilical cord to Western imperialism" (p166). Of course as long as liberals remained primarily concerned with "a spiritual alliance with the religions of the East," conservatives would follow another path that was not paved with the "syncretism" of the liberals. As the conservatives saw it, the liberals had neither a "message" for the Chinese nor the "Spirit-filled men" to deliver such a message (p206). In the final chapter, Lian Xi cautiously argues that foreign missions played a role in shaping Protestant liberalism in the United States.

The Conversion of the Missionaries offers an important account of China missions. For the most part, the organization of the chapters is good. There are subtitles, footnotes, and a few appropriate photos (the one of Peal Buck is excellent). The focus on the "syncretism" that informed liberalism is a welcome addition to better understanding the confrontation of Chinese and American culture. The fact that the book's interpretation of the resulting synthesis differs considerably from *Taking Christianity to China*, speaks of the richness of the topic.

On the matter of shortcomings, the book's arguments are not entirely convincing. As an intellectual history, it relies heavily on the writings of a select few and thus its ability to offer arguments for a larger movement is limited. Lian Xi himself admits the writings of Hume, Rawlinson, and Buck are better seen as indicators rather than representatives of the transformation of missionaries. Especially problematic are the biographical writings of Buck which "are 'fiction' in a sense - earlier experience reconstructed in a later frame of meaning" (p96). In some areas, the analysis appears tentative, as when he assesses the overall impact of liberal missionaries on American Protestantism.

In regards to writing style, the use of metaphors will not appeal to every reader and neither will the lack of definitions of key terms. The use of political terminology is also problematic; he writes of how a spirit of liberalism pushed Presbyterian theology "away from the far right toward the centre" (p224).

The Conversion of the Missionaries and Taking Christianity to China champion opposing groups of missionaries, yet both recognize the complexity of American missionary activity in China. With encounters between cultures, there is resistance and appropriation, but also collaboration. Missionaries themselves underwent a process of adaptation and transformation. As American missionaries confronted Chinese culture on a daily basis, they likely experienced more tribulations than victories. Nonetheless, Christianity is alive today in China and has fared better than many had predicted.

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