

Chasing the Chinese Dream in America: 20th-Century Chinese Christian Students in the United States and Their Quest for Modernization

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Received 28 June 2014; revised 17 July 2014; accepted 30 July 2014

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Abstract

This paper looks at the Chinese Christian students of the early 20th century in the light of their own publication *The Chinese Christian Students*. For these overseas Chinese students, Christianity represented not just a personal belief but a means of modernization, a way in which individuals could continually renew, or more accurately reaffirm, their identity via religious and ideological conversion. The author argues that Christianity provides these Chinese students a way to fulfill their traditional, “old China” role of literati in America, and thereby to build or at least to envision, a new modern China.

Keywords

Chinese Immigrants, Chinese Christian, Identity Formation, Contextualization

1. Introduction

The history of Chinese immigrants in the United States has been examined countless times, almost from certain fixed points of view: the coolie trade, the building of the railways, and the quest for gold. While all of these perspectives have provided insights into Chinese immigration as seen through a socioeconomic lens (Pan, 1994), the scholarship has focused largely on the lower classes and their immigrant history, on issues of discrimination and anti-Chinese movements, and on immigration policy and exclusion laws (Daniel, 1988; Dobbin, 1996; Hing, 1993; Kwong, 1997; Siu, 1987; Zhou, 1992). Such a focus stands in stark contrast to the studies looking at today’s Chinese immigrants to the United States, people shown to be academically successful, holding solidly

How to cite this paper: Kuo, Y.-H. C. (2014). Chasing the Chinese Dream in America: 20th-Century Chinese Christian Students in the United States and Their Quest for Modernization. *Chinese Studies*, 3, 113-119.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4236/chnstd.2014.33015>

middle-class positions in society, and having the highest salaries among all the races that comprise American society (Bureau of Labor Statistics, US Department of Labor, 2013). Other studies have suggested, however, that this picture of Chinese Americans as constituting the “model minority” is merely a media-produced stereotype, with the true story showing a highly polarized socioeconomic distribution (Choi, 2008; Takaki, 1998).

In fact, that dichotomy has existed throughout the history of Chinese immigration to the United States. Also too rarely told is the story of the Chinese students who have been coming here since the late 19th century, a story that differs markedly from the master narrative on Chinese immigrants. In startling contrast to the general stereotype of early Chinese immigrants as being of lowly socioeconomic status, most of these Chinese students have come from wealthy merchant families and they have been eager to believe in, or at least to adapt themselves to, that western ideology which very much includes Christianity, and yet equally eager to reconceptualize their Chineseness in the course of forging bonds with the West.

This paper intends to fill in some of the missing pieces of the early-Chinese-immigration puzzle by looking at the Chinese Christian students of the early 20th century in the light of their own publication. I will be contending in this article that in the eyes of the first waves of Chinese students, Christianity represented not just a personal belief but a means of modernization, a way in which individuals could continually renew, or more accurately reaffirm, their identity via religious and ideological conversion.

2. Ideologies behind the Religion: *The Chinese Christian Student*

According to the records of an American Christian missionary organization, in the 19th and early 20th centuries there were very few Chinese Christians in this country (annual report of the City Missionary Society, 1901). If we broaden our view so as to behold more than just the Chinatown Chinese, however, we gain a very different perspective. We find that among Chinese students in the United States in the early decades of the 20th century, many of them were Christians (Liang, 2010). They were very organized in the universities, and they had very active social exchanges. The monthly magazine *The Chinese Christian Student* represents a kind of crystallization of an organization, the Chinese Students Christian Association that was founded in 1909 by a small group of Chinese students. Published monthly, and sent free to all Chinese college students living in the United States¹. It provides us with a window into their ways of thinking and their activities at the time. The magazine existed from 1925 to 1947. The first issue be found within the collection of the Burke Library of the Union Theological Seminary in New York City that of November 1925, the last issue that of November 1947. A 1931 editorial provides us with a useful overview of the organization that produced the magazine:

“The Chinese Students [Christian] Association is composed of local chapters set in different college campuses throughout the United States and Canada. All chapters fall under three main headings, the Eastern, Mid-Western, and Western departments. Each is headed by a regional staff elected by the students in that region. The overall committee is the Central Executive Board, chosen from officers of the three departments” (*The Chinese Christian Student*, 1931). The piece goes on to say that the Association serves three purposes: to organize all Chinese students into cooperative efforts and thereby instil in them a strong Christian character; to render all possible services to Chinese students in America; and to promote mutual understanding and friendship between the American and Chinese peoples.

When it comes to the content of *The Chinese Christian Student*, it can roughly be broken down into the following four categories: a good deal of commentary on current events in China; updates on the events attended by, and the activities of, Chinese students in the United States, such as meetings arranged by the Chinese Students’ Christian Association, plus the latter’s financial statements; book reviews, and discussions of authors and books about China in a recurring column entitled “What we are Reading”; and a wide range of op-ed pieces scrutinizing China and America through both a cultural and a religious lens. Last but not least the magazine’s final page, a bulletin-board-like format entitled “Personal News,” provided up-to-date info on members, from marriages, births, to academic honors to movements.

Those writing for the magazine ran the gamut from Chinese professors and scholars, to church or missionary leaders working in both American and Chinese universities, to American politicians, to celebrities who once had been students in the United States. Conspicuous in the latter regard are the many articles penned by Hu Shi, a noted scholar promoting the New Culture Movement in China who finally became a diplomat. Among Hu’s

¹One reads in the May 1935 issue (vol. 25, no. 7) that for non-students the subscription rate is one dollar a year, or twenty cents for a single copy.

contributions to the magazine are “My Student Days in America,” which appeared in the May-June 1934 issue and “Chinese Christian Colleges and American Friends” which appeared in the February-March 1940 issue, at a time when Hu was serving as Chinese Ambassador to the United States.

Virtually all of this publication’s pieces reflect the close relationship that these Chinese students had with their homeland; they remained in close contact with China and were highly concerned about it. One always gets a strong sense of that, whether a member is speaking about his latest experiences or a more distinguished contributor, back in China, is writing a think piece.

The first issue filed in the Harvard-Yenching Library is that published in November 1931: Vol. 23, No. 2. It contains a special supplement on Manchuria, which at that time was responding to the Japanese invasion. The student authors’ discourse resonates with their strong sense of responsibility, very likely gained via their allegiance to the traditional literati/intellectuals’ culture. In a second-page piece entitled “Chinese Students Promise to Serve Their Country,” a National Affairs committee chairman stated that “we, the members of the Chinese Students’ Club at Michigan, are offering our services to our country. We hope that the United States will take a lead...” (p. 5). Although all of the Manchuria supplement’s descriptions of the Japanese invasion strive to be objective, they are nonetheless suffused with an angry tone, replete with righteous indignation. By reading between the lines one realizes that much of this magazine’s ethos was inherited from the May Fourth Movement back in China, which had as its primary objective a strong nation but also instilled in its followers a strong desire to pursue knowledge and cherish truth.

“The Role of the Church in China’s Rebirth,” an article penned by Dr. C.Y. Cheng, a moderator of the Churches of Christ, describes the severe opposition that the Christian Church in China had been facing over the previous seven or eight years in the form of its encounters with the New Thought, nationalism, communism, anti-Christian agitation, and strained international relations (pp. 5 & 8). After noting that his article first appeared in the form of an address presented at the world “Y,” presumably referring to a Y. M. C. A. Conference held in Cleveland in 1931, Cheng goes on to state that “the greatest hope for China lies with the people,” arguing that only a genuine awakening among the common people of China, not the efforts of its political leaders, would lead to the creation of a strong nation.

Depicting the efforts made in northern China by the Mass Education Movement under his leadership, the Chinese Christian Dr. James Yen, states that the Christian church was “not slow to realize the need” to bring itself in line with the contemporary slogan “go to the people”. As part of this spirit of adjustment to the way things are, Yen notes that he accepts, or at least is reconciled to the value of, those movements that have in his view brought “spiritual depression” to China. In this regard he mentions Hu Shi, one of the leaders of the New Thought Movement in China and a man who “has no sympathy with the Christian religion and yet shows the utmost frankness and fairness of mind.” After citing these words of Hu’s—“I do not believe in God, I do not believe in immortality, but you do. Stick to what you believe. Don’t try to water down your conviction to please others”—Yen suggests to the reader that “He [Hu Shi] would honor us more if we stuck to our convictions”.

A prevalent belief among Chinese intellectuals and church leaders of this period was that Christianity was beneficial to China’s modernization. It simultaneously renewed the people from the grassroots up and kept them connected to their deep-rooted Chinese culture. In the latter regard it is noteworthy how in the same article, the author quotes the words of the ancient Chinese sage Mencius—“The people are the foundation of the nation”—as he seeks to underscore the vital importance of the Mass Education movement, initiated by the church. It was by no means uncommon for students and missionaries writing for *The Chinese Christian Student* to place their beliefs within the framework of existing Chinese intellectual discourse. Perhaps precisely because they felt compelled to overtly honor the values of the May Fourth Movement, which sought to overthrow every aspect of the Chinese heritage, in their discourse these intellectuals still celebrated the traditional Chinese culture and its value system. They, and especially the missionaries, also realized, however, that if Christianity was to be disseminated throughout China, contextualization was necessary to transform this “yang-jiao” (洋教; foreign religion) (Lin, 1990). This meant not only striving to sever its relationship with imperialism but actively using it as a new source of nationalism—precisely the efforts these Chinese students actively engaging in, throughout the pages of the magazine.

None of these theoretical efforts, however, whether made by young Chinese intellectuals or their American friends within the pages of the magazine, would have amounted to much in the absence of a correlative effort under way back in China. There, many intellectuals were writing pieces that depicted Christianity as being not only entirely compatible with Chinese culture but also an engine of modernization. They portrayed Jesus as a

revolutionary martyr who wanted to rebuild his society and who sought the emancipation of the Jews from Roman rule (Chang, 1927; Hong, 1924; Shen, 1926), and they tried to connect those aspects of Jesus to the materialism and socialism so popular among intellectuals at the time (Hu, 1926; Lin, 1928).

At first blush it might seem odd that so high a percentage of the material found within *The Chinese Christian Student* pertains to the country that the students had come from as opposed to the one they were studying in, and that relatively few pieces have a spiritual slant. In fact, this reaffirming of one's original culture is a theme that pervades the literature on immigration (Tu, 1991). The one's traditional culture of the motherland often serves as an anchor when one moves to a foreign country, a bedrock upon which one can build up and maintain one's self- and cultural identity.

Such a project certainly was under way here, for despite its title this periodical contains surprisingly few articles about Christianity itself—its ideology, bible-text studies, etc. Most of the articles, commentaries, and special issues are devoted to the upsurge of nationalism in China, and thus to politics and economics. The first few issues kept in the Burke Library, for example, discuss such topics as “Christianity and Nationalism” (December 1925, vol. 1, no. 2), “Has Christianity Any Place in China?” (January 1926, vol. 1, no. 3), and “Christian Education in China” (February 1926, vol. 1, no. 4). The same trend holds true within the later issues of the 1930s. Most of the articles and discussions delve into the current political situation and the ongoing war in China, with little being said about personal spiritual connections to Christianity. Granted, in vol. 23, no. 2, one does find a poem entitled “Pray,” penned by Dr. W. B. LaForce, but the articles occupying most of the layout range from the Manchurian situation to the role played by “The Church in China's Rebirth” to international relations, especially the Chinese-American one² (*The Chinese Christian Student*, 1931, p. 2). The pieces one would expect to find in such a publication, providing information about activities sponsored by the Chinese Christian Students' Association, also are there, those making readers aware of a financial campaign³, committee elections⁴, and meetings and conferences⁵. It is the “Men and Events” column that is the most revealing, however, for a close look at the Chinese contributors to it reveals that they came from totally different backgrounds than the immigrants to Chinatown and had concerns entirely different from those held by less fortunate Chinese. These were men who had frequent interactions with academic institutes back in China such as Tsinghua University, Yenching University, and the German Yenching Institute⁶, and yet they courageously chose to alienate themselves from political authority by serving as an independent intelligentsia, intent upon bringing western ideas into China. The city most frequently mentioned in their magazine is not any American one but rather Shanghai—the place that many of these students came from⁷ and continued to have interactions and connections with⁸. It also quickly becomes apparent that Shanghai businessmen had very close relationships with these students, often indeed being their fathers⁹. Not only were announcements by these often put on the front page of the magazine, but one especially prominent figure, Yin Son Lee, a leading Shanghai businessman and a director of the Chinese Y. M. C. A., Shanghai Rotary Club, and Sino-Japanese Society of Shanghai, wrote a dispatch for the publication entitled “To Chinese Students in the United States” that depicted the Japanese bombardment of Shanghai and the horrors of the broader extended Japanese invasion¹⁰.

Even though these Chinese students in the United States do clearly view themselves as having the social responsibilities traditionally borne by China's literati, they also care about the simple aspects of their daily lives.

²“Chinese-American Relations: A Synopsis of Developments of Particular Interest to Chinese Students,” in *The Chinese Christian Student*, no author given, vol. 23, no. 2 (New York City: November 1931), p. 4.

³“Our Financial Campaign: Miss L. C. Kung, Treasurer, Urges Chinese Students to Cooperate to Reach Quota,” in *The Chinese Christian Student*, vol. 23, no. 2 (New York City: November 1931), p. 3.

⁴“New Members Named on Advisory Committee,” in *The Chinese Christian Student*, vol. 23, no. 2 (New York City: November 1931), p. 6.

⁵“Chinese Students in America: Reports of New Officers and Activities from Many Campuses,” in *The Chinese Christian Student*, vol. 23, no. 2 (New York City: November 1931), p. 7.

⁶They reported on the latest presidency of Tsing Hua University, on the plan to establish a German-Yenching Institute formulated by Dr. E. von Borch, former German Minister to China, so as to facilitate an exchange of German and Chinese students and scholars, and on the fact that New York's new Christian leader also was a professor of Philosophy in Yenching University. See “Y. C. Mei Named President of Tsing Hua University,” “German-Yenching Institute is Planned,” and “New York's New Christian Leader” in *The Chinese Christian Student*, vol. 23, no. 2 (New York City: November 1931), p. 5.

⁷A fact that crops up in numerous issues of *The Chinese Christian Student*.

⁸There is a great deal of information about things happening in Shanghai, and the contributors tend to work there. See “Men and Events” in *The Chinese Christian Student*, vol. 23, no. 2 (New York City: November 1931), p. 9.

⁹See *The Chinese Christian Student*. Vol. 23, no. 5 (New York City: February 10, 1932), p. 1.

¹⁰“To the Chinese Students in the United States,” in *The Chinese Christian Student*. vol. 23, no. 5 (New York City: February 10, 1932), p. 1.

Thus even as they raise funds for Chinese flood relief¹¹ they discuss the needs of their own children—who are American-born¹². The two aspects of their lives are intimately intertwined. Their strong sense of elitism also pervades their critiques and writings, but that fact bespeaks nothing so much as their obvious allegiance to the spirit of modernity that lies at the heart of the May Fourth Movement. That allegiance is revealed most notably by the fact that this magazine, although distributed only among Chinese students and Chinese contributors, was written in English. Just as Christianity for these students represented Western values, so too writing in English represented not just their elitism but also their link to modernity.

3. Reconciling the Two Traditions

The Chinese Christian Church has been a pervasive phenomenon all across the diaspora. One can find not just great numbers of Chinese churches but also fellowships and bible-study groups in the United Kingdom, Portugal, Italy, Spain, Ireland, Austria, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Switzerland, all of these being countries that do not have very substantial numbers of Chinese immigrants. It has long been noted by sociologists that the factor driving most of these conversions of overseas Chinese is very much utilitarian in nature (Chong, 1998; Ng, 2002; Wang & Yang, 2006; Yang, 1998, 2004). And despite how significantly these 20th-century Chinese Christians differ from their Chinatown counterparts with respect to socioeconomic background, reasons of migration, and overall worldview, that insight still seems to hold true of them. The utilitarian nature of their experience, as men new to both Christianity and America, can be broken down into the three ensuing categories.

3.1. Information Exchange

In order to realize just how central a publication such as this one could be, to the lives of some young Chinese men and women residing in a foreign country, one first must imagine what it was like to live without having access to the means of communication we take so for granted today: the internet, Facebook, Twitter, and most basically television and the telephone. This publication serves as an important public bulletin board, a place for Chinese students to socialize with one another, meeting old friends and making new ones.

Granted, radio was hugely important back in the first half of the 20th century, but it was strictly a public, in the sense of a mass, medium whereas *The Chinese Christian Student* gave its contributors a platform from which they could speak out about the public issues of the day even as readers and contributors alike forged a real sense of community, via their awareness that they and their kindred spirits were socializing simply by perusing the same bulletin board. Nor can we minimize the importance to these men of simply staying in touch with what was happening back in China, for they thereby not only reconnected themselves to their motherland but also, by receiving their news through a largely upper-class filter, maintained their sense of elitism. That sense sprang from their implicit belief that they were simply the latest heirs of China's ancient literati-based culture, but it was given a new life by being reconceived within a Christian mindset. The latter inevitably seemed modern to students who often bewailed the fact that their homeland remained weak and powerless.

3.2. In Search of a National-Cultural Identity

Identity-formation has long been a focus of interest for sociologists in the field of immigration studies. It often becomes an essential tool that immigrants/migrants almost desperately hold onto, as they combat the hardship as well as the discrimination that usually come their way. The students we are studying here are no exception in this regard, for whereas only a relatively few articles in this nominally Christian publication deal directly with matters of religious faith, the related issue of the search for identity crops up over and over again in the form of articles related to such topics as discrimination; the viability, or lack thereof, of a dual national allegiance; and the cultural duties that Chinese students in America must fulfill. For example in the April 1926 issue (vol. 1, no. 6), C. J. Ho analyzes the sense of inferiority he believes to be widespread among his fellow students studying abroad. In his view China was sending students out to study in America only because it had been defeated and indeed humiliated by the West in the course of modern history, and thus the students were in search of things their own culture couldn't give them, from technological (and thereby military) advances to democratic forms of

¹¹“Engineers Stage Play for Chinese Flood Relief,” in *The Chinese Christian Student*, vol. 23, no. 2 (New York City: November 1931), p. 6.

¹²“Chinese Students in West to Meet: Ten Universities to Discuss Needs of American Born,” in *The Chinese Christian Student*, vol. 23, no. 2 (New York City: November 1931), p. 5.

political organization. Ho contended that this general sense of inferiority felt by Chinese in the face of Western civilization produced such debilitating aspects of the students' mindsets as "lack of discrimination" (he meant the habit of granting blanket superiority to the West, with that resulting in a lack of ability to discriminate between its good and bad aspects) and passive attitude: believing that there was nothing in Chinese civilization that a mere student could possibly share with the people of the United States.

In "Does My Future Lie in China or America?", which appeared in the June 1936 issue (vol. 26 no. 7), Robert Dunn looked at both sides of the question that has tortured the consciences of so many Chinese students in America over the years. When making the case for an American allegiance, Dunn is clear about why he holds America so dear: "I owe much pride and gratitude to America for the principles of liberty and equity which it upholds, for the protection its government has given me, and for its schools and institutions in which I have participated."

3.3. The Use of Christian Ideology to Recalibrate the Old Role in New China

James Watson, a Harvard Sinologist, has suggested, in his study of the society of Southern China including Canton and Hong Kong, that culture is best treated as a toolbox (Watson, 1982, 1997). That notion was entirely apt in the present context for Christianity, and for these Chinese students, clearly it was not only a philosophical or spiritual quest but also toolbox that provided them with ideological strategies they could employ to fix problems of both the macro and the micro, the old and the new types.

On the one hand, the new Christian ideology was used to fulfill the old traditional expectation of literati. As the "backbone" or "elite" of the new China—the view itself is very much traditional and Chinese—the students seem to have seen Christianity as a thought-system providing them with a framework within which they could fulfill the traditional role of literati (Tu, 1993), while on the other hand their individual Christian faiths, when taken jointly, were seen by many Chinese students as comprising a collective way of ushering the New China into existence. Of course these 20th-century Chinese Christian students, living in the United States, were by no means the first people to link Christianity to revolution, socialism, and nationalism. Nevertheless, the forging of such links, within the pages of *The Chinese Christian Student*, allowed them to fulfill their traditional, "old China" role of literati and thereby to build or at least to envision, a new modern China.

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