Beneficent Imperialists:
American Women Missionaries in China at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*

In the summer of 1895, American missionary Hattie Yates Cady wrote to her sister of a delightful joke. Having had some Chinese dresses specially made, she went out to pay some calls.

Oh, by the way just let me tell you a compliment (?) I received the other evening . . . Miss Annber tells me that [the Chinese women] all admired me so much, said I wore Chinese clothes just like a Chinese woman, did not act awkward in them and walked exactly like a Chinese woman (How is that for my small feet?). The only thing needed to make me complete was to do my hair in Chinese style. I think if they could only hear me speak Chinese they would conclude that I was a native of China. . . . They thought Ca Sien-seng [Mr. Cady] must be a very wise man to have chosen a wife so much like a Chinese woman. No remarks allowed.1

Cady’s playful diction and punctuation underscore her ironical amusement at her successful charade. Her impersonation of a Chinese woman was evidently not a genuine attempt at empathy or at blending in with the local population. On the contrary, by reiterating three times the phrase “just like a Chinese woman,” Cady accentuated the distance, rather than the similarities, between herself and the women around her. The role of a Chinese wife, about which she seemed to invite teasing, presented a particularly sharp contrast in terms of power and cultural status. As this anecdote illustrates, the attitude of American missionaries toward the Chinese could be complex and contradictory, entangled as it was in the Americans’ sense of superiority as well as their own cultural and gender identity.

This article will consider the relations of power between American women missionaries and the Chinese women and girls among whom they

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worked. It argues that American missionary women engaged in what can be called “beneficent imperialism.” Confident that they were bestowing the benefits of a more advanced civilization on China, they were quite unabashed about trying to impose their culture on the Chinese and expressed little discomfort with either their privileged position in Chinese society or the implicit backing they enjoyed from the power of the U.S. government. As agents of “cultural transfer,” therefore, they were, in fact, wielding one of the most potent forms of American power in China.

The concept of cultural transfer grew out of an earlier debate on cultural imperialism, which had its roots in the strongly critical stance of New Left historians and others in the 1960s and 1970s regarding U.S. foreign policy. Scholars of the American missionary experience took up the concept and weighed the question of whether missionary activity qualified as cultural imperialism, with all its pejorative implications. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., for instance, stopped short of defining missionary activity as imperialism but described it instead as cultural aggression, or the “communication of ideas and values across national borders ... accompanied by political, economic, or military pressure.”


4. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., “The Missionary Impulse and Theories of Imperialism,” in The Missionary Enterprise in China and America, ed. Fairbank, 363–64, in which he compares missionary activity to classical economic, sociological, and political theories of imperialism. At around the same time, liberal historian Schlesinger legitimated the use of the word “imperial”
Religious historian William R. Hutchison was blunter in his assessment: “If ‘imperialism’ connotes the attempt to impose one’s ideas and culture on another,” he wrote, “and the possible instruments of imposition . . . include, for example, ordinary persuasiveness backed by vastly superior resources—then the missionary movement unquestionably qualifies as an arm of this broader sort of imperialism.”

Paul Harris, who defined cultural imperialism as “the active expression abroad of a culture that has been shaped by the experience of aggressive expansion and dominance,” contended that missionaries need not have played “any specific, functional role . . . in the larger operations of the Western powers.”

More recently, scholars have proposed the idea of “cultural transfer,” or “cultural transmission,” in part to avoid the automatic condemnation of “cultural imperialism,” and in part to draw attention to the actual process of transfer. They point out that cultural transfer is rarely a unilateral relationship in which all power rests with the transmitting culture. Rather, they show, cultural messages themselves are often mediated, negotiated, and transformed by the needs, desires, and intentions of the recipients. If, in the process, the “imperialists” get let off the hook, as it were, the tradeoff importantly restores agency to the formerly silent recipients.

I suggest, however, that just because cultural transmitters are not necessarily cultural imperialists does not mean that they cannot be such. Thus, I employ the term “beneficent imperialists” to capture the inherent contradiction in the project of American women missionaries. The United States, of course, did not

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maintain a formal empire in China comparable to the British or French possessions in India, Southeast Asia, and Africa, and American missionaries may not have openly espoused the rhetoric of empire and the “white woman’s burden,” as many British women in India did. Despite the outburst of jingoism around the time of the Spanish-American War, many Americans prided themselves on what they considered a unique forbearance towards imperial enterprises, deeming this enlightened outlook to be additional proof of the high level of development of American society and democratic institutions. In the case of China, Americans were fond of asserting that a “special relationship” of sympathy and understanding bound the Chinese and the American people together, such that the Chinese instinctively understood, Americans believed, that American expansion into China was motivated by pure friendship and disinterested benevolence, not crass imperialism.

Nevertheless, the American presence in China should not be seen as entirely benign or innocuous. Though the United States resorted to military force and diplomatic coercion less than did the European powers in China, American diplomats still pushed to maintain and expand the privileges won through such means, while American businessmen sought to exploit the fabled China market, and missionaries endeavored to evangelize the Chinese population. None of these aimed to leave China untouched. Whether the aim was


9. Missionaries—at least, male missionaries—were not immune to such enthusiasm. See, for instance, Mackenzie, The Robe and the Sword; and Carol C. Chin, “Power, Culture, and National Identity: The United States, China, and Japan, 1895–1920” (Ph.D. diss., The Ohio State University, 2001), ch. 2. A suggestive study of women’s ambivalence in a later period is Karen K. Garner, “The YWCA’s Role in Opposing ‘Unequal’ Treaties with China, 1925–1930,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association, Washington, D.C., January 1999. Further research is necessary to be able to state definitively whether women wrote much about expansionism at the turn of the century or at all.


to “open,” “modernize,” or “Christianize,” all assumed that their expansion into China would transform that country for the better, in part because they believed in America’s God-given mission to civilize and Christianize the rest of the world, in part because they were convinced of the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race.¹²

To explore the workings of beneficent imperialism, this article examines the interplay of cultural transfer and cultural identity. I look at the ways in which women missionaries in China constructed categories of race and gender vis-à-vis the Chinese women among whom they worked. Many Americans held simultaneous and contradictory images of the Chinese as uncivilized heathens and eager pupils, a duality arising from the paradox in Americans’ own national identity as both an exceptional and an exportable civilization. Female missionaries, however, tended to judge the Chinese people according to culture more than power or even, sometimes, race. They considered their Chinese converts to belong to the category of “Christian” first and that of “the Chinese race” second. Thus, with the acquisition of the right cultural attributes—such as a Western education, the accoutrements of “modern” civilization, and, above all, conversion to Christianity—Chinese could transcend the putative limitations of race and be regarded as almost American. This resulted in the missionaries’ stress on education for Chinese women and girls, which produced Chinese Christians with a hybrid cultural identity.¹³

The identities of these American women embodied their own dualities, centering on questions of gender, culture, and power. What social and cultural roles did the missionaries believe appropriate for Chinese women? Their actions and their writings reveal a fundamental ambivalence about new gender roles. In part, they harked back to the mid-nineteenth-century American ideals of virtuous womanhood and domesticity, whereby the educated Chinese woman would be the center of a clean and loving Christian home and provide a pure, moral influence on future generations of Chinese children.¹⁴ In part, the mis-


¹³. Most historians of U.S. foreign relations have treated racial thinking solely as a source of relatively fixed, negative stereotypes about other peoples. Even those scholars who recognize the malleability of racial categories usually find an alternation between two (or more) equally negative stereotypes. For instance, Michael H. Hunt, in Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy (New Haven, CT, 1987), shows how the image of Asians vacillated between “clean and industrious” and subhuman and dangerous (60). John W. Dower, in War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War (New York, 1986), analyzes the switch from wartime images of Japanese as brutish apes to the postwar view of them as clever, teachable monkeys—still a negative stereotype, though a more harmless one. The idea of race as a culturally constructed category is fairly new in diplomatic history, though a related idea appears in the work of anthropologist Ann Stoler. (See note 50, below.)

¹⁴. The literature on nineteenth-century women is enormous. See, for instance, Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” American Quarterly 18 (Summer 1966): 151–74;
sionaries advocated a new Chinese woman, one whose education and skills made her the intellectual equal of Chinese men and Western women, and who was capable of administering schools and hospitals with professional efficiency. American women considered women’s status in society to be a key indication of how civilized that society was, and they believed that improving the position of Chinese women was one of the most important benefits they could bring to China.

It is also instructive to ask how women missionaries might have redefined their own gender roles in a setting in which many of the normal relations of power were inverted. For instance, foreign women occupied a position of privilege and status vis-à-vis ordinary Chinese men, moving about in public more freely than they would at home, secure in their identity as foreigners. Within the institutions they established and controlled, women missionaries enjoyed a high degree of authority and autonomy from male control (although the women’s schools were nominally under the direction of the male station head). Thus, although women missionaries did not participate directly in the overt exercise of U.S. military, diplomatic, or economic power, they occupied a position of power in relation to the local population because of their powerful cultural identity. This privileged status reinforced the American women’s sense of themselves as representatives of the center, coming to teach those at the periphery, but not to learn from them.

The missionaries’ sense of superiority was predicated upon notions of race and culture. Racialist thinking was prevalent in late nineteenth-century America, bolstered, in part, by Darwinian notions of the superior Anglo-Saxon race. It seemed a truism that “the Asiatic race” in general, and the Chinese in particular, were inherently inferior to Americans in character, mentality, and capabilities. Much of the information that Americans had on China came from books such as Samuel Wells Williams’ *The Middle Kingdom*, widely influential since its publication in 1848, and Arthur H. Smith’s *Chinese Characteristics*, first published in 1890 and reissued numerous times. Both authors were long-time China missionaries and well-regarded experts. *The Middle Kingdom*, in two volumes totaling over 1,500 pages, was a thorough compendium of Chinese history, geography, language, culture, and social customs. *Chinese Characteristics*, on the other hand, presented broad generalizations regarding the many supposed flaws and occasional virtues of “the Chinese.” Smith’s descriptions, backed by more than twenty years of experience in China, gave readers to

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15. This is well documented in Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny.*
understand that the Chinese were an alien race indeed, with unfathomable customs and decidedly un-American character traits. Among his chapter headings, for instance, were “The Disregard of Time,” “The Disregard of Accuracy,” “The Talent for Misunderstanding,” “The Talent for Indirection,” and “The Absence of Public Spirit”—a complete contrast to the values that late-nineteenth-century, Progressive-era Americans prized. Even such seemingly positive characteristics as “Politeness,” “Content and Cheerfulness,” “Filial Piety,” “Benevolence,” and “Mutual Responsibility and Respect for the Law” turned out to be defective virtues, and the author declared that such failings all stemmed from a lack of “Character and Conscience.” While admitting that “many of the evils in Chinese society . . . are also to be found in Western nominally Christian lands,” Smith insisted that a careful comparison of Western failings and Chinese flaws would conclude that “the face of every Western land is towards the dawning morning of the future, while the face of China is always and everywhere towards the darkness of the remote past.”

If the aspiring missionary had done any preparation for the nature and society of the Chinese, Smith's popular work might well have been on her reading list, along with various pamphlets and textbooks issued by the mission boards. In addition, the mission society magazines, with titles like *Heathen Woman’s Friend, Light and Life for Heathen Women*, and *Woman’s Work for Woman*, regularly featured articles and letters from missionaries in the field, describing social conditions and customs as well as the progress of the work. And as Patricia Hill shows, many of the new volunteers had been inspired by the romance of foreign missions, having attended lectures by China missionaries visiting on furlough, illustrated by lantern slides, Chinese dresses, and other curiosities.

But aside from those who were following in the footsteps of female relatives or classmates, most of the new recruits had little information about the objects of their ministrations or genuine comprehension of the conditions in China, and they set sail across the Pacific with a kind of blind faith.

Upon arrival in China, many expressed their culture shock in strong terms. A Mrs. S. L. Keen wrote in the *Heathen Woman’s Friend* in 1894, “I had heard that Peking was the dirtiest city in the world, but my imagination could not conceive the true picture and the actual odors.” The author vividly described the dirt and dust, the lack of basic public sanitation, and the distressingly low level of personal hygiene of the Chinese. She was relieved to find that “the missionary compounds, with their trees and breathing spaces, clean, comfortable homes, and the dear English language, were oases in the desert of unintelligi-

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17. On the question of who the missionaries were and why they went to China, see Hill, *The World Their Household*, and Hunter, *Gospel of Gentility*. For the religious motivations of an earlier generation of missionaries, see Amanda Porterfield, *Mary Lyon and the Mount Holyoke Missionaries* (New York, 1997).
ble jargon and filth.” As with so many other new missionaries, dirt and smells were what horrified Keen the most about the country where she had chosen to spend the next several years, if not the rest of her life.

For these women, coming from a stratum of American society that placed a high value on cleanliness as evidence of civilization and godliness and at a time when Progressive reformers were focusing attention on public sanitation, China and the Chinese seemed very alien indeed. But, once settled and having commenced study of the local dialect, the missionaries found much to appreciate. For veteran missionary Edmonia S. Marshall, what was once alien had in fact become home.

Returning to China after an absence of two and a half years, we had almost thought that Oriental sights and sounds would have lost their familiarity, and there would be, in some degree, a repetition of that first strange and never-to-be-forgotten experience of contact with an alien people and civilization. On the contrary, our return was a veritable home-coming, with eager straining of eyes for familiar landmarks, happy recognition of a thousand local customs; above all, a joyful reunion with friends and brethren.

Even dirt could take on a different meaning. To the neophyte, dirt was emblematic of all the ways in which the Chinese as a race were incontrovertibly alien. But for Ellen Faris, dirtiness or cleanliness served as a key marker of individual improvement, of progress out of the category of heathen toward the category of civilized and converted. In a 1906 article describing the benefits of itineration to preach among poor rural women, she reported the following hopeful signs:

Frequently, with soiled clothing, unkempt hair and dirty hands and faces, they crowd into the inn or chapel where I am. Almost invariably some of them slip away after a time, and reappear later washed and combed. A very untidy woman, whose clothing was not only ragged but smeared with grease, said to me one day, “I was almost afraid to come to see Mrs. Faris lest she might object to my rags.” “Oh, no,” I said, “I never object to rags if they are clean, but I do object to dirt.” The following day she appeared again in a clean, though ragged, garment.

Clearly Faris believed that by encouraging cleanliness she had brought these women one step closer to Christianity. At the same time, she was clear-sighted enough to note with amusement that the Chinese women “attribut[e] my clean-

18. S. L. Keen, “In Peking,” Heathen Woman’s Friend 25 (March 1894): 273–74. Heathen Woman’s Friend was the journal of the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church. It later changed its name to Woman’s Missionary Friend, apparently having considered that “heathen” might be offensive.

liness to the food I eat.”20 This may not have been as absurd as Faris thought if the poor rural women were trying to express their perception of the distance between their standard of living and hers. Although the missionaries certainly were aware of the poverty of rural Chinese women, they did not always recognize the ways in which class differences were expressed in the Chinese cultural context.

Cleanliness, however, was merely the outward manifestation of the larger project of acquiring civilization, which of course meant Western civilization. What initially sounds like racial prejudice on the part of American women might instead be interpreted as aversion to specific cultural attributes. Indeed, once the Chinese women had received some Western education and had either converted to Christianity or showed promise of doing so, they were described as equal or nearly equal to Western Christian women. Thus, women missionaries expressed few qualms about imposing American, Protestant, middle-class culture on the Chinese. Moreover, they believed it was neither possible nor desirable to separate the teaching of Christianity and the reforming of Chinese social and family practices. Thus, they did not hesitate to make use of the power of American culture to achieve their evangelical ends.

Women missionaries saw themselves as teachers, rather than preachers—teachers not only of the Gospel and basic literacy, but also of family and domestic skills. One obvious reason for this orientation may be that women were not ordained ministers and thus had not received the same specialized theological training as their male counterparts, although many had undergone an emotionally intense conversion experience prior to heeding the “call” to missionary service.21 To a great extent, they saw their role as similar to that of their sisters at home in the settlement houses of Chicago and New York, rather than that of the preacher in the pulpit. In an 1894 article entitled “The Social Settlement Element in Foreign Missionary Work,” one author noted that she was struck by the resemblance between settlement house and missionary work. Learning to keep a clean and orderly home, acquiring the virtues of “punctuality, cleanliness,... and honest, thorough work”—these same lessons would serve to “Americanize” the immigrants in New York and to “civilize” the heathen women in China.22 In both cases, moral education and domestic training would produce good wives and mothers, and cultural training would surmount racial difference.

Although foreigners occasionally paid lip service to the richness of Chinese classical civilization and culture, it was also clear that such tradition was of no benefit to non-elite Chinese women. Chinese women were excluded by long-standing social custom from a classical education in Confucian letters,
philosophy, and literature, and very few could read classical Chinese. Many
nineteenth-century male missionaries, both American and European, had
become well-known for their mastery of the difficult literary language and their
translations and editions of the classics; in fact, some seemed to devote more
time to scholarly pursuits than to proselytizing (thus producing the first gen-
eration of eminent sinologists and linguists). But the vocation of the women
missionaries was to the women and children of China, and classical learning was
irrelevant to their immediate concerns. They found that the classical tradition,
as enshrined in social practices, was inimical to the interests of Chinese women,
and thus they felt no misgiving about infringing on traditional culture.

High on the missionaries’ list of social practices targeted for reform were
arranged marriages, footbinding, and the restriction of women’s education. The
Americans encouraged the girls at their boarding and day schools to resist famil-
ial pressures to accept an arranged marriage, occasionally even intervening
between the young woman and her family. The missionaries’ opposition did
not, however, stem from a belief in romantic love and individual choice as the
basis for marriage. After all, many of the missionary couples themselves had
contracted their marriages in order to provide an organizational affiliation for
the female missionary and a helpmate for the male missionary; they trusted that
conjugal affection would develop out of the shared dedication to their work.
The real reason that the American women strongly opposed arranged marriages
was that such family commitments usually meant that their students were
obliged to marry non-Christian men. Ideally, the Chinese Christian young
women would marry Chinese Christian young men, many of whom were
trained as native pastors, and the young couple would both continue in
church-related work. Such reasoning is evident in Grace A. Funk’s complacent
comment in 1910 on a newly converted Chinese man bringing his future
daughter-in-law to the Shaowu Girls’ School, insisting that she be taught the
foreign doctrines:

It is too good an opportunity to miss, for the bride-groom will not be ready
for his bride for several years, and in that time she will probably develop in
steady Christian growth, and her mind will be trained to meet the growing
demands made upon the women of China intellectually, and she will have
learned useful lessons in cleanliness and sanitation.

Thus, the young bride-elect was to receive triple schooling in religion, intel-
lect, and housekeeping. Clearly, a Christian arranged marriage was perfectly
acceptable.

Some of the missionaries were not content with reforming only social mores
that restricted and oppressed Chinese women. Even such aspects of culture as

24. Foochow Messenger 7 (January 1910): 4. The Foochow Messenger was the Fujian-based
journal of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions.
music and language were deemed unnatural or primitive and were suspected of holding back the proper development of the Chinese, while Western languages and music were considered divinely sanctioned and thus intrinsically superior. Emily S. Hartwell of Foochow College wrote in 1909 that the advantage of an alphabetic language was that “it corresponds with the Creator’s design,” whereas Chinese characters were “difficult because artificial and not in accord with the arrangement of nature.” (One might, of course, counter with the argument that an alphabetic language is limited to a particular dialect, time, or place, while ideographs represent pure thought, less culturally bound and hence perhaps closer to a universal, divine language.) In Hartwell’s Eurocentric mindset it would probably be inconceivable that any heathen system could be preferable to English. She predicted that teaching English might help produce a phonetic system for Chinese, which would replace the clumsy, outmoded characters, just as wheeled vehicles would replace the sedan chair, and thus “hasten the awakening of the mind.” In short, modern—that is, Western—civilization, with its supposed universal validity, should replace primitive, idiosyncratic contrivances.25

Her colleague, a Miss H. L. Osborne, was similarly confident of the importance of Western sacred music in developing the character of the Chinese Christians and even the culture of the entire nation. After reporting that “a Musicale at College demonstrated the fact that the Chinese boys can learn and do appreciate good music”—by which she meant Western music—she reflected on the beneficial influences of musical training. When the students graduated and became pastors, they would be able to use Western hymns “to convert what often seems a riotous mob into a worshipful, Christian congregation” and offer an attractive alternative to “heathen worshipers who shout and call aloud upon their gods of wood and stone.” In other words, Western sacred music had the power to tame and civilize even the wildest heathens, who would instinctively recognize its superiority to their own music. She also believed that the Western method of voice production was healthier and more natural, and that “the boys, themselves, would be happier, healthier, holier,” having abandoned the “thin, weird falsetto” of Chinese singing. These claims were not enough for Osborne, however. She concluded her report with the lofty declaration that “the one who is successful in changing Chinese standards of music and in inspiring a taste for harmonies, has left no unimportant mark on the nation.”26 The boldness—even arrogance—of this assertion expresses the attitude of a beneficent imperialist. Osborne was certain that inculcating Western culture would make the boys

26. Foochow Messenger 1 (April 1904): 27–28. It is not clear that the students always received this training in the spirit that Osborne hoped. Another teacher, Mrs. Wm. D. Noyes, wrote in 1907 from Canton, “A choir of eight boys come together twice a week and practice hymns and songs . . . but I must say they would rather sing the Yale ‘Boola’ song than anything else” (Woman’s Work 23 [February 1908]: 43).
healthier and the nation stronger; it would overcome the weaknesses of the Chinese race.

If education and Western culture were essential to overcome perceived racial handicaps in China’s development, no area could be more urgent than the education of Chinese women and girls. American women missionaries threw most of their energies into organizing and maintaining schools, from those for the youngest elementary-school girls to those for college-age young women, supplemented by “Bible training” for adult women. The teachers relished occasions to demonstrate to skeptics, both Chinese and Western, that ordinary Chinese girls were the intellectual match of any student, male or female, Chinese or North American. Julia Bonafield reveled in the praise of a Canadian visitor who exclaimed after a school recitation in Foochow in 1892: “You astonish me! I never expected to see such girls in China. Our Canadian girls can do no better.” 27 The teachers were justifiably proud of their pupils for refuting the stereotyped notion that Chinese women were intrinsically less intelligent or teachable, or that they suffered from what Arthur Smith called “intellectual turbidity.” As a report from another school asserted, “Miss Rouse believes her girls are brighter than those of the same age and having the same advantages in America.” 28

Even more gratifying were occasions upon which Chinese girls shattered both racial and gendered expectations. When a seminary girl won first prize in a religious essay contest, the Presbyterian missionary publication Woman’s Work gloated over the response of the Chinese men. “Many men,” it reported, “were among her competitors, ordained ministers only being excluded, and one of them, who received the second prize, was heard to say that ‘the men would have to break a hole in the girls’ seminary wall to listen to the instruction given there.’” 29 Both of these incidents, of course, testified not only to the academic prowess of Chinese girls, but to the quality of instruction at the mission schools. The missionaries’ pride in having produced Chinese students who could rival both North American women and Chinese men demonstrated their belief—or their attempts to convince themselves—that education and culture mattered more than racial difference.

The goal in educating Chinese girls, however, was not merely to showcase their intellectual capabilities, but to produce useful women for a new China. The missionaries sent them out to teach in schools, work as physicians and nurses, or administer hospitals and orphanages. Glowing reports of their skill and dedication drove home the point that properly educated Chinese women were as capable as foreigners of running the institutions of social and educa-

27. Woman’s Missionary Friend, September 1892; quoted in Margaret E. Burton, Education of Women in China (New York, 1911), 82.
29. Woman’s Work, February 1892; quoted in Burton, Education of Women in China, 80.
tional reform. In one sense, then, these Chinese graduates could be seen as mirror images of the American settlement-house workers and Progressive reformers. But, as we will soon see, there were limits to how far the Chinese girls were expected to emulate their foreign mentors.

In addition to training young women to be physicians, teachers, and mission workers, the missionaries did not neglect the education of adult women. Older women who had converted to Christianity were taught basic literacy and trained as “Bible women,” who could extend the effective reach of the missionaries into remote villages and speak to rural women in their own dialects. The missionaries took particular pains to cultivate the knowledge, skills, and confidence of the older helpers, holding very different expectations of them than of the quick-learning younger schoolgirls. In 1904, a Mrs. G. H. Hubbard recounted with pride the development of their skills at the Pagoda Anchorage Bible-woman’s training school:

Also, “The Gospel History of Jesus Christ” has been a great quickener to the thinking capacity of our women and led them to a far greater searching of the Scriptures than ever before, as they were required to search the Bible to find answers to the questions and to write out the answers in Romanized. Some found this very difficult at first, even to the shedding of tears but gradually gained knowledge and confidence and learned to appreciate the value of such mental discipline.

In short, given the right cultural environment, even uneducated older peasant women were capable of overcoming the deficiencies of their background and mastering Western-style “mental discipline.”

Some of the more advanced Bible women were sent out for some practical experience in proselytizing and public preaching. One of their mentors reported:

It was gratifying to hear the good reports that they gave on their return in the Fall, of how women were ready to listen and ask questions and how their own souls were stirred by the needs of the work. The experience served to awaken in them a sense of the nature of the work and a desire for doing such work. . . . It is surprising sometimes to see how soon a timid woman will learn to make a good prayer in public.30

Like the younger mission-school graduates, these Bible women used their training to occupy new positions in the public sphere, asserting their recently acquired authority. Beneficent imperialism, therefore, had the capacity to improve both older and younger women’s lives by opening possibilities to them. Yet, having trained these women to assume new public roles, the missionaries stopped short of subverting traditional gender roles entirely. The new

prospects for Chinese Christian women were still positions that primarily served other women; they did not venture into politics or business. Moreover, most of the mission-school graduates did not follow the example of their foreign mentors in dedicating their entire lives to educational and medical work, nor were they expected to forego marriage and family.\textsuperscript{31} Despite the often-cited need for well-trained teachers to meet the growing demand for women’s education, the investment in educating these young women was to pay off primarily when they became good Christian wives and mothers. One missionary was quoted as saying, “While we should be satisfied with nothing but the best and highest training possible for our girls, yet we must constantly bear in mind that we are training the future mothers of China.” Another declared, “Our greatest hope is that they may be model homemakers.”\textsuperscript{32} Their destiny was to serve as helpmates and spiritual companions to their Christian husbands (who were often teachers or pastors themselves), to raise good Christian children, and to provide living examples of clean, loving, Christian homes.

The highest praise was reserved for those hard-working women who managed to do it all. Mrs. San was described as one such paragon, “a bright Christian woman” and wife of the local pastor, who, “besides teaching and caring for her twenty pupils who board with her, cares for her own family [of six] and makes their clothes. . . . She is a very busy woman and a very capable one.”\textsuperscript{33} In her capacities as both teacher and mother, Mrs. San was helping to raise the future generation of Chinese Christians. Another young graduate, married to a newly minted preacher at a distant station, kept “the cleanest native house [this missionary] has ever seen and taught the most uncongenial women . . . in the Christian way.” Even more noteworthy was the unusual spirit of equality described in her marriage: “[T]he husband and wife, both educated, refined, and spiritual, found their only true companionship in each other.” In fact, as the missionary wryly observed, not only did this young wife achieve intellectual companionship with her mate, she turned out to be consistently faster than her husband at computing accounts.\textsuperscript{34}

Competing intellectually with one’s husband was acceptable because the missionary had already stressed the young wife’s clean home and Christian spirit. For the Bible women, in other words, traditional feminine virtues were still celebrated. One woman, described as “not brilliant book-wise, but patient, faithful, and loving,” had difficulty adjusting to her new role as teacher. “At first she did not understand the best method of teaching—to much of rote, too little of comparing, reasoning, and understanding, but she was humble enough to

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{31} Of the entire roster of the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society for 1908, 294 were listed as “Miss” and 12 as “Mrs.” (\textit{Woman’s Missionary Friend} [July 1908]: 265–66.) On the question of marriage versus career for mission school graduates, see Graham, \textit{Gender, Culture, and Christianity}, 91–98.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Quoted in Burton, \textit{Education of Women in China}, 199–200, 91.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Ibid, 95.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Ibid, 92.
\end{itemize}
learn from another, even tho she had taken a diploma.” She quickly improved, to the point where “she is filling well her ‘corner’ as preacher’s wife, mother, and teacher.”35 Note the conventional attributes of this woman: patient, faithful, loving, humble, not raised to a false self-importance by her superior education, but well fitted to be a good Christian wife and mother, as well as a teacher. Although they had trained her to assume a position of some authority as a teacher, well outside the normal sphere of a Chinese woman, her foreign mentors still approved of her traditional “feminine” virtues, including humility and submissiveness.

Nor did the missionaries underestimate the newness of even this amount of public activity or belittle the cultural and social barriers these Chinese women had to brave in order to teach, offer prayers in public, or even attend meetings. A Miss C. E. Chittenden reflected:

It is impossible for us with our western freedom to realize what an ordeal the walk to church services was for most of the women of this city class. In Inghok it is not good form for a woman to walk through a business street, and a young woman’s good name is in danger if she goes frequently out of her immediate neighborhood.36

Sensitive to such social difficulties, the missionaries praised the courage of the Chinese women who dared to overcome them, especially since, in their view, it arose not from a masculine assertiveness of personality, but rather from a humble Christian faith. One missionary quoted the “fear and trembling” of “a nice little widow” upon first venturing to offer public prayers:

“Oh!” she said, “I was so afraid at first to have evening prayers with all those strangers about me. But I just prayed in my heart for the Holy Spirit to help me; and I remembered the lessons on the Gospel of Mark, that I had just been studying in school—had taken the book with me to this new place—so I had something to talk about, and pretty soon it all came so much easier.”37

Diffidence, modesty, and humility were feminine, Christian virtues that the missionaries encouraged and praised, even while they themselves displayed a much more aggressive confidence. Thus, the American women encouraged these Chinese women to break social taboos and venture in a very limited way into the public sphere, much as had their own predecessors, the antebellum abolitionists. In both cases, the women were motivated, not by a desire to challenge social conventions, but by a belief in the righteousness and importance of their message. The little widow felt confidence, not in her intrinsic right to speak out as a human being, but only in herself as a vehicle for her adopted culture.

35. Ibid, 25.
36. Ibid, 37.
But the abolitionists were not the comparison that came to mind for the missionaries. They reached farther back for an antecedent, likening the Chinese Bible women to the early Christians. One writer praised the Bible women in these terms: “Among them there arose many veritable ‘mothers in Israel,’ like Mrs. Wang, whose sterling character and energetic work remind us of those women who were such effective forces in the early history of American Methodism.” These Chinese women were to be considered pioneers in religion, not in social activism.

So, although the missionaries themselves had stepped out of traditional female roles of submissiveness and the private, domestic sphere, they continued to promote relatively conservative feminine roles for Chinese women. Unlike nineteenth-century British feminists in India, the missionaries were not propagating feminist values along with American modernity. Moreover, when Chinese students in the early 1900s began to join radical, nationalist organizations en masse, the missionaries did all they could to suppress such political activity in the mission schools. Beneficent imperialism clearly did not envision radical social transformations.

Chinese mission graduates, however, sometimes transcended the conventional cultural and gender roles to become not only teachers, but missionaries or professionals themselves. The most celebrated of these were two physicians, Dr. Mary Stone (Shi Meiyu) and Dr. Ida Kahn (Kang Aide), who present a striking example of hybrid cultural identity. Even their Americanized names, derived from the meaning or the sound of the Chinese names, suggest that they functioned as honorary Westerners. Upon graduating from a Methodist mission school, Mary and Ida arrived in the United States in 1892 with their sponsor, Gertrude Howe (who had adopted Ida), to attend medical school at the University of Michigan. The U.S. immigration officer, evidently surprised, asked their chaperone, “‘What makes these girls look so different from the other Chinese women who come here?’ ‘All the difference between a heathen and a Christian,’ was her prompt response.” As far as Howe was concerned, the acquisition of cultural attributes—in this case, religion—had superseded racial categorization, and the immigration official apparently sensed this as well.

Upon their return to China, prestigious M.D. degrees in hand, Stone and Kahn settled into the medical missionary life alongside the foreign missionar-

ies. A 1912 mission study textbook acclaimed their accomplishments and dedication in essentially the same formulaic style as was used to describe the work of foreign missionaries. Yet the author also recounted episodes in which the doctors’ hybrid identity as ethnically Chinese and culturally Western came into question, in sometimes dangerous and sometimes amusing ways. For instance, during the Boxer uprising of 1900, when many foreign missionaries were evacuated, Kahn and Stone left with the foreigners, benefiting from their status as missionaries at a time when Chinese Christians suffered heavily from the Boxer wrath. On another occasion, Kahn and a foreign missionary were confronted in a rural area by hostile crowds. The villagers allowed the American, Alice Stanton, to pass unharmed but began throwing stones at Kahn’s sedan chair, shouting, “A foreigner! A foreigner!” Could it be that the xenophobic villagers were more offended by the existence of a Westernized Chinese woman than by the presence of the actual Western woman? Did they sense something culturally “wrong” about Ida Kahn?41

The Chinese people among whom Kahn and Stone worked were not uniformly resentful of the doctors’ foreign education and hybrid culture. Occa-

41. Burton, Notable Women, 137, 141–42.
sionally, the relatives of a cured patient would manifest their gratitude by the
ceremonial presentation of a traditional “merit board,” a carved inscription in
classical style. One such board “complimented us by a comparison with two
noted women of ancient times, who were great scholars.” Exceptional as these
modern Chinese women doctors were, the only fitting comparison could be to
figures from the legendary past. Notably, the comparison also reclaims the two
doctors as members of the Chinese historical tradition, rather than Western
culture.

Moreover, contemporary Western accounts consistently remarked that
ordinary Chinese women trusted Dr. Kahn and Dr. Stone more than foreign
doctors and felt more at ease with them. Although such statements might
simply reflect cultural bias on the part of the reporters, it seems likely that they
were accurate, since, after all, the writers of such observations would be dis-
paraging their own efficacy among the Chinese by the comparison. Thus, on
some level, the Chinese patients felt that the doctors were Chinese women like
them: their foreign-acquired knowledge apparently made them more trustwor-
thy, not less.

On public occasions, the doctors seemed to feel the need to revert to a strictly
Chinese identity and forego social practices that were clearly permissible for
foreign women. Soon after their return from the United States, Drs. Kahn and
Stone were visited by members of the viceroy’s staff interested in “modern
affairs.” The two doctors, however, chose to defer to Chinese custom and
decided to meet with the men, instead deputing their foreign mentor, Gertrude
Howe, to speak on their behalf. And upon the formal opening of their newly
built hospital, Kahn and Stone refused to be introduced to the assembled dig-
nitaries, even though “the officials insisted that coming forward would be in
entire harmony with etiquette and propriety.” Once again, they prevailed upon
their American mentor Howe to act as their proxy. Even though they were
perfectly willing to make public speeches while visiting the United States, on
this ceremonial occasion they felt the need to be more Chinese than even the
Chinese officials regarding social customs.

If Kahn and Stone themselves appeared to worry occasionally about being
sufficiently Chinese, the foreign missionaries enjoyed playing on the question
of the doctors’ racial-cultural identity. In one gleefully reported incident involv-
ing Mary Stone,

The Hon. Charles M. Dow of Jamestown, N.Y., who was taking a trip around
the world, met Bishop Lewis on a Yangtse-kiang steamer, and was invited by
him to stop off at Kiukiang and make the acquaintance of a remarkable
surgeon of that city. Great was Mr. Dow’s astonishment when the surgeon
appeared and proved to be “a small and very attractive Chinese woman.”

42. Ibid, 170.
44. Burton, Notable Women, 195.
It seems likely that both Bishop Lewis and the author of the account enjoyed the confounding of Mr. Dow’s culturally conditioned expectations; in fact, the bishop must have gone out of his way not to give any indication of either the gender or the ethnicity of the famous surgeon.

Similarly, on Dr. Stone’s return visit to the United States, now as a celebrated missionary doctor raising funds for her hospital work, her missionary sponsors and hostesses praised her as a woman and a Christian more than as a Chinese. Their comments reveal sometimes obvious and self-conscious attempts to surmount racial categorization. Her fellow missionary, a Miss Hughes, gushed, “Her smiling face . . . is a wonderful revelation to people who judge the Chinese by the putty-faced laundrymen, the only specimen of China they have ever seen.” This remark illustrates the dual images discussed previously: clearly, Hughes still held common racial stereotypes about “the Chinese,” but she felt that Stone had transcended such a category. Others vied to prove that their racial prejudice vanished in the face of the doctor’s graciousness, femininity, and Christian virtues: “She was in our home for a month, and she is one of the most attractive women of any race I have ever met. . . . She is so gracious and cordial. She came into our family just as a member of it.” Repeated mention of her attractiveness indicates a lingering obsession with Stone’s physical characteristics, but by admitting her as a member of the family, the American woman seemed to be vaunting her lack of racial prejudice, perhaps to demonstrate her own superiority as a Christian.45

Lest it seem that a cultural construction of race resulted solely from the missionaries’ religious beliefs or from a woman’s perspective, a few comparative examples may be useful here. At a meeting of male missionaries, it was reported that

one of the speakers remarked that we ought not to require too much of the Chinese in a religious way, but should bear in mind that they are Asiatics. This was, no doubt, the secret thought of many others, until the leader of the meeting called attention to the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ was an Asiatic, that all His apostles and all of His disciples were Asiatics, and that most of the early Christians were Asiatics also.46

Both the meeting leader and the writer who chose to report this incident seemed to be emphasizing that cultural or religious attributes surmounted the perceived handicap of “race.”

In another instance, the public pronouncements of American businessmen showed that the shared characteristics and business culture of their Chinese trading partners evidently superseded differences of race or nationality. In 1902, Seth Low, of the trading house A. A. Low & Brother, declared, “I have inher-

45. Ibid, 185.
ited from [my father], and have acquired in my own business life, the highest respect for the character of the Chinaman as a merchant.” Other speeches and articles uniformly praised the honesty and reliability of Chinese businessmen. Many of the most successful Chinese entrepreneurs had received some form of Western education, either at a missionary school or overseas, and a large number of them were Christian. They spoke Chinese and shared Chinese cultural traits, yet they also moved with ease in the Western business world, having learned their trade in the British or Dutch colonies of Southeast Asia. Apparently, the American businessmen parsed the hybrid identity of these Western-educated Chinese as fellow businessmen first and foremost, downplaying their race. Two years later, Low—now mayor of New York—saluted the departing Chinese minister Wu Tingfang by referring to new archaeological evidence that the human race originated in China; he thus proudly claimed Minister Wu “as a brother.” Like the American churchwomen, Low professed—at least in public—that any perception of racial difference had disappeared in the glow of shared culture. Both a Chinese missionary doctor and a Chinese diplomat merited inclusion in “the family” by virtue of their cultural, not racial, identity.


48. Michael R. Godley, The Mandarin-Capitalists from Nanyang: Overseas Chinese Enterprise in the Modernization of China, 1893–1911 (New York, 1981) is an intriguing study of overseas Chinese entrepreneurs who made their fortunes in Southeast Asia and returned to assist in China’s economic development. Godley suggests that the economic behavior of these returning capitalists was not much different from that of European imperialists. The book contains many other fascinating points about the ambivalence of the overseas Chinese towards their cultural identity. For instance, it was a common pattern for successful businessmen to send one son to England for education and to give another son a classical Chinese education, thus covering both bases. Wu Tingfang himself was born in Singapore and educated in Hong Kong.


Questions of appropriate cultural roles arose not only for the educated Chinese women, but for the missionaries themselves as well. As single women of pious backgrounds at home in the United States, they had fit into certain roles and social expectations of modest conduct. Once in China, however, those roles were open to renegotiation, and the women did not always follow expectations, even those of the men in their expatriate society. A male missionary and expert on Chinese social customs advised foreign women to be overscrupulous in their observance of both Western social patterns and Chinese etiquette for women: “While it is impossible for foreign ladies to conform to Chinese social customs in their entirety it is well to adopt every precaution against the possibility of giving occasion for scandal. It should also be remembered that what would be considered improper at home should never be done in China.” The writer went on to recommend that foreign ladies should never appear in public without either a servant or an older woman; even in merely taking walks, “it is well . . . for several ladies to be together.” But the women—either out of a sense of liberation or simply out of practicality—often ignored or transgressed such rules, creating new definitions of acceptable, permissible, or safe behavior.

For instance, Mary Porter Gamewell reflected, while traveling alone in 1896, on the curious situation in which she found herself. Commenting that nothing but a paper-covered lattice separated her room at the inn from the strangers next door, she wrote: “These are peculiar surroundings for a lone woman, twenty miles from the habitation of our kind. Yet I feel safer here than I would in an equally rough place in America. The Chinese will do nothing to disturb me.” The last sentence sounds almost like a stereotyped faith in the gentle nature of “the Chinese,” except that by this time Gamewell was a twenty-year veteran of the China field and had presumably observed a wide variety of human nature among Chinese people. More likely, her experience had taught her that foreigners—even unprotected women—automatically acquired power and high status, even among the “rough” people of an inn. Furthermore, she felt reinforced by the assistance of a porter, whose character was vouched for by “our Mission” and who acted as a buffer between her and the details of travel:

Here I am, far removed from friends and among Chinese travelers and other inn people, yet I am secure. This carter is a stranger to me, though known to some members of our Mission. He brings in my baggage, calls for water for me, pays my bills, calls me in the morning, and is entirely responsible and to be depended on to get me to my journey’s end.

Because the American women enjoyed extra privileges, compared to life at home, Gamewell felt free to set her own limits for propriety and safety. Other missionary women routinely traveled to remote areas with only male Chinese

52. Tuttle, Mary Porter Gamewell, 170, 173.
attendants, evidently fearing no harm to either their safety or their reputation. Yet they still considered it highly improper to be alone with Western men. Jane Hunter suggests that this distinction stems from the American women’s view of Chinese men as de-sexed, effeminate, and unmanly and therefore no threat. Indeed, one American woman wrote of her servants, “Our house boys do not look like married men with families, but they are. They are so quiet, attentive, careful, tasteful, and exact about their work that they seem more like well-bred girls than men.” This writer clearly shows not only her level of comfort around Chinese servants, but also her gendered interpretation of cultural differences.

On other occasions, the foreign women exercised flexibility and ingenuity to evade the dilemma of clashing social expectations for women’s behavior. When the local magistrate attended the commencement ceremony at a mission school in Hainan, the ceremony was a mix of Western and Chinese ritual, except for a small difficulty of etiquette in greeting the distinguished visitor. One of the teachers reported, “Mrs. Melrose and I successfully dodged him, as, according to Chinese custom it was not proper for him to speak to us, and according to our custom he was very rude if he did not. We avoided the difficulty by keeping out of sight.” Oddly, these foreign women ended up following the solution of Drs. Stone and Kahn: in trying to reconcile two separate cultural expectations for women’s public behavior, they chose the less assertive option.

This episode, in which the foreign women tried to modify their behavior to fit with Chinese norms, seems to have been relatively unusual. For the most part, the missionaries did not describe themselves as having acquired any but the most superficial attributes of Chinese culture. Emily Hatfield Hobart, by 1910 a veteran of more than twenty years in China, boasted of her acculturation to Chinese food, compared with other foreign ladies. “Friday I went to a part of Chinese wedding festivity. . . . There was also a feast which of course I enjoyed only I could not eat very much as all the other ladies at my table were foreigners who did not care for Chinese food and the contrast would have been too great.” Hattie Yates Cady delighted in wearing Chinese dresses and looking, as she fancied, like a Chinese: “Oh! I almost closed this without telling you about my Chinese dresses. Now Aunt Sabrina will never want to put on the native dress but I am having three dresses made. . . . Will send you a picture of your Chinese ‘sister’ some day.” And, as quoted earlier, she found it quite hilarious that she could impersonate Chinese feminine demeanor well enough

53. Hunter, Gospel of Gentility, 204–16. There may also be a “hierarchy of races” here, since it is unlikely that European women in Africa felt the same way about their black servants.
55. Woman’s Work (July 1906): 152–53.
56. Emily Hatfield Hobart to daughter Betty, 22 October 1910, Emily Hatfield Hobart Collection, Special Collections, University of Oregon Library.
57. Harriet Yates Cady to “Mary,” 2 February 1895, Cady Collection.
that onlookers commented that she looked and walked “just like a Chinese woman.” Her description of the incident as “a compliment (?)” indicates that she had no intention of losing sight of the difference in status between her true identity and her charade. As these examples suggest, these two women, at least, were only playing at becoming Chinese or adopting elements of Chinese culture. They were secure enough in their own powerful identities as American women that even their long residence in China did not seem to produce much of a hybrid cultural identity. Emissaries of beneficent imperialism, they came to bestow civilization on China, not to be transformed themselves. On the contrary, contact with Chinese culture tended to reinforce their sense of Americanness and strengthen their conviction of the superiority of American culture and institutions. Their encounter with people and culture on the periphery only reaffirmed their assumption that they, in the center, should be the teachers and define what was worthy to be taught.

That this certainty of cultural identity may have stemmed in part from their missionary vocation is suggested by the counterexample of Sarah Pike Conger, wife of the American minister in Peking, E. H. Conger (1898–1905). Sarah Conger’s attitude toward Chinese culture and the Chinese people was so unusual as to make her the exception that proves the rule. Soon after arriving in China, she reflected upon her previous closed-mindedness and “attitude of superiority” toward foreign cultures, and she hoped to learn and be changed by the experience of China: “Now, in 1898, I have come to this far-off land and am somewhat prepared to seek, to see, to detect, to learn, and to bring into my life perhaps a little knowledge of the customs and home life of China and her people.” Her attitude of humility serves to highlight, by contrast, the imperial attitude of the missionaries. They had come to China to teach, not to learn—to change the Chinese without themselves being transformed.

Because Conger was not a missionary, she evidently was able to be much less dogmatic regarding Christian versus “heathen” practices. For instance, she once asked some workmen not to hammer on a Sunday, but was reminded that Sunday was a day like any other for the Chinese and that the workers would lose a day’s work. She did not insist on the men recognizing the sanctity of the

58. Cady to sister Helen, 19 August 1895, Cady Collection.
59. The example of Pearl Buck, who claimed to feel more at home in China than in the United States, stems from somewhat different circumstances. Herself the daughter of missionaries, Buck was born and raised in China and grew up speaking fluent Chinese; hence, she was born into a hybrid cultural identity. The women under discussion here were nearly all first-generation missionaries and were born and educated in the United States. No matter how comfortable some of them became in China, like Edmonia Marshall, cited earlier, they still referred to the United States as “home.”
60. This is related to the concept of “constructing whiteness” by comparing oneself to blacks or people of other races. As many scholars of cultural studies have shown, the act of defining certain persons or practices as foreign or “other” helps to constitute the boundaries of one’s own identity. See, for example, David Campbell, Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity (Minneapolis, MN, 1992).
Sabbath, as a missionary undoubtedly would have, but compromised by arranging their work from then on so that it would always be finished before Sunday. “My ideas of right,” she mused, “should not be so arbitrary as to deprive them of a day’s wages.” It is hard to imagine any missionary calling her religious ideas “arbitrary,” yet Conger was a devout Christian too.

Conger was also unusually forthright in her sympathy for the Chinese point of view regarding the foreign intrusion, and in her impartial assessment of Western behavior in China. Her letters and diary are full of remarks like, “How do these foreigners appear to the Chinese? Many times I feel ashamed that we do not appear more like civilized people.” Unlike the missionaries, Conger did not automatically equate “Western” with “civilized.” Even after the Boxer uprising, when many in the foreign community were—understandably—expressing resentment at the anti-foreign violence, Conger voiced a different attitude.

Poor China! Why cannot foreigners let her alone with her own? China has been wronged, and in her desperation she has striven as best she could to stop the inroads, and to blot out those already made. My sympathy is with China. A very unpopular thing to say, but it is an honest conviction, honestly uttered. Even the Chinese soldier was true to his gods. On the city wall we saw standing many shrines, simple and small, yet complete in detail.

For Conger, Chinese resistance to foreign imperialism was a trait to be respected, even admired. She also considered it praiseworthy for even the common soldiers to be loyal to their beliefs, whereas a missionary would more likely have lamented their clinging to heathen superstition.

The point here is not that Conger was representative of Americans in China, for she was certainly in a minority. But just because her views were so

I do not wonder that the Chinese hate the foreigner. The foreigner is frequently severe and exacting in this Empire which is not his own. He often treats the Chinese as though they were dogs and had no rights whatever—no wonder that they growl and sometimes bite. Would that more of the Christ-spirit could be shown them by these people coming from Christian lands! Neither the “young West,” nor “young America,” has all in its store of knowledge. Might it not be well to watch and search? Even in the “dark” nations unknown lights might be discovered. (45–46)

At the same time, however, if then–Secretary of State John Hay’s interpretation is correct, Conger’s feelings toward China were not entirely positive:

Mrs. Conger writes to say that they want to be transferred to the Embassy at Mexico. She seems to regard the prospect of going back to China as something intolerable. She seems entirely oblivious, however, of the further undoubted fact that they were not forced to go back. (John Hay to McKinley, 14 August 1901, John Hay Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, DC)

Even Conger, sympathetic though she was to the Chinese, did not view China as home.
different—and she was, after all, married to the embodiment and representative of U.S. power—she serves, by contrast, to underscore the complacency and cultural arrogance of those engaged directly in beneficent imperialism.

The American women missionaries brought with them on their civilizing mission a mentality conditioned by the late nineteenth-century, middle-class, Protestant culture from which they came. They prided themselves on their ability to overlook racial differences, instead considering culture—especially education and religion—to be the most salient form of difference. Thus, their mission to the heathen women and children of China was to bring them the advantages of a Western, Christian education and American-style gender roles. In the process, they produced women such as Ida Kahn and Mary Stone, whose hybrid cultural identities were neither Chinese nor Western. Because they were imperialist, the missionaries actively sought to subvert the traditional cultural and social practices they found; because, in their own minds, they were beneficent, they saw this effort as a boon to the Chinese.

The missionaries trained Chinese women to become teachers and doctors, but they also taught them to be good Christian wives and mothers. They empowered these women to assume new professional and social roles, yet they discouraged them from stepping too far beyond traditional gender boundaries. In this, they were, perhaps, not so different from the male missionaries who tried to prevent their students from becoming independent of the mission sphere. Beneficent imperialism involved bringing the benefits of American culture and civilization to them, but it did not extend to promoting feminist activism.

As representatives of Christianity and American culture, the missionaries came to change, not to be changed. In the mission schools, they produced cultural hybrids, but their own identities resisted hybridization and remained proudly American and Christian. Secure in the superiority of their Americanness and the magnanimity of their Christianity, they did not pause to consider the possibility that Chinese culture might have some value, or that China might have something to teach them. As cultural imperialists, coming from the center of civilization from their cultural/religious standpoint, the missionaries could not see any value in the culture of their target population. As beneficent imperialists, they saw it as their mission to remake the lives of Chinese women and girls, and they were confident that their mission was a righteous one.

In her discussion of the concept of cultural transfer, historian Jessica Gienow-Hecht calls for more studies of cultural transfer in various regions and periods. Her own focus being post-1945 Europe, she wonders whether instances of cultural transfer before World War I “represent a mere interlude in world affairs, a prologue to post–World War II programs, or a qualitative turning point in America’s relationship with the world.”

66. Gienow-Hecht, “Cultural Transfer.”
tions, diplomatic historians will have to draw upon and integrate the techniques of area studies into the writing of international history. My own work suggests that the forms of cultural transfer that took place between American missionaries and Chinese women were no mere interlude or prologue but instead were intrinsic to the cultural identities of both sides. Because of who they were, the American women missionaries quite possibly could not be other than beneficent imperialists.

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67. Examples include Kwok, *Chinese Women and Christianity, 1860–1927*, which examines the theological views of Chinese converts; Hu Ying, *Tales of Translation: Composing the New Woman in China, 1899–1918* (Stanford, CA, 2000), which examines the way Chinese writers negotiated and translated cultural messages about the new woman; and my own work in progress on images of Western modernity in Chinese women’s magazines.