

Selling the Mission: The North American YMCA in China 1890-1949
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The archival material relating to the history of the North American Young Men's Christian Association's (YMCA) activities in China, housed at the Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, spans over a hundred years of involvement in the region. The greater part documents the entry of American YMCA secretaries into the field in 1890 through to the creation of the People's Republic in 1949. The International Committee of the North American YMCA's foreign work grew out of an interest by local and student Associations in missionary activities. These YMCAs collected testimonials from returned missionaries and shared them through their various publications, such as the *Intercollegian* and *Young Men's Era*. These writings planted the seeds of desire to perform missionary work in the minds of many men and women attending institutions of higher learning in the United States. Ultimately, hundreds declared their intent to support missionary activities directly through the missions themselves or in a lay capacity.

The YMCA's role in the history of missionary work is curious. The YMCA was not organized as a missionary enterprise, though it worked intimately with missionaries. Over time the YMCA's scope and work in China evolved. This paper seeks to trace an outline of that evolution - in particular the evangelical outreach in the missionary field - as evidenced by the material contained within the Kautz Family YMCA Archives. As the YMCA matured in China its relationship with missionaries evolved. This evolution is demonstrated by examining in greater detail four distinct periods in the American Young Men's Christian Association's history in China. These periods articulate shifts or turning points in the relationships between the YMCA, the missionary community, and the Chinese citizens.

In the first period we will explore, 1889-1890, the YMCA takes a secondary role to the Church. During this period, the YMCA refrains from entering a foreign area without an invitation from the local missionary community. This deference to the Church – and, by extension, the missionaries - was a deliberate choice made by the YMCA. The YMCA believed that its role was to build off the work of the missionaries, creating a refuge for Chinese Christians from the ills of the city. In the second era, 1891-1896, the YMCA is more established and begins to dramatically grow its influence in the field. The third era, 1900-1912, the YMCA is increasingly led by an indigenous population. The YMCA also begins to cooperate at a more equal level with missions. The final period, 1930-1951, marks the decline of the North American Young Men's Christian Association's activities in China. In this phase, the North American YMCA's presence is reduced to a token force as a result of decreased support from abroad and dramatic turmoil inside China. Ultimately, this evolution led to an indigenous YMCA in China that persists to this day.

The Early Years (1889-1890): The YMCA Defines its Role in Relationship to the Church

At the request of missionaries in Japan, the American Young Men's Christian Association officially began its international work in Tokyo in 1889. Driven by the missionary zeal of the time, the YMCA sought the "evangelization of the world in this generation."¹ However, rather than promoting a particular denomination, the YMCA, with its three-fold mission of developing the whole individual (mind, body, and spirit) worked to foster a new breed of Christian citizen - or at the very least, a citizen touched by Christian values. The primary agent deployed to conduct this work was the YMCA secretary. The secretary was the principle paid position and guiding hand of the YMCA as well as the primary organizer. Many YMCA secretaries of this period had a strong religious background. In fact, several had intended to join the ministry, while others were recruited from the ministry.²

The written records comprising the Kautz Family YMCA Archives describe a competing tension between the YMCA's desire to serve as an active evangelizing force, while being mindful to not present itself as a missionary effort. Instead, the Young Men's Christian Association articulated its position as secondary to the Church. As such, the YMCA did not evangelize a particular denomination of Christianity. Rather, it promoted Christian concepts and offered "legitimate attractions calculated to draw young men," thus providing protection from the sins of the world.³

The American YMCA was very clear that it was not seeking to form a new denomination but rather to engage the public in Christian work. The debate as to the role of the YMCA and the Church began early in its history; and the policy was laid soon after the first YMCA became established in North America. In 1856, during the third gathering of North American YMCAs, YMCA leadership adopted a position that they did not "intend that this institution [YMCA] shall take the highest place in our affections...that we hold this organization as auxiliary to the divinely appointed means of grace, the CHURCH *and the preaching of the Gospel.*"⁴ The American YMCA was equally clear that they were not attempting "pioneer or general missionary work for all classes," and that they would engage young men only when called to do so by missionaries in the field.⁵

In an open letter to the YMCAs of the world, College Secretary of the Central International Committee of the Young Men's Christian Association, Luther Wishard, issued a call for the students to see the opportunity to promote the work of the YMCA around the world. He also seems to temper their zeal by reminding them of the YMCA's position in relation to the

¹ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *World Service, A History of the Foreign Work and World Service of the Young Men's Christian Associations of the United States and Canada* (New York: Association Press, 1957), 37.

² Howard Hopkins, *The History of the YMCA in North America* (New York: Association Press, 1951), 162.

³ *Internet Archive*, "Records of the General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries of China held at Shanghai, May 7-20, 1890," <http://www.archive.org/details/recordsofthegene00unknuoft> (accessed October 24, 2012).

⁴ Central Committee of the Confederation of the Young Men's Christian Associations of the United States and British Provinces. *Journal of Proceedings of the Third Annual Convention of Young Men's Christian Associations of the United States and British Provinces, Held on June 19th, 20th, and 21st, 1856, at Montreal, Canada* (Washington: Thomas McGill, Printer 1856), 68.

⁵ *Internet Archive*.

Church. Wishard explains that the YMCA, being subordinate to the Christian denominations, “has no right to inaugurate a work anywhere until called to that work by the members of denominations.”⁶ Wishard is aware of several foreign Associations as having “sprung up spontaneously.” These student YMCAs were organized and supported by missionaries who saw potential in the YMCA’s work. He closes the letter stating that he is very hopeful for an active YMCA movement in a future China.⁷ However, lacking a large indigenous Christian base to build off of, the YMCA would progress more slowly in China than in other nations.

In addition to its self-imposed limits of expanding into new areas only at the request of missions, YMCA leadership faced logistical barriers that hampered its expansion abroad. In the United States, the Young Men’s Christian Association was experiencing rapid growth. This growth, in the number and types of associations, was at risk of suffering from a lack of coordination. Many local YMCAs found their limited staff increasingly stretched to meet the demands of a growing membership. There was a very real need of “men of ability and education” to provide work that was both practically helpful as well as more deeply spiritual.⁸ That need was felt particularly in the 276 college associations of which only four had secured General Secretaries to organize their efforts. The YMCA’s structure and organizational capacity placed limits on its ability to expand both at home and abroad.

The college Association was the primary source for recruiting future YMCA secretaries for work both at home and abroad. As in the city YMCAs, the college YMCAs conducted bible study and discussed the activities of missionaries abroad. As interest in Christian outreach grew, the college Associations organized a series of summer institutes to meet this demand. With the support of the Evangelist Dwight Moody, these efforts grew beyond a program and outreach offering and became a full-fledged missionary recruitment tool. By June 1890, nearly 4,000 men had declared an intention to go out to the missionary field as a result of this work.

In response to this surge in missionary interest, the College Young Men’s Christian Associations - in conjunction with the College Young Women’s Associations and the Inter-Seminary Missionary Alliance - organized the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions. The purpose of this new group was to coordinate, solicit and deliver young men and women for the missionary field. The Student Volunteer Movement was a direct response to Wishard’s dilemma of “how to develop and organize the wonderful uprising of missionary zeal in our colleges so as to make it permanent and to keep it in harmony with existing missionary

⁶ Luther Wishard to fellow students, Shanghai, China, May 15, 1890, China Correspondence and Reports 1890-1891, box 22, YMCA International Work in China, Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries. The Central International Committee of Young Men’s Christian Associations was the predecessor of the World Alliance of Young Men’s Christian Associations. The World Alliance is a confederation of National Councils of YMCAs from around the world.

⁷ Luther Wishard, “The Young Men’s Christian Association in China,” November, 1890, China Correspondence and Reports, 1890-1891, box 22, YMCA International Work in China, Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, 3. By the time Wishard writes this, the American YMCA model had already achieved a permanent presence in India and Japan.

⁸ Cleveland H. Dodge, “The Problems Which Confront the International Committee.” *The Intercollegian for the Young Men’s Christian Associations* 12, no. 1 (October, 1889): 5.

agencies.”⁹ Maintaining harmony with existing missionary agencies was of serious concern to the YMCA and the Student Volunteer Movement. They wanted to offer real assistance to the missions and not be a disruptive force. The missions themselves were keenly aware of the flurry of activity surrounding foreign work in the United States.¹⁰ They, like the Student Volunteer movement, were eager to capitalize on the enthusiasm for missionary work in the United States. By working together, the missions and the YMCA - through the Student Volunteer Movement - created a process for the organized deployment of American missionaries. Once a Christian base was formed in a community, the missions would request that the YMCA send a secretary to work with the young men.

Called to Action (1891-1896): The YMCA Enters China

The call to enter China that Wishard was looking for arrived a year later in 1891. That year, the Missionaries of Peking (Beijing) sent an open letter to the International Committee - the governing body of the North American Young Men’s Christian Association - petitioning them to enter the field. They requested that the YMCA “secure and send to Peking a young man to develop the full scope of association work.”¹¹ The missionaries of Peking (Beijing) called for the YMCA to provide services for the Chinese young men in the city. The missionaries believed that “what the Chinese want is not the theory of the Association, but an object lesson presented by a successful Association.”¹² In fact, the missionaries of Peking (Beijing) felt that the YMCA could ultimately serve as a force to unite the different denominations in China. They speculated that by bringing the different denominations together in China, the YMCA could ultimately demonstrate the strength of Protestantism.

It is remarkable that China - which would ultimately receive the lion’s share of the American Young Men’s Christian Association’s time, talent, and treasure - was at first not seen as a nation ready for the YMCA to enter. Over the course of a year the appropriateness of going into China was quickly addressed by the missionaries of Peking (Beijing). Initially the YMCA in China played a supporting role, building off the work of the missions. However over time the scope of the YMCA would evolve. This evolution unfolds through the writings of the YMCA and its secretaries in China.

The first secretary that the North American Young Men’s Christian Association sent to China was David Willard Lyon. Lyon, whose parents were missionaries of the Presbyterian board, was born in 1870 in the city of Hanchow (Hangzhou).¹³ Lyon returned with his parents to America in 1891 to receive his education. As President of his College Young Men’s Christian

⁹ “Northfield the Fourth.” *The Intercollegian for the Young Men’s Christian Associations* 12, no. 1 (October, 1889): 3.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Urgent Calls from China, China Correspondence and Reports, 1890-1891, box 22, YMCA International Work in China, Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Biographical Data, Lyon, David Willard, box 132, Biographical Records, Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.

Association and later corresponding member of the Student Volunteer Movement for Illinois, Lyon was the perfect candidate for YMCA foreign work.

When the North American YMCA arrived in China, it brought with it its organizational culture. Part of that culture was the requirement that reports be created and submitted regularly. The reports the secretaries wrote to their superiors in the United States document the YMCA's strategy to engage communities. The reports also provide examples of how critical collaborating with missionaries was to the YMCA's successful establishment and growth in China.

In 1896, YMCA secretary D. Willard Lyon wrote his - and the YMCA's - first report in China. Working in the city of Tientsin (Tianjin), Lyon describes his initial progress of achieving the YMCA's mission: developing active Christianity in the community.¹⁴ In his report, Lyon describes a preexisting prayer meeting group organized by Dr. B. G. Atterbury of the Presbyterian Mission. The meetings were for the English speaking Chinese students attending one of the many colleges in the city. Lyon reports that Dr. Atterbury's bible study group became the core constituency of the first Association. Lyon, leveraging his YMCA training, developed the prayer group into a YMCA by implementing an organizational structure.

By creating a Prayer-meeting Committee to organize the reinvented group, Lyon set the stage for active Chinese leadership. Feeling that the Chinese students were ill-equipped to facilitate the prayer groups, Dr. Atterbury and his students felt that the meetings should be conducted as they had in the past, by foreign Christians who were more familiar with and trained in biblical teachings. Lyon, to the contrary, felt that the "Chinese boys themselves" should undertake the leadership. Initially the students objected, feeling that "the meetings would not be as interesting or profitable if conducted by Chinese," but Lyon urged them forward. He understood the importance of a member-driven organization and his insistence that the young men take the lead allowed him to report a successful and much livelier meeting than before. Meetings were more active, had full participation, and saw increased attendance.¹⁵ Lyon's assertion, that the Association be conducted his way, demonstrates the first crack in the YMCA's deference to the missions. During this period, the YMCA's work continued to support of the missions; however, it became clear that YMCA business would be conducted in a YMCA fashion.

The successes documented in Lyon's first report were not limited to growing the Tientsin (Tianjin) YMCA out of a prayer group. The secretary lists a series of accomplishments that he felt the YMCA had a hand in bringing about. First, he describes gaining a better understanding of the Tientsin (Tianjin) students and their coming to a better understanding of him and, by extension, the Association. Lyon deployed a strategy of going to the University once a week to drill the young men in military tactics "in order to get into more intimate touch

¹⁴ Report of D. Willard Lyon, First Quarter 1896, China Annual and Quarterly Reports 1896-1899, box 22, YMCA International Work in China, Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.

¹⁵ Report of D. Willard Lyon, First Quarter 1896, 3.

with them.” He describes the students being naturally diffident towards him, but that through his efforts he came “into a position of greater influence with them.”¹⁶

Lyon notes the conversion of Chinese students to Christianity as a second accomplishment in his report. Conversion to Christianity was a primary goal of the North American Young Men’s Christian Association during this period. Lyon takes the time to describe each of the seven conversions that took place during his first three months. These descriptions underscore the importance of conversion as a component of the YMCA’s mission. In addition, the manner in which several of the conversions took place illustrates the collective impact of the YMCA working alongside the various missions in Tientsin (Tianjin). As the missionaries hoped, the YMCA had begun to serve as a unifying force for Protestantism. They created an opportunity for students to witness testimonials of traveling missionaries and a shared space where the missionaries could interact with the students.¹⁷ Finally, the conversions are representative of the YMCA’s role during this period; the YMCA’s programs served as a support to the missions.

The third accomplishment Lyon cites was evangelistic work performed by Chinese students. Lyon was very impressed by these Chinese evangelizers who went to the streets to spread the gospel among their fellow students and community members, despite it being “below the dignity of students.”¹⁸ This was notable, as the students could have lost their government scholarships if officials knew they were preaching “the doctrine.”¹⁹

The fourth accomplishment, titled “volunteers,” was the conversion of several medical students to become missionaries to their own people. Lyon credits most of this work to two International Missionary Alliance members, Mr. and Mrs. Woodberry. Lyon is surprised that the students would decide to become missionaries at their late ages, since they had attended mission schools in their youth and would have had many opportunities to make this choice. He credits these conversions to the Holy Spirit staying with them until they were ready to become self-supporting medical missionaries.²⁰

Beyond reporting the Association’s business, Lyon’s report gives a glimpse into his adjustment to China. Lyon reports that he spent his first three months ill which he attributes to his “acclimatization.” Having made it through this period of illness, Lyon made arrangements for a small summer cottage on a piece of land purchased by the missionaries of Tientsin (Tianjin) for a summer resort. He is sure to point out to his superiors in New York that the purchase was necessary, and that he is now prepared for future climatic issues.²¹

¹⁶ Ibid, 4.

¹⁷ Ibid, 5.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Report of D. Willard Lyon, 6.

This brief six page report is rich with information. In quick order, we learn the foundation upon which the Tientsin (Tianjin) YMCA was established, as well as the methods used to transition a preexisting prayer group into a nascent YMCA. We see a loosening of roles from Wishard's writings six years prior, where a firm line was drawn between the YMCA's work and that of the missionaries. We learn how dependent the YMCA was on missionaries for support. We also begin to see the need the missionaries had for the YMCA in engaging the young men of the city.

However, as fact-rich as the reports are, they only provide part of the picture. The majority of the reports are centered on the Association itself and largely on its successes. The Kautz Family YMCA Archives contains correspondence written by the YMCA secretaries, which provide an insider perspective into the interplay between the YMCA secretaries and the Church/missions. For example, before deciding to go to China, Lyon wrote a letter to Wishard dated August 3, 1893, expressing grave doubts as to his ability - and the appropriateness of his going abroad - to promote the Association's work in China. He asks Wishard to pray for him as he struggles with this decision.²²

Lyon's personal struggle illuminates the larger struggle the YMCA faced in defining its role in relation to the Church. Though Lyon had previously committed himself to Christian service through the ministry; his involvement with the YMCA exposed him to a second path. This new option - becoming a YMCA secretary - was a radical departure from the traditional path of the ministry. However, Lyon felt such a strong calling to the Student Volunteer Movement that he was left with a profound personal struggle.²³ Should he serve Christianity through the ministry or through the YMCA?

Lyon would struggle for nearly a year, until the following spring, with this decision. Describing his turn of heart as "one of the most impressive signs of God's blessing," he writes, "there was a day and hour at which time suddenly without any previous warning of it God seemed by his spirit to reverse my attitude towards this question."²⁴ This change of heart came at the expense of Lyon joining the ministry. The gravity of this decision is underscored by the fact that Lyon asks Wishard to write to his father, a missionary, about his upcoming service in China.

The elder Lyon's reply to Wishard exposes some of the divisions between the YMCA and the missionaries. In it, he chastises Wishard for soliciting his son to go to China, writing, "it may be true that laymen are better able to influence young men than ministers," but that he should

²² D. Willard Lyon to Wishard, August 3, 1893, China Correspondence and Reports 1893-1895, box 22, YMCA International Work in China, Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ D. Willard Lyon to Wishard, May 12, 1894, China Correspondence and Reports 1893-1895, box 22, YMCA International Work in China, Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.

find lay men to do that and not men who have “taken vows before the Presbytery to be a minister of the gospel.”²⁵

Wishard’s correspondence with David Willard Lyon and the elder Lyon demonstrates the discomfort some missionaries felt with the YMCA’s evangelistic work in foreign nations. While it is likely that a good deal of Lyon’s father’s scorn was the result of his son breaking a vow to join the ministry, his criticisms do not end there. Rather, he calls into question the efficacy and appropriateness of the YMCA’s strategy of engaging young urban men. He goes so far as to call the winning of men to Christ by the laity a dangerous heresy.

Ultimately, the detractors did not prevent the YMCA from going abroad. The missionary supporters who called for the American YMCA to send “good men” to conduct Association business prevailed.²⁶

Drawn to Action (1900-1912): The Shifting YMCA Philosophy

As the YMCA in China became more established and grew into new areas, it began to push the boundaries of its work. In a letter addressed to John Mott dated January 30, 1900, Lyon describes the possibility of the Association growing into Peking. Peking, the city that initially issued the call for the North American Young Men’s Christian Association to send men, is now described as an “interior provincial capital” with only a small sympathetic foreign community outside of the missionaries.²⁷ Lyon believes that the work with the “heathen young men of Peking” could not be supported financially by the local Chinese Christian community. He believes that any Association work should be done strictly along “missionary lines,” or externally funded endeavors focused on winning men over to Christ. Lyon acknowledges that this would challenge the YMCA’s current policy of local self-support. This would also mark the first time the YMCA would attempt to create a Christian base in a Chinese city and is a radical departure from the YMCA simply extending the foundational work performed by missionaries.

The day before Lyon wrote to Mott about Peking, he wrote to Charles Ober, field secretary based in Chicago, Illinois, for insight into his desire to organize a YMCA in the city. Regarding the “Peking situation,” he writes, “so far as I know the Foreign Department of the International Committee has not as yet undertaken any distinctively missionary work for heathen young men in foreign lands, other than the holding of gospel meetings.”²⁸ Lyon

²⁵ D. N. Lyon to L.D. Wishard, June 27, 1894, China Correspondence and Reports 1893-1895, box 22, YMCA International Work in China, Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.

²⁶ D. Willard Lyon Letter to Morse, On canal boat, October 18, 1895 China Correspondence and Reports 1893-1895, box 22, YMCA International Work in China, Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries. In fact Dr. Atterbury of the Protestant Mission in Tientsin (Tianjin) was laying a plan early for Lyon to go to Tientsin versus Peking (Beijing) as was originally intended.

²⁷ D. Willard Lyon to Mott, Peking, January 30, 1900, China Correspondence and Reports Jan-May 1900 , box 22, YMCA International Work in China, Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.

²⁸ D. Willard Lyon to Ober, Peking, January 29, 1900, China Correspondence and Reports Jan-May 1900, Box 22, YMCA International Work in China, Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries. In his

understands that this undertaking is outside of the scope of his charge. However, he notes that a recent issue of the YMCA publication *Foreign Mail* indicated that the International Committee's view on externally supported foreign Associations may be evolving.

Foreign Mail, a quarterly publication out of New York, contains accounts and musings from the YMCA secretaries working in the field as well as accounts and appeals from the International Committee. It is likely that the story Lyon was referring to was found in the September, 1899 issue from the International Committee. The Committee makes an appeal to invest in the Association's work in South America.²⁹ The appeal describes Brazil in terms similar to the way China was initially depicted: a population with "low morality and rampant heathenism filling the cities." The authors call on the YMCAs of North America to send funds to wipe out the debt of a foreign YMCA. The Committee proposes that the building and property be held by the American YMCA, marking a radical departure from prior practice. This precedent may have provided Lyon with an opening to suggest evolving the work of the Association in China to a similarly more proactive approach. Lyon saw Peking (Beijing) as a center of activity in China and so an important opportunity to proactively build up a Christian base.

Lyon's vision for an Association to be formed in Peking (Beijing) took seven years to come to fruition. In 1907, through collaborative efforts between Princeton University and the International Committee, the North American YMCA secured funds to construct a building in Peking.³⁰ The Peking YMCA would serve as a base for the YMCA to engage the "literati," or student class, of China. Working with students was the basis of YMCA work. However, a testament to the YMCA's success in 1905, the missionaries of China called on the YMCA to take full charge of the work among students. They felt, similar to the original call from Peking in 1891, that the "YMCA with its inter-denominationalism and its three-fold appeal, ... bade fair to do for Chinese students what it had already done for students in America."³¹ While the initial call that brought the YMCA into China was to take over existing groups, the YMCA was now entrusted with the strategy and implementation of student work. Emboldened by its success in Peking, the YMCA would continue to make plans to extend its work elsewhere in China.

In the twenty-two years since Wishard surveyed China, the Chinese YMCA witnessed dramatic growth. A handful of prayer groups organized by missionaries in 1890 expanded to twenty-five city Associations and 105 student Associations, with a total membership in the tens of thousands by 1912. With the increase in Associations and membership came a reevaluation of the YMCA's significance for the Chinese nation. President Yuan Shih Kai, along with the Premier and the President and Secretary of the National Assembly, received the delegates of

capacity as field secretary Ober's primary responsibility was the recruitment of young men to enter the YMCAs Foreign Work Department.

²⁹ "A Young Men's Work in South America. An Appeal", *Foreign Mail* 5, no. 3 (September, 1899).

³⁰ The Report of Robert R. Gailey to the International Committee Young Men's Christian Associations of North America for the Year ending September 30, 1907, China Annual and Quarterly Reports (B-Le) 1907, box 1, YMCA International Work in China, Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.

³¹ The Princeton Work in Peking, 1914, China Princeton in Peking -The Legation Guard YMCA - Sightseeing Trip Series, box 89, YMCA International Work in China, Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.

the Sixth General Convention of the Associations of China and Korea. This honor demonstrates the growing significance of the YMCA in Chinese society. That significance is largely due to the successful indigenization of the Chinese YMCA.

By 1912, the Chinese YMCA had largely become a local enterprise with over two hundred Chinese staff members, or three times more Chinese than foreign staff. This increasingly indigenous YMCA grew Lyon's initial work of establishing the YMCA into new areas. The Chinese YMCA now had a publication and lecture department to communicate their scientific, technological and religious messages more broadly. During this same period, the YMCA continued to cooperate with missionary societies; however, the missionaries were now setting aside individuals to work in the Associations, particularly within their student centers.³² The YMCA had become established in China by this point and was focused on growing the Association to meet the needs of China. The missionaries in turn increasingly looked to the YMCA to provide logistical guidance and support.

Perhaps the aspirations of the Peking (Beijing) missionaries who first called the North American Young Men's Christian Association to China had been realized. Their vision that the YMCA would serve as a unifying force among Protestant denominations appears to have transpired within the sixth General Convention of the Associations of China and Korea. The Chinese Association members represented fifteen denominations of Protestantism. This interdenominational support greatly enhanced the mission's ability to develop young men. In fact, the student YMCAs had so incorporated the work of the YMCA and spirit of the times that they began to repeat history, forming the Chinese Student Volunteer Movement for the Ministry, modeled very closely after the Student Volunteer Movement that sent Lyon to China. The chief aim of this organization, organized under the Chinese National Committee, was to solicit and develop Chinese men for the ministry.

This period of YMCA development took place within the context of great political upheaval. The ability of the YMCA to successfully navigate and grow its work despite this upheaval is remarkable. The forces of change at play in China in many ways strengthened the YMCA's position amongst the missionaries. The YMCA was no longer *called* to action; YMCA leadership was now actively seeking out ways to enter new areas of work.

In 1912 a commemorative report titled *Five Years of Progress, 1907-1912* highlighted the YMCA's strong position within China. The opening section of the report is noted as being "A Year of Promise."³³ The Revolution of 1911 had the real effects of cutting off financial support for local Associations and causing many school and college closures. This effectively shut down the work of many college Associations for a year. In spite of this, the YMCA remained optimistic. The author acknowledges that an organization largely made up of young men could

³² The following Missionary societies were setting aside men for the work; Canadian Presbyterian, Canadian Methodist, Irish Presbyterian, The United Free Church of Scotland, Danish, American Episcopal, Friends, China Inland, Wesleyan, Church Missionary Society and the English Baptist Missions.

³³ The National Committee of the Young Men's Christian Associations of China, "Five Years of Progress, 1907 - 1912," Annual Report of the YMCA's of China 1907-1912, box 16, YMCA International Work in China, Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.

have “become hopelessly entangled in the political situation,” but credits the wisdom of its leaders and members to ensure the non-political stance of the Association.³⁴ The report’s list of accomplishments and anticipated future developments indicates that the following year truly could be promising. Post-revolution, the YMCA and other Christian organizations were now open to voluntary religious work. In addition to the YMCA having more freedom to enter locations of its choosing, “governors, railway officials, army officers, presidents of colleges, missionaries and other responsible leaders” called upon the YMCA to work with their young men. This more secular work - coupled with the landscape of the new post-revolution China - created a situation that encouraged the YMCA to abandon its self-professed strategy of taking the “most conservative course possible.”³⁵ This new political climate created a landscape where nothing prevented the “immediate nation-wide extension among all classes of men” except a sufficient number of trained secretaries.³⁶ The Chinese Young Men’s Christian Association, having experienced over twenty years of growth and indigenization, became increasingly assertive in regards to its work.

The *Five Years of Progress* report opens with an illustration that captures the spirit of the Chinese YMCA. A series of narrowing steps leads to doors of a church that have been thrown wide open. The altar is visible at the end of the aisle. The pews are empty, as if calling men to fill them. The caption at the bottom reads “every activity of the Association is designed as a stepping stone to the Church.”³⁷ The bottom, foundational step of the YMCA promotes the succeeding steps of social activities, education, and physical work. These lead to moral development and finally bible study, which ushers one into the church.

This image tells the story of a YMCA which no longer views its role as a support to the missions. By this point in time, the YMCA fully owns its role in promoting not just Christian ways, but in *creating* Christians. This philosophy stands in stark contrast from the reports Wishard sent twenty-two years earlier.

Forced to Action (1930-1951): The Decline of American Support

The Chinese YMCA’s successes would continue for another decade, eventually expanding to forty-one organized city YMCAs. Over that period, the Chinese Association continued to grow and modify the scope of its work. By 1922, North American participation, in terms of personnel and financial support, had reached its peak.³⁸ The American YMCA had a growing deficit issue which was exposed by the economic collapse of the Great Depression. The American YMCA became increasingly unwilling and unable to financially support the work in China. In 1930, the American YMCA conducted a series of surveys of its international work in order to better understand the scope of its work and to plan for its future. This report exposes a growing tension between the American and Chinese YMCAs.

³⁴ Ibid, 1.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Five years of Progress.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Latorette, 275.

The 1930 Survey for China is divided into two bodies of work. The bulk of the documentation is the survey itself, which was conducted by the Chinese National Committee. The authors are quick to note that they are not submitting a “survey”, but rather a “special study” that employed the techniques of a survey. The authors point to limited funds as preventing them from conducting a proper survey. The study is prefaced by a report written on behalf of the North American YMCA. This report provides commentary on the study, noting where the author is in agreement with the Chinese findings and where they differ. In addition, the report provides insight into the views of the North American YMCA on the Chinese mindset, events in China, and Chinese society. These comments are written from the perspective of an outsider and stand in stark contrast with the study itself. Even in the areas where there is agreement, the tone tends to be that of condescension, in contrast to the optimism of the study.

This study was created at a turning point in the relationship between the Chinese and the American YMCAs. The Chinese YMCA had grown to a point where they desired – but perhaps did not need - the North American YMCA’s assistance. In similar fashion, the American YMCA felt that it still had a role to play in the work of the Chinese YMCA, though it was increasingly unclear what that role should be. Perhaps by taking the view of a critical outsider, the North American YMCA was seeking to distance itself from the foreign work.

The report opens by stating that “China is passing through not one revolution but half a dozen and the changes which took place in Europe over a period of many centuries are being condensed into the lifetime of a single generation.”³⁹ The report declares that the changes have been more violent than those which gradually produced the changes in European and American society. The cultural bias in this report is made more striking when compared to the optimism of earlier writings, when the work in China was relatively new. The report puts the perceived failings of Chinese society squarely on the Chinese themselves - in particular their character and the inability of that character to produce courageous, loyal, unselfish and dependable leaders.

The report author believes that the foreign secretaries who were the foundational leadership of the Chinese YMCA should be in China for no longer than a five year term. He asserts that men who have spent significant time in China face a readjustment upon return as difficult as the one they first experienced entering the field. In fact, the report claims that interviews with returned secretaries indicate that being in the field imparted a “kind of sterilization” on the secretaries. The findings, which were delivered at the height of the YMCA’s dismantling of its foreign work, seem to be a harsh assessment of the work in China. They document a shift in the value of the foreign work within the United States. With the vast majority of foreign secretaries now withdrawn, the report concludes that if the YMCA were to succeed or fail in China, it would be by Chinese efforts.

³⁹ Earnest M Best, “Comments on the Report for the Special Study and on the Situation in the China YMCA,” International Survey, China (YMCA) Vol. 1, C.2, International Survey 1930, China, box 3, Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, 3.

By 1930, the YMCA had become a predominantly Chinese Association that was poised to address Chinese issues in a Chinese fashion. This can be attributed to two primary factors. First, it had always been the American YMCA's primary intention to cultivate an indigenous association. The role of the foreign secretaries was to establish new areas of work and to guide and nurture the Association and its local leaders to a point of self-sufficiency. Each year, the ratio of Chinese secretaries to foreign secretaries grew. The top position of General Secretary was never held by a foreigner after 1915; and by 1930 the majority of YMCA work was conducted by Chinese staff.

The second factor leading to indigenization was political unrest in China. It was important that the Chinese Associations not appear to be under the control of the West. In order to accomplish this, the American YMCA began to transfer control of Chinese assets to the Chinese YMCA.⁴⁰ The growing anti-American sentiment in the Chinese national discourse was mirrored by the attitudes of the Association. Many Chinese staff felt that the North American YMCA's requests for information regarding their financial support were an example of Western "economic imperialism."⁴¹ Many of the foreign secretaries agreed, believing that it was the responsibility of the Western world to provide support to China unquestioningly.

The political unrest solidified the steady advancement of indigenization within the YMCA. It also called into question the YMCA's proposition that Christianity was a solution for China's woes. Despite these shifting tides, the YMCA remained important to Chinese leaders. The report describes proposals by Communists to take over the YMCA and reorganize it according to party ideology. However, these proposals were narrowly rejected, largely owing to the influence of men in government who had a background with the Association.⁴²

These political relationships demonstrate how the indigenous Chinese YMCA positioned itself. For example, the Association worked closely with government schools. Across China, the YMCA provided lectures, swimming classes, sports recreation, conferences, movie showings, and worked with student organizations. As a result of these close ties, the vast majority of YMCAs reported positive interactions with political authorities in the 1930 survey.

In addition to enjoying positive relationships with the government, the YMCA also maintained close ties with the Church. The Chinese YMCA reported very close cooperation between the Church and the YMCA in the 1930 Survey for China, in spite of feelings of competition "in the early days of the institutional church in China."⁴³ Cooperation between the Association and the Church took the traditional forms of Evangelistic meetings, Bible study, and lectures. Some YMCAs helped the Church in its financial campaigns by allowing them to use YMCA facilities for events. At the same time, the Chinese YMCA felt that a better working

⁴⁰ Latorette, 283.

⁴¹ Best.

⁴² Best.

⁴³ Daniel Fu, Director, "The 1930 Special Study of the Young Men's Christian Associations of China." The National Committee of the Young Men's Christian Associations of China, Shanghai, July 1930, 356.

relationship with the Church could be nurtured but that both “the Church and Association leaders should address [the relationship]....”⁴⁴ The study states that even though YMCA relations with the Church were reported favorably, “there is a good deal of indifference and in some cases despair among the YMCA people of the possibility of co-operating with the churches.”⁴⁵

The study also explored the relationship between the YMCA and the Church from a layman’s perspective. It found that active YMCA members felt that the Association and the Church had an intimate and cooperative relationship. However, non-Christians and Christians who were not members of the YMCA believed that the relationship was formal and lacked a true spirit of cooperation. Both groups believed that the difference between the Association and the Church was that the YMCA performed more social welfare and community work, while the Church was more religious, spending its time preaching to communities. The study makes it clear that no one felt that the Institutional Church or Church Union could take the place of the YMCA. The analysis states that as far as the layman was concerned, there was “no conflict in policy, function or working relations between the YMCA and the Church,” with each having its own distinctive role in the community.⁴⁶

The YMCA’s growing program operated increasingly in the secular sphere. The Chinese YMCA had become thoroughly “Chinified” with the vast majority of participants being non-Christian.⁴⁷ Religious programming was still important; however, the Chinese YMCA felt it could offer more and by this period their non-religious offerings outnumbered the religious ten to one. The survey provides evidence of how far the relationship of the YMCA and the Church had evolved. It seems to position the two bodies, the YMCA and the Church, as equals, with each operating in different, though complementary capacities. Through its cooperation with the Church, the YMCA maintained its Christian core while offering increasingly secular lines of work.

By 1931, the Chinese YMCA was a true Chinese organization. The foreign secretaries were small in number and largely relegated to a supporting role. In addition to fewer American staff, the Chinese YMCA received dramatically fewer funds from the United States. This presented the Chinese leadership with a new challenge that served as the final tipping point, solidifying the Chinese Young Men’s Christian Associations evolution into an independent and indigenous Christian organization with a large social program and non-Christian constituency.

When the Japanese invaded Manchuria in 1931, the YMCA was present to respond to and document the situation.⁴⁸ The occupation of the area created a difficult situation for the American Secretaries. New buildings were postponed, the student work suffered, and the Japanese authorities put the Chinese YMCA under heavy surveillance. However, the YMCA leveraged its networks, and the American secretaries in China reached out to their government

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 31.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 362.

⁴⁷ Best, 12

⁴⁸ Laturette, 286.

and Japanese colleagues to help alleviate the worst of the situation. To develop support in the United States, several foreign secretaries quickly composed a letter to John Mott imploring him to meet with President Hoover and influence him to take a decisive stand against Japanese aggression.⁴⁹ In China, the American secretaries organized a “Sino-Japanese Christian group” to provide service to the thousands of workmen who had lost employment as a result of the hostilities.⁵⁰

In unoccupied China, the YMCA collaborated with other agencies to provide relief work to refugees from floods and fighting. In 1931 in the city of Wuhu, this work began following a flood that YMCA reports as creating between 50,000 and 80,000 refugees.⁵¹ The YMCA, along with the Wuhu Relief Society and the Taosist Society, raised funds and worked with the displaced. The YMCA also worked to garner support from Christian leaders in the region.

The worsening economic depression in the United States and the American YMCA’s massive deficits resulted in further reductions in its foreign work in 1934. Americans in China took on heroic efforts to stay, but ultimately they were demobilized. The 1934 National Convention, which was reported to be the largest gathering of lay Christians, was a bright spot during this period.⁵² The following year, financial assistance from the United States ended, except for the nine remaining American secretaries. However, partnerships with other Associations, such as the Danish YMCA, and other missionary groups helped ameliorate this.

The conditions brought about by war continued to hamper the ability of the YMCA; however, the Americans could occasionally act as an intermediary between the two Chinas. That ended with the American declaration of war following the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The Japanese military no longer granted the Americans special status and accordingly, the American secretaries could no longer protect the YMCA in occupied China. By 1942 twelve Associations had been seized.⁵³ During the war, the American secretaries provided assistance and demonstrated one last time their prowess at organization. Relief work and service to the military increased. In free China, in spite of the war time difficulties, the YMCA raised local funds to conduct basic Association work in limited areas.

From a casual inspection, the war time era seems to be spent responding to a never ending series of crises. The majority of the correspondence and reports during the period is oriented towards requesting and procuring funds; tracking down the whereabouts of friends, family and staff; and responding to the harsh realities of war. However, there are materials that indicate a strong religious program was being enacted. The Chinese YMCA, in conjunction with

⁴⁹ Eugene Barnett to John Mott, October 5, 1931, China Correspondence and Reports October 1931, box 48 YMCA International Work in China, Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.

⁵⁰ Eugene Barnett, Confidential Report of Visit to Manchuria, October 9-33, 1931, China Correspondence and Reports October 1931, box 48, YMCA International Work in China, Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.

⁵¹Y.K. Woo, Report of Inspection Visit to Wuhu, China Correspondence and Reports October 1931, box 48, YMCA International Work in China, Kautz Family YMCA Archives. University of Minnesota Libraries.

⁵² Laturete, 290.

⁵³ Laturete, 298.

YWCA's student work departments, participated in the Youth and Religion Movement. In 1942, the Youth and Religion Movement reported a successful campaign to energize the youth and laity, organizing a base to develop future Christian work in the city.⁵⁴

Post-war offered a fleeting glimpse of renewal for American involvement in China. The United States sent funds and new secretaries to China. The foreign secretaries embarked on a training program to re-strengthen the Chinese staff that had been depleted during the war. The American renewal was short lived, however, and in 1948 many YMCA foreign secretaries and other missionaries again left China at the suggestion of their consulate. The last YMCA foreign secretary left China in 1951.

Through Associations in Taiwan and Hong Kong, the American YMCA continued limited work in the region, though never as directly as in the past.

The Lasting Impact

The North American Young Men's Christian Association, during its sixty year tenure in China, observed the modern era unfold in China. Looking back at its meager beginnings, the Association's growth is astonishing. When Wishard addressed the gathering of missionaries in Peking, he also communicated his work to the United States. At the time his impression of China was that it was "not ripe for such a widespread, aggressive movement as is now called for in Japan and India. China is in need of any amount of pioneer missionary work, such as the Young Men's Christian Association is not qualified nor authorized to undertake."⁵⁵ However, with the support of missionaries, the YMCA entered the field and discovered that there was an insatiable demand for the types of work performed by their organization.

By looking at the activities of the Young Men's Christian Association, we are afforded a more nuanced understanding of missions. The YMCA's non-denominational "mission" brought countless thousands to Christianity. They constructed schools and conducted health campaigns. Ultimately, they would venture into new communities at their own discretion, becoming a mission in nearly every way except for denomination. As the Chinese Young Men's Christian Association went through the process of indigenization, they experienced a secularization of the work. However, at no point along this evolutionary journey did the Chinese YMCA abandon its Christian principles. The correspondence from the final days of American involvement in China demonstrates this. In a letter addressed to the head of the American YMCA's Foreign Work Department, Eugene Barnett, Chinese YMCA General Secretary Y. T. Wu writes to address concerns from New York regarding a series of pamphlets created by the Chinese Association Press regarding Christianity and Communism. Wu asks Barnett for "Christian forbearance in

⁵⁴ Victor Hayward, Report on Campaign of the Southeastern team of the 1942 Youth and Religion Movement, China Correspondence and Reports Jan -April 1942, box 55, YMCA International Work in China, Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.

⁵⁵ L.D. Wishard, "The Young Men's Christian Association in China," November 1890, China Correspondence and Reports 1890-1891, box 22, YMCA International Work in China, Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.

which you would respect our view and our judgment just as we respect yours and a sufficient amount of confidence in us that we are trying our best to work out the implications of the Christian faith in the new situation in China.”⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Y.T. Wu to Eugene Barnett, November 9, 1950, China Correspondence and Reports November 1950, box 62, YMCA International Work in China, Kautz Family YMCA Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries.