Response to: Protestants and the Chinese in 19th Century America

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Daniel has given a very broad and varied account of the complex Protestant efforts to Christianize the Chinese during the second half of 19th century America. A careful reading of his account shows that while the American Christians professed belief in the same God, they often differed among themselves in how they perceived the Creator and their fellow beings and in what they thought God's will was for themselves and for others.

The attitudes, ideas, and responses of the Protestants were shaped not only within the social, economic, & intellectual limitations of their times but also by geography - i.e. by where they were living. This was also true of the Chinese who came to the United States. When the East met West in the New World, their interactions re-shaped some of their pre-conceptions about each other and also reinforced some mis-conceptions about one another.

Daniel's topic is very timely in view of the recent concern with increased immigration from all over the world. All this coincides my research interest in C-A church history which is:

1) to see that history within the context of the immigrant experience,
2) to explore the transcultural aspects of that history, and
3) to find some clues to God's design amidst man's disorder.

What can we learn from this account of what happened to this group of Chinese immigrants who came more than a century ago? Perhaps we can gain some insight into the power of an idea, or find some suggestions for transcultural cooperation, or get a sense of perspective for tasks which require longterm vision.

When the first group of Chinese arrived in California in the 1850s, they became part of what Marcus Hansen called, the "second colonization of America". This period of enormous immigration was brought about by the combination of social and political unrest and economic ills in the Old Worlds of Europe and Asia, the advent of the Industrial Revolution which required a large labor force, and the discovery of gold in California in 1849. Today's immigration is taking place amidst social and political unrest and economic ills internationally and at home and the advent of a technological revolution which is changing the profile of labor. We are just missing a gold rush. Perhaps that is yet to come!
Once again, we hear anti-immigrant rhetoric. But this is not a new cry. As early as 1753, Benjamin Franklin wrote:

Those who come hither are generally the most stupid of their own nation... unless the stream of importation could be turned from this to other colonies... they will soon so outnumber us... (that) we will...not be able to preserve our language, and even our government will be precarious"

Perhaps researchers 100 years hence will read the anti-immigrant literature about today's immigrant groups and conclude that they, like the Chinese, were "widely loathed and hated". They would be only be partly right in both cases. Concurrent with the loathing and hating from some sources was support and respect from others. In-between were many who were either uninformed, uninterested, or uninvolved.

Whenever immigrants anywhere become settlers in a new land, they embark on a transcultural journey which millions of immigrants - whether voluntary or involuntary - have travelled before them. Those who emigrated to the United States infused their aspirations and expectations into the living and still evolving American mosaic. At the forefront of the struggle of the Chinese to become part of their new country were Christians of Chinese and European descent.

Daniel recounted the different motivations behind the Protestant efforts to Christianize the Chinese. This account largely presents the Chinese as people who was done to or done for.

I will respond by recounting the motivations and efforts of some Chinese Christians. I will cover a few of the same events but from the perspective of the Chinese involvement in the conversion of Chinese in America and China. It will show people who were "filled with the Spirit" and who were innovative initiators, visionary planners, and tough-minded doers.

From this perspective, the initiative and persistence that led to the founding of the first Chinese mission came from several Chinese Christians who arrived in California in 1851. They immediately approached the Episcopal church to start a mission to the Chinese. When the request went nowhere, they went to the First Presbyterian church and requested a missionary to start work with the Chinese. When the national board denied this request, they persisted and made another request which was finally answered.
When the first missionary arrived from China in 1852, these Chinese Christians helped establish the mission. The eldest - whose brother-in-law was China's first Protestant - became the colporteur. Another became a teacher in the school.

The other two had been students at Morrison Education Society, the American mission school in Hong Kong. From their arrival, they became a bridge for the newcomers to the larger community because they were bilingual and had previous significant contact with Westerners. One started the first bi-lingual newspaper which served as a bond for the fledging community. The other was a spokesperson in the Chinese community. His letters protesting California's unjust laws against the Chinese brought him an invitation from the Governor for a discussion.

Meanwhile on the East Coast, another former student of Morrison Education Society, Yung Wing, was studying at Yale. The beginning of higher education of Chinese in America on a large scale can be traced back to him.

This achievement was the result of his agonizing search for God's will in his life during his senior year. After eight years in America, "All his tastes and feelings and affinities, intellectual and moral," made him feel at home here. But China's needs were always on his mind. Years later, he wrote of his struggle:

I often wished I had never been educated, as education had unmistakably enlarged my mental and moral horizon, and revealed to me responsibilities which the sealed eye of ignorance cannot see, and sufferings and wrongs of humanity to which an uncultivated and callous nature can never be made sensitive.... But this is a low view of life... unworthy of a being bearing the impress of divinity.

I was determined that the rising generation of China should enjoy the same educational advantages that I had enjoyed; that through western education China might be regenerated, become enlightened and powerful... To accomplish that object became the guiding star of my ambition.

It took him sixteen years to realize that goal. In 1870, he established the Chinese Educational Mission in which 100 boys in contingents of thirty plus were brought to the United States to be educated. Over sixty graduated from American colleges - including Yale, Harvard, and Princeton - before the mission was stopped. The achievements and contributions of these graduates - in China, on the international scene, and in the United States - were only the beginning of the legacy of Yung Wing's vision.
In March 1870, another remarkable Chinese Christian came from China. Although his life was brief and his time in America was less than a year, he left a legacy which gives us additional understanding of transcultural cooperation, the effectiveness of human efforts, and persistence in pursuing visions.

Fung Seung Nam was a Confucian scholar who was studying for the bar in Canton when he was sought to disprove the Christian religion by studying the Bible in order to refute it. Instead, he was converted. He, like many of the early converts, was transformed by the concept of a loving God who was Creator of the Universe. These early converts were led by the vision of building a spiritual community on earth - the Kingdom of God. They were convinced by the basic precept to "Love thy neighbor" and to express this in concrete works. Only such transcendant concepts could persuade them to leave their old beliefs and to embrace a religion for which they had to endure such hardships and sacrifices and which demanded such strength and determination.

Fung was appointed to work at the Baptist Chinese Mission where the Rev. John Francis, who spoke only English, facilitated opportunities for Fung to reach the Chinese. Working in tandem, they visited lodging houses, shoe factories, copper works and stores in San Francisco and the surrounding counties. Their relationship was a true partnership of East and West in mission and undoubtedly affected all those who saw them.

On Sunday, Fung preached in the street in the morning, in other Chinese Sunday Schools in the afternoon, and to the Baptist Sunday School in the evening. His power to engage and hold the attention of his audience was phenomenal. His street preaching reached crowds which ranged from 700 to 1500! His appeal crossed denominational lines; Chinese Presbyterians and even their Western missionary assisted him in his street preaching by passing tracts and flipping hymn charts.

Every night, Fung met with inquirers in his room. In October, a convert was about to be baptized when word came that he was locked up by a relative to prevent his baptism. Fung and the inquirers knelt and prayed, "praying the Lord to deliver Brother Wing, praying also for the one who was detaining him. Like the disciples of old, they found their prayer answered". There was a full house at the baptism of Wing with 200 Chinese and many Westerners present.

By December, however, his labors took their toll and he fell ill. In January, as San Francisco was beset by wind and rain, Fung suspended street preaching for the first time. He bought an organ so that he could teach the Chinese to sing hymns and
finished his book on the relative merits of the doctrines of Jesus and Confucius. A few weeks later, he lapsed into a semi-coma and died in Francis' arms.

Fung's funeral service was attended by Christians of the East and West who accompanied his body to Lone Mountain Cemetery. He was the first Chinese to be buried among westerners. This was a testimony to his ability to transcend race - even in death.

After the funeral, the Chinese Christians gathered in Fung's room to mourn the death of their spiritual leader. They wanted to do something as a legacy to his memory - something to ensure that the work for which he died would continue, something which would sustain them when they were subjected to hostilities from non-Chinese and Chinese alike. As one Christian explained:

"trouble and persecution beat upon them waves of the sea... Many were homeless, for when one of our number was out of employment, he could not go back to his heathen relatives as he did aforetime, and ask them for food and shelter until he could find work again. If any should do so, he would either meet with...refusal, or, accepting the grudgingly bestowed aid, would have to submit to...ridicule, contempt, and petty persecutions.

Their thinking resulted in the formation of the Chinese YMCA. It's purpose was to convert and support Christians in America and China. It was to operate on three principles: members were to be totally responsible for 1) financial support of the organization, 2) governing the organization, and 3) the conversion and care of new members. In short, they were to be self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating. These are the same three "selfs" of the current Three-Self Movement in China. I surmise that further research will show that their roots may be Chinese-American!!

The CYMCA had elements of the Western YMCA and the Chinese family associations. It included a place for Bible study and worship, for organized Christian work, and for oversight of prospective Christians. It also provided "shelter for the homeless, and nursing in sickness, and Christian burial of the dead." The speed with which subsequent chapters were formed all over California and throughout the United States among several denominations is testimony to their appeal and effectiveness. One appeal was that the organization gave them a platform for social action.
The minister of the Chinese Presbyterian Church at that time was the Rev. John Kerr, a medical doctor on sabbatical from Canton Hospital. Although he wrote eloquently in defense of the Chinese in America, his mindset was with those in China who saw the Chinese Americans as "overseas Chinese" and not as American settlers of Chinese descent. He was also not used to the independent-minded Chinese-Americans because he had been in China for so many years.

Kerr objected to what he felt was political activity. His insistence that the men confine themselves to religious activity caused Lee tong Hay to leave the Presbyterian Church. Lee, an eloquent and independent activist, joined the Methodist Church whose Western missionary, the Rev. Otis Gibson, was in sympathy with social action.

What made some Chinese in America different from some of those in China? It may be the same thing which is echoed in the accounts of other immigrant groups - the effect of the idea of freedom and equality on the newcomers.

Anthony Trollope noted this phenomena when he visited in 1862. "The Irishman", he wrote, "when he expatriates himself to one of those American States, loses much of that affectionate, confiding, masterworshipping nature which makes him so good a fellow at home (in Ireland). But he becomes more of a man...(because) America has given them rights and privileges which an old country... probably could never give." Sometimes America had to be reminded and/or compelled through the courts to live up to its ideals of equal rights.

One of these rights was the right of Chinese and Chinese-American children to attend the public schools of San Francisco. In 1876, the Chinese paid a school tax for 1500 children but none of them were admitted to the public schools. This large number of children is surprising to a lot of people because so much of literature about this period refer to a bachelor society, the lack of women, the absence of family life, and the transient nature of their community. These are all familiar themes in the accounts of many European immigrant groups.

While researching a number of years ago, I came across a reference entitled "The Chinese of New England". With great excitement, I found the article and discovered that it was about French Canadians! It seemed that they also were being condemned for being a bachelor society, etc. Like the Chinese, they were referred to as "birds of passage". In the Chinese case and in other immigrant group histories, more research is needed and more focus put on the women and children who were here.
In 1876, Lee Tong Hay, who was then President of the Chinese YMCA was one of the signers of a memorial to President Grant in which one of the charges refuted was about the lack of family life. It stated that "already a few hundred Chinese families have been brought here. These are all...keepers at home, not known on the public street. There are also...perhaps a thousand Chinese children born in America."

The Chinese filed a suit in 1884. Their attorney was William F. Gibson, son of the Methodist missionary, They won the suit. In April 1885, a segregated public school was opened for their children.

During the 1870s, two educated and enterprising Chinese women arrived in San Francisco. One was Mrs. Tong Kit Hing, wife of the Baptist minister; the other was Mrs. Tam Ching, wife of the Presbyterian minister.

Western women missionaries had been calling on the Chinese families "with little result" until the arrival of the Mrs. Tong and Mrs. Tam. Because they spoke Cantonese and were unencumbered by cultural barriers, they opened more doors to the housebound "keepers at home" and their children.

This team effort of East and West was described by one missionary. Tam first reconnoitered the area, perfecting "arrangements for attack" with a "certain methodical slowness, for many of the houses are as impregnable as a fortress". Soon Tam even persuaded some women to come to the mission for meetings. These team efforts were effective in sustaining many families through the dispersions caused by recurrent attacks on the Chinese community.

Besides contributing to community building in America, the Chinese YMCAs also actively promoted and supported work in China. The organization's motto was "China for Christ." This impelling purpose arose out of two issues. One was to give immediate support to Christians who returned to China and faced persecution from family, friends, and strangers; the other was to regenerate China through Christianity and education because they thought that how people of Chinese descent in America were treated was related to China's perceived strengths & weaknesses.

The Chinese YMCA members contributed generously to missionary work in Kwangtung Province and particularly to the counties from which they came. They hired Chinese missionaries to set up preaching stations or chapels, to organize free schools, and to distribute tracts.
By 1903, there were few places in these counties where there was not a mission chapel within walking distance. When I visited Kwangtung Province in 1979 through 1982, the most outstanding schools, colleges, and hospitals were usually former Christian ones to which Chinese Christians in America had contributed generously.

This is only a part of the legacy of the Chinese-American Christians on both sides of the Pacific. How was this hardy band of believers - a minority among a minority - able to do all that they did? They were transformed by a powerful idea, led by a vision, and obedient to a precept. This concept, vision, and precept enabled Christians of the East and West - at their idealistic best and within the cultural limitations of the times - to transcend geography, culture, race, and theology and become partners in mission. In the midst of man's disorder, they became part of God's design.