

The Impact of the Seventh-day Adventist Work in China on the Denomination as a Whole

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The Seventh-day Adventist work in China has had a unique impact on the Seventh-day Adventist work. While Seventh-day Adventist work in Europe was the earliest and seemed most successful in the beginning, by 1935 the Seventh-day Adventist work in China was the 2nd most important work outside of North America. At that time, it far surpassed the work in other areas in terms of missionaries and converts. While the work in Europe quickly became self-supporting, the work in China continued to have a large contingent of foreign workers until 1949. Adventist work in India began about the time it did in China, but it never grew to the dimensions that the China work did and it never captured the imagination of the American Adventists to the degree that the China work did. Did the work in China have a greater impact than the work in Europe, Africa, India or Latin America? It would take an investigation much more intensive than this paper to judge the answer to that question. Regardless, the question suggests a new kind of investigation in Adventist studies. Few other denominations have as broad a reach as the SDA church does, and few have as integrated a church structure. Thus what occurs in one area of church endeavor can impact other areas in ways that are discernable.

I could substantiate much of what I have just stated, but there is also much of it that I cannot substantiate. That will be the case with this entire paper. Rather than being a research paper, it is much more a conceptual paper. As such, it may have incorrect data, overstated conclusions, and suggestions that may be impossible to prove or disprove. However, my purpose is not to present new facts but to stir up your thinking about the topic so that it can be seen in a new way. The ideas I have are based more on guesswork than on any large scale research, so I would invite challenges to my facts, additions to my ideas, and further suggestions for research.

Each year TIME magazine publishes an issue with the person (or object) that “for better or for worse...has done the most to influence the events of the year.” Likewise, the aspects of the SDA work in China that I will highlight have not necessarily been positive. Thinking about the positive and negative aspects of each impact may help us consider the impact of future aspects of SDA work around the world.

Seventh-day Adventist mission work has gone through a number of significant stages. At first the small group of perhaps 200 Sabbath-keeping Adventists focused their mission on former Millerites in the upper Northeast of the United States. The second stage of Adventist missions occurred when non-Millerite Christians were converted to the Sabbath-keeping Adventist’s ideas. Soon their vision grew to include foreigners in North America and then the foreign lands of Europe as third and fourth stages. There was little thought of reaching out to peoples and lands that were not already Christian.

Thus Abram’s LaRue’s interest, perhaps as early as 1879, in going to China was unusual. He appears to be one of the first SDAs to show an interest in going to a non-Christian, non-

colonial country. When he arrived in Hong Kong in 1888 his primary work was with English sailors in Hong Kong Harbor. However, the fact he did have some tracts translated into Chinese for distribution among the local people shows that they were a significant concern. Clearly he was looking beyond the boundaries of Christianity to those he would have called “the heathen.” There is no doubt that LaRue’s presence in China along with reports of his work, both formal and informal, inspired the first official missionaries to travel to China in 1902. Reports from J. N. Anderson, E. H. Wilbur and their wives, the first official SDA missionaries to China, bear this out.

It seems that the first missionaries in China helped spark a movement among SDAs in North America to begin mission work in many other places around the world, many of them in non-Christian and non-colonial areas. Thus, the first impact of the Seventh-day Adventist work on China was to help broaden the vision of the church and inspire its people (who were still primarily in North America) to go in mission service to non-Christian lands and support it with their finances.

One of the earliest missionaries was Dr. H. W. Miller. He began as a pioneer mission doctor in an isolated mission station in Honan province, but eventually came to participate in the massive institutional expansion of the church in China. By 1930 he was the China Division President. Miller’s life story has been told,¹ but the impact of his life and efforts in the context of Christian missions and the Seventh-day Adventist mission in China has not been adequately addressed. I would like to suggest that he participated in implementing the policy of building institutions in China to the place that the Seventh-day Adventist church reportedly had more missionaries serving in China in the late 1930’s than any other Protestant mission organization.² The people of Miller’s era believed, perhaps appropriately for their time and place, that institutions were the way of advancing the gospel. It was said of Miller that wherever he landed, he built a hospital.

Perhaps this is the appropriate time to note that some of the trends that I will describe in this paper are part of much larger trends outside of the church and within the church. Protestant missions in China were heavily institutionalized and institutionalism had certainly become a significant part of the SDA method of expansion. Harry Miller would have been at Battle Creek during some of its most heady days within the denomination. Shortly after Miller left for China, Ellen White tried to dampen some of the enthusiasm for institutions, particularly John Harvey Kellogg’s plans for the Battle Creek Sanitarium. Institutionalism was certainly not a unique feature of the SDA work in China. However, it seems that there was a unique focus on building institutions in China. In the *SDA Yearbooks* from 1927 to 1949, the China Division is usually the only division with a separate functioning Building Committee. It has been reported that at one time it also had a full time employee whose sole responsibility was construction.³

¹ Moore, Raymond S. *China Doctor; the Life Story of Harry Willis Miller*. New York: Harper, 1961.

² Longway, Ezra L., *Dangerous Opportunity* (Washington, D.C: Review and Herald Pub. Association, 1974), back cover.

³ The Far Eastern Division (FED), when it included China, is the first division to report a Building Committee (in 1927 in the *SDA Yearbook*). Building Committees continued in both the FED and the new China Division after 1931, but in the FED the membership was made up of the members of the executive committee.

In 1937 there were 258 foreign workers in China including their wives.⁴ These included men and women who would later spread throughout the Seventh-day Adventist church and impact much of it worldwide. Many of those who served in China in the 1930's and 1940's returned to North America and made significant contributions there. These would include William Henry Branson, Denton Rebok, Edwin R. Thiele, Frederick Griggs, Thomas Geraty, and Kenneth H. Wood, Sr. I would like to suggest that one of the things they sought to replicate worldwide was the building of institutions. This was not unusual, for the Protestant work in China had begun with the building of schools and hospitals, primarily in the coastal areas. After thirty years, observers like Hudson Taylor began to urge a different kind of mission work, more personal and more in the interior of the country. Nonetheless, founding western style institutions and building western style structures became the norm for Protestant work in China. The Seventh-day Adventist in China participated in this activity. Miller began his work founding a dispensary in Sin-tsai Hsien (now called Xincai 新蔡), Honan province beginning in November, 1903. He eventually became most well-known for his work at the hospital in Shanghai in the 1920s and 30s. It is reported that he not only treated members of the Kuomintang party including Chiang Kai-shek, but also Chou En-lai and Mao Tse-tung.⁵ Paul Quimby's involvement with the Kuomintang party in the 1930 was a result of his work in building up educational institutions in China.⁶ Perhaps the success of the institution building in China encouraged similar activity around the world, particularly after the war with Japan began to make any mission work in China difficult. I would argue that the skills learned, often at the most basic level, by missionaries in China, enabled them to have an impact elsewhere. When they were redeployed both in the homeland and around the world, their experience in China continued to influence the way they did their work in more ways than those limited to institutions.

If Dr. Harry Miller and the building of institutions characterized the first half of the 20th century, then David Lin and his critique of institutionalism characterizes the next period, encompassing perhaps the entire second half, of the 20th century. Following the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, David Lin led the church as best he could in spite of the increasingly pressured and dispirited Adventist church institutions. Shortly before his arrest and incarceration in 1957, he wrote a critique of Adventist work in China, the subject of John Ashe's presentation. I would like to suggest that its message could be summarized as the apparent opposite of Dr. Miller's: Institutions are not the way of advancing the gospel. It seems to me that he was absolutely right for his time and place. However, the pressure brought to bear on workers and particularly on David Lin himself had a significant impact on the Seventh-day Adventist work in other areas of the globe.

⁴ *China Division Reporter*, 8, no. 8, (August 1938): 4.

⁵ Personal conversation with Robert Fetrick 10-1-2014. Fetrick became acquainted with Dr. Miller during the year he spent at Hong Kong Adventist College 1972-1973.

⁶ Paul Elmore Quimby and Norma R. Youngberg. *Yankee on the Yangtze: One Missionary's Saga in Revolutionary China* (Nashville, Tenn: Southern Pub. Association, 1976).

In particular, when it became apparent that the South Vietnamese government was about to fall to the Viet Cong and its North Vietnamese supporters, Ralph S. Watts, Jr., as president of the Southeast Asia Union Mission, consciously considered what had happened in China when the missionaries withdrew and left the Chinese workers to lead the SDA institutions. Watts had been a student at Far Eastern Academy when its students and staff, along with the Division personnel were evacuated from Shanghai. He remembers tensions between the Chinese church personnel and the Americans prior to this evacuation. He concluded that the tension was the result of the fact that the Americans were leaving the Chinese behind to face the dangers associated with the Communist arrival. Over the years he had become aware of how the Chinese church workers had been severely pressured and eventually many were imprisoned and some lost their lives. He deliberately chose to consult with the Vietnamese leaders prior to the major events associated with the end of the American War in Vietnam. He offered to evacuate the leading workers from Vietnam to spare them from the difficult experiences that the Chinese church leaders had faced, and they accepted his offer.⁷ Thus, the experience of David Lin and other church leaders in China inspired later church leaders to prioritize people's lives above the continued operation of the institutions.

The fourth area of impact arose from the process whereby the Hong Kong-Macau Mission took on Conference status in 1979-80. Prior to this point, the leadership of each level of church administration was appointed by the leadership in the level above it. After the HKMM was able to demonstrate its ability to be financially self-supporting, the Far Eastern Division of the Seventh-day Adventist church granted it Conference status and thus authorized it to select its own leadership. It was the first mission field in Asia to achieve that milestone.⁸ Over the next few years, a number of other missions in the Far East followed the lead of the Conference in Hong Kong-Macau. What is of particular interest is the justification that Samuel Young uses to describe the transition. He says that between 1968 and 1976 the leaders of the HKMM "laid the foundation of a "self-supporting, self-administering, and self-propagating church."⁹ While this terminology and the idea of local mission autonomy go back to early Protestant mission leaders such as Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson in the mid-1800s, and John Nevius in Korea in the 1890's,¹⁰ it is most well known from the title of the organization of Protestant churches in China: The Three-selves Patriotic Movement (TSPM). Some of the earliest attempts to follow this plan

⁷ Personal phone interview with Ralph S. Watts, Jr. October 13, 2014. Only one Vietnamese leader chose to remain in Vietnam. The story of the evacuation is told in Ralph S. Watts, Jr., *Saigon: The Final Days* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 1990). Republished in 2005 as *Escape from Saigon*.

⁸ D. A. Roth, "Quadrennial session held in Singapore for FED," *Adventist Review*, 158, no. 11 (March 12, 1981): 17.

⁹ Samuel Young, ed., *Chinese SDA History*, Chinese Union Mission of SDA, Hong Kong. Chinese language edition published in 2002. English edition forthcoming.

¹⁰ See Robert Reese, "The Surprising Relevance of the Three-self Formula," *Mission Frontiers*, (July-August, 2007): 25-27. <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/pdfs/29-4-three-self-churches.pdf>. See also Caleb Siebel, "The Origins of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement: John Livingston Nevius," <https://krex.k-state.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/2097/13421/Origins%20of%20the%20Three-Self%20Patriotic%20Movement%20John%20Livingston%20Nevius.pdf?sequence=1>. Accessed on 10/12/2014; and Daniel Bays, *A New History of the Christian Church in China* (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 71.

in Africa failed.¹¹ It seems to have succeeded quite well in Korea. Yet I have heard it suggested that the moves toward self-governance in the Far Eastern Division may not have been the best for the advancement of the church.¹² Regardless, led by the HKMC, the movement toward local autonomy had a significant impact on the church in the Far East.

One further area that the Seventh-day Adventist work in China has impacted the church as a whole is in relationship to the ministry of women. Throughout its history in China, Christianity has elevated the role of women. Local Roman Catholic churches often had women workers who were crucially important to the continuation of the church through difficult times. Protestant missionaries started schools for women who were not then traditionally educated. They discovered quickly that women could work better with women, so crucial mission work in China was often done by single foreign women. Modeled on their work, Chinese women began to do personal work. Soon the position of a “Bible Woman” became an important part of almost all Protestant work in China.¹³ For example, from within the SDA church, David Lin tells of “three modern apostles,” all single women missionaries, who influenced his life.¹⁴ In an account of Lin’s presentation to the 100th anniversary of the official work in China in 2002, the Adventist Review reports:

The first, a Miss Pyle, started a girls' school to which the 12-year-old girl who would become David's mother was sent. Here the girl learned to pray; and later, when her son David, 2, was at the point of death, she prayed for his healing and dedicated him to the Lord. Another missionary, Miss Dunn, led his mother to the Sabbath teachings and the Seventh-day Adventist Church. A third woman, Lucy Andrews, invited David to her home to study the Bible. He began to keep the Sabbath.

After the founding of the People’s Republic and the destruction of the institutional Seventh-day Adventist church in China, the informal Adventists gatherings in China were often led by women. Eventually, under the auspices of the TSPM, some of these women received ordination and became the leaders of the largest Adventist church groups in China. Before his death in 1996, Wilbur K. Nelson told the story of visiting a remote Adventist group in China sometime in the mid-1990s. When invited to attend an ordination, much to his surprise he found himself participating in the laying-on-of-hands for a group of candidates that included a number of women. However, the fact that women pastors in China were being ordained was not widely known.

Meanwhile, outside of China the Seventh-day Adventist church began to grapple with the issue of ordaining women. The General Conference sessions in 1990 and 1995 declined to approve the ordination of women. Yet the pressure in North America, Australia and Europe to ordain women grew stronger. In 2010 word of the ordination of Seventh-day Adventist women

¹¹ Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1986), 221.

¹² In some places, the new Conference constituencies elected entirely new staff creating difficulties because of a lack of continuity.

¹³ In the SDA church see for example Florence E. Shull's, “Work on Behalf of the Women in Kiang-Su Province, China,” *Review and Herald* 95, no. 7 (February 14, 1918): 11.

¹⁴ Bettina Krause and William Johnsson, “Chinese Adventists Celebrate Centenary,” Adventist Review Online, <http://archives.adventistreview.org/2002-1550/news.html>, retrieved 10/12/2014.

in China came to some in the church as a great surprise.¹⁵ This news stirred up significant interest and became an argument in the debate concerning what the rest of the church should do about this contentious issue.¹⁶

There is no question that the entire SDA church has been formed in the shape of the North American SDA church. Its impact on the rest of the world church is probably so pervasive that it would be difficult to separate it out and describe it. However, the church in China has influenced the rest of the denomination in at least the five ways described. The influence of the Chinese SDA church may well grow much stronger over the next half-century. Today there are almost as many people attending Seventh-day Adventist services in China as there are in North America.¹⁷

It is possible that the Chinese Adventist church could continue to influence the entire church in the future. In contrast to other “mission fields” such as South America, Central America, and some of Africa, Adventist growth in China (now up to over 400,000 people), has happened in a country that is not Christian and has been hostile to any religion. This may result in an Adventism that is truly indigenous, faithful to its Christianity, its Adventism, and its culture. Added to this, the church in China has not had significant foreign influence for more than sixty years. The Chinese church’s theology and practices have grown up out of necessity, from within Chinese culture, with little foreign influence. Perhaps this will provide models for Adventist churches elsewhere. The Chinese church’s focus on personal ministry, its pragmatism, and its non-institutional nature may eventually impact the rest of the Adventist world. While today its place in Chinese society is still somewhat precarious, I would guess that in the future, the Adventist church of China may well have as profound an impact on the rest of the SDA church as North American Adventists have had since the church began.

¹⁵ J. David Newman, “Women Pastors Officially Ordained,” *Adventist Today* 18, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 3.

¹⁶ See for example, Madeline Johnston, “Another Woman Ordained for Pastoral Ministry in China,” *Spectrum* 29 (June 2010), <http://spectrummagazine.org/node/2472>.

¹⁷ Attendance figures for North America are impossible to come by. The 2014 Statistical Report is grossly incomplete. It seems that not many in the North American church care to collect these statistics. Entire Conferences and Unions do not report them. Nonetheless, at the end of 2013 North America reported a membership of 1,166,854 with an average church attendance grossly underreported at 186,804. My guess is that less than 50% of the membership is in attendance each Sabbath, suggesting that there are about 500,000 people in church in North America on Sabbath. It is also possible that average attendance at Adventist services in China is considerably greater than the reported membership of 416,939 with an average attendance reported at 414,904.