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Union Theological Seminary's Dense Social Network in Twentieth-Century Chinese Christianity

CHRISTOPHER D. SNELLER

Abstract

Union Theological Seminary (New York) played a significant, though scarcely noticed, role in indigenizing Christianity in twentieth-century China. From 1911 to 1949, 196 Union alumni served in China. This paper focuses not on the seminary's Western graduates but on its thirty-nine Chinese graduates who helped "Christianity in China" become "Chinese Christianity." Men such as Wu Yaozong 吳耀宗, Ding Guangxun 丁光訓, and Liu Tingfang 劉廷芳 played leading roles in sinicizing Christianity. They did so first through the Christian colleges in Republican China, and later through the Three-Self Patriotic Movement in the People's Republic of China. Union empowered its ambitious Chinese graduates with a dense social network, before and after 1949, where Chinese Christians established and strengthened relational ties.

This article examines how Union Theological Seminary in New York contributed to the indigenization of Christianity in twentieth-century China. Despite Union's deep connections with the Protestant movement in Republican China, only Xu Yihua 徐以驊 of Fudan

University has documented the link between Union and China.¹ My research confirms, and expands on, Xu's argument that Union exerted an "extensive impact on the Christian church in China" through its training program for foreign missions, prestigious faculty, and recruitment of Chinese students.² He rightly concludes that Union "strengthened the liberal wing of Chinese Protestantism" but further research will clarify how exactly this process occurred.³ In this article I propose a new approach for framing Union's influence: the seminary impacted China through a *dense social network*. After providing several examples of Union's social web in China, I will summarize the history of the seminary. Then, I will detail how it influenced Chinese Christianity, present two sociological theories that help explain its influence, and describe several Chinese Christian leaders in this network.

EXAMPLES OF UNION'S SOCIAL WEB IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY CHINA

In 1919 a group of Christian faculty members at Yenching University formed a group called the *Sheng Ming She* 生命社 or Life Fellowship. The group met weekly with a stated purpose of demonstrating "the

¹ See Xu Yihua, "Union Theological Seminary and the Christian Church in China," *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 14 (2004–2006): 11–24, and "'Patriotic' Protestants: The Making of an Official Church," in *God and Caesar in China: Policy Implications of Church-State Tensions*, ed. Jason Kindopp and Carol Lee Hamrin (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2004). Xu presented his findings at a conference at Huazhong Normal University, Wuhan, China, on October 23–24, 2004. This paper, entitled "Niuyue xiehe shenxue yuan yu Zhongguo Jidu jiaohui" 紐約協和神學院與中國基督教會 [Union Theological Seminary and the Christian Church in China] was published in *Liyi yu ronghui: Zhongguo Jidutu yu bense jiaohui de xingqi* 離異與融會——中國基督徒與本色教會的興起 [Alienation and Integration: Chinese Christians and The Rise of Indigenous Christianity], ed. Liu Jiafeng 劉家峰 (Shanghai: The People's Press, 2005).

² Xu, "Union Theological Seminary and the Christian Church in China," 23. See Christopher D. Sneller, "The Role of Union Theological Seminary (New York) in Sinicising Christianity," in *Sinicising Christianity*, ed. Zheng Yang-wen (Leiden: Brill, 2017), chapter 2; and "Let the World Come to Union and Union Go into the World: Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York and the Quest for Indigenous Christianity in Twentieth Century China" (PhD diss., King's College London, 2015).

³ Xu, "'Patriotic' Protestants," 114.

truth and merit of Christianity” in contemporary China.⁴ It consisted of four Chinese and five Americans: John Leighton Stuart, Lucius Chapin Porter, Howard Galt, Luella Miner, John Stewart Burgess, Timothy Tingfang Lew (劉廷芳 Liu Tingfang), Pao-chien Hsu (徐寶謙 Xu Baoqian), T. C. Chao (趙紫宸 Zhao Zichen), and William Hung (洪業 Hong Ye).⁵ Five of the nine members of the Life Fellowship—Burgess, Porter, Lew, Hung, Hsu—attended Union.⁶ Of the fellowship’s founding Chinese members, seventy-five percent were Union alumni. These leaders served in prominent positions throughout Republican China. In March, Timothy Tingfang Lew and another Union alumnus, Andrew Y. Y. Tsu (朱友漁 Zhu Youyu), officiated Sun Yat-sen’s private funeral service at Peking Union Medical College.⁷ Union graduates continued to impact Chinese Christianity after 1949.

In the spring of 1950 Y. T. Wu (吳耀宗 Wu Yaozong) went to Beijing with a small group of Chinese Christian “progressives.” Daniel Bays notes that “it was Wu’s reputation and connections that opened doors for them to see some top leaders, including Zhou Enlai.”⁸ One of those friends was Gong Pusheng 龔普生, who along with her sister Gong Peng 龔澎, served as a private secretary and translator for Zhou Enlai 周恩來. Wu went on to publish the “Christian Manifesto” that summer. The next year he took the lead in creating the “Three-Self Patriotic Movement of the Protestant Churches in China” (TSPM). He led the TSPM until his death in 1979. In the 1980s and 1990s the TSPM and Chinese Christian Council (CCC) were led by Bishop K. H. Ting (丁光訓 Ding Guangxun). Wu, Gong, and Ting all graduated from Union Theological Seminary.

Throughout the twentieth century Union Theological Seminary exerted an extensive influence on Chinese Christianity. Yet the existing scholarship scarcely mentions this connection. Scholarship related to

⁴ Philip West, *Yenching University and Sino-Western Relations, 1916–1952* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 17.

⁵ Upon first mention I list Chinese names in the manner in which they are most often referred, followed by Chinese characters 漢字 and, where needed, pinyin.

⁶ Burgess, Union 1909; Porter, Union 1908; T. T. Lew, BA/MA Columbia 1915/17, Union 1917, PhD Teacher’s College 1920; Hung, Union 1920; Hsu, Union 1924, PhD Columbia 1933.

⁷ Sun Yat Sen Funeral Sheet, MRL 6: Timothy Tingfang Lew Papers, Series 3, Box 1, Folder 3, The Burke Library Archives (Columbia University Libraries) at Union Theological Seminary, New York (hereafter, Burke).

⁸ Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 160.

Union and China has centered on the controversy surrounding Chinese evangelist John Sung (宋尚節 Song Shangjie).⁹ Additionally, the depth of Union's influence has gone unnoticed because the correlation is difficult to explain. Like an iceberg, the extent of Union's influence on China is not easily seen from the surface. For example, Philip Wickeri, in his biography of K. H. Ting, argues that other factors diminished any deep contribution made by Union on Ting.¹⁰ As noted earlier, only one scholar has detailed the role Union played in Chinese Protestantism. Xu Yihua contends that the New York seminary was the most influential of American institutions on theological education in Republican China. Union's role in China deserves further inquiry.

HISTORY OF UNION THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Established in 1836, Union's Presbyterian founders sought to establish a moderate, urban, and international theological seminary. They placed their school in the heart of New York City and sought to be an alternative to the theological conservatism of Princeton Theological Seminary. The founders wished to provide a seminary "in the midst of the greatest and most growing community in America" for "all men of moderate views and feelings."¹¹ Within two years, ninety-two students enrolled at Union, making it the third largest seminary in the United States, behind Princeton and Andover.¹² By the twentieth century, Union established itself as the vanguard of theological liberalism in the United States.

From its founding Union desired to be an institution of international influence. The "Society of Inquiry concerning Missions" was the first

⁹ See Lian Xi, *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), chapter 6; and Daryl R. Ireland, "John Sung: Christian Revitalization in China and Southeast Asia" (PhD diss., Boston University, 2015).

¹⁰ Philip L. Wickeri, *Reconstructing Christianity in China: K. H. Ting and the Chinese Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 72.

¹¹ UTS Founding Charter in George Lewis Prentiss, *The Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York: Historical and Biographical Sketches of Its First Fifty Years* (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph and Co., 1889), 8.

¹² Robert T. Handy, *A History of Union Theological Seminary in New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 14.

student society formed at Union. On December 9, 1837 a group of students appointed leaders of the society and resolved to devote one day a month to it.¹³ From four to five o'clock in the afternoon on the first Monday of each month students participated in the Society of Inquiry. In a sermon entitled "The Union Theological Seminary" in the 1880s, George Lewis Prentiss commented:

I have the clearest conviction that the Union Seminary is capable of doing a great work for Christ and the Church. It has already done much; not a few of the most useful ministers in the land, not a few of our best missionaries among the heathen, are its alumni. . . But I trust it has a still nobler career in the future.¹⁴

For decades following its establishment, the seminary encouraged students to consider seriously the call of foreign missions. Union established the first professorship of missions in American in 1873, installing George R. Prentiss as the Skinner and McAlpin Professor of Pastoral Theology, Church Policy and Missions. From 1838 to 1884 Union sent 146 alumni out to serve as overseas missionaries. The most common fields of service were Turkey (27), Syria (21), China (20), India (12), and Persia (9). The twenty Union-trained missionaries in China included Chauncey Doorich, professor and dean of the North China Union Theological College; Leander Pilcher, president of Peking University; Gilbert Reid, founder of the International Institute in China; and John Newton Hayes, secretary of the Anti-Opium Society of China. Even today a plaque next to the Van Dusen Gate at Union's main entrance declares "Through this gate let the world come to Union and Union go into the world."

¹³ *Records of the Society of Inquiry of the New York Union Theological Seminary 1837-1854*, 5, UTS Series 10, Subseries B, Box 2, Burke.

¹⁴ Prentiss, *The Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York*, 100.

UNION'S IMPACT ON CHINESE CHRISTIANITY

The number of Union alumni going to China swelled to 196 from 1911 to 1949.¹⁵ In an era when Union's graduating class averaged 97 students, the seminary sent five graduates to serve in China each year. Every year for 38 years five percent of Union's student body ended up in China. In 1954 former president Henry Sloane Coffin boasted of Union's long-standing missional emphasis: "From its outset, Union Seminary had focused its eyes upon the entire globe as belonging to Christ and to be made His to its uttermost parts."¹⁶ Why did Union's numbers in China grow so significantly in the twentieth century?

First, social changes after the Boxer Uprising of 1900 opened China to the West like never before. In 1905 the 1,300-year-old imperial examinations were terminated. Six years later the mandate of heaven ended for the Manchus, who had ruled since 1644. The Qing dynasty collapsed. For four thousand years emperors had ruled China but in 1912 China transitioned to a republic. The great Chinese civilization had been crippled in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Throughout this agonizing period foreign nations humiliated the once-great nation. Karl Marx predicted that China would disintegrate when it met the glare of foreign light, like "any mummy carefully preserved in a hermetically sealed coffin."¹⁷ The Middle Kingdom was changing in ways she never had in her long history. Surveying the twentieth century in China, Kenneth Scott Latourette rightly noted: "Upon this ancient people with its memorable past the revolutionary age thrust itself with shattering force."¹⁸ Over and over again China was shamed by and before the world. The imperial system had been

¹⁵ These figures are based on my study of *The Union Theological Seminary: Alumni Directory, 1836–1958* (New York: The Alumni Office, 1958). From 1838 to 1884, Union sent 146 alumni out to serve as overseas missionaries. The most common fields of service were Turkey (27), Syria (21), China (20), India (12), and Persia (9).

¹⁶ Henry Sloane Coffin, *A Half Century of Union Theological Seminary* (New York: Scribner, 1954), 207.

¹⁷ Cited in Jonathan Fenby, *The Penguin History of Modern China: The Fall and Rise of a Great Power, 1850–2008* (London: Allen Lane, 2008), xxxi.

¹⁸ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *Christianity in a Revolutionary Age: A History of Christianity in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century*, vol. 5, *The Twentieth Century Outside Europe* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1962), 371.

built on the indigenous Chinese philosophies of Confucianism and legalism. These systems had survived twenty dynasties but even they came under attack in the New Culture Movement (新文化運動 *Xin Wenhua Yundong*). As the Middle Kingdom changed, it opened to the outside world like never before.

The Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Mission (SVM) tapped into a surge of piety and a compelling sense of religious duty on campuses throughout North America. The SVM captivated a whole generation of young American Christians with a global vision, sending out 33,726 foreign missionaries between 1890 and 1920.¹⁹ Student volunteers accounted for half of all the American Protestant missionaries of this period. The period from 1902 to 1927 was, as Daniel Bays has noted, the “golden age” for the Sino-Foreign Protestant Establishment (SFPE).²⁰ By the 1920s there were over 8,000 foreign missionaries in China. Importantly, this flood of missionaries came at a pivotal period in Chinese history. Because of China’s sweeping social changes, Christian institutions flourished in this period. “The SVM represented a true impulse of idealistic internationalism, one that was profoundly disillusioned by the narrow nationalisms of the Great War and the destructive horrors to which it gave rise,” comments Terry Lautz, “it is difficult to overestimate the impact of the SVM on the fledgling Chinese Christian colleges at the high tide of the movement in the decades straddling 1900.”²¹ More and more missionaries were going to China and building institutions throughout the land.

Lastly, more Union graduates went to China because the seminary made changes to enhance its emphasis on overseas missions and to increase its number of international students. In 1914 the seminary hired Daniel J. Fleming to direct the newly formed Department of Foreign Service. Fleming created a missions’ curriculum and, after discovering that only two foreign nationals had enrolled at Union in its first fifty

¹⁹ Terrill E. Lautz, “The SVM and Transformation of the Protestant Mission to China,” in *China’s Christian Colleges: Cross-Cultural Connections, 1900–1950*, ed. Daniel H. Bays and Ellen Widmer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 1.

²⁰ “Protestant growth between 1900 and 1915 was impressive by all indices. Foreign missionaries numbered about 3,500 in 1905 and 5,500 in 1915, well on the way toward their eventual high-water mark of more than 8,000 in the 1920s. Chinese Protestants, about 100,000 in 1900, numbered almost 270,000 communicants (330,000 baptized) in 1915; this growth would also continue in the 1920s, reaching about 500,000 before the storms of nationalism hit.” Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China*, 94.

²¹ Lautz, “The SVM and Transformation of the Protestant Mission to China,” 2.

years, sought to attract more international students. In 1924 the school created an annual Student Friendship Fund—funded by faculty and students—for an outstanding international student to study at Union for one year. The low number of foreign scholars changed drastically. Thirty years after the fund's creation, Union President Henry Sloane Coffin boasted: "It has been Union's distinction to aid in the preparation of a number of the most influential leaders in the Churches of Asia, South America, Africa and the Pacific Islands."²²

During the years of Republican China, Union accepted more Chinese students than any other divinity school or seminary in the United States. Timothy Tingfang Lew became Union's first Chinese student in 1914. Between then and 1949 thirty-eight more Chinese students and scholars studied at Union for a year or more.²³ The list of Chinese who came to Union reads like a "Who's who" list of influential Chinese Christians.

1. Timothy Tingfang Lew, Union class of 1918, professor and dean of School of Religion in Yenching University and member of the Legislative Yuan of the Nationalist Government in China;

²² Coffin, *A Half Century of Union Theological Seminary*, 218.

²³ These students and scholars were Wang Shanzhi (Lazarus Shan Chih Wang), Hou Xuecheng (Entang Hsuehcheng Hou), Hong Weilian (William Hung), Zhu Youyu (Yu-yue Tsu), Jian Youwen (Timothy Yu-wen Jen), Bao Mingqian (Mingchien Joshua Bau), Cheng Jingyi (Ching-yi Cheng), Cheng Zhiyi (Andrew Chih-yi Cheng), Xu Baoqian (Pao-chien Hsu), Luo Shiqi (Shih-chi Lo), Xu Dishan (Ti-shang Kough Hsu), Zhou Tian (Tien Chow), Peng Jinzhang (Chin-chang Peng), Gao Chong (Chang Elijah Kao), Guo Qiongyao (Chwen-yao Gwoh), Wu Yaorong (Yao-tsung Wu), Lin Huacheng (George Hiok-chho Ling), Dai Huiqiong (Wai-king Taai), Wu Ruilin (Paul Yuey-len Wu), Xu Changling (Mencius Clifford Hsu), Shi Yufang (Peter Y. F. Shih), Wang Junxian (Wallace Chun-hsien Wang), Zheng Shaohuai (Sheffield Shao-huai Cheng), Gong Pusheng (Pusheng Kung), Wei Yongqing (Yung-ching Wei), Lu Zhenzhong (Chenchung Lu), Cai Yongchun (Yung-ch'un Ts'ai), Yu Peiwen (Pei-wen Yu), Ding Guangxun (Kwang-hsun Ting), Yao Xianhui (Hsien-hwei Yao), Jiang Wenhan (Wen-han Kiang), Liu Xinfang (Carl Hsin-fong Liu), Fang Kuangyu (David Kuang-yu Fang), Liu Yuchang (Yu-tsang Liu), Liu Nianfeng (Nien-feng Liu), Sheng Xuan'en (David Sheng), Zhang Lingzhen (Lydia Ling-chen Chang), Hu Ren'an (Ronald Ren-an Hu). See Charles R. Gillett, ed., *Alumni Catalogue of the Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York, 1836–1926* (New York, 1926); Harold H. Tryon, ed., *Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York, Alumni Catalogue, 1836–1947* (New York, 1948); and Alumni Office of Union Theological Seminary, *The Union Theological Seminary Alumni Directory, 1836–1958* (New York, 1958). List compiled by Xu Yihua, "Union Theological Seminary and the Christian Church in China," 15.

2. William Hung, Union class of 1920, faculty of Harvard University as director of the Harvard-Yenching Sinological Institute and professor at Yenching University;
3. Andrew Y. Y. Tsu, Union class of 1921, bishop in the Anglican Church in China and a professor in St John's University in Shanghai;
4. Pao-chien Hsu, Union class of 1924, professor in history and philosophy of religion at Yenching University until his death in 1944;
5. Y. T. Wu, Union class of 1926, founder and chairperson of the Three-Self Movement;
6. K. H. Ting, Union class of 1948, bishop in the Anglican Church, president of Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, chairperson of the TSPM, president of the China Christian Council.

With Fleming at the helm of its Foreign Service department, Union deepened its commitment to overseas missions.

Chinese Christians came to Union because of its reputation, because their professors in China recommended it, and because it was in New York City. The seminary's appeal grew as it offered joint programs with Columbia University and Teacher's College, which were both right across the street. Between 1854 and 1953 Columbia granted 1,834 degrees to Chinese international students, more than any other university in the United States.²⁴ During these 100 years, 9,929 Chinese students were granted degrees from twenty-six American universities. Of these, 2,430 earned degrees from Columbia or New York University, representing 24.5% of the total. Not only did Columbia attract more Chinese students than any other American university but Teacher's College, which was affiliated with Union, also drew students. With the presence of distinguished philosopher John Dewey from 1904 to 1930, Teacher's had a reputation for being America's finest institution for training educators. The triumvirate of Columbia, Teacher's, and Union provided outstanding educational opportunities in whatever a Chinese student might want to study.

²⁴ *A Survey of Chinese Students in American Universities and Colleges in the Past One Hundred Years* (New York: National Tsing Hua Research Fellowship Fund and China Institute of America, 1954), 40–50. Tabulated by Stacy Stacey Bieler, "Patriots" or "Traitors": *A History of American-Educated Chinese Students* (London: M. E. Sharpe, 2004), appendix G, 382.

During a pivotal period in Chinese history, New York City played an important role in educating China's future leaders. Stacy Bieler studied the "significant but often unacknowledged role that American-trained students have played in building modern China" and concludes that Chinese students "were sometimes exalted, but more often they were mistrusted, and even persecuted for being tainted by the West."²⁵ My research confirms Bieler's comment on the "significant but often unacknowledged" impact of American-trained students in modern China. Even though Union's Chinese graduates were "tainted" by a Western education, they rose to levels of prominence in communist China. In 1906 the president of the University of Illinois, Edmund James, wrote a letter to President Roosevelt urging him to help fund Chinese students in the United States:

China is upon the verge of a revolution. . . . The nation which succeeds in educating the young Chinese of the present generation will be the nation which for a given expenditure of effort will reap the largest possible returns in *moral, intellectual, and commercial influence*. If the United States had succeeded thirty-five years ago, as it looked at one time it might, in turning the current of Chinese students to this country, and had succeeded in keeping that current large, we should to-day be controlling the development of China in that most *satisfactory and subtle* of all ways, through the *intellectual and spiritual domination* of its leaders.²⁶

James' letter betrays a latent cultural imperialism; however, his point cannot be ignored. American universities exerted a profound influence on Republican China by training a generation of Chinese leaders.

In Republican China an American education often served as an asset, but it became a liability in Communist China. But the realm of Chinese Christianity proved to be an odd exception. Why would a Union-trained Chinese Christian have political advantages over a Harvard-trained financier or a MIT-trained engineer? Because, as I hope to demonstrate, Chinese graduates of Union had access to a powerful social network and a theology that could adapt to Communism. The power lay not in a Union degree itself but in access to the social web connected with the seminary. The New York school

²⁵ Bieler, "*Patriots*" or "*Traitors*", xi.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 43. Emphasis hers.

provided key leaders for the Christian enterprise in China, especially in the Christian colleges and Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). Faculty members in these Christian colleges and YMCA leaders identified the most outstanding students and helped them apply to study at the top schools in the United States. For those interested in studying theology, Union Theological Seminary was an obvious recommendation.

The seminary focused on China in general and on the Christian colleges in particular. As the fundamentalist-modernist controversy raged in the 1920s, conservative missionaries tended to focus on evangelism in rural areas and liberal missionaries, including Union alumni, in education and other forms of service in cities.²⁷ Thirty-nine Union graduates filled faculty positions at the thirteen colleges in the United Board.²⁸ In addition, Chinese graduates from Nanking (2), Yenching (5), Shanghai (2), and St. John's (4) studied at Union. Union alumni came from and were sent to China's Christian colleges; the seminary also influenced the board administratively and financially.²⁹ Union's president from 1945 to 1963, Henry Pitney Van Dusen, served as president of the United Board.³⁰ Van Dusen used his influence to raise funds for China's colleges among New York's wealthy, especially the Rockefellers. When the Rockefeller Foundation denied a funding request from the United Board in 1948, Van Dusen appealed directly to Rockefeller. Rockefeller's reply on February 9, 1949 reveals the depth of their friendship: "Because of my appreciation of the important contribution that the Christian colleges have made to China and because of your interest and Henry Luce's in them, I am glad to make a further

²⁷ Lian Xi, *The Conversion of Missionaries: Liberalism in American Protestant Missions in China, 1907–1932* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 15.

²⁸ University of Nanking (8), Ginling College (1), Yenching University (8), University of Shanghai (3), St. John's University (3), Lingnan University (5), Fukien Christian University (2), Hua Chung College (2), West China Union University (1), Shantung Christian University (Cheeloo) (3), Soochow University (2), and Hangchow Christian College (1).

²⁹ After being forced out of China in 1951, the United Board for Christian Colleges in China (UBCCC) became the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia (UBCHEA). See William P. Fenn, *Ever New Horizons: The Story of The United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia, 1922–1975* (North Newton, KS: Mennonite Press, 1980).

³⁰ United Board of Christian Higher Education in Asia, Series II, Box 64, Folder 1692, Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library (hereafter, YDSL).

contribution as you suggest.”³¹ Rockefeller had serious misgivings about how the Christian colleges could function in Communist areas, but he gave again. Between 1913 and 2008 Rockefeller philanthropy in China totaled \$246,519,386.³² Union’s influence on the Christian colleges in Republican China has received scant scholarly attention.

TWO SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES THAT FRAME UNION’S INFLUENCE

So far, I have attempted to establish the important links between Union Theological Seminary and China’s Christian colleges. But how do we frame and explain Union’s role in indigenizing Chinese Christianity? Two theories from sociology help answer this question. The first, that of a “dense social network,” is espoused by James Davison Hunter in *To Change the World* (2010). Hunter critiques as “mostly wrong” the Hegelian view of culture that says world history is the biography of great men. He argues that the “*key actor in history is not individual genius but rather the network* and the new institutions that are created out of these networks.”³³ Active and interactive networks—“dense networks”—shape cultures and change the world. “World-changing is most concentrated when the networks of elites and the institutions they lead overlap,” suggest Hunter.³⁴ A network of elites swirled around the Christian colleges in China, the YMCA, and Union. These institutions not only provided an education, they also catapulted people into a privileged social network. This network enabled Union-educated leaders to rise to positions of institutional power in twentieth-century China. The seminary’s hidden power lay in its relationships, its role in helping students establish and deepen interpersonal ties.

³¹ United Board of Christian Higher Education in Asia, Series II, Box 64, Folder 1705, Special Collections, YDSL.

³² Mary Brown Bullock, *The Oil Prince’s Legacy: Rockefeller Philanthropy in China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 215.

³³ James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 38.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

In his 1973 article entitled “The Strength of Weak Ties,” Mark Granovetter argued for the power of weak friendships.³⁵ He explained how social ties strengthen with time, emotional intensity, intimacy, and mutual service. These strong ties lead to a greater overlap in the circle of mutual friends. A person’s acquaintances (weak ties) are less likely to be socially connected to each other than their close friends (strong ties). A web of acquaintances constitutes a low-density network. The strength of weak ties, according to Granovetter, lies in their role as a “crucial bridge” linking “two densely knit clumps of close friends.” Weak ties allow disparate groups of people to connect; therefore, “individuals with few weak ties will be deprived of information from distant parts of the social system and will be confined to the provincial news and views of their close friends.”³⁶ Individuals with few weak ties are difficult to integrate into broader political or social movements since membership in goal-orientated groups depends on recruiting by friends and acquaintances. Social systems lacking weak ties tend toward fragmentation and incoherence. By layering Granovetter’s concept of the strength of weak ties with Hunter’s thoughts on dense social networks, Union’s hidden influence on Chinese Christianity, before and after 1949, comes to the surface.

Union graduates formed a dense social network in the years of Republican China. The seminary linked Shanghai and New York, connecting ambitious Chinese and powerful Americans. This Sino-American network worked bi-directionally, east to west and west to east. Chinese Christians gained access to a powerful social network of liberal Protestants. Likewise, these Americans formed ties with a network of Chinese Christian leaders who would shape China. Together the group formed a robust relational network that extended beyond pastors and professors to business leaders and politicians. Union Theological Seminary linked Chinese Christians with its professors, other Union graduates throughout China, and influential Americans. Lew, Hung, Wu, Ting, and others formed strong and weak ties to men such as Henry Pitney Van Dusen, Harry Emerson Fosdick, Henry R. Luce, and John D. Rockefeller, Jr. In China this social web found clearest expression in the YMCA and the Christians colleges. Union’s Chinese alumni rose to positions of prominence in China

³⁵ Mark S. Granovetter, “The Strength of Weak Ties,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 6 (May 1973): 1360–1380.

³⁶ Mark Granovetter, “The Strength of Weak Ties: A Network Theory Revisited,” *Sociological Theory* 1 (1983): 201–233, 202.

where they influenced the church and the state. In the following review of Chinese students who attended Union, I hope to reiterate the depth and interconnectedness of the seminary's social network in China.

UNION ALUMNI IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY CHINA

Timothy Tingfang Lew (Union, 1915–1917)

Union's first Chinese student was Timothy Tingfang Lew. Like many other prominent Christians who attended Union, Lew grew up in a Christian family and studied at a Christian school in China. Between 1915 and 1920 he obtained degrees from Columbia University, Teacher's College, and Yale Divinity School. He studied at Union for two years but transferred to Yale, where he graduated in 1918. While finishing his PhD at Teacher's College, Lew taught at Union. He returned to China to teach in Beijing. Eventually he became dean of Yenching's School of Religion and assistant to the chancellor. In 1922 Lew helped establish the *Life Fellowship*. He then founded and edited the group's influential periodical *Truth and Life*. His influence extended far beyond Beijing's classrooms, as demonstrated by his role in Sun Yat-sen's memorial service in Beijing. In the 1930s Lew became a member of the KMT's legislative Yuan. Lew returned to Union in 1927 for a one-year teaching assignment in which he taught on principles of indigenization. Lew's network at Union gave him access to church leaders in Manhattan and other powerful Americans, such as Harry Emerson Fosdick and John D. Rockefeller, Jr. In 1926 Lew kept a list of Union alumni in China. The list of Union's Chinese network contained 101 names.³⁷

William Hung (Union, 1917–1920)

One name on Lew's list was William Hung, who studied at Union from 1917 to 1920. Hung met Lew in 1916. Lew encouraged him to come to New York to pursue his two academic passions: history at Columbia and theology at Union. Before returning to China, William Hung joined

³⁷ MRL 6: Timothy Tingfang Lew Papers, Series 3, Box 1, Folder 13, Burke. See appendix E.

Henry Luce in traveling across the US to raise fund for Yenching University.³⁸ Hung's fundraising efforts with Luce deepened his connections to a matrix of wealthy Americans and ambitious Chinese. In 1924 Hung became dean of Yenching's College of Arts and Sciences. Hung, Lew, and Yenching's president, J. Leighton Stuart, became a triumvirate that ran the university throughout the 1920s. Hung's biographer contends that his leadership allowed Yenching to emerge from "an obscure college run by Western millionaires to a nationally recognized Chinese university that participated fully in the intellectual life of China."³⁹ Other Union graduates had vital roles in the SFPE and later in the Three-Self Movement.

Y. T. Wu (Union, 1924–1927 and 1937–1938)

Y. T. Wu studied at Union from 1924 to 1927 and again from 1937 to 1938. In 1924 when Wu first applied to the seminary, two of his three letters of reference came from Yenching professors who were Union alumni. A deep and interconnected social web appears again and again in Union's relationship with Chinese Christianity. In his 1936 application to return to Union, Wu explained the school's impact on him during a formative time. The seminary, he wrote, "really opened my eyes to the meaning and truth of religion in those years when I was initiated into Christian work." He hoped to return in 1937 to "come into contact again with the prominent minds and spirits which Union so helpfully offers."⁴⁰ Regardless of one's assessment of Wu, his immense role in twentieth-century Chinese Protestantism cannot be denied. In the 1920s and 1930s he held key positions in the Chinese YMCA, where he influenced generations of young minds across China. Wu spearheaded the creation of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. For this he is both respected and reviled. For his close alliance with the Communist government, some Christians brand him as a heretic or an anti-Christ.

³⁸ Luce's son founded *Time* magazine and became one of the most influential men in America. In 1936 Henry R. Luce founded The Henry Luce Foundation to honor his missionary parents. When he died in 1967 much of his fortune, estimated to be worth \$100 million, went to this foundation. Today, it is one of the world's most important foundations in funding Asian studies.

³⁹ Susan Egan, *A Latterday Confucian: Reminiscences of William Hung* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 110.

⁴⁰ Letter from Y. T. Wu to Daniel J. Fleming, August 27, 1936, Series 10A: 4, Folder 10, Burke.

Lee-ming Ng aptly described Y. T. Wu as the “most controversial” and “least understood” of Chinese Christian leaders in modern China.⁴¹ Wu’s liberal Christianity enabled him to collude with the CCP to build a Protestant church that sought to be loyal to both Communism and Christianity.

K. H. Ting (Union, 1947–1948)

In the 1930s Y. T. Wu posed a question to university students in Shanghai: “Is it enough for Christians to be concerned only with personal salvation, or should Christians be concerned about social reform?”⁴² Wu challenged young Chinese Christians to bring the “whole Gospel of Jesus”—the personal and social gospel, the gospel of peace and revolution—into play at a pivotal time in China’s history. This question transfixed K. H. Ting, who was studying theology at St. John’s University. Ting grew up in a Christian family in Shanghai and attended St. Peter’s Church where a popular priest, Dong Jianwu, was a secret member of the Communist Party. As Philip Wickeri rightly points out, St. Peter’s foreshadowed Ting’s future career with its Communist sympathies, Christian piety, liberal theology, and commitment to self-government, self-propagation, and self-support.⁴³ Ting followed in Wu’s footsteps in working with the YMCA, attending Union Theological Seminary, and returning to China to help lead the TSPM. Ting had every reason to be a *persona non grata* after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China on October 1, 1949: as a graduate of St. John’s he was culturally alienated from traditional China and as an alumnus of Union he was connected with China’s enemy, the United States. Despite these concerns Ting fought hard to return to China. He soon found a personal audience with the second most powerful man in China, Zhou Enlai. Historically, how are we to understand Zhou’s willingness to meet with Wu and Ting? Would it not have been easier and more consistent with Communist ideology for the CCP to simply snuff out Christianity in new China? The answer, once again,

⁴¹ Ng Lee-ming, “Christianity and Social Change: The Case in China, 1920–1950” (ThD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary: 1971), 174.

⁴² K. H. Ting, “Mr. Y. T. Wu: A Lasting Influence for Marxism and Christianity,” in K. H. Ting, *God is Love: Collected Writings of K. H. Ting* (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook Communications Ministries International, 2004), 486.

⁴³ Wickeri, *Reconstructing Christianity in China*, 25.

lies in the dense social network in the SFPE. A former Union student helped connect Wu and Ting with Zhou: Gong Pusheng.

Gong Pusheng (Union, 1941–1942)

After graduating from Yenching University in the 1930s, Gong Pusheng joined the Chinese Communist Party. In 1939 she met Zhou Enlai. Zhou told her: “You should go to America where you can tell the whole world about the Chinese people’s war against Japan’s invasion and win international support and sympathy. You need to make friends there and learn more about America.”⁴⁴ Gong traveled to New York where she enrolled at Columbia and Union. Before finishing her MA in religion, she met Eleanor Roosevelt, Pearl Buck, and other well-known Americans. Gong embodies the elite network of Chinese students at Union who were connected to prominent people in both China and America. It was Gong who introduced K. H. Ting to his wife Siu-may Kuo. She also provided Wu and Ting with a direct link to Zhou Enlai and the corridors of power in Communist China.

Ting noted that Wu and other Christian leaders met with Zhou several times in 1950 for “earnest discussions during which he warmly praised the Three-Self principle Christians had raised in the past.”⁴⁵ The social network represented by Chinese Christians was simply too powerful and too connected internationally for the CCP to wipe out Chinese Christianity. Zhou used Wu to garner support for the CCP amongst Chinese Christians; Wu used Zhou to create an indigenous Chinese church, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. Wu and Ting would ensure that the TSPM adhered to United Front ideology; Zhou would provide political cover for the TSPM, no easy feat under the capricious Mao Zedong. The Chinese Christians who attended Union were an ambitious group who recognized the benefits and power of working collectively.

They not only helped lead institutions in China but they also formed organizations in America. In 1918 Jonathan and David (1907) merged with the Cross and Sword (1917) to form a new secret society: Association for Accomplishing Ideals (*Cheng Zhi Hui* or *CCH*). By 1936 the association had 270 members. These members rose to prominence in

⁴⁴ “Gong Pusheng—Revolutionary and Diplomat Extraordinaire,” *Jianghuai Morning News*, September 25, 2010, accessed January 7, 2014, www.womenofchina.cn.

⁴⁵ Ting, “Mr. Y. T. Wu,” 490.

Republican China, creating a dense social network in which members helped advance one another's careers.⁴⁶ In his study of Chinese students in the United States between 1900 and 1927, Ye Weili notes:

CCH held an interesting place in modern Chinese history that has not been fully understood and recognized, partly because the fraternity remained secretive throughout its history and few members have candidly recorded their experiences.⁴⁷

Though not a secret society, another example is the Chinese Students' Christian Association (CSCA), which was founded in 1909. CSCA's members intended to play prominent roles in building a new China. Members of CCH and CSCA formed a dense social network in Republican China. These organizations, in which Union students played key roles, testify to the ambition and interconnectedness of Chinese Christians in America. Due to its location, its prestigious faculty, and its vast network in China, Union provided social connections for Chinese Christians like no other seminary in the world. Union alumni formed a dense network and helped create organizations such as the Life Fellowship and Three-Self Patriotic Movement. Chinese Christianity, especially the liberal branch, owes a greater debt to Union Theological Seminary than previously recognized. But how exactly did Union graduates adapt Christianity theologically? Would the Christianity of Union graduates in China be recognizable to Athanasius, Tertullian, or Augustine?

Many missionaries in China answered this question with a resounding "No." They rightly saw many Union alumni, including prominent Chinese Christians, as deserting the historic Christian message. During his visit to China in 1920, the theologian W. H. Griffith Thomas observed the prevalence of modernist theology amongst many Western

⁴⁶ CCH members included: Jiang Tingfu (head of Qinghua University's History Department and the Republic of China's ambassador to the USSR, USA, and United Nations), Zhang Boling (founder and long-time president of Nankai University), Zhou Yiqun (president of Qinghua University), Nie Qiqie (founder of the Great China Spinning and Weaving Company), Wang Chengting (vice-speaker of China's senate in the 1910s and member of the Chinese delegation to Paris Peace Conference) and Eugene Yuren Chen (protégé of Sun Yat-sen and China's minister of foreign affairs from 1926 to 1927).

⁴⁷ Ye Weili, *Seeking Modernity in China's Name: Chinese Students in the United States, 1900–1927* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 46–47. See also Egan, *A Latterday Confucian*, chapter 7, for William Hung's role in forming Cross and Sword.

missionaries and Chinese Christians, especially those affiliated with the YMCA and the Christian colleges. Thomas spoke with missionaries who lamented the growing influence of liberal theology. Henry Anderson bemoaned the modernist influence in schools inside and outside China: "The seminaries are being filled with men who are New Theology men and who have no message to give. The students are filled with rubbish and then expected to preach, and what will they preach?"⁴⁸ One missionary in China gave Thomas an instruction sheet that explained how Union Theological Seminary in New York prepared students for overseas service. The sheet compared modern views, which it praised, and biblical views, which it scorned.⁴⁹ The worst offenders, in Anderson's mind, were Chinese who had studied in the West:

The "returned student," the man who has been to America and obtained a degree there. He often returns home to China with views of the Bible and Christianity which are definitely critical.⁵⁰

Y. T. Wu was one of these returned students.

CONCLUSION

In 1933 Wu concluded that China needed not "piece-meal improvements, but basic reforms" which should take the form of a "new global economic and political system."⁵¹ With rhetoric rich in Christian language, Wu turned to Communism to fulfill his vision of the kingdom of God. In 1950 he wrote:

The old dead Christianity must doff its shroud and come forth arrayed in new garments. It must learn that it is no longer the sole distributor of the panacea for the pains of the world. On the contrary,

⁴⁸ Henry Anderson, "Modernism in China," *Journal of the Wesley Bible Union* (February 1921), quoted by W. H. Griffith Thomas, "Modernism in China," *The Princeton Theological Review* 19, no. 3 (October 1921): 657.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 663.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 644.

⁵¹ Y. T. Wu, "The Meaning of the Social Gospel" and "The Price of Peace," in *The Social Gospel*, 20, 99, cited in Ng, "Christianity and Social Change," 204ff.

God has taken the key to the salvation of mankind from its hand and given it to another.⁵²

Wu believed God had taken the keys to salvation from the Christian church and given them to the Communist Party. Many Christians consider Wu a traitor to the Christian faith. He did in fact conflate Christianity and Communism; however, it seems that no tension existed between the two in Wu's mind. The latter represented the fulfillment of Jesus' ideas of justice and freedom from oppression. The Chinese Communist Party embodied the kingdom of God. Union played a role in equipping Wu with a liberal, and thus adaptable, Christianity. But he was not the only one. In 1921 W. H. Griffith Thomas correctly perceived Union's key role in training Western missionaries and Chinese Christians in a modernist approach to the Christian faith. Significantly, among all Western theological schools, Thomas singled out only Union Theological Seminary in New York, not Tübingen, Harvard, or Andover, as the source of this critical thought. The New York seminary helped indigenize Christianity in China through both its dense social network and liberal theology. The extent of Union's theological impact on Chinese Christianity merits ongoing research.

⁵² Y. T. Wu, "The Reformation of Christianity," *Ya Kung Toa*, July 16, 1950. Francis Price Jones, *Documents of the Three-Self Movement* (New York: National Council of Churches of Christ, 1963), 14.