

**Carol C Chin, “Beneficent Imperialists: American Women Missionaries in China at the Turn of the Twentieth Century,”** *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (June 2003): 327-352.

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*Published by H-Diplo on 27 July 2003*

In her article “Beneficent Imperialists”, Carol Chin contributes to the growing scholarship on the participation of women in the work of American Empire. Exploring the attitudes of American women missionaries toward the Chinese women among whom they worked, she coins a new term to describe the contradictions inherent in their work. And so “beneficent imperialism” is added to Jane Hunter’s “imperial evangelism,” a category intended to emphasize heavenly rather than earthly power, and Amanda Porterfield’s “religious imperialism,” a designation intended to separate American imperialism from the “political” power of its British counterpart. With the new coinage, Chin too strives to disconnect the “crass” form of imperial power from a form of expansion that Americans believed was motivated by “pure friendship and disinterested benevolence” (p. 330). Americans were “in their own mind” beneficent (p. 351).

Chin has offered us a fascinating glance into the minds of American women who worked in China in the early twentieth century. Her analysis of their writings is thoughtful and sensitive, and her article offers many opportunities for debate among those of us who are grappling with issues emerging from women’s participation in American imperial projects. For example, Chin suggests that American women “may not have espoused the rhetoric of empire and the ‘white woman’s burden,’ as many British women in India did” (p. 330); yet much of her evidence contradicts this statement since it resonates with the American domestic discourse that Amy Kaplan has labeled “manifest domesticity.”

In engaging in this debate, however, I want to raise questions about Chin’s source base and her analytical approach because the American mind seems to dominate her intention to explore power relations between American and Chinese women. How are we to assess “the interplay of cultural transfer and cultural identity” and explore the nature of American-Chinese interactions without Chinese perspectives (p. 331)? Chinese women are barely present in this article. We see a photograph of Shi Meiyu, but we do not hear her voice. I wonder whether Carol Chin would be willing to tell us about the kind of Chinese sources she might have access to and how they might change her interpretation of the work of American missionary women. I also wonder whether readers of the list think that historians of the U.S. might benefit from taking a postcolonial approach to their work, reading against the grain, centering the “subaltern” as the subject of their work, and bringing foreign-language sources to bear on American colonial discourses. Would these strategies better enable us to explore the many meanings of U.S. imperialism? I’m thinking here of the work of Lata Mani in her *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India*.

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