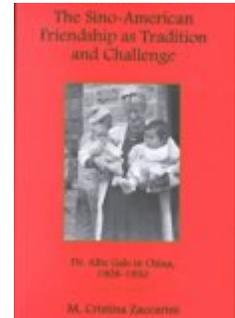


**M. Cristina Zaccarini.** *The Sino-American Friendship as Tradition and Challenge: Dr. Ailie Gale in China, 1908-1950.* Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2001. 228 pp. \$41.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-934223-70-6.



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## Transnational Sisterhood

As Protestant missionary societies proliferated after the Civil War, many citizens of the United States sailed and settled abroad to edify heathen souls and uplift alien societies. Breaking out of the iron cage of Victorian gender ideology predicated on the notion of separate spheres, American women actively participated in this overseas venture. In fact, by the turn of the twentieth century, women comprised over 60 percent of the American Protestant missionary force. In many foreign mission fields, their work extended far beyond the bounds of Christian evangelization. They played a key role in founding schools for girls and providing basic education to children in rural areas. Paralleling the professionalization of women's culture in late-nineteenth-century America, Protestant missionaries with higher education provided specialized services, such as medical work, for the local populace. Building on the classics on the subject such as Jane Hunter's *The Gospel of Gentility* and Patricia Hill's *The World Their Household*, M. Cristina Zaccarini seeks to reconstruct the cultural and social milieu in which

American woman Protestant missionaries achieved what she calls "empowerment-through-piety" in the foreign land.[1] She takes her story to a later period (1908-1950) that roughly overlaps with the Republican era in Chinese history.

The central figure in this relatively slim volume is Dr. Ailie May Spencer Gale, the wife of Methodist missionary doctor Francis Spencer and a physician in her own right. The reasons for narrating the life of this relatively unknown figure, as Zaccarini explains, are many. As Methodist missionaries, the Gales were representing the largest denomination in Protestant America from the mid-nineteenth until the mid-twentieth century. The Methodist Episcopal Board also dispatched the most active contingent of evangelizers once it began its ministry in China in 1848. It was also a good guardian of its historical records. A vast body of correspondence between these carriers of Christian messages overseas and their stateside sponsors is well inventoried, allowing for detailed chronicling of missionaries' work and everyday life. Zaccarini also presents Ailie Gale as an archetype of American women who accepted the

prevailing assumptions about women's role in society but simultaneously eroded them through service rendered in the name of female piety. Gale also shared with her contemporaries, men and women, a belief in Western Christendom's fundamental superiority in the world. Her deep sympathy towards China's yearnings for modern nationhood and resistance to Japanese colonial domination mirrored the mental topography of Americans whose lives were entwined with China's turbulent twentieth-century history. Like that of her better-known cohorts such as Pearl Buck, Gale's pro-Nationalist advocacy helped mold American public opinion between the 1930s and the early postwar years leading up to the Communist takeover.

Zaccarini's central theme, "empowerment-through-piety," is seamlessly woven into this portrayal of a woman who, arriving in China with her missionary husband and six-month-old son in 1908, founded a girls' school and two hospitals in Nanchang, the capital of Kiangsi Province. Until her final return to the United States in 1950, Gale devoted her life to Methodist ministry in China, building her work around educational and medical projects in three locations. Like earlier generations of female missionary volunteers, who had carved out socially acceptable roles outside the home, Gale draped her activities in the public sphere with the respectability of female piety and Christian evangelism. But her missionary activities gave her more than a legitimating garb, as did those of her forerunners to them. In the course of pursuing God's work in Nanchang, Tunki, and Tzechung, Gale gained experience in the management of complex modern organizations, honing her skills in planning, staffing, fund-raising, budgeting, and other practical aspects of hospital administration and running nonprofit enterprises. By virtue of working in a far-off land, Gale was often able to elude the male-dominated Methodist Episcopal Board's attempts to control the church's overseas ministry. As a result, she achieved a remarkable level of autonomy in managing her hos-

pitals and schools. China's dire shortage of experts trained in Western medicine also shaped the trajectory of Gale's professional development. At a time when women were marginalized in the American medical profession and largely confined to such subfields as pediatrics, obstetrics, and gynecology, Gale was called upon to work as a surgeon and was almost lionized for her expertise. At the same time, Gale found greater receptivity and validation from her Chinese patients, accustomed to Confucian and Taoist medicine, for the type of holistic approach to healing traditionally associated with female doctors and increasingly denigrated in the United States. Christian ministry in China thus created a form of free-enterprise zone for American women and fostered their professionalization in ways unattainable in their homeland.

In the 1920s, the Methodist Board was drawn to other institutional priorities and allocated diminishing resources to its overseas missions. As funding from the church's central administration declined, Gale was able to sustain her work in China by dint of her political astuteness and managerial acumen. She generated needed funds by reaching out directly to benefactors in the United States rather than going through the Methodist Episcopal Board's New York office. Zaccarini strategically cites passages from Gale's letters to her donors to conjure up the image of a competent professional administrator versed in ways of secular business. Gale knew exactly what must be done to keep her charitable operation going at a time of shrinking resources. As her own publicist, Gale aggressively promoted herself and trumpeted her achievements to the home field and benefactors. Elaborating on setbacks and failures did not serve this end, and that was a reason why Gale continued to publicly express optimism about Christian convert Chiang Kai-shek's political future. Her deepening disillusionment with Nationalist corruption and ineptitude was kept from underwriters of her work. Besides, it was no small feat to protect her schools and hospitals

from harassment and attacks by antiforeign vandals in a country perennially wracked by foreign encroachment, revolutionary upheaval, and war. That entailed careful cultivation of political connections with local elites. Because they were pursued for the paramount cause of Christian ministry, Gale probably did not perceive a Faustian bargain. Nor was such accommodation with less than savory local political authorities a moral dilemma unique to missionaries in China. In the nationalistic ideological regimentation in late Meiji Japan, American Christian educators had to make similar compromises with the state to safeguard their work from government meddling.[2]

Although part 2 of the book focuses too narrowly on Gale's life as reconstructed from her correspondence, it underscores the intimate American involvement in China's civil society in the turbulent first half of the twentieth century. While China's state apparatus was transformed spasmodically, U.S. private-sector resources streamed into the country through organized charitable projects or as individual private donations. These American monies and manpower helped provide some vital social services that neither the Chinese state, nor its local ancillaries, nor its contenders had adequate resources---or inclination---to support. To the extent that American citizens' labor, funds, and political imaginations permeated social spheres such as female education, public health, and medical care for the poor independent of Washington's official policy, the Sino-American "special relationship" was fulfilling its mythical promise. American women's ventures outside the home and hearth, as epitomized by Gale's service in Republican China, illustrate how state formation and the evolution of civil society blurred into each other across the boundaries of the modern nation-states.

Zaccarini captures an aspect of this transnational civil society in her reference to Protestant sisterhood---a bond of affection, religiosity, and moral purpose of which Gale envisioned herself a

part. The reader will note, however, that the book is oddly reticent about Gale's relationship with fellow Methodist women engaged in overseas missionary work. As Zaccarini correctly points out, communication networks among American women in the form of letter writing and group publications built the infrastructure of the solidarity and activism linking those who ventured abroad and directly engaged local life with those who sponsored them from afar. But she gives little sense of whether or how Gale received inspiration and practical guidance from what her "sisters" were doing elsewhere in her adopted land. Did those assigned to various missions around the world support each other by sharing their personal joy, tribulation, and acquired insights? Did these webs of communication through which social identity and professional information traveled exist only lineally between individual missionaries and their supervisors and supporters in the United States, as Zaccarini seems to suggest, or did they ramify multidirectionally? Rui Yazawa-Kohiyama's study has instructed us that American Presbyterian and Dutch Reformed women missionaries in Meiji Japan worked in a fairly bureaucratized system of self-governance.[3] The absence of comparable structures of mutual aid and collegiality in China, which Zaccarini's silence on this point might imply, begs a related question of comparative interest: were China's relative disadvantages in internal transportation and communication infrastructures the cause of this scarcity of mutual aid? The full texture of the transnational sisterhood that sustained Gale's career for forty-two years would have been made more palpable had the book engaged these questions.

#### Notes

[1]. Jane Hunter, *The Gospel of Gentility: American Women Missionaries in Turn-of-the-Century China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); and Patricia R. Hill, *The World Their Household: The American Woman's Foreign Mission Movement and Cultural Transformation*,

1870-1920 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985).

[2]. Pui-Lan Kwok, *Chinese Women and Christianity, 1860-1927* (Atlanta: Scalars Press, 1992); and Noriko Ishii, "Crossing Boundaries of Womanhood: Professionalization and American Women Missionaries' Quest for Higher Education in Meiji Japan," *Journal of American and Canadian Studies* 19 (2001).

[3]. Rui Yazawa-Kohiyama, *Amerika Fujin Senkyoshi: Rainichi no Haikei to Sono Eikyo* (Tokyo: Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai, 1992).

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