It is no small matter to try to reproduce one’s own institutions in another country. Yet in China in the late 1800s, American missionaries attempted to do exactly that. By 1900, they had committed to an ambitious project to establish schools, colleges, hospitals, medical schools, museums, presses, and chapters of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) in many parts of the country. Some of these institutions have long since vanished. Others have not only survived China’s turbulent twentieth century, they have evolved into elite institutions. Beijing University, Qinghua University, and Peking Union Medical College stand out as salient examples, but there are others. Taken collectively, these institutions contributed to China’s modernization in the twentieth century. None of this was a part of the missionaries’ plan at the start. Back in 1860, when foreigners first gained access to the Chinese interior, the zealous men and women who streamed into the country intended only to spread the Gospel and prospect for souls. Fixated on this holy purpose alone, they established circuits, opened chapels, and delivered sermons. Eschewing other forms of evangelism, they could not imagine a future in which they would oversee large institutions with budgets and bureaucracies. But by 1900, American missionaries—a group not exactly known for its flexibility—had reinvented their entire enterprise in China. How and why did this transformation take place, and what were the consequences of it? This book answers these questions.

We can better understand this transformation by meeting two missionaries who were active in China during this period of change: Absalom Syden-
stricker and Henry Winters Luce. Today, both men are best known not for their missionary work but for raising children who achieved global fame. Sydenstricker’s daughter, Pearl Buck, wrote *The Good Earth*, a best-selling novel that won Buck the Pulitzer Prize in 1932 and established her as America’s foremost literary voice on China. Luce’s son, Henry Robinson Luce, created a media empire in the twentieth century that included the magazines *Time, Life, Fortune*, and *Sports Illustrated*. But we are concerned here not with the celebrity children but with the obscure fathers. Each one of these men, in terms of his traits and method, perfectly captures a certain missionary type. Thus, a snapshot of each helps us to understand the larger transformation within China missions.

Absalom Sydenstricker represents the older missionary model, one that dominated for decades before losing out. In an effort to understand what made her father tick, Pearl Buck devoted an entire book, *Fighting Angel* (1936), to his monomaniacal drive to save the Chinese “heathen.” Absalom’s missionary operation, which he launched in 1880, worked something like this. On top of his white donkey, he would toss his bedding roll and whatever supplies he needed. He would then don his loose-fitting Chinese gown, which, when combined with his long, braided hair (required of Chinese men in the Qing Dynasty), made him appear somewhat Chinese. But not really. His great height, white skin, protruding nose, and glassy blue eyes gave him away. Bidding his wife and children farewell, Absalom would head out for several days . . . or weeks . . . or months.1

Out on the road, he must have presented quite a sight—as giant men on small donkeys always do. Though his feet nearly dragged in the dirt, he remained erect in the saddle, utterly oblivious of or impervious to the smirks and snickers of the Chinese watching him clip-clop by. But most striking would have been the evangelical fervor that glowed in his eyes. “There is fire in him,” a Chinese man observed. “The flame in his soul leaned over and caught at the flame in me.” Indeed, Absalom entertained not a single doubt as to the cosmic significance of his life’s work. He was “a spirit made by that blind certainty,” his daughter wrote, “that pure intolerance, that zeal for mission,” and “that high confidence in heaven.” Frighteningly austere and unyielding as iron, Absalom was exactly how people who dislike missionaries imagine them to be. Yet within his rigid frame radiated a warm heart. He adored the Chinese. And they, for the most part, loved him back.2

After reaching the preselected town, Absalom would set up shop and wait. Before long, a crowd of people would materialize, eager to see the strange visitor. Capitalizing on their curiosity, he would try to establish friendly relations by engaging in good-natured banter and handing out his Christian literature. If lucky, he might generate immediate interest in the Gospel. But if not, it was no matter. He would hover in the area, returning to the village
again and again to build trust and familiarity in the people. He would also rent a simple structure to serve as a chapel. Here he did not require much—just a spacious room, some wooden benches, and a table to serve as a pulpit. He would then preach in the chapel long enough to secure a handful of converts, at which point it was time to move on. Before departing, he would install as minister of the new chapel a convert from a different village whom he had trained. Twice a year, he would return to each town on his circuit to check on its progress, handle complaints, and conduct baptisms. For fifty years, Absalom conducted missionary work in roughly this fashion. He represents the traditional itinerant minister, and when he began his career in 1880, this model enjoyed the support of nearly all missionaries. But its reign would not last. By the 1890s, when Henry Luce reached China, it was already on the way out.3

Henry Luce represents a different model—the model that won out. After he graduated from Yale College and Princeton Seminary, his mission board deployed him to China. Though devout like Sydenstricker, Luce employed a diverse array of strategies in his effort to expand God’s kingdom. Instead of traveling along a circuit, Luce remained stationary, working primarily at a college founded by his mission. There he taught Physics and served as department head. He also introduced a new sport called basketball and arranged games between students and faculty. A natural organizer, he oversaw the move of the college to a new city where it joined a consortium of other institutions that included a medical school and a theological college. The mission board, recognizing his people skills and administrative abilities, appointed him vice president of the institution and dispatched him on fundraising tours in the United States. Affable and persuasive, Luce locked up commitments from big donors, many of whom were linked to the industrial fortunes of the Gilded Age. Armed with capital, Luce expanded the infrastructure of the college, creating a campus complex rivaling any in America. He gave his life to this model of missionary work, and in his view it was worth it. The goal of a mission, after all, was not just to save souls but also to improve the physical and intellectual well-being of the people, generate prosperity, and increase China’s global standing.4

Between 1860 and 1900, China missions underwent a seismic shift. Collectively, missionaries moved away from the itinerant model epitomized by Absalom Sydenstricker and toward the institutional model perfected by Henry Luce. Though Luce focused on college education, other sorts of institutions flourished as well. By century’s end, missions had witnessed a Cambrian explosion of evangelical diversification, one that generated a sudden variety of institutions. In addition to colleges, missionaries founded museums, printing offices, hospitals, medical schools, nursing schools, mental asylums, schools for the blind and deaf, famine relief agencies, and YMCA branches. Historian Daniel Bays has called these institutions “the single
most impressive visible result of the missionary labors of the late nineteenth century. The transformation was stark.

Why did America’s China missions turn away from Sydenstricker’s model and embrace the one exemplified by Luce? Why, in other words, did missionaries engage in large-scale institution-building near the century’s end? This was the question I set out to answer. Like most historians, I embarked on my research harboring a theory that was really more like a hunch. I expected that the sources, once examined, would support a narrative of gradual but inevitable evolution along a continuum. That narrative, I predicted, would follow this general arc. After pioneering missionaries like Sydenstricker succeeded in establishing a beachhead in China, institutional missionaries like Luce would follow in their wake. This latter group would fortify Christianity’s expanding presence by erecting schools, colleges, and hospitals. They would pay for all of this building by drawing philanthropic funds from America’s growing pool of wealthy donors—families that had struck it rich during the country’s industrial expansion. In this narrative, in other words, I saw Sydenstricker and Luce as representing consecutive and complementary phases of a single initiative intended to Christianize China and Americanize its institutions. As I delved into missionary sources, I expected to find a self-confident people, the Americans, with superior resources inexorably imposing their will over the Chinese. I began, in sum, from the assumption that Americans held the advantage.

I was in for a rude awakening. In missionary accounts, I did not find proud declarations of well-laid plans coming to fruition. Rather, from these pages resounded the plaintive howls of men and women collectively agonizing over their emotional and physical pain. Instead of glorious triumph, missionaries wrote mostly about devastating setbacks: violent mob attacks, burned-down churches, desecrated graves, lethal diseases, dying family members, extreme isolation, mental depression, physical exhaustion, stingy mission boards, and their utter inability to win converts. Generally speaking, I was discovering not a record of success but rather the existential shock of a grand dream going awry. The evidence compelled me to reassess my preliminary assumption that missionaries wielded superior power and that institution-building had been in the cards all along. It was time to script a new narrative.

This book proposes a radically different storyline. It argues that the wave of institution-building was never inevitable and that missionaries like Luce were not in the original plan. Instead, missionaries lurched abruptly in the new direction in response to a crisis of such mammoth proportions as to threaten the viability of China missions. To understand this new narrative, we must look back to the moment of initial Protestant penetration. To missionaries, all had seemed promising back in 1860 when a treaty ratified dur-
ing the Second Opium War allowed them, for the first time in history, to
leave China’s coastal cities and proselytize in the interior. They had no plans,
at this time, to build institutions other than churches and the occasional small
school to be run by a missionary’s wife. Holy crusaders, they marched into
rural China predicting rapid success—and why not? They had divine wind
at their backs. God Himself had guaranteed victory—or so they thought.

They were not prepared for what happened next. In the interior, they met
with what we might call the “real” China—a rural population with entrenched
systems of belief. The countryside abounded with vernacular religions fea-
turing a colorful array of gods, ghosts, and demons. In an already crowded
supernatural landscape, there was little room for God and Jesus. Missionar-
ies also confronted the governing class, the local scholar-officials whose
knowledge and authority flowed out of Confucianism. For centuries, this
philosophy had informed Chinese statecraft, dominated the education sys-
tem, organized society, and molded values. Since Christian missionaries and
Confucian scholar-officials both claimed a monopoly over eternal truth, they
could not coexist in peace. They became “natural enemies,” in John King
Fairbank’s words, like “cats and dogs.” Viewing missionaries as unwanted
disruptors in a social order over which they presided, Chinese officials dug
in. Conflict ensued. As the collective efforts of missionaries crashed against
a wall of Chinese resistance, anti-Christian violence spiked. Most mission-
aries suffered from low morale, if not outright depression. Some quit. Others
died. And many quietly formed an opinion that, years earlier, would have
been unthinkable: that traditional itinerant preaching did not work. China
had become less a land to be conquered and more a crucible to be survived.

It was time to regroup. Though some missionaries refused to modify their
method, others responded to crisis with innovation. Starting in the 1870s,
they abandoned their circuits and began experimenting with new evangelical
models. After making visible gains, these pioneers presented their new mod-
els at a major missionary conference held in Shanghai in 1877. Receiving just
enough endorsement from colleagues, they returned to their work to con-
tinue developing their experimental operations. At this point, they had a
stroke of luck. Back in the United States, two grassroots movements trig-
ger a flow of hundreds of new recruits into China. Starting in the 1870s,
the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society sent to China a whole new catego-
ry of missionary—the single woman—which brought a much-needed focus
on Chinese women and girls. A decade later, a second movement exploded
on college campuses—the Student Volunteer Movement (SVM). Hundreds
of young graduates (a group that included Luce) signed up for missions work
instead of heading into the usual professions. Casting aside the old-fash-
ioned itinerant model, these young men and women infused the newer ex-
perimental models with their vitality and numbers. Some of them delivered
very few sermons and undertook no itinerating at all. They were far more likely to teach science or math, head a college, treat patients, or run a YMCA chapter.

Thus far, our narrative appears somewhat one-sided, with Americans acting on China. In fact, the agency of Chinese people played a powerful role in effecting the transformation of missions. Their first major act, of course, was to repulse the initial missionary advance. After that, they continued to exert influence by expressing their preferences to a suddenly receptive missionary body. Indeed, repeated failure had taught missionaries a crucial lesson: one could not simply impose one’s religion onto the Chinese and expect them to embrace it. To ensure Chinese “buy in,” a missionary needed to cater to the needs of the Chinese, especially those who were not benefiting from the Confucian social order. Though the status quo in China satisfied many people, others derived little advantage from it. Large numbers fell through the cracks. Those left out were open to alternative ways of living, worshiping, learning, and self-actualizing—if only missionaries would listen. In the 1870s and 1880s, some missionaries did exactly that. They built the kinds of schools, churches, hospitals, and organizations many Chinese wanted. As reciprocal needs, Chinese and American, fit snugly together, the two sides tacitly recognized the interlocking nature of their interests.

But the Chinese did more than just avail themselves of institutions—they changed them from within. As more Chinese joined the new institutions, Americans started to see themselves less as permanent fixtures on the Chinese landscape and more as catalysts: they would spark the formation of churches, schools, and hospitals before receding. As the role of foreigners shrank, the Chinese role expanded at a commensurate rate. The Chinese started to preach the sermons, teach the classes, treat the patients, and run the organizations themselves. By century’s end, some Chinese were forming American-style institutions on their own. It is hard to imagine this Chinese agency when it remains abstract. A third biographical sketch allows us to attach this concept to a real man.

Meet Yen Yung Kiung. Born in 1838 to a poor family in Shanghai, Yen flashed signs of the kind of intelligence that inspires parents to dream. Might their son one day become a scholar-official? That dream, however, would require expensive schooling in the Confucian classics, something Yen’s father could not afford. Fearful that the boy’s talent would go to waste, the parents made the fateful decision to enroll him in an Episcopal boarding school run by missionaries. Better to send him to a Christian school, they reasoned, than to no school at all. But it was at this point that the parents lost control of Yen’s destiny. For though he would rise, it would be along a non-Confucian track. At school, he impressed his American teachers with his precocity, so much so that the mission decided to invest in his future: it sent him to the United
States in 1854 to continue his education. After high school, Yen matriculated at Kenyon College, where he played sports, joined a secret society, and dominated the curriculum. In 1861, he graduated as class valedictorian. Returning to China, Yen discovered that America had altered him profoundly. He had acquired a hybrid identity, one that fused together Chinese attributes and American ones. He also realized how extraordinarily rare he was—very few people like him walked the earth. Missionaries, of course, welcomed Yen’s metamorphosis. Bilingual and bicultural, Yen could work effectively among both Chinese and Americans. They perhaps even imagined him as the prototype for a new kind of missionary. He was God’s secret weapon.

Except Yen did not feel like a weapon. What he felt was lonely. He had lived overseas for too long and now was paying the price. He could no longer relate to his fellow Chinese, and the Americans failed to comprehend his inner turmoil. This was the downside of being an prototype: no one could empathize with him because nobody else had shared his experience. He was alone. But instead of quitting, Yen hunkered down. Over time, he found ways to express his formidable talents through the missionary apparatus. He engaged in some conventional preaching and translation work, but his largest contribution lay in education. He loved Kenyon and aspired to give Chinese youths access to a comparable education. In what is now Wuhan, he opened two schools, one of which evolved into a university. In Shanghai, he helped found St. John’s, the first college in China started by an American mission. As the college’s first dean, he had a hand in constructing its curriculum, building its administrative apparatus, defining its culture, and forming its vision. Yen’s many achievements, a missionary observed, showcased the “possibilities of a cultivated, Christianized, Chinese mind.”

While Yen clearly embraced many things American, he remained thoroughly Chinese. Nationalism smoldered in his core. When Europeans treated Chinese people as second-class citizens in Shanghai, Yen demanded fair treatment. Before his death in 1898, he bemoaned to his children that he would not live to see a resurgent China. “Well, my sons,” he said, “I am sorry that I shall not in my lifetime have the chance of seeing our country become rich and powerful, but you of the younger generation will . . . witness a New China.” This, after all, had been his purpose all along: to use American knowledge and systems to build “New China.”

Yen’s agency did not cease with his death and so neither does our story. Ralph Waldo Emerson defined an institution as “the lengthened shadow of one man.” These words certainly apply to St. John’s, whose graduates carried Yen’s vision into their careers. As industrialists, engineers, physicians, statesmen, educators, filmmakers, and intellectuals, they became the builders of modern China. Many of these alumni, born after Yen had died, knew nothing of the man or his role at the genesis of their alma mater. To them,
he was only the mysterious name attached to Yen Hall. But another group knew exactly who Yen was. Like Luce and Sydenstricker, Yen had descendants who enjoyed illustrious careers. His son, W. W. Yen, recalled his father leading his children on tours of American and Chinese battleships and factories out of “eagerness” to have them “see all that was possible in the way of modern inventions.” W. W. Yen studied at the University of Virginia before teaching at St. John’s. He then went on to edit China’s Commercial Press, a major conduit for Western knowledge, and serve as president of the Republic of China in the 1920s. Like his father, W. W. Yen helped develop a college, Qinghua, which is today an elite university. Yen Yung Kiung also raised his nephew, F. C. Yen, who graduated from St. John’s and Yale Medical School before pioneering in public health. Like his uncle, F. C. Yen spent his life building up institutions. He taught and administrated at Yale’s medical school in Hunan Province, helped establish the Central Medical College in Shanghai (now Shanghai Medical College of Fudan University), became the first Chinese vice president of Peking Union Medical College, and served as Minister of Public Health in the 1930s. There were many others who bore the imprint of Yen Yung Kiung’s influence. However, if we were to try to identify them all, the endeavor would overwhelm us and consume this entire book. Would it be an exaggeration, therefore, to say that Yen Yung Kiung—the small boy deposited in a mission school by desperate parents—succeeded in grafting his DNA onto modern China?

This book, like Yen’s life, is as much about Chinese agency as missionary action. In the pages ahead, we venture inside the lonely chapel of a fearless Chinese minister who is determined to plant Christianity in a hostile village without any help from missionaries. We meet a former pirate who uses the church to cure his opium addiction before launching a ministry centered on sin and redemption. We visit a mission school where the local Chinese pastors oust the American teachers who refuse to tailor the curriculum to their demands. We meet three teenage boys who radically alter their life trajectories by volunteering to accompany their missionary teacher back to America. We encounter equally courageous Chinese girls who request admission to a male-only missionary medical school. We venture inside a major missionary hospital to witness a Chinese doctor performing an operation never before attempted in China. In the countryside, we witness Chinese Christians who, without missionary sanction, perform exorcisms to rid the supposedly possessed of demons. Last, we follow a bold Chinese minister who, in a village suffering from drought, pits God against local deities in a winner-take-all contest to see which supernatural entity can deliver rain.

All of these stories take place after the Opium Wars and before 1900. This was a turbulent period in China, one that saw the Qing government cling to power in the face of intense foreign aggression. What did this aggression look
like? Bryna Goodman and David Goodman have described it as a “piece-meal agglomeration” comprising “a diversity of colonial arrangements.” There were unequal treaties, won through war, that conferred special rights to the Western powers. One such right, extraterritoriality, allowed foreigners accused of crimes against Chinese civilians to be tried in their own tribunals. Treaties also engendered a system of treaty ports, “forcibly-opened sites for foreign trade” that “dotted China’s coastal areas.” In addition, the foreign powers seized territories, “coercively leased” properties where “Chinese sovereignty was suspended,” and created spheres of influence, special zones where they enjoyed the right to mine for minerals and build railroads. Yet despite this exploitation, China never relinquished sovereignty. “While the chaos and poverty of China as a whole . . . is beyond question,” observes Daniel Vukovich, China “retained its political sovereignty at all times aside from various cantonments and concessions.”

That China was never formally colonized has presented scholars with a dilemma. What nomenclature should one employ when trying to conceptualize China’s predicament? While scholars wisely avoid calling this a “colonial period,” the West’s metastasizing influence prevents them from classifying China as “independent.” China’s status lay somewhere in between. Goodman and Goodman note that many scholars have, in “formulaic fashion,” settled on semicolonialism, a term first used by Vladimir Lenin, as a way to comprehend China’s ambiguous status. Marius Meinhof, Junchen Yan, and Lili Zhu observe that other scholars favor colonial modernity, a term that “entangles colonial logics” with Chinese “projects of modernization.” “Even after the Opium Wars,” these authors point out, Chinese officials seeking to modernize “did not simply receive foreign influences.” Rather, “they actively traveled abroad, investigating the Western powers” in their search for “strategies to rescue the country.” Though these terms differ from one another, they all reflect the fact that China was subjected to extensive foreign aggression but preserved a degree of autonomy at the governmental level.

What about the nongovernmental levels where the missionaries operated? There is no denying that, in a practical or logistic sense, missionaries benefited from Western imperialism. Indeed, they could access China’s interior only because of privileges attained through war. Once inside, they availed themselves of their own government’s infrastructure, such as consular offices, and invoked treaties when they felt their rights were violated. What is more, the same gunboats that protected foreign residents and assets provided missionaries with security as well. Though clearly the beneficiaries of imperialism, missionaries did not see themselves this way. Most not only decried it, they conceived of their movement as the antidote to it. They saw “Western expansionism,” William Hutchison wrote, as an “inexorable force” that must be “tamed” or replaced with “fine spiritual imperialism.”
Though missionaries viewed the religion, education, and medicine they brought as unambiguously noble, they were nevertheless imposing their culture, which they deemed superior, on the Chinese. For this reason, past scholars have understood missions as a form of “cultural imperialism.” The idea to link missions to nationalism and imperialism, writes Dana Robert, “proved to be an irresistible thesis” starting in the late 1950s. The American attempt to project military power in Indochina in the 1960s convinced more historians to subscribe to this thesis. Robert cites Paul Varg as an example of an historian who produced excellent scholarship within this paradigm. Varg set out to explain why missionaries failed to Christianize China. He argued that their religious and philanthropic project got “caught in the vortex of nationalistic crosscurrents.” Believing in the supremacy of their own culture, they brought what they “believed to be [China’s] needs” and not “what the Chinese themselves felt to be needs.”

Scholars like Varg have a point. Let us imagine that we are somehow able to summon Absalom Sydenstricker from the dead and ask the stalwart evangelist if his purpose in China was to eradicate indigenous belief systems and replace them with Christianity. He would probably scoff with disgust at the obvious nature of our question before responding, “Of course, that is exactly what I meant to do.” Pearl Buck agreed that a form of imperialism propelled her father through life. Animated by an “imperialism of the spirit,” she wrote, Absalom “set forth into the universe to make men acknowledge his god to be the one true God, before whom all must bow.” Furthermore, if we could somehow deploy a satellite, send it back to 1860, and program it to take photographs over China for several decades, the pictures from this eye-in-the-sky would reveal the steady expansion of American institutions. The photographic sequence, in other words, would look a lot like cultural imperialism.

However, there is more to the story. When we zoom in with our hypothetical satellite’s camera lens, reaching the level of person-to-person interaction, the cultural imperialism narrative does not fade, but a different story emerges alongside it. We see that the Americans, though initially the aggressors, are repelled by the Chinese. They experience emotional and physical anguish as the people they had come to save reject them. Unable to impose their will, the Americans acquire a much-needed dose of humility. For some, it does wonders. Previously inflexible, they start to bend in response to pressure from the Chinese, who seem much stronger than the victims of cultural imperialism ought to be. After regrouping, some Americans rally and return to the field, ready to build institutions other than churches. Crucially, the institutions they erect end up reflecting an unspoken compromise: while advancing the evangelical objectives of the missionaries, the institutions also serve Chinese needs. They do exactly that, and the Chinese do not hesitate to use these institutions to better their lives. Mothers and fathers...
lacking educational options (like Yen’s parents) send their children to free schools. The sick obtain medical attention at no charge. The inquisitive read about the outside world in missionary magazines. Young men flock to their local YMCA, which channels their energies into community building, social improvement, and sports. Our close-up shot, in short, reveals the presence of new institutions that were less about imperialism and more about mutual benefit. They contributed to what Xu Guoqi has called “a shared history.”

Our camera’s zoom feature also affords us a closer look at Chinese identity. From out of these missionary institutions, a new kind of human being emerged. No longer shaped exclusively by Chinese influences, these individuals exhibited hybridity: their identities fused together Chinese and American knowledge, culture, and values. They were, in every sense of the word, “new” men and women who did not previously inhabit the earth. Since this book is filled with these kinds of people, readers must decide how to conceptualize them. One option is to comprehend them as the unwitting subjects of cultural imperialism and see their hybrid identities as evidence of their colonized minds. This interpretation is valid and applies in certain cases. It does, however, fail to take the agency of Chinese individuals into account. In the pages ahead, readers will meet many Chinese who, instead of submitting passively to a dominant institutional power, actively constructed identities by making deliberate choices. They saw the American presence as an opportunity and seized advantage. For example, many Chinese who attended American schools availed themselves of instruction in math, science, and English but passed on Christianity. They reserved the right to pick and choose and, by doing so, exercised a form of power within their negotiation with Americans.

Those American missionaries were not immune to change themselves. When we train our camera on them, we find that that they too evolved. Even Absalom, when we zoom in, carries much less cultural arrogance than we initially supposed. According to Pearl Buck, he came to be motivated by a fierce “intolerance” for white “race superiority.” He acquired respect for the Chinese and despised any foreigner who treated them as lesser. Absalom also argued that “Chinese Christians should have full powers of self-government” in their churches and “should be free of . . . domination from the missionaries.” Missionaries needed to back off, in other words, and cede power to their converts. He even believed in giving the Chinese the latitude to modify church creeds to “fit their own souls,” on one condition: they must keep the Holy Trinity intact. Even Absalom, it turns out, was not the uncompromising zealot many thought him to be.

This book is certainly not the first to push beyond the cultural imperialism paradigm. Back in 1980, Jonathan Spence eloquently remarked that missionary activity took place in “that indefinable realm where altruism and ex-
ploitation meet.” More recent scholars have tended to view this paradigm as an excessively blunt instrument with which to treat a nuanced topic. Ryan Dunch has observed that cultural imperialism, as a blanket theory explaining missions, “reduces complex interactions to a dichotomy between actor and acted upon, leaving too little place for the agency of the latter.” Dunch’s own research on the Protestant missions of Fujian Province reveals how Chinese converts used the intellectual offerings of missionaries to imagine a modern Chinese state. Daniel Bays, in his history of Christianity in China, identifies a progression of increasing Chinese ownership of church governance: “The Chinese Christians were first participants, then subordinate partners of the foreign missionaries, then finally the . . . sole ‘owners’ of the Christian church.” With Ellen Widmer, Bays also edited a collection of essays on Christian colleges that emphasizes not these institutions’ imperialistic nature but their hybridity; American educators and Chinese students each adopted some of the other’s ideas in these “bicultural” settings. David Hollinger, in his recent book, sees the “missionary project” as a “dialectical event,” one involving exchanges of ideas, through which the “world we call modern was created.” Going even further, Lian Xi has argued that missionaries exposed to Chinese culture underwent a “transformation of thought and attitudes” that amounted to a “conversion” to “Oriental life.”

This book recounts the unexpected origins and rapid rise of American institutions in China. It does so by telling the stories of the Americans who established the institutions and the Chinese who changed them from within. The approach, in sum, is biographical. I make no pretensions toward offering an exhaustive account; indeed, the size and scope of the American project in China precludes a comprehensive treatment. By 1905, China was host to 1,304 American Protestant missionaries who came primarily from the Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, and Episcopal denominations. These men and women established 1,888 stations, which were often churches or chapels. In education, they founded 966 primary schools that enrolled 19,884 Chinese children. Their 187 high schools and colleges offered instruction to 9,130 students. In the area of medical services, Americans built 70 hospitals and 67 dispensaries, which combined to treat over 500,000 patients annually. Given the sheer number of institutions, I have had to be selective in choosing the cast of characters for this narrative. To this end, I have kept my focus squarely on innovators—Americans and Chinese whose experimental ideas gained traction, attracted followers and imitators, and assumed brick-and-mortar form as institutions.

Our story starts in 1860 and proceeds chronologically to its end around 1900. Chapters 1 and 2 depict the missionaries’ first foray into the Chinese interior, an advance that meets with stiff resistance and yields frustration, sickness, and death rather than converts. In Chapter 3, missionaries con-
front something unexpected on the countryside: cases of demon possession. While these encounters baffle missionaries, their converts find ways to exploit the demon phenomenon. In Chapter 4, some missionaries experiment with a new evangelical model that de-emphasizes the missionary’s role and devolves responsibility to the Chinese. Chapter 5 focuses on a handful of creative missionaries who respond to their crises with innovation; their new evangelical models spur a missionary recovery in the 1870s. In Chapter 6, we take a front-row seat at a major missionary conference where these innovators present their models to colleagues. Chapter 7 examines three Chinese men who, after receiving educations in America, return to China with hybrid identities and use institutions to pass American-style education to the next generation. Chapters 8 and 9 describe the transformative role that single women play in schools and hospitals after the advent of the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society. Chapter 10, a mirror image to Chapter 7, presents three Chinese women who study medicine in America before running hospitals in China. Chapter 11 describes two organizations, the Student Volunteer Movement and the YMCA, that fill missionary ranks with a new type of recruit. In Chapter 12 we examine perhaps the most influential of all institutions—the college.

By 1900, the transformation was complete. In the space of four decades, the needle on the missionary spectrum had moved dramatically in the direction of Henry Luce and Yen Yung Kiu. Americans like Luce could function effectively in bureaucratic settings that rewarded collegiality, fundraising, and social organization. Chinese in the mold of Yen could filter all of the Western learning streaming into China, identify the knowledge the country needed in order to modernize, and disseminate this through institutions. Absalom Sydenstricker could not flourish in this new environment. Nor did he want to. As institutions rose up around him, Absalom stuck to his circuit. He performed missionary work in the twentieth century much like he had in the nineteenth—with one notable exception.

It turned out that even Absalom could modernize just a little. At some point, he traded his white donkey for a mule and hired a carpenter to build a custom-made wagon, a vehicle unlike any other in the world. The new wagon could transport him, his bedding, his boxes of Christian books, and his ministerial accoutrements from village to village. Wheeling around in his ecclesiastical contraption, Absalom became the envy of the countryside. Peasant farmers would stop their field labor to watch as he “clattered up and down” the dirt roads “in great content.” But fame would not be his friend. When word of the God mobile got out, a gang of thieves decided they coveted it. One day, after Absalom set out, robbers ambushed him on the road, seized possession of his vehicle, and hurled his books into a ditch. Not one to back down from a fight, Absalom struck the thieves with his whip. And
using his height to great advantage, he “cracked a lot of their heads together.” But there were too many assailants to fend off, and eventually they overwhelmed him. Bruised and bloodied, Absalom walked thirty miles home to his wife and children wearing only his underwear (they stole his shoes and clothes too). Was he defeated? Hardly. He could not run a board meeting at a hospital or university. But he could survive—and perhaps somewhat enjoy—a nasty scrape with bandits. Absalom was indomitable.\textsuperscript{33}

But he was living in the wrong time. By the twentieth century, he had become a living antique, a crusty holdover from a bygone era. What would have been his optimum time to shine? In 1860, missionaries advanced into the Chinese interior for the first time. Though God no longer took the form of a pillar of fire as in the Old Testament, these men and women sensed His presence at their backs, supporting their holy venture. Victory seemed assured, until . . .