

# **DIVORCING THE WEST: A REINTERPRETATION OF JAPANESE CHRISTIAN ANTI-WESTERN THINKING IN THE CASE OF THE JAPANESE YMCA (1880-1945)**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Recent scholarship has noted that the anti-Japanese position of the Western powers in WWII contributed to a reduction of foreign influence in the Japanese Christian community. In this paper, I propose that focusing solely on political factors overlooks the underlying conflict between foreign missionaries and Japanese Christians. I examine this suggestion through a case study of the Japanese YMCA from 1880 to 1945. While rising militarism exerted pressure on Japanese society during WWII, the anti-Western mindset within the Japanese YMCA was not without historical causes, such as the demand for local autonomy and theological differences. By looking at the relationship between foreign missionaries and local agents in the Japanese YMCA during WWII, I argue that the anti-Western attitude of the latter was part of a process of continuous development of decades-long cooperation with and struggle for independence from foreign missionaries.

## **Introduction**

Ever since the establishment of the first Protestant Church in Japan in 1872 (Hara 2005, 19), Japanese Protestants have been questioned about their nationalistic stance, particularly in relation to the rise of the militarist and authoritarian government. A great many studies have examined the relationship between Japanese Christianity and the Emperor system.<sup>1</sup> Recent scholarship has examined the conduct of Japanese Christians in a militarist empire, and their relationship with the Japanese Christian community. While some Japanese Christians resisted the militarist government policy and advocated pacifism,<sup>2</sup> most Japanese Christian institutions aligned themselves with the imperial government by publically embracing the Emperor system.

The nationalistic conduct of Japanese Christians has been examined primarily through a political lens that concentrates on the impact of government policies on religious groups. In his article, "The Cross Under an Imperial Sun," A. Hamish Ion paints a panoramic picture of Japanese Christianity under an imperial government from 1895 to 1945 (Ion 2003, 69-100). He notes that the involvement of Western missionaries in the development of Christianity in Japan was one of many concerns facing Japanese Christians between 1894 and 1931. Ion further notes that Japan's militarist invasion of China prompted criticisms from the Western powers and Protestant

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<sup>1</sup> See Ion (2003, 69-100); Tomizaka Kirisutokyo Center (1996); Kudō (1993, 25-55).

<sup>2</sup> See Hayashi (1989, 635-650); DDJJK (1969).



denominations in Britain and America. Influenced by the international crisis and the domestic centralization of control over religious groups, Japanese Christians decided to sever connections with Western Christianity, politicians, and cultural values (Ion 2003, 88). Japanese Christianity or *Nipponteki Kirisutokyō* 日本の基督教, a concept coined in the late 1930s, encapsulated this nationalistic and anti-Western attitude that aimed to “join Christianity with Japan’s traditional spirit, thought, and religion” (Ion 2003, 88)<sup>3</sup>.

In agreement with Ion, I propose that the Japanese YMCA’s hostile attitude towards Western powers needs to be seen within a larger framework. An exclusive focus on political factors (rather than acknowledging their background importance) can lead to the inherent conflict between foreign missionaries and Japanese Christians being overlooked. This paper thus explores the relationship between Japanese YMCA agents and their American mentors, from 1880 to 1945. While rising militarism exerted pressure on Japanese Christians, the anti-Western mindset within the Japanese YMCA was not without its historical causes, such as the demand for local autonomy and theological differences. From its establishment in 1880 to the end of WWII, the Japanese YMCA was involved in activities that demonstrated loyalty to the imperial state and that reflected a struggle for independence from their American colleagues. An examination of the relationship between foreign missionaries and local agents in the Japanese YMCA suggests that the anti-Western attitude began long before the outbreak of WWII. The finding of this paper adds to knowledge that suggests a nationalistic Christianity, characterized by Western antagonism, only occurred during wartime.

The first section of this paper outlines the broader religio-political milieu in which Japanese Christianity was nurtured, molded, and developed. The focus is on major political events that underpinned the development of Christianity from the Meiji period in Japan to the end of WWII. The second section examines the relationship between the Japanese YMCA and American missionaries from 1880 until the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937. This section elaborates how local agents accepted, transformed, and then rejected the evangelical vision introduced by their Western mentors.<sup>4</sup> In the third section, I explore the wartime attitudes of the Japanese YMCA toward foreign missionaries, using articles from the periodical *Kaitakusha* 開拓者, which encouraged anti-Western religio-political thinking. Finally, I conclude with an argument that moves beyond the traditional interpretation of Japanese Christianity, primarily from a political perspective. Much of the conduct of Japanese Christians living in an authoritarian state can be best understood in terms of a paradigm that incorporates both internal and external forces. Furthermore, I point out that the missionaries’ failure to identify the nationalistic discourse of Christianity occurred not only in the Japanese context, but also in Republican China. Our understanding of Christianity in the East Asian context would be enriched by further comparative analysis.

## The Historical Setting of Christianity in the Rising Empire

There was a revival of foreign Christian missions in Japan during the 1880s. Prior to the issuing of the Constitution of the Empire of Japan (*Dai Nippon Teikoku Kenpō* 大日本帝国憲法) in 1889, when the whole nation embraced westernization, missionary activities were conducted in a relatively friendly environment. A number of Euro-American Protestant denominations constructed their institutional frameworks during this period. The five major denominations that expanded all over Japan were the Congregationalists, the Presbyterian-Reformed Church, the Methodists, the Holy Catholic Church (Anglican Episcopal), and the Baptists (Iglehart 1959, 80-83). By the end of the 1880s, the missionary force had increased from 145 in 1883 to 363, and their places of residence from thirty-seven to eighty-nine (Iglehart 1959, 71). In this initial stage of

<sup>3</sup> Original source see Kiyohiko (1937).

<sup>4</sup> While attitudes towards the American leadership divided among the Japanese YMCA by 1900, this study focused on the group that characterized a nationalistic interpretation of Christianity. See Davidann (1995, 107-125).

church development, Japanese Protestants assisted missionaries, rather than taking a leading role in the evangelical work. This trend can be seen in records of the Second Missionary Conference in Osaka in 1883, where the discussions were led and the conclusions reached by missionaries. Although the Conference brought up the issue of devolving responsibility from missionaries to local evangelical agents, the Japanese converts were not assigned responsibilities on the grounds of their immature status.<sup>5</sup> However, as Charles W. Iglehart (1959, 70) notes, no tension existed between missionaries and Japanese leaders at the time.

From 1889 to 1945, Japan became a Shinto State regime and embarked on an expansion of its territory in East Asia. The Emperor, legitimized by the Constitution in 1889, became the supreme ruler of the country. In October 1890, the Imperial Rescript on Education (*Kyōiku ni kansuru chokugo* 教育に関する勅語) was issued, designed to build a spirit of loyalty towards the Shinto State through the education system. Japan's defeat of China in 1895, and of Russia in 1905, strengthened national confidence in its polity and led to further imperialistic expeditions. Noting the pursuit of self-interest by Western powers in Asia, Japan revitalized its old slogan "*Fukoku kyōhei*" (富国強兵 Enrich the country, enhance the army). Thus, the nation retreated from over-westernization and adopted a militarist approach in its nation-building.

Disagreement emerged between foreign missionaries and local converts in the midst of the surrounding wave of nationalism. The missionaries maintained that local believers were of inferior status and should be excluded, as witnessed at the Missionary Conference in Tokyo in 1900, where 435 delegates and forty-two missions and agencies were represented, but no provision was made for the participation of Japan (Iglehart 1959, 112-113). While the whole nation was immersed in the building of a modern imperial state, Japanese churches and their leaders displayed "sensitive reactions to all the trends that were sweeping the nation" and "followed the general mood in a new attitude of criticism toward the missionaries whose training and competency ... were scarcely adequate to the new demands." Iglehart (1959, 93) suggests missionaries lacked sufficient training by their mission societies in the 1880s and 1890s, including in language and theology. This shortfall distanced missionaries from Japanese life. As Mark R. Mullins (2003, 145) also notes, most missionaries came to Japan with fervent evangelical zeal, but their theological training gave them limited resources for understanding local cultures and religious traditions. At the time, evangelical work followed a pattern where missionaries drew the blueprint, and Japanese pastors maintained local Christian communities (Mullins 2003, 95-96). Missionary ignorance of nationalistic trends generated a desire among Japanese Christians to sketch the future of the churches. In contrast to the Western missionaries, Japanese Christians responded to the imperialistic trend by following the first Sino-Japanese War through concrete actions such as, "providing comfort for bereaved families" and "disseminating information that justified the war." (Ion 2003, 72)

In addition, a series of indigenous movements led by charismatic Japanese Christian leaders occurred at the turn of the twentieth century. Mullins argues that proponents of these indigenous movements adopted a dichotomous view of Christianity and Western cultures. While accepting Christianity, they rejected the Western style Christianity that bonded them unnecessarily to Western organizational forms. They also rejected denominational politics, and missionary control (Mullins 2003, 143). One well-known case was the establishment in 1901 of the Nonchurch Movement (*Mu kyōkai* 無教会) by Uchimura Kanzō 内村鑑三 (1861-1930). After being criticized by missionaries for "upholding Japanese Christianity," Uchimura defended his rights by pointing to the "sectional or denominational forms of Christianity" existing within the missionary enterprise that were similar to national Christianity (Mullins 2003, 147-8). In opposition to the Western framework of establishing the church as an institution, Uchimura advocated an ideal church as one that "fit the natural simplicity of Japanese culture," and where converts gathered in love (Ballhatchet 2003, 49).

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<sup>5</sup> The legal acknowledgement of Christianity after its aborted prohibition came in 1873.

The beginning of the twentieth century saw the Forward Evangelistic Campaign of 1901-1904 under the motto of “Our Country for Christ,” indicating a sense of responsibility on the part of Japanese Christians for evangelizing the whole nation. The following years, which encompassed the famine in northeastern Japan, witnessed collaboration between Christian social movements and the government (Iglehart 1959, 119-120, 128-129). There were no signs of confrontation, at least on a large scale, between the Japanese Christian community and the Shinto State at the beginning of the Showa period (1926-1989) (DDJJK 1972, 12). The Japanese churches reasoned, however, that they had to make a statement of their stance towards a fascist regime in the early 1930s (Tomura 1974, 68). The Special Higher Police (*Tokubetsu kōtō keisatsu* 特別高等警察) then started an investigation into Japanese Christian organizations in 1936 and paid special attention to pacifism among Christians after the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese war in July 1937 (Tomura 1974, 12-14). The situation became more compelling for Japanese Christians when the government initiated a National Spiritual Mobilization Movement (*Kokumin seishin sōdōin undō* 国民精神総動員運動) in October 1937, which emphasized loyalty to the country. In order to advance a totalitarian nation-state, the Spiritual Mobilization Movement was replaced by the Imperial Aid Assistance Association in 1940 (1940-1945, *Taisei yokusankai* 大政翼賛会). All organizations, including the Christian community in Japan, were compelled to fall in line with this Association (Hara 2005, 111-113).

The political position of the church in Japan was further questioned when their foreign counterparts denounced Japan’s military actions in the Manchurian Incident in 1931. Initially, the National Christian Council of Japan (hereinafter referred to as the NCCJ) was opposed to the Incident and attempted to seek help from “Christians overseas to implore governments to help in bringing about a peaceful settlement between China and Japan.” The condemnation of Japanese actions by “Western missionaries in Japan and Western Christians in general” not only put Japanese Christians in an awkward situation, but also disappointed their Japanese counterparts (Ion 2003, 75-76).<sup>6</sup>

The Second World War became a catalyst for the Japanese churches to show their loyalty to the Emperor, not necessarily in the form of religious worship, but in being compelled to at least show their support for the ruling power. From November 1937, a Christian patriotic movement emerged out of some churches in Tokyo. At the same time, the NCCJ made a statement on the Manchurian Incident and decided to draft a letter expressing gratitude to the overseas Imperial Army (DDJJK 1972, 46-48). Furthermore, in December 1937, several Christian institutions, including Tokyo YMCA and YWCA, joined in a prayer ceremony for the wellbeing of the Empire. In February and May 1938, lectures on the meaning of holy war and the consistency between the Japanese spirit and the Christian spirit were held in Osaka under the surveillance of the police department (DDJJK 1972, 106). Several factors prompted this independent and nationalist reform among Japanese churches. These factors included an anti-Japanese statement by the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury; a call for aid for China from the British Salvation Army; and a call for anti-communist and pro-Japanese support by the Roman Pope (DDJJK 1972, 44-45).

The Religious Organizations Law, passed in 1940, centralized religious groups through the imposition of political restrictions. Many scholars consider the establishment in June 1941 of the United Church of Christ in Japan (hereinafter, the UCCJ)—the only legal Protestant organization in wartime Japan—to have been based on this new law (Kubota 2002, 52). The launch of the Imperial Aid Association in 1940 functioned as a further force in promoting a “New Order” movement with the aim of creating a totalitarian one-party state by removing political and economic dissidents. A result of this movement was the abolition of a number of political parties and unions. The arrest of the commander of the Salvation Army, Uemura Masuzō 植村益藏, in July 1940, serves as one example. Arrested by the Tokyo *Kempeitai* (東京憲兵隊 military police) on suspicion

<sup>6</sup> Original work see Shigeru (1976, 54).

of spying, Uemura was eventually released because of insufficient evidence. Uemura's antiwar and anti-militarist attitudes attracted political attention, however. In response, the Salvation Army in Japan passed the reform proposal and made a public announcement of its stance supporting the imperial state in newspapers in August 1940 (Sasaki 1965, 35-36).

### Struggling with American Missionaries: The Japanese YMCA from 1880 to 1937

The first YMCA in Japan was founded in Tokyo in 1880. Early founders of the organization, some of whom were from the samurai social class, favoured a nationalistic identity. In fact, thirty percent of all Meiji converts were ex-samurai, and they organized themselves into bands. Some YMCA leaders belonged to influential bands, such as the Yokohama band and Kumamoto band. Uemura Masahisa 植村正久, a YMCA founder, was a member of the Yokohama band. While the Yokohama band was well known for its evangelical approach to Christianity, Uemura was a strong advocate of cultural independence from the missionaries. Another member of the Yokohama band was Honda Yōichi 本多庸一, who joined the YMCA's executive committee in 1903. Honda was "a strong nationalist," supporting the First Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese War. Another YMCA founder, Kozaki Hiromichi 小崎弘道, belonged to the Kumamoto band, which was known as the most nationalistic group of converts in Japanese Christianity (Davidann 1998, 55-56).

Most Japanese Christians embraced liberal theology on the grounds that it matched their desire "for a more public, socially active Christianity." This was in agreement with the ideology of Confucianism, which advocated public service in society. The arrival of American YMCA missionaries in Japan in the 1890s, however, had infused a different theological thinking emphasizing evangelicalism (Davidann 1998, 56-57). When missionaries were sent to Japan at the start of the global YMCA movement, their vision was to introduce an American-style YMCA to Japan (Davidann 1998, 40). Mission work by foreign workers was often combined with a sense of cultural superiority over their Japanese colleagues. In the Osaka Missionary Conference of 1883, Japanese colleagues were frequently referred to as "the heathen," and respected members of the Japanese Christian community involved in Bible translation were addressed as "assistants" (Davidann 1998, 37-38, 94).<sup>7</sup>

However, unlike the foreign missionaries, Japanese Christians interested in the YMCA emphasized their cultural roots, and after the Meiji Restoration were more concerned with filling the moral void. One notable speech was made by Yokoi Tokio 横井時雄 at the Second Summer School of the Japanese YMCA in 1890, expressing a hostile attitude toward Western missionaries and emphasizing Japanese identity. Yokoi, a prominent Christian who lost control of Dōshisha University to the American board in the 1890s, stated:

As for European and American forms of Church government and customs, we [Japanese Christians] will accept only critically or reject without hesitation their approach. Instead we will rely on our own history, customs, and ideas in promoting growth and progress for Christianity in Japan. (Davidann 1998, 80)<sup>8</sup>

The Japanese YMCA founders wished to transform the moral outlook of Japanese society through Christian ethics. This goal is clearly illustrated in the first issue of *Rikugō Zasshi* 六合雜

<sup>7</sup> Davidann points out a similar cultural assumption of the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race among the American missionaries within the Japanese YMCA, by referring to the American YMCA missionary writers, Robert E. Speer and Sherwood Eddy.

<sup>8</sup> Original work see Tokio (1891).

誌 (*Cosmos*, launched in 1880), the mouthpiece of the organization, as well as in its succeeding journal *Kaitakusha* 開拓者 (launched in 1906).

Central to the old moral system of Japan was loyalty and filial piety. A new Japan requires new ethics. The old moral ethics must be transformed based on the notion of equality and mutual love. Christianity is a necessity that supports the new ethics from an internal perspective. (YMCA Shi Gakkai Henshū linkai 2003, 5)

Japan had been at most a legal system, which was referred to as *Rechtsstaat* by German people. It has a framework but not a moral flesh. It is only Christianity that can fulfil the task of building a moral flesh. (Nihon Kirisutokyō Seinenkai Dōmei 1906)

Contrary to the evangelical expectations of their Western colleagues, Japanese converts were deeply rooted in local cultural, political, and social settings, upon which their concerns were based. At this time, Japanese Christians were accused of disloyalty to the Emperor and father, loss of patriotism, and of being a danger to national authority. In response, the Japanese YMCA pointed to the close link between strong nationalism and Christianity in Euro-American countries.<sup>9</sup> In his monograph titled, *A World of Crisis and Progress: The American YMCA in Japan, 1890-1930*, Jon Thares Davidann argues that this moral approach was part of the nationalist discourse among Japanese Christians. He declares it to be “an independent and unique Japanese style of Christianity.” According to Davidann (1998, 78-80), this independent movement, “was a way for Japanese Christians to reconcile Christianity with their own national identity.” In 1903, an article in the journal, *Nihon no Seinei (The Japanese Youth)*, argued that local autonomy of the Japanese YMCA was a prerequisite for evangelical work, and that receiving financial support from the American YMCA was necessary for achieving ultimate independence. In order to avoid a repetition of the Dōshisha Incident, where the Japanese trustees lost control of the school to the American board in 1890s, recipients would “freely use the fund” and work together with overseas Christian contributors to establish the Kingdom of God among the youth.<sup>10</sup>

Although the YMCA International Committee passed a resolution in 1899 that set native control as the goal for all foreign YMCAs, Davidann (1998, 44) points out that tension existed in terms of indigenous leadership being controlled by foreign colleagues who insisted on conformity to American standards. According to Davidann, disagreement over the membership rule of the YMCA, reflects the different theological grounds which turned into a battleground for local autonomy. When Luther Wishard, International College Secretary of the YMCA, visited Japan in 1889, his insistence on strict adherence to the American standards of the YMCA, requiring, for example, a candidate’s association with “an evangelical church professing the trinity of God and the divinity of Christ,” caused tension among Japanese Christians whose theological thinking was liberal and Unitarian (Davidann 1998, 89). The conflict became visible when the college association at Tokyo Imperial University abandoned the evangelical test for YMCA membership in 1892.<sup>11</sup>

Davidann observes that by the 1920s, Japanese YMCA leaders had a greater share of control, which was clearly reflected in the complaints of YMCA missionaries. In 1930, G. S. Phelps, the senior American secretary in Japan, also expressed his displeasure with the situation, and the policy of the Japanese administration that obviously ignored the foreign secretary (Davidann 1998, 97).<sup>12</sup> Davidann also remarks on tensions caused when the Japanese and American YMCA leaders expanded the missionary cause in Korea and Manchuria after the Russo-Japanese War. As the

<sup>9</sup> *Rikugō Zasshi* 六合雑誌 [The Cosmos] on 11 October 1880, see *Rikugō Zasshi* ([1880] 1983, 1: 92).

<sup>10</sup> See Beikoku seinenkai ([1903] 1984).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. Original resource see Swift to Morse (1892, 2).

<sup>12</sup> Original resource see Confidential Notes on Japan (1922); Reports of Annual Meeting (1930, 14-15).

Japanese YMCA missionaries took on the unique role of transmitting Christianity into Oriental contexts, they simultaneously undermined the authority of evangelical work by their American counterparts. Different evangelical visions and national polity shaped a less harmonious but more competitive relationship between these two groups. When Japan launched a larger-scale war in China and other countries in East Asia in the second half of the 1930s, the relationship fell into a trough.

### A Divorce with the West: The Japanese YMCA from 1937 to 1945

After the outbreak of WWII, the Japanese YMCA responded to the national call with support and cooperation. The 273<sup>rd</sup> committee conference in July 1937 passed the following motions:

1. The need for providing comfort services to the Imperial Army carried out by the NCCJ, working through the affiliated YMCA to raise funds and goods.
2. Contribute necessary service in terms of the comfort and welfare of the soldier in active service.
3. When a comfort messenger is sent, they should cooperate with the NCCJ and the YMCA. (Nara 1959, 331)

From 1937, the Japanese YMCA launched the Manchuria Project (*Tairiku jigyō* 大陸事業) sending Japanese Christians to China for comfort work.<sup>13</sup> In Shanghai, welfare services included haircutting, writing letters for wounded soldiers, and opening recreational places in old YMCA buildings. In addition to Shanghai, the comfort team of the Japanese YMCA went to Nanjing, Suzhou, Hangzhou, Beijing, Zhangjiakou, Tianjin, Baoding, Guangdong, etc. (Nara 1959, 332-334). In August 1938, the National Council of the Japanese YMCA<sup>14</sup> pressured the Korean YMCA for an alliance through the political slogan “*Naisen itai*” (Japan and Korea as one, 内鮮一体). According to the first clause of the resolution, the Korean YMCA was required to seclude itself from the world alliance of the YMCA and transfer all rights of dealing with foreign countries to the National Council of the Japanese YMCA. This resolution was in essence a facilitator of the Japanizing of the Korean YMCA. As a result, twenty-one Korean YMCA branches joined in the alliance (Nara 1959, 329-330). In addition, in 1939 the Japanese YMCA sought cooperation with YMCAs in East Asia, with the aim of protecting local YMCA activities from suppression by the Japanese military government. In the case of China, a major aim of the Japanese YMCA was the need to protect Chinese refugees. Assistance from the Japanese YMCA also involved fundraising and cooperation with local YMCAs (Nara 1959, 335-336).

In late August 1940, the Japanese YMCA held urgent conferences in response to the growth of anti-Christian sentiment in Japan. The principles guiding young Christians from a moral perspective were changed and replaced with a new ideology emphasizing “the cultivation of loyal and outstanding Imperial subjects” (Sasaki 1965, 36). A collective declaration by the Japanese Christian community was made at the national congregation in October 1940, which demonstrated support for the nation’s overseas expansion at that time.

During wartime, *Kaitakusha* served as one primary source for tracing theological thinking and attitudes that were adored by and circulated among its membership. Articles by Japanese Christians who went to China during wartime shed light on their interpretations of Japanese colonial policy, as well as their attitudes towards foreign missionaries. In the China mission, some articulated a core

<sup>13</sup> A project launched by the Japanese YMCA from 1937. Causes included the Imperial Army’s comfort, refugee rescue, contacting Chinese YMCAs, protecting local YMCAs and churches from the Japanese military, etc. See YMCA Shi Gakkai Henshū linkai (2013, 255).

<sup>14</sup> The Council was established in 1904 when City YMCAs (9) and Student YMCAs (59) in Japan merged into one organization. See *Nihon YMCA Dōmei Kessei 100 shūnen kinen shashin nenpyōshū* (2003).

concern about the dominance of Western ideology, the activities of Western missionaries, and the role of Western powers in East Asia. Among those who joined the YMCA's Manchuria Project was Suekane Toshio 末包敏夫 (1897-1991), who lived in China from 1938 to 1946.<sup>15</sup> Prior to his arrival in China, Suekane worked in the Kobe YMCA in 1921 and then moved to the Kyoto branch in 1931, influenced by the concept of the social gospel. To support Japan during the Second Sino-Japanese War, the Japanese YMCA launched a special project in cooperation with the NCCJ, providing comfort to the Imperial Army. The Kyoto YMCA took an active part in this project (Kyōto YMCA shi hensan iinkai 2005, 234-235). In 1938, Suekane led the third unit for comfort cause to the northern part of China.<sup>16</sup>

An article on the construction of East Asia and missions for young Christians in the 1939 edition of *Kaitakusha* provides a detailed picture of Suekane's religio-political thinking (Suekane 1939, 22-26). In Suekane's view, the world was being encroached upon by the Euro-American powers. Japan's imperial expansion was perceived as a counterweight to Western ideology. The Marco Polo Bridge Incident was not considered Chinese resistance toward the Japanese. Rather, it reaffirmed the urgency and necessity of constructing a collaborative community in East Asia. It was thought that otherwise the political and economic sphere of Asia would continue as a semi-colonial state, dominated by Western powers. Suekane's one-sided interpretation was that Japan's action in China was not an imperialist intrusion but a bid to emancipate China from the hands of Euro-American colonialism. Although acknowledging the existence of Japan's capitalist intrusion in China, Suekane asserted the majority of Japanese people believed in the construction of a new order in East Asia, inspired by the idea of liberation. This new order was fundamentally different from capitalist imperialism. Suekane believed that the new order was based on the notion of oriental authenticity.

Suekane's experience in China made him well aware of Chinese nationalist sentiment towards Japanese action. Slogans about fighting the Japanese to save the country expressed an explicit logic that China's liberation was closely tied up with winning the war against Japan. However, Suekane criticized this short-sighted ideology and argued that China's independence from Japan would strengthen colonization by Euro-American countries. Among various reasons contributing to a misunderstanding of Japan's action in China, Suekane singled out democracy and communism as the two main ideologies among the Chinese leading class. Furthermore, the rise of the doctrine of "ethnic independence" (*Minzoku jiketsu shugi* 民族自決主義) aimed at liberating the Chinese from a semi-feudal and semi-colonial status, enhanced anti-imperialist patriotic fervour among young Chinese intellectuals. Many of these individuals had been educated in mission schools. Suekane thought Western missionaries exported their cultural and political ideology through their evangelical education, generating a pragmatic, realistic, and political-oriented religious attitude among Chinese students. Suekane attributed anti-Japanese feeling to this Western education system and to Chinese dependence on the West. In contrast, young Japanese students were attracted by the mystical religious aura of Christianity, which gave them a historically transcendent worldview and an idea of eternity. Suekane thought Christianity in modern China had been distorted by Western humanist ideology. The responsibility for saving Chinese Christianity from this Western impact fell on Japanese Christians, because they held the correct religious attitude. This task was conceived as an obligation for Japanese believers, to be performed in the name of love. As a Japanese citizen, as a Christian believer, and also as an East Asian, Suekane urged Christians in China and Japan to overcome the shadow of the Marco Polo Bridge Incident and collaborate in the reconstruction of East Asia in the firm belief that this process would engender a new experience of faith based on Nipponism. Such a faith was different from that of the Occident, as it was grounded in the soil of familism and emphasized the love of redemption. Suekane believed that under the influence of such

<sup>15</sup> See YMCA Shi Gakkai Henshū iinkai (2013, 120); Endō (2014, 101-109).

<sup>16</sup> See Endō (2014, 101).



a faith, the deadlock of Western civilization would be broken and Japan would contribute to world Christianity.

Suekane's anti-Western religio-political thinking was shared by other Japanese Protestants. Like Suekane, Bessho Kenjiro 別所健二郎 (?-?) held a similar viewpoint. A colleague of Suekane, Bessho was a director of the Kyoto YMCA when he was dispatched to China's northern area to provide military comfort in 1938 (Nara 1959, 334). An article in 1940 articulated Bessho's vision of the China mission as concern about Western influence in the mission field (Bessho 1940, 41-46). Based on his experience and understanding, Bessho observed that mission work in China had been led by foreign missionaries along with Chinese converts who were dependent on their Western mentors both financially and spiritually. The question of achieving autonomy and establishing an indigenous church independently of their foreign counterparts, therefore became an important question for Chinese Christians.

Bessho believed the 1930s were a crucial transition period for China and referred to the church union movement in Chinese society as outstanding. Bessho estimated that 61 percent of Chinese Protestants were involved in this alliance movement nationwide. This campaign touched on issues such as the rationality of a preaching strategy and the independence of the churches, and led to the emergence of institutions such as the Church of Christ and the Holy Catholic Church in China. Bessho believed that members from the association of Christian education, the medical evangelical organization, the YMCA, and the YWCA could play a crucial role in reconstructing the nation, and that a religious movement featuring a Chinese element would arise when foreign missionaries withdrew their leadership. In this transitional period, joint efforts by the domestic Japanese churches, and the YMCA and its branches in China, were viewed by Bessho as appropriate sources of spiritual guidance for Christians in both countries to promote the shared mission of constructing the East Asian community. Japanese Christians were encouraged to join in shaping the religious landscape in China in collaboration with Chinese believers. Bessho excluded Western missionaries from the future vision of the Christian community in China and the construction of East Asia. In this way, Western influences were expelled from the religious sphere in China. This was in accordance with the concept of an East Asian community fundamentally opposed to the potential threat from the Euro-American countries.

Nara Tsunegorō (1909-1986), another leader in the Japanese YMCA, was also active in constructing a concept of a New East Asia.<sup>17</sup> In 1942, Nara was assigned to the southern part of China where he encountered Chinese Christians in Hong Kong and Guangdong (Nara 1943, 2). In 1943 he was dispatched by the Japanese YMCA to assist the Hong Kong YMCA with financial support. In August 1944 Nara was drafted to the Imperial Army in Dong'an (currently the city of Mishan in Heilongjiang Province) (Nara 1959, 335, 342). His activities were informed by a strong sense of obligation felt by the Japanese people at the time, which aimed not only to safeguard Japan, but also to undertake the great cause of constructing a prosperous East Asia. In Nara's words, it was a shift in the historical trajectory from "Japan in the world" to "a world in [the hands of] Japan" (Nara 1944, 3). The idea that the rise and fall of Japan controlled the fate of East Asia revealed a Japan-centered nationalist attitude.

In his article titled "The Development of Japanese Christianity in the Greater East Asia" in 1944, Nara advocated two tasks for Japanese Christians, which in essence would serve the nation. As Japan's power was expanding with the acquisition of overseas territories at the time, Japanese Christianity should center on Japanese spiritual traditions and serve as a spiritual force in tandem with Japan's expansion. In this sense, the export of Christianity from Japan became a medium for spreading Japanese ideals. Nara stressed this expanding mission could not be categorized under the term "international," for that term had been adopted by British and American missionaries in the old world order. The mission for Japanese Christians in a new order was to correct the "chaotic

<sup>17</sup> See YMCA Shi Gakkai Henshū Iinkai (2013, 167).

cultures” caused by the cultural superiority of British and American missionaries. Nara argued that Japanese Christianity had correctly grasped the essence of Christian ideals because the Christian community in Japan was isolated from those of the Euro-American countries. Japanese Christianity, therefore, had a leading role in the spiritual landscape of East Asia. These two tasks, taken together, were based on the premise of the existence of Japan as a nation. Nara praised the Emperor for allowing Christianity in Japan and called for an individual reflection on the royal grace of the Emperor. Japanese Christians, according to Nara, would show their patriotism by engaging in the construction of a “New East Asia.”

Nara’s nationalistic evangelical vision is reflected in his proposed task of cooperating with Chinese Christians to create the East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere and to propagate “the awakened self-consciousness of a new East Asia” (Nara 1943, 2). In his article titled “The Gospel and Culture in China” printed in *Kaitakusha* in 1943, Nara said he thought one prominent task was to eliminate the “evil deeds” of British and American missionaries who oppressed the “inferior” Chinese people with notions of their “superior” civilization. The spread of the Western mission, from Nara’s viewpoint, displayed cultural arrogance in demanding a civilizing process from the local people, and also represented a conglomeration of individualism and political ideologies. China had failed to defend itself from the penetration of Western values in national life. In contrast, Japan had distinguished Christian teachings from Western ideals and solidified the Japanese essence in its encounter with Christianity. Nara interpreted the Manchurian Incident in 1931<sup>18</sup> as triggering self-awakening among Chinese intelligentsia from “total westernization” to the “cultural construction of a new China,” and embodied in the indigenous movement among Chinese churches. Although the Incident aroused anti-Japanese sentiment, in essence it was neither anti-Japanese nor dependent on British and American missionaries. Nara believed there was an obligation for Japanese Christians to address their fellows in China and advocate a return to Oriental self-consciousness and a true understanding of the gospel. In his concluding words, Nara prayed for the formation of an alliance with Chinese Christians in order to fight against Britain and America.

## Further Discussion

This paper has explored the anti-Western mindset of members of the Japanese YMCA during WWII, and their conflicts with American missionaries from 1880 onwards. The opposition towards missionaries can be seen not only in Japan’s indigenous movement and nationalist sentiment prior to the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War, but also in the writings of Japanese YMCA Christians who went to China during wartime. These conflicts were fuelled by the rising militarist power and centralization of political control over religious groups; by the cultural superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race; different theological thinking; and a desire for local autonomy. The consensus in the Japanese YMCA about independence and cultural roots before and during WWII suggests the need for a broader analytical framework to address the detachment of foreign influence from the Japanese Christian community during the wartime period. Instead of solely interpreting the hostility towards Western missionaries through a political lens, this paper offers a balanced view that focuses on the internal conflicts between Japanese Christians and their Western colleagues.

The antagonism towards Western powers was closely associated with the nationalistic discourse of the Japanese YMCA. The missionaries’ failure to recognize this hindered their mission work in a local context. Similar conflict occurred between Western missionaries and Chinese Christians in Republican China. When the National Christian Council of China (hereinafter referred to as the NCCC) drafted an official letter to the Shanghai Municipal Council, urging a thorough investigation of the Incident on 30 May 1925, the political activities of the NCCC stirred up a heated discussion within the missionary community (Correspondence 1925). As the NCCC facilitated its

<sup>18</sup> The Japanese invasion of the northeastern part of China in 1931.

indigenous movement and advocated the abolition of “Unequal Treaties,” the China Inland Mission withdrew from the Council in March 1926 (Macrae 1926, 818; The National Christian Council 1926). In response to a series of ensuing political activities by the NCCC, a large group of prominent missionaries issued a statement on April 7, 1927, criticizing the NCCC and asserting that the Council had lost the confidence of a large part of the missionary body due to its political activities (Missionary Group 1927).

While Western missionaries were driven by evangelical zeal, local converts perceived and reshaped Christianity based on their concerns in a local context. A further examination of Christians, in both Japan and China, would capture features of the discourse of nationalistic Christianity during the wartime period. Other questions in need of examination are: How did Chinese Christians deal with the role of missionaries in churches? and What were the similarities and differences in this process between China and Japan? In particular, as some Japanese Protestants in the Japanese YMCA were involved in the Manchurian Project, what was their relationship with Chinese Protestants? How did they collaborate with their Chinese colleagues? While Japanese Christians joined in the national cause to show their loyalty to the Emperor, Chinese Christians expressed their patriotism in the form of anti-Japanese militarism. Further research needs to be undertaken on the manner in which Chinese Christians perceived and responded to Japanese evangelical work under Japanese occupation. These are questions crucial to understanding the entanglement of political activities and nationalism in the complicated discourse of Christianity in a most dynamic East Asia.

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## Abbreviations used in the Paper

KSMK *Kirisutokyō Shakai Mondai Kenjyū* 基督教社会問題研究.  
DDJJK *dōshisha Daigaku Jinbun Kagaku Kenkyūjo* 同志社大学人文科学研究所

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