

“MODERNIST” PROTESTANTISM TRIUMPHS CHINESE “SUPERSTITION”: HOW BLUE CHINA’S SUN YAT-SEN OVERTHREW THE YELLOW EMPIRE

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Introduction: Blue China and Yellow China

Marie-Claire Bergère coined the concept “Blue China” when elaborating the background of Sun Yat-sen. By the turn of the 20th century, Blue China, Bergère stated, consisted of the country’s coastal regions, treaty ports, and overseas communities, was outward-focused, maritime, modernist, and revolutionary, and stood in opposition to the “Yellow China” found in the country’s inward-focused, conservative, traditional, continental hinterlands (Bergère 1998, 20-23).

Blue China	Yellow China
Coastal (extending beyond China's borders)	Continental
Progressive	Conservative
Revolutionary	Reformist/reactionary
Outward-focused	Inward-focused

Major Blue China determinant: Protestant Modernism

Factors of importance (Treadgold 1973),

- ❖ A “social gospel” had risen in the West during the second half of the 1800s, which starting to influence the teachings in the missions in (primarily Blue) China
- ❖ Dominance of pietism slowly receded in Protestant missions
- ❖ Catholic missions continued to “miss the boat,” papal ban on tolerating Chinese traditions in Christian liturgy limited Catholic outreach
- ❖ Creation of a “modernist elite” in Blue China that would hold considerable – or even, disproportional – political sway over the coming decades

Protestant “Window of Opportunity” in Blue China

Temporal window of “Chinese susceptibility” to modernist Protestant missionary teaching manifests itself in Blue China between the late 19th century and the early 1920s,

- ❖ **Start:** dominance of modernist message in Protestant missions achieved by the turn of the 20th century in China (Treadgold 1973, 76-79).
 - High demand for Western learning – despite occasional annoyance about the religious zeal of mission teachers – amongst Chinese revolutionary youth
 - Imperialist excesses in “Yellow China” (e.g., crackdown on Boxer rebellion) not (yet) leading to major repugnance toward Christianity in Blue China
 - Modernist Protestant gospel aligned with anti-superstitious sentiment in China
- ❖ **End:** by the early 1920s anti-religious movements started taking aim at *all* religions, instead of only “backward superstition” (Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 51)
 - Humiliation at Versailles (1919) gave rise to anti-Western sentiment, with anti-Christian sentiment in its wake
 - Growing interest in Communism and the Soviet Union in China increasingly clashed with sustained Western imperialism
 - Christian missionaries and converts viewed as stooges of Western imperialism

References

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- ❖ Goossaert, V., and Palmer, D. (2011). *The religious question in modern China*. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press.
- ❖ Schiffrin, H. Z. (1968). *Sun Yat-sen and the origins of the Chinese revolution*. 2nd pr. Berkeley (Calif.): University of California press.
- ❖ Treadgold, D. W. (1973). *The West in Russia and China : religious and secular thought in modern times*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



Sun Yat-sen: A Representative of Blue China?

Sun Yat-sen 孫逸仙 (1866-1925),

- ❖ Hailed from Southern China’s coastal Guangdong province
- ❖ Had experienced firsthand both the virtues and shortcomings of the West during his schooling in Hawaii and Hong Kong
- ❖ A fluent English-speaker, Sun maintained many contacts with overseas Chinese (*Huaqiao*) and would visit the West on numerous occasions
- ❖ Centered his revolutionary activities almost completely in Blue China
- ❖ Overthrew the faltering Qing dynasty in 1911, became the Republic of China’s first provisional president a year later

Sun Yat-sen and Protestant Modernism

Sun Yat-sen, while pre-dating the “window of opportunity” during his education abroad,

- ❖ Got an Anglican Schooling in Hawaii and Hong Kong with focus on Western sciences
- ❖ Was baptized a Protestant (Baptist) in Hong Kong
- ❖ Was inspired during the “window of opportunity” with clear signs of the Protestant “social gospel” in his “*minsheng*” (people’s livelihood) doctrine (e.g., by Henry George)
- ❖ Strutted the revolutionary organizations led by him with Protestant Chinese from Blue China; religion as only way to obtain modernist Western learning (Schiffrin 1967, 89)
- ❖ Maintained cordial contacts with Protestant Missionaries and the YMCA until the end of the “window of opportunity” in the 1920s – and even beyond

Research Aims

- ❖ **Zoomed-out:** Systemizing and specifying Marie-Claire Bergère’s dichotomic concept of Blue and Yellow China, by linking the Chinese revolutionary movement in the former to the influence of Protestant Modernism – instead of an often generalized “Western learning” or “Christianity.”
- ❖ **Zoomed-in:** Connecting Sun Yat-sen’s religious faith and replication of missionary credo in his discourse and ideology-construction to his background in Blue China and Protestant formative influences.



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