

**Dr. Mabel Lee: The Interstitial Career of a  
Protestant Chinese American Woman, 1924-1950**

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"Did you really mean it to be merely a small Baptist Church in China Town? Or did you once imagine it to be the beginning of a Hull House of a Chinese Jane Addams? Or a Henry Street Settlement of a Chinese Lillian Ward? Frankly speaking, it is strange that you should spend your life on a thing that is merely a Baptist church in China Town." Hu Shih to Mabel Lee 19 Nov. 1936<sup>1</sup>

Hu Shih's revealing remarks to Dr. Mabel Lee in 1936 are keys to unlocking her surprising, and perhaps, disappointing, career. Though he was a close friend of Mabel Lee, the prolific Chinese intellectual could not comprehend her determination to bind herself to the First Chinese Baptist Church on Pell Street in New York City's Chinatown. It seemed to him that Dr. Lee's intelligence and abilities were wasted on such a small and insignificant congregation.<sup>2</sup> During a recent visit to New York City, Hu Shih had suggested that she "revive" her "scholastic and intellectual interests" by resuming her research work. He also encouraged Mabel Lee to develop the church into a social service center which would be:

truly useful to the community and sufficiently inspiring to enlist the enthusiasm of the younger generation. In brief, it should not be mere evangelism and church-going. It should be education, social work, sanitation, culture, and civic life. That would be worthy of your work, your life-long devotion.<sup>3</sup>

The social utility of Protestant Christianity for Chinese national reconstruction was a question which would dominate Mabel Lee's life and career choices. As the only

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<sup>1</sup> Hu Shih to Mabel Lee, 19 Nov. 1936, *First Chinese Baptist Church New York City collection* [FCBCNY]: folder entitled "No value." The personal letters and papers of Mabel Lee and the church are held in the church, but have not been organized.

<sup>2</sup> Despite her claims to be happy as the director of the Church and its community center, Hu Shih was unconvinced: "I thought the work there (as I saw it) was of a kind that could not long hold all the heart & mind of a person like you." *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* Three years later, Hu Shih (1891-1962) would be one of the board of directors of Mabel Lee's Chinese Baptist Community Center. Though he was five years senior to Mabel Lee, both studied together at Columbia University in the late 1910s and were active with the Chinese Students Association. Their close friendship is evinced by Hu Shih's dedication of his Haskell Lectures (1933) to her. See Hu Shih, *The Chinese Renaissance* (Chicago, 1934). On Hu Shih's flirtation with and eventual rejection of Christianity, see Min-Chih Chou, *Hu Shih and Intellectual Choice in Modern China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984).

child of the Rev. Lee To, a Baptist minister, merchant, and sometime president of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association of New York City, she attempted to carry on her father's legacy in her own life. In doing so, she passed up opportunities to return to China and contribute more directly to its nationalistic aspirations in the 1920s and 30s. By choosing to follow in her father's footsteps, she threw her lots with a Protestant religion heavily scrutinized in China and approaching the twilight of its cultural hegemony in the United States. Shortly after she cast herself into the role of a Victorian missionary matron, the women's missionary movement declined sharply in strength and numbers, yielding to government-supported professional social workers.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the persistent questions about the value of Christianity for the modern world, Mabel Lee clung tenaciously to the Chinese church and lived out her later years in relative obscurity. Hers was a career which fell through the cracks. During years of anti-feminist backlash and Chinese Exclusion in America, a woman as talented as Mabel Lee found few outlets for personal expression. Yet, she survived because of her religious convictions and financial connections. Carrying her nationalistic and feminist sentiments into her role as de facto minister of the Chinese Baptist mission in New York City's Chinatown, she marked out an ambiguous space where she was able to establish a comfortable niche for herself.

### **The Chinese Christian Suffragist**

To a large degree, Mabel Lee's career reflects the transformation of transnational Chinese Protestantism in the years between the two World Wars. Her father's generation boldly articulated a vision for a modern republican China infused with democratic values

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<sup>4</sup> Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874-1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). I've drawn from recent studies in American women's history: Judy Yung, *Unbound Feet: A Social History of Chinese Women in San Francisco* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995); Rosalind Rosenberg, *Divided Lives: American Women in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992); Estelle B. Freedman, "The New Woman: Changing Views of Women in the 1920s," in *Decades of Discontent: The Women's Movement, 1920-1940*, edited by Lois Scharf and Joan M. Jensen. 2d ed. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987): 21-42.

and Protestant religion. Drawing from a modernized version of evangelicalism, her father's generation never questioned the social usefulness of Protestant Christianity for modern China. Indeed, they fervently believed that Protestant Christianity was the spiritual foundation upon which the modern democratic nation-state was to be built. By the 1920s and 30s, however, this vision was shaken and the self-perception of the Chinese Protestants of Mabel Lee's generation underwent dramatic changes. But during her childhood and youth it was her father's religious and nationalistic vision for China which nurtured her suffragist and nationalist convictions.<sup>5</sup>

The Rev. Lee To (1861-1924), like many young Chinese laborers, came to the United States in the late 19th century in search of work and wealth. His conversion and acquisition of English language skills at a missionary school enabled him to upgrade his status to that of the merchant class and clergy. Thereafter, he became an influential member of New York's Chinatown elite in the 1910s. Like many Chinese Christians of his generation, Lee was attracted to progressive evangelicalism's call for social reform and convinced of its usefulness for constructing a republican form of government for China.<sup>6</sup>

After completing his theological training in Canton and New York, Lee To was appointed by the American Baptist Home Mission Society in 1898 to be a missionary to the Chinese in the Pacific Northwest. In 1904, Lee To was appointed to be a minister at the Morningstar Mission in New York City's Chinatown.<sup>7</sup> Seventeen years later, he assumed the presidency of the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Society and chaired the Lin Sung Association. White Baptists hailed him as the Christian "mayor" of New

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<sup>5</sup> Timothy Tseng, "Chinese Protestant Nationalism in the United States, 1880-1927" *Amerasia Journal*, forthcoming.

<sup>6</sup> Lee To was born in Canton, China on October 11, 1861. Some details of his life are given in the newsletter of the New York City Baptist Missionary Society, *Metropolitan Baptist Bulletin* January, 1924 (III:1): p.3.

<sup>7</sup> This mission, started by the Woman's American Baptist Mission Society back in 1892 had merged with the Methodist work in Chinatown in 1912. Eventually, it came under Baptist control - specifically, the New York City Baptist Mission Society.

York's Chinatown who did away with Chinese "idols." To him was given the credit of modernizing and Americanizing Chinatown and helping to bring peace between its warring tongs.<sup>8</sup>

Mabel, his only child, was born in Hong Kong in 1896. She spent her early childhood in China where she was raised by her grandmother and mother. Trained in a missionary school, Mabel became proficient in English. When she rejoined her parents in the United States, she brought her language abilities and a Boxer Indemnity scholarship.<sup>9</sup> She enrolled in Barnard College and immediately seized the attention of the Chinese Students Association and the New York City press. Mabel proved to be a gifted communicator and an ambitious young woman. In the May 1914 issue of *The Chinese Students' Monthly*, in a manner reminiscent of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Jessie Taft, she argued for the necessity of woman's suffrage for the viability of modern democracy. True feminism, Lee concluded was "nothing more than the extension of democracy or social justice and equality of opportunities to women."<sup>10</sup> Early in 1915, she gave a speech at the Suffrage Workshop that received coverage in several New York dailies, including the New York Times.<sup>11</sup> Later that year, in a speech entitled "The Submerged Half" Mabel Lee argued for woman's equality. "The welfare of China and possibly its very existence as an independent nation," she noted, "depend on rendering tardy justice

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<sup>8</sup> "Under the leadership and ministry of Mr. Lee, Chinatown has been transformed into a thoroughly Americanized Community, which has resulted, among other reforms, in the elimination of idols from the Council Hall at 12 Mott Street." *Metropolitan Baptist Bulletin* January, 1924 (III:1): 3. After his death, in an effort to raise money for a community center in his honor, an unknown Chinatown leader eulogized Lee: "...if the Christianity represented by Mr. Lee is real Christianity, we are in favor of it with him. For as he stood for Christianity, he stood for brotherly love and kindness to all, for peace, for happiness and good will to all men. He has never used the name of Christianity in all his years in New York, to rob us of our wivies and children; to cover up greed or selfish motives, or as a protection for ill doing." Untitled speech, author unknown FCBCNY (1925?)

<sup>9</sup> Charles Hatch Sears, "A Chinese Leader in New York City," *Missions* (Dec., 1925): p. 682.

<sup>10</sup> Mabel Lee, "The Meaning of Woman Suffrage," *The Chinese Students' Monthly [CSM]* (May, 1914): 531; Lee, a history and philosophy major at Barnard later did Master's level work at Teachers' College in educational administration. Two years later, she contributed to the *Chinese Students' Monthly*, "Moral Training in Chinese School," *CSM* (June 1916): 543ff.

<sup>11</sup> "Chinese girl for suffrage: Miss Mabel Lee of Barnard is Speaker at Meeting," *New York Times*, Jan. 30, 1915 (9:4); Helen Maclay to Mabel Lee, 1 Feb. 1915 FCBCNY.

to its womankind. For no nation can ever make real and lasting progress in civilization unless its women are following close to its men if not actually abreast with them.”<sup>12</sup>

By now she had attracted some suitors, but Mabel appeared to be uninterested in them. She had larger plans for herself.<sup>13</sup> Though she was active in the Chinese Students Christian Association, her ambition was to become the president of the respected Chinese Students Association. After a hard fought campaign in the fall of 1916, Lee was forced to concede the election to T. V. Soong. The election appeared to be a result of some manipulation of the ballots by Soong.<sup>14</sup> Her struggles with male peers in college revealed the limitations of her feminist aspirations even among the progressive-minded future leaders of China.

Undaunted by this defeat, Mabel Lee enrolled in Columbia University’s doctoral program in political science where she earned her Ph.D. in economic history.<sup>15</sup> She now appeared poised to return to China and to take her place among a new generation of nationalists and reformers. She might even have become the dean of women at a college in Amoy.<sup>16</sup> Instead, she decided to return to New York City and enter into an export business venture.<sup>17</sup> In 1924, shortly after returning from her trip to China, a turn of events caused her to reconsider her plans.

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<sup>12</sup> “China’s Submerged Half,” unpublished speech, 1915?; H. K. Chow to Mabel Lee, 12 Oct. 1915, both located in FCBCNY.

<sup>13</sup> Y. S. D. from Cornell wrote to her: “I admit that we have not known each other enough to be in love, in its turest (sic) meaning, if there is one. But one thing was and still is evident that if I want to love any girl at all, you are of the type.” Y.S.D. to Mabel Lee, 30 Jan. 1915 FCBCNY.

<sup>14</sup> *CSM* (Nov., 1917): 61-65.

<sup>15</sup> Her dissertation was published as: Mabel Ping-Hua Lee, *The Economic History of China: With Special Reference to Agriculture* (New York: Columbia University, 1921).

<sup>16</sup> During the summer of 1929, Lee visited China and wrote to her Baptist friends wistfully: “It seems that China is run by my personal friends. One is head of this University and another of that; one is in charge of all the railroads in China, and another of Finance or Education, etc.” See “Dr Mabel Lee: On a Visit to China Writes Interesting Letter,” *The Metropolitan Baptist*, Sept. 29, 1929 (1:1): 3.

<sup>17</sup> “During 1923-24 Dr. Lee went to China at the summons of the University of Amoy. While there she was invited to the position of Dean of Women in the University. However, she decided to return to the United States in 1924 to enter into business relations with a Chinese firm, having headquarters in Hong Kong, and engaged in exportation from the United States to China.” *Metropolitan Baptist Bulletin* January, 1927 (VI: 1): 3.

## The Church

On November 22, 1924, so the story goes, Rev. Lee To had been attempting to negotiate peace between rival On Leong and Hop Sing tongs over dinner. The stress of the heated discussions precipitated a heart attack or stroke killing 61 year old Lee To on the spot. Five weeks later, Dr. Mabel Lee was appointed director of her father's mission by the American Baptist Home Mission Society and the New York City Baptist Mission Society.<sup>18</sup>

In an attempt to capitalize on her father's respect and influence in Chinatown politics, Mabel Lee - with the help of Dr. Charles H. Sears, the Executive Secretary of the New York City Baptist missionary society - initiated a fund-raising campaign to buy a building in Chinatown for the mission in the memory of her father.<sup>19</sup> Since its beginnings, the mission had rented facilities in Chinatown. But now a new building was to be purchased which would belong to the Baptist mission societies and the Chinese community. It was to become the religious and social service center for New York's Chinatown.<sup>20</sup> Initially, Lee wanted to serve only until the building was erected - at the most three years. Not trained to be a minister, she had hoped to move into a different field when her work was completed. As historical fortune would have it, she remained in the church for the rest of her life.<sup>21</sup>

Why did Dr. Mabel Lee decide to assume the reins of her father's life work? Why did she sacrifice a promising career in China to become the matron of a small Chinese congregation? There are few hints in the records. Perhaps there were few

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<sup>18</sup> *Metropolitan Baptist Bulletin* Dec, 1924 (IV: 3): 3; C. H. Sears to Jean White, 26 Dec. 1924, FCBCNY.

<sup>19</sup> C. Y. Sears to Mabel Lee, 9 Jan. 1925 FCBCNY.

<sup>20</sup> Among Northern Baptists, the 1920s was a period of growth for Chinese missions. New facilities were erected for Chinese Baptists in Fresno, Sacramento, and Seattle. See Timothy Tseng, "Ministry at Arms' Length: Asian Americans in the Racial Ideology of American Mainline Protestants, 1882-1952" (Ph.D. dissertation: Union Theological Seminary in NY, 1994).

<sup>21</sup> Stanley Hazzard to Eugene C. Carder, 1 Feb. 1944. ABHS-R (see footnote 26 below), General File C, Folder 3 [Chinese Baptist Mission 1927-1949 New York City Baptist Mis. Soc.]

opportunities for her to express her ideas in American society. Backlash against women and persistent racial discrimination greatly reduced her chances of attaining her ambitions. Furthermore, instability in China between the two World Wars made it risky for single women to live and work there. It is also likely that the Chinese church provided Lee an opportunity to carry on her father's legacy so that she could act as a filial daughter. Also, her widowed mother needed care and it was possible that Mabel valued her connections with Chinatown and Baptist network. Ultimately, it was her religious and nationalist convictions that convinced her that the church and community center were greatly needed.

Six months into her appointment, she wrote a circular letter to the members of the church. The anti-imperialist movement in China was on everyone's mind. "We all hope," she said, "that this [movement] may prove an opportunity for the restoration of some of our rights enabling us [to] make further progress in gaining for China its rightful place among the nations." She then blamed both the Western nations and Chinese traitors for China's troubles. The imperialists "still feel that it is their 'burden' to overrun other nations weaker than they, because it is to advance their civilization." But, "our own people" have also betrayed China: "Attracted by individual gain and profit they forgot all their fellow-countrymen." For the young Dr. Lee, the solution to the problems of China - indeed of the whole world - was Christianity. Calling for renewed faith, trust, and resolution to win "more to the gospel and spreading Christ," Lee urged her members not to lay the entire blame for China's troubles on foreign governments and people. "...China can never be strong unless she has the right kind of citizens." she warned. "It is not only the enemy without. The enemy within is even more dangerous. And the only way we can really conquer is through the heart, by putting Christ within." In the end, Lee argued that

It is not the nationality which counts. Not all Chinese are to be trusted, and not all foreigners are anxious to crush us. We have many foreign friends who are very anxious to help us win our rights. The difference lies in the fact that they have Christianity in their hearts . . . Christianity is the salvation of China, and the

salvation of the whole world.<sup>22</sup>

Whatever factors went into her decision to remain in the mission, it was her religious nationalism which stood out the most. She made her choice and became a missionary matron - the *de facto* minister of the First Chinese Baptist Church of New York City. Yet, her decision placed her in an uncomfortable position of dependency upon the New York City Baptist Mission Society.<sup>23</sup> As an educated and wealthy woman with feminist convictions, such an arrangement with the mission society eventually became the seedbed for future conflict and disillusionment.

### **Struggle for Control and Independence**

As Dr. Mabel Lee began her ministry, tremendous changes in American and Chinese society swirled about her and the Chinatown mission. An angry anti-Christian Chinese nationalism put both white and Chinese Christians on the defensive.<sup>24</sup> The cultural changes in Post-Victorian urban America, attributable in part to the loss of confidence in the moral strength of Western civilization, jeopardized the survival of mainstream American Protestantism. Even as the modernist-fundamentalist controversies raged among Presbyterians and Baptists, the growing disillusionment with traditional missionary work resulted in a tremendous loss of contributions.<sup>25</sup> All this was followed by the Great Depression, which had a terrible impact on mainline Protestantism, in general, and the mission in New York's Chinatown, in particular.

Like so many Chinese Protestant leaders, Dr. Mabel Lee responded to the anti-

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<sup>22</sup> Mabel Lee, circular letter dated July 3, 1925, FCBCNY.

<sup>23</sup> Indeed, prior to 1943, Chinese Christians were dependent upon white missionaries for their ability to move about the United States and to and fro China freely. On numerous occasions, Charles Sears had to vouch for Mabel Lee or her church members in order for them to return to China for a visit.

<sup>24</sup> Jessie G. Lutz, *Chinese Politics and Christian Missions: The Anti-Christian Movements of 1920-28* (Notre Dame: Crossroads, 1988).

<sup>25</sup> Robert T. Handy, "The American Religious Depression, 1925-1935" *Church History* 29 (March 1960): 3-16; George Marsden, *Fundamentalism in American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford, 1980)

Christian movements in China and the Chinese diaspora in two ways. First, as mentioned earlier, against the charges of being an anachronistic opiate of the people, she reiterated her convictions that Christianity was the key for the national salvation of China.

Secondly, she became convinced that an independent Chinese church offered the only hope for Chinese Protestants to break free of their dependency upon white Christians. An indigenous Chinese Christianity which truly served the interests of the Chinese people was needed. Over the next two decades, as she wrestled with the New York City Baptist missionary society, she became convinced that the mission and community center must be controlled by the Chinese themselves.

Before the Great Depression hit New York City, Lee cooperated with the regional and national Baptist mission societies. In 1926, monies raised from the Chinese community in memory of Rev. Lee To were combined with mortgages given by the American Baptist Home Mission Society to purchase 21 Pell Street. This property was in need of major repairs, so the interested parties decided to wait until more monies were raised before renovating it. Soon, it was decided that the Pell Street property was not adequate for the kind of mission and community service center envisioned.<sup>26</sup> Thus, in 1930, through the support of a wealthy benefactor and on Lee's own initiative, a stock company was created to purchase a better property on Mott Street - the restaurant where Lee To had died. It was hoped that the proceeds from the sale of the Pell Street property would generate enough income to make necessary renovations for the new Mott Street property.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Correspondence and records detailing the complex series of business transactions can be found in both branches of the American Baptist Historical Society Archives. The G. Pitt Beers files (group 4, box 7) in the Valley Forge branch (ABHS-VF) contains records pertaining to the American Baptist Home Mission Society's involvement. The New York City Baptist Mission Society files (General File C), located in the Rochester branch (ABHS-R) were not completely organized when I examined them.

<sup>27</sup> In order to purchase the 7-9 Mott Street property without placing the NYC Baptist Mission society at risk, E. L. Ballard, who contributed \$17,000 to the Chinese mission in 1927 helped Mabel Lee to form a stock company, the Mazet Realty Corp., where his contributions constituted the society's shares. E. L. Ballard to Charles H. Sears, 23 May 1930. ABHS-R, General File C, Folder 1.

Unfortunately, shortly after the purchase, the Depression struck New York City mercilessly. As the value of properties plummeted in the early 1930s, the New York City Baptist Mission Society wanted to sell the Pell Street property and take their losses (which included the monies raised from the Chinese community). At this point, Lee saw an opportunity to buy out the Baptist city mission society. She pooled her family's wealth and business profits and took the financial burdens of the Pell Street property off the hands of the city mission society on the condition that the property's title be transferred to the Chinese church. The mission society was initially amenable to this proposal, but later reneged. As attempts to transfer the title of the building failed, Lee's frustration with the society's unwillingness to relinquish control began to simmer.

Other developments in the 1930s created unremitting aggravation for Lee. Since 1914 the church work was supported jointly by Baptists and Methodists. Lee disliked working with the Methodist missionary superintendent. When the Methodists withdrew from the work in 1932, it gave greater control over the mission to Lee but at a greatly reduced level of denominational financial support.<sup>28</sup> Her later efforts to hire additional missionaries from the Baptists were stonewalled on account of budgetary limitations. Overworked and resentful, Lee felt - correctly as it would turn out - that she would never be relieved of the mission work. By 1936, the Pell Street property was renovated and the church rededicated. Though she was ready to move on, Hu Shih's encouragement kept her at the helms of the mission and community center for the rest of her life.

During the 1930s, fearing a loss control over the work, Lee rejected opportunities to unite the Chinese mission with other Protestant denominational efforts. With her family fortune bound to the mission and with China being an increasingly dangerous place to live in the 1930s, Lee could not simply abandon the mission work. But this

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<sup>28</sup> C. H. Sears to Eugene C. Carder, 27 Feb. 1932. ABHS-R, General File C, Folder 2? [1st Chinese Baptist Mission Church of NY, 1932-1939; Chinese Christian Center].

created tensions between Lee and the younger members of the church.<sup>29</sup> Eventually the church would witness the gradual exodus of the second generation who sought other churches that more relevantly addressed their concerns. By the end of the 1930s, Lee's idealism regarding the establishment of an independent Chinese church eroded into a personal struggle to protect her real estate investments.

During the Second World War, most of the Chinese boys that she nurtured left the mission to support the war effort or to find greater opportunities in other cities. More concerned about integrating into American life, a new generation of younger Chinese Protestants found her ties to Chinatown to be a part of a fading and forgettable past.<sup>30</sup> Dwindling membership fueled Lee's frustration and accelerated her disillusionment with her earlier Protestant vision.

In 1944, after the death of Charles Sears, the longtime executive minister of the New York City Baptist Mission Society, Lee decided to wrest the title of church property away. By 1954, the church title was finally vested in the Chinese congregation. In the 1950s and 1960s, Mabel had complete control over the church property. The mission and

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<sup>29</sup> Evelyn Lee was a young woman whom Mabel Lee, with the assistance of Charles Sears, helped send through Denison College in the early 1930s. Upon her return, she was led a group of young Chinese men and women who pressed for a federalizing of denominational missions in New York City. Mabel Lee was opposed to this plan and gained the support of Sears to renovate the Pell Street building instead. While the younger people and the denominational executives favored union work (they had succeeded in Chicago, Philadelphia, and Boston), Mabel Lee was the chief obstacle. See Evelyn Lee to Board of Directors (NYC Baptist City Mission Society) 20 Mar. 1935; "Confidential memo to members of Special Committee in matter of policy of Society on Chinese work," Charles H. Sears, 15 Mar. 1935; "Minutes of Special Committee in matter of policy of Society on Chinese work," 18 Mar. 1935; C. H. Sears to Fred B. Newell, 3 May 1925. All located in ABHS-R, General File C, Folder 7 [Chinese Christian Center. Interdenominational correspondence]. Eight years later, Lee remained an obstacle: "Dr. Sears had always been very frank about all problems connected with Dr. Mabel Lee and your work. We know how he was caught in a tangled web. We know also that nothing could ever persuade Dr. Lee to enter into cooperation with anybody and we feel very badly about this." Theodore F. Savage to Stanely B. Hazzard, 20 May 1943 ABHS-R, General File C, Folder 3 [Chinese Baptist Mission 1927-1949 New York City Baptist Mis. Soc.]

<sup>30</sup> Studies that trace the changes in New York Chinatown: Renqiu Yu, *To Save China, To Save Ourselves: The Chinese Hand Laundry Alliance of New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992); Julia I. Hsuan Chen, "The Chinese Community in New York: A Study in Their Cultural Adjustment, 1920-1940" (Ph.D. dissertation: American University, Washington, D.C., 1941).

social service center at last belonged to Mabel Lee and the Chinese community. But this victory was costly. In the years since the church became independent, the First Chinese Baptist Church became a congregation with much property, few members, and no identity or vision.

### **Conclusion:**

The story of Chinese Christians between the two World Wars is one of sacrificing a distinct religious identity in order to become socially useful. In China, however, the Church was rejected and perceived to be useless for national or social salvation. While many Chinese Christians attained high levels of social and political prestige, they chose to downplay or reject their Christian identities for the sake of the nation. Hence, elitist Chinese Christianity was often reduced to mere morality. Theologically conservative Chinese Christians, on the other hand, articulated clear and distinct identities often at odds with ecumenical Christianity and the nation-state (even though they were culturally Chinese). Yet, this brand of Christianity not only survived into the post-war period, but also became its dominant expression since 1970.<sup>31</sup>

In the United States, while mainline Protestants were increasingly preoccupied with their position of dominance, Chinese churches were ignored. Even prior to the Second World War, increasing pressure was placed on Chinese (and other racial-ethnic) Christians to assimilate into the mainstream and to shed their ethnic identities. While second generation Chinese Christians were willing to integrate and cooperate with their denominational leaders, their parents - nurtured in the soil of anti-Western nationalism - continued to hold out desperate hopes that Christianity would be accepted by their fellow Chinese and the modern world.

Mabel Lee's interstitial career reflected that aspiration. Unlike her father, she

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<sup>31</sup> Xi Lian. *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China* (Yale University Press, 2010).

believed that an independent Chinese Christianity would be accepted by modern Chinese society. She devoted her life to that purpose but her vision was rejected. Indeed, she was a woman who lived at the wrong time in American history. Despite her eloquence, her racial identity hindered her from becoming as prominent as Pearl Buck. Her gender hindered her aspirations of becoming as influential as Hu Shih or T. V. Soong. Like her fellow nationalist and socially progressive Chinese Christians, all she could do was watch helplessly as history raced past her.