Accommodating the Chinese: The American Hospital in China, 1880-1920

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Thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the
Departments of Asian Studies and Public Health
University of Adelaide
November 2003
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ABSTRACT

In 1921 a medical missionary to China, Harold Balme, wrote:

prior to the introduction of modern medicine into China there was nothing in the whole country that was at all analogous to the western hospital.2

Ralph Crozier’s view, that “the most conspicuous institution brought by the medical missionaries was, of course, the hospital” was echoed by Karen Minden thirty years later in the 1990s.3 All imply that the transfer of the hospital was both one-way and complete; that is, it was transplanted and flourished like an exotic species of flora. This dissertation argues that this was not the case. Firstly, there was no such thing as a typical missionary hospital: each had its own distinctive character. Secondly, missionary hospitals differed from their European and American counterparts in many significant respects. Thirdly, even when an institution is imposed (as it may be in a purely colonial context) the transfer always involves varying degrees of negotiation, persuasion and adaptation by both parties. It is rarely simple or exclusively one-way. And lastly, the late-empire hospitals established under Chinese auspices (government and local charity), rather than being inspired exclusively by missionary models as is implied in the statements above, also had indigenous precursors.

This dissertation takes as its subject matter the history of Protestant missionary hospitals in China during the period of most rapid expansion of the missionary enterprise: c1880 to c1920. The focus, rather than being on the medicine practised in them, is on those aspects of the hospital which have been largely overlooked to date: their architecture, financing, staffing and administration.

The aim of this study is to discover in what respects the late nineteenth-century American

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hospital in China was different from its counterpart in America; in particular, the differences that can be attributed to it being in China, among the Chinese. The notion of sinicisation – the adoption and sponsoring of Chinese culture and institutions – provides the main theme of this thesis. I seek to answer the question, to what extent, and in what ways, was the Western hospital sinicised?

The history of hospitals in China remains largely unexplored to date so, rather than centering on a single source, person or institution, this study is both broad and comparative: broad, to provide a structure for putting together and telling a large story and comparative so that the distinctiveness of the hospital in China is made clear.