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by
Jessie G. Lutz

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Mission Dilemmas: Bride Price, Minor Marriage, Concubinage, Infanticide, and Education of Women

Not long after China became open to American visitors in the 1970s, a colleague of mine went to China. I was, of course, eager to hear about his findings and somewhat disappointed when he stated that the longer he stayed in China the more complex and diverse it seemed. He observed much that contradicted previous images. About the only immediate conclusion he had reached was that it was unwise to generalize about China.

Sometimes, it seems, that the pioneer Protestant missionaries had somewhat similar experiences. They departed for China with negative, but broadly painted images. China was heathen, and therefore, other; as heathen, it was inferior to the Christian West. It was a country where superstition reigned; women were illiterate and oppressed; infanticide, footbinding, and concubinage prevailed. Mid-nineteenth-century Protestant missionaries perhaps came closer to purveying Orientalism as defined by Edward Said than any other propagandists of China to the West. China would never attain an advanced civilization until the female half of the population was lifted out of degradation, and this could be accomplished only through stimulus coming from outside. Many of the women's mission societies founded during the second half of the century defined their special task as converting the mothers in heathen lands and thereby elevating women to the status

enjoyed by women in the West. Because women were by nature more susceptible than men to religious emotion, because they were peculiarly capable of self-sacrifice, they should employ their nurturing talents among the subjugated women of Africa and Asia.¹

Yet, the longer the missionary resided in China, the more exceptions to his images he found, the more complex seemed the process of altering China's social practices. Despite diversity, the Chinese social fabric was tightly woven. Certainly, the patrilineal, patriarchal, patrilocal society was the ideal. There were, indeed, secluded, subservient wives with bound feet and widows who remained chaste even if they were in their teens or twenties when their husbands died. Ignorance in a woman was considered desirable by many, and a negative self-image characterized many women. When missionaries queried women on the catechism, they were apt to respond that they were stupid, incapable of learning.

The woman of the inner chamber, however, was an ideal beyond the realm of the possible for the majority of Chinese. Well-to-do gentry and merchant families might achieve such, and footbinding, though not seclusion, was widespread in north China. The early Protestant missionaries, however, were working in southeast China among laborers, peasants, and petty traders and artisans. Poverty did not permit seclusion of their women; they were needed to help their husbands in the shops, to work in the fields at planting and harvesting time, and to supplement the family income in other ways, mending clothes, spinning, selling dumplings, or even begging. They had to fetch water, wash

clothes in the river, and gather brush for fuel. They visited temples to pray for a son or for a relative's recovery from illness. Cramped housing meant that a great deal of living took place outside the house: meals might be eaten on the doorstep; children played in the streets, and women sewed and mended outside where there was light. They sometimes forged close friendships with other women in their age cohort and could occasionally use public shaming against an abusive husband. However desirable for a good marriage, footbinding was a luxury many poor women could not afford. Especially this was true in southeast China with its minorities and trading links with southeast Asia; furthermore, this region had never been as fully integrated into the Confucian tradition as the north. For families at this economic level, the boundaries between inner (*nei*) and outer (*wai*) were, of necessity, blurred and permeable.²

Slave girls (*niu zai*), infanticide, minor marriage, concubinage, and bride price, there were. Missionaries were in agreement that these were heathen customs that must be eliminated; Christians could not practice them. Even today we would concur that these are lamentable institutions that degrade women. It was also true that no public schools were available to women in nineteenth-century China, and we can agree with the missionaries on the desirability of women's education.

Even so, change proved to be a difficult process, often stirring up opposition and enmity. The adoption of little daughters-in-law, purchase of servant girls, abandonment or destruction of new-born girls, and early marriage were part of complex social and economic patterns; more often than not, they were rooted in

poverty. Ending any of these practices could create real hardship and disrupt family life. Sometimes they almost seemed to be the lesser of numerous evils. The frequency in anti-Christian literature of allegations of sexual promiscuity and perversion by missionaries indicates the emotion aroused by attempts to alter women's status.³ Even if the authors deliberately employed salacious sexual references because of their inflammatory nature, there was real fear that changes would undermine Confucian, patrilineal traditions. As for the goals and content of women's education, a consensus did not exist despite agreement on the desirability of such education. Missionaries, in their attempts to set standards of conduct for converts, faced a dilemma, or more accurately, a series of dilemmas.

Missionaries had come to China to save souls from damnation. They had come to bring salvific Christianity to the heathen. As Andrew Walls has often reminded us, however, pure Gospel is never transmitted; human beings are the transmitters and interpreters.⁴ And missionaries were children of their age. Christianity in Western dress, or more specifically Protestantism, was for them Christianity. Western Christendom was civilization, the base line against which Chinese civilization was judged. The three C's, Christianity, commerce, and civilization, were interwoven; they were the source of Western progress and power. Even if numerous missionaries learned to appreciate Chinese achievements in art, literature, and philosophy, they could not abandon their faith in the uniqueness and superiority of Christianity so long as they remained evangelists. Few were capable of permitting Chinese to make their own interpretation of the Gospel message.

They might gain greater understanding of Chinese values and mores and of Chinese opposition to change, but tolerance was different from acceptance. They might develop individual friendships and cease to view these Chinese as simply souls to be saved. The relationship, however, remained that of teacher-pupil, truth knower and disciple. Yet another complication was the fact that most missionaries were beholden to their home boards, and Western board members lacked the leavening experience of residing in China. Even when missionaries sought compromises or *modus operandi*, patrons in the West often vetoed them.

Let's look at some of the complexities of the missionary attempts to introduce education for women and to alter practices considered degrading to women. We can best do so by examining the voluminous diaries, letters, and reports of Protestant missionaries held at the Day Missions Library of Yale Divinity School, the Archives of the Council for World Mission at SOAS, London, and the Basel Mission Society Archives. Thanks to the expert curators of these archives, their sources are well preserved and easily accessible.

Secondary wives, or if you will bigamy, would seem a relatively straightforward issue. Even if an American male recently defended polygyny as ordained by God, most of us accept the legitimacy of monogamy. One husband or one wife is about all we can handle. But consider the case of Zhang Fuxing, a successful Basel evangelist and a lineage elder in northeast Guangdong during the 1850s and 1860s.⁵ His mediational skills were frequently called upon in quarrels between lineage branches, and his commanding personality often enabled him to protect

fellow converts when they were attacked by fellow lineage members. He had lost his one son and since his wife suffered from chronic illness, there was little likelihood that he would have another. Having acquired land and possessions, he could afford a second wife. He brought a younger woman into his household. His congregation did not take exception and it was a year or two before Basel missionaries in Hong Kong learned of Zhang's action via a convert trained in the Basel middle school. In 1862 Basel decided to send a Western missionary, Philipp Winnes, to investigate the situation and to instruct and baptize members of the Christian community, which had already existed for almost a decade.

Zhang was unrepentant. When reproached, he cited the Old Testament example of Abraham, who took the maid servant Hagar to bed in order to produce a male heir. Non-Christians often predicted that disaster would rain upon those who neglected the ancestors, and Zhang pointed out that heathens interpreted his childlessness as a punishment of the gods for abandoning them. He was ridiculed as an unlucky man without sex life and without an heir. For having failed to fulfill his family obligation to produce a son to carry on the family line, he was criticized as unfilial. Producing a son would allay such criticism and restore his authority as a lineage elder and his ability to protect his converts. The secondary wife indicated that she had nowhere to go and pleaded that she not be returned to her family, where she would be unwelcome. Instead of immediately excommunicating Zhang, Winnes simply excluded Zhang from Holy Communion. After returning to Hong Kong and consulting with the senior Basel missionary Rudolf Lechler, Winnes

joined Lechler in sending Zhang a letter dismissing him as a preaching assistant on the grounds that he had proved himself unworthy.

Aware that the home board had difficulty in understanding his actions, Winnes tried to explain. “The Honorable Committee has expressed its wonderment over the fact that I have not immediately expelled the man, for his deed is contrary to the Holy Scriptures and must be treated accordingly.”⁶ The Wuhua Christian community, Winnes stated, would not have supported excommunication. They did not regard the taking of a second wife for the sake of producing a son as a serious crime; nor, apparently, did his wife oppose the move. Before bringing the girl into his household, Zhang had consulted with the church elders, pointing to examples from the Bible to justify his decision. Finally, the Wuhua Christians needed Zhang to defend them, particularly with the recent rise in persecution. The people would remain loyal to Zhang whatever Winnes’ public declaration, and precipitate action would only split the Christian community. Winnes assured the board that Zhang would misstep again and then it would be possible to excommunicate him. Such an argument was totally unacceptable to the Basel home committee, which insisted that Zhang be immediately excluded from the Christian community. Resolution came only with the death of Zhang’s first wife in 1864 and Zhang’s “remarriage” to his second wife in a public ceremony before the assembled congregation. By her, he had three sons and four daughters.

The church, of course, never accepted multiple marriage even though concubinage continued to be an issue. Some converts fulfilled their desire for an

heir by resorting to the Chinese practice of adopting a son, preferably a nephew, or adopting a husband for one daughter. Some who desired a secondary wife for whatever reason simply defied the church, sometimes letting their association with formal Christian institutions lapse. Included were such prominent Christians as Wu Tingfang, ambassador to the United States, Chan Oi-ting, first Chinese consul-general to Havana, and Sun Yat-sen. Others, such as Chiang Kai-shek, had clandestine concubines. Until recently, divorce has not been a favored option.

Footbinding for many Westerners was the most conspicuous indicator of the oppression of Chinese women and yet its abolition proved to be less controversial than discontinuance of concubinage or the taking of secondary wives.⁷

Abandoning footbinding entailed fewer ramifications involving social values. Already, several segments of the population did not engage in footbinding: the Hakka, the Tibetans, the Mongols, and many of the Manchus, plus peasant women who were obliged to work in the rice fields. The campaign against footbinding merits attention, nevertheless, because it is illustrative of the cross cultural nature of many social reform movements in China. As Kwok Pui-lan has noted in *Chinese Women and Christianity, 1860-1927*, the initial stimulus often came from missionaries, but Chinese made significant contributions in terms of leadership and action.⁸ The missionary community itself was divided over the propriety of launching a campaign against footbinding. Women missionaries in their work with mothers and daughters witnessed the pain inflicted, so that they tended to favor abolishing the custom and to insist that unbinding the feet be made a condition of

admission to parochial girls' schools. Certain Western doctors questioned the wisdom of interfering with a Chinese tradition if it were not morally wrong. Other physicians argued, on the contrary, that deforming one's body given by God was a sin and should be outlawed. At the general conference of Protestant missionaries in 1877, the majority agreed simply to discourage the practice.⁹



"Tsicheo Girls' School, 1906" - Manly Papers, YDSL RG 182

Three years earlier, in 1874, some sixty Chinese Christian women had gathered at a Xiamen church to discuss the issue of footbinding. Sponsored by

John Macgowen of LMS and his wife, they founded the *Jie chanzu hui* (Anti-footbinding society).¹⁰ The organization relied mainly on persuasion, notably, encouraging church members not to bind their daughters' feet. Huang Haishang, a prominent Methodist minister in Fuzhou, collaborated with Mrs. S. L. Baldwin in writing five long essays criticizing footbinding.¹¹ In other sections of China, Chinese pastors and evangelists published articles condemning footbinding and prevailed upon their wives, Bible women, and teachers to set an example by unbinding their feet. Progress was slow, however, for unbinding one's feet was also painful, and parents were fearful lest big feet damage their daughters' marital prospects. For a woman to defy custom and ignore the criticism of relatives took fortitude and courage. The Christian community did not yet provide whole-hearted support.

By the turn of the century opinion was shifting among reformist leaders as well as Christians. A nationwide movement became possible. Zhang Zhidong, Kang Youwei, and Liang Qichao condemned the custom as harmful to both women and the nation. Prominent Christians such as Dr. Hu Jinying and Dr. Shi Meiyu (Mary Stone), two of China's first Western-trained female physicians, had natural feet and supported the campaign by publicizing the unbinding of feet by adult women. Alicia Little, wife of an English merchant in Shanghai, founded the *Tianzuhui* (Natural foot society) in 1895, traveled through the country and founded branch societies among Chinese women in many cities. More girls' parochial schools and even a few private schools in large cities made natural feet a condition

of admission; bound feet, it was contended, were a concrete symbol of the oppression of women; educated women did not engage in such practices. In 1902 Empress Dowager Ci Xi issued an edict banning footbinding. The tradition waned quite quickly, first among educated urban women and then among rural women. Christianity had served as a moral force empowering Christian women to come out in public against the practice, while changes in the attitudes of gentry reformers provided the necessary national support.

The sale of slave girls, infanticide, and minor marriage were all a consequence of poverty, a course of action resorted to with reluctance. The priority accorded sons also contributed to the relatively high incidence of these practices among the poor. According to Carl Smith, the 1921 campaign to ban the purchase of slave girls was the first time that Hong Kong Chinese Christians as a group had initiated a reform movement.¹² The movement was noteworthy also for the active role women played and for the enlistment of labor unions in the cause. Leadership and support came from churches and also from the YMCA and the YWCA under Mrs. Ma Ying-piu. Parents with too many mouths to feed sometimes sold a young daughter to a well-to-do family seeking a servant. The girl became the property of her new family, though it was expected that the owners would find a husband for her when she came of marriageable age; her children would not be slaves. Though some families treated the servant well and she even became a “little sister” (*niu zai*) to the family daughters, the custom lent itself to abuse. The slave girl was subject to the whims of her mistress and the sexual demands of males in the family. If

mistreated, she had little recourse.

Opposition to the Anti-Niu Zai Society came principally from wealthy Chinese merchants, landowners, and professionals, though a number of well-to-do, prominent Christians supported the campaign. The opponents of abolition argued that the girls were saved from starvation or life as a beggar or prostitute; they were much better off in the home of their owners where they were assured of food and clothing. Furthermore, the slave status was only temporary until the girl reached the proper age for marriage. The natal parents received money to tide them over a crisis while the purchaser acquired a maid. Since the Hong Kong government depended on the elite in governance of the Chinese populace and since the government did not ordinarily interfere with long-standing Chinese customs, the Hong Kong administration was reluctant to take action. Officials maintained that the girls were sold as domestic servants, not as slaves, and that they had the same legal protection as if they were living with their parents. Slavery, they stated, was illegal in Great Britain and did not exist in Hong Kong. *Anti-niu zai* proponents and even some British jurists found the arguments disingenuous. At mass meetings organized by Christian groups and labor unions government officials and business leaders came under severe questioning.

News of the anti-*niu zai* movement reached the House of Commons and the Secretary of State for Colonial Affairs, Winston Churchill. In March 1922 the Colonial Affairs Office ordered the Hong Kong government to undertake investigations leading toward abolition. Opponents of abolition resorted to stalling

tactics. The practice should be eradicated gradually as opportunities for the girls' employment opened up; a society should oversee and protect the slave girls; an industrial school to train the girls should be established. Public meetings, some of which became unruly, continued. Activists had been in touch with the Canton government then under Guomindang control; putting further pressure on the Hong Kong administration, the Southern government had issued a proclamation abolishing the *niu zai* system in March 1922. Women's groups in England publicized the issue. The Colonial Office grew adamant in insisting that the Hong Kong governor go forward with a bill outlawing the practice. Despite vehement opposition by the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and the governor's own condemnation of venomous attacks on the Chinese community by ignorant persons, the governor had no choice but to obey the instructions of the Colonial Secretary. A bill forbidding the purchase of slave girls was passed by the Hong Kong Legislative Council in February 1923.

The campaign had created divisions within the Chinese Hong Kong community and had broken with the tradition that the Hong Kong government follow a hands-off policy regarding Chinese customs, leaving the Chinese to police themselves. Chinese Christians, on the other hand, had gained a sense of community and of their power potential. Women had entered the public arena and had honed their organizational skills. It would be naive to think that employment of slave girls ended immediately with a legal ruling. Ways of subverting the law existed and were utilized. On the mainland, the purchase of servants continued well

into the twentieth century. Maxine Hong Kingston in *The Woman Warrior* records, for example, that her mother, who had graduated from To Keung School of Midwifery in 1835, bought a slave girl to help her in her practice.¹³ Even today, echoes of the custom persist in the widespread practice of employing Filipino maids by Hong Kong and Taiwan families; investigations have brought to light numerous instances of abuse.¹⁴

For families at the subsistence level, the birth of a daughter could present the choice of infanticide or minor marriage, that is, betrothal of the infant and transferral of her to the household of her future husband. One Christian inquirer whose wife had just given birth to a girl consulted a Chinese evangelist. God has given you the daughter, the preacher said; you must not kill her. If you can't afford to raise her, then give her to another family so that their son will have a wife. "Very well," replied the father, "it shall be as you wish, but if you had not been here, the girl would not have remained alive."¹⁵ In another instance, the wife of a geomancer killed her new-born daughter and immediately adopted a baby girl to suckle with the goal of securing a future wife for her son. Interesting is the fact that the wife did this on her own initiative while her husband was away. The actual betrothal, however, awaited the husband's return.¹⁶ Infanticide was officially forbidden in China, but without alternatives, impoverished parents continued to resort to the measure, and the government was powerless to prevent it.

Though infanticide was officially forbidden in China, impoverished parents without alternatives continued to resort to the measure, and the government was

powerless to prevent it. Infanticide was either carried out almost immediately after birth in the privacy of the home or the newborn was abandoned. In some cities there were even “baby towers” where abandoned infants could be deposited.¹⁷ Since Christian converts were forbidden to commit infanticide, more than one missionary had infants brought to him with the request that he adopt the baby or find a home for it. On three occasions, Ye Huangsha, wife of a preacher and an evangelist in her own right, brought a new-born infant to E. J. Eitel for placement in the Berlin Foundling Home.¹⁸ Meanwhile, she and other Christian women exerted pressure on the Basel mission to find a more permanent solution. Though the Basel mission did begin to subsidize the rearing of several unwanted children in the homes of Christian women, such a policy did not address the problem.

Chinese orphanages, subsidized by the government or philanthropic individuals, existed, but were far from sufficient. Many Christian societies, like the Berliner Frauen-Missionsverein für China, established foundling homes. Roman Catholic sisters in particular devoted themselves to rescuing abandoned girls to be raised as Catholics. Wang Yuchu of the London Missionary Society served as head of the Berlin Foundling Home for several years and campaigned ceaselessly among both Chinese and Westerners for establishment of charitable homes.¹⁹ Even the foundling homes and orphanages were palliatives which could save only a fraction of the abandoned or unwanted girls. The orphanages, furthermore, became a source of misunderstanding and even hostility among Chinese. Since many of the abandoned infants were close to death at the time they were obtained, the death rate

among them was extraordinarily high. Also, with dozens of babies crowded into inadequate facilities, infectious diseases could sweep through the nursery killing most of its occupants. Only 3 to 6 per cent of those entering Catholic orphanages survived, according to John-Paul Wiest.²⁰ Such statistics, understandable under the circumstances, gave rise to tales of sisters gouging out the eyes of babies to make medicine, and the rumors could not be laid to rest despite denials and inspections. They fed anti-Christian sentiment so that orphanages were favored targets in anti-Christian riots. Mission societies were no more able to eradicate infanticide than the Chinese government. Propaganda might deter a few parents, but a rising standard of living seemed to be the only solution. Among the tiny Christian minority, education and/or mission employment did enable many to abandon a custom that was universally considered regrettable.



“Orphanage in Peking” - Archives of the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia, YDSL RG 11

Minor marriage, a possible alternative to infanticide, offered a number of advantages to poor parents intent on continuing the family line. Since there was an imbalance in the sexes with girls in short supply, a young girl coming into her fertile years commanded a high bride price. Adopting a little daughter-in-law cost little more than a chicken and a bottle of wine to give the natal parents. Betrothal was deemed binding except in extraordinary circumstances, so the adoption assured a bride for the son, while consummation of the marriage could be arranged later without the expense of a go-between and costly marriage feast. The adopting family would soon have the services of a maid, and the young girl, it was hoped, would be socialized into the family with minimal friction. The parents who gave up the girl did not have to provide a dowry and they were relieved of rearing a child who would enter another homestead almost as soon as she became a productive member of the household. Like the *niu zai* custom, the practice could lead to abuse. The child could be overworked and the future mother-in-law could be cruel, but at least the family had a stake in rearing her to adulthood.

For Western Christians, a proper marriage meant the union of two consenting adults; the home boards and the Western missionaries, furthermore, desired that converts marry only fellow Christians in order to create the Christian families considered the backbone of the church. In 1862, for example, the Basel home board forbade Christians to marry non-Christians except under special circumstances. Missionaries residing in China and aware of the shortage of Christian women assented so long as the escape clause existed. For the time being

a direct confrontation with Basel was avoided and the escape clause was regularly invoked. More serious was Basel's opposition to the purchase of wives (bride price), the adoption of little daughters-in-law, and lengthy engagements. Disobeying Basel's prohibition of these practices would warrant excommunication. Chinese Christians as well as many missionaries considered the board rules unreasonable. The policies, they said, demonstrated a lack of understanding of the Chinese scene; Basel's regulations were not only unrealistic; they were unenforceable. The missionaries petitioned the Basel committee to reconsider and in 1882 the board agreed to permit betrothal of little daughters-in-law so long as they remained in the homes of their natal parents. Such a restriction, of course, negated the benefits of early betrothal. Many Chinese Christians and resident missionaries worked out compromise solutions or simply ignored the regulations, but dissatisfaction over the home boards' refusal to allow Chinese to adapt to Chinese mores continued to rankle.

Rising standards of living among Christians and opportunities for education of girls in parochial schools would gradually reduce the need for minor marriage though it never disappeared. Despite a growing recognition that daughters can be wage earners contributing to the family budget, preference for sons remains strong in China even today, and the one-child family policy puts pressure on a couple to insure that the child be a male. Abortion of female fetuses has apparently gained preference over infanticide, especially in urban areas; in the countryside it is difficult to know what the actual practices are since infanticide is a private act. At

any rate, the imbalance of sexes continues and investigations by the Women's Federation seem to indicate that infanticide still occurs, particularly in cases where a daughter would mean the end of the family line and among the rural poor.²¹ More often than not a girl can marry up, while parents living in rural poverty complain of the difficulty of raising the necessary bride price to acquire a wife for their son.

It has been said that one major contribution of Protestant missions in China was the introduction of formal, public education for women. Agreement on the need for women's education was easier to achieve than consensus regarding the goals and nature of women's education, and, furthermore, changes in the perceptions of women and their roles necessitated changes in goals and curricula. Unanimity was never attained. During the twentieth century the needs of the state came to have high priority among Chinese, while Westerners eventually came to accept the development of the whole individual as desirable. Even so, the Social Gospel encouraged a heavy emphasis on social service. The early Protestant missionaries often wrote of uplifting of the oppressed women of China, but this vague goal did not mean that they were feminists in the modern sense. Equality of the sexes was not a concept held by either male or female missionaries, and male leadership prevailed in the church. Liberating Chinese women did include the right of women to enter the public sphere in their separate identity as women; it also included the idea of the sanctity of all souls and the prohibition of physical abuse. Perhaps as Alison R. Drucker has noted: "it was less disturbing to criticize another culture for injustice to women than to castigate one's own."²² Female missionaries

outside the constraints of their home society and only partially subject to the constraints of Chinese society felt freer to initiate and lead good works than they might have in the West. They were, as the Chinese labeled them, “Western she tigers,” an anomaly to the Chinese and a phenomenon not frequently encountered in the West.²³

Education of girls often began with a missionary wife instructing a few students in her home. Little thought had gone into planning a course of study or delineating long-term goals. More often than not, a Chinese tutor provided sufficient training in reading and writing for literacy, while the missionary wife taught religious studies, perhaps a little mathematics, and domestic skills such as sewing. In the absence of Chinese models or simply drawing on personal experience, the missionaries imported the techniques and structure of the West: formal classes, examinations, progression through the program until graduation. Early attempts at teaching English often led to the girls becoming mistresses or “protected women” of Western merchants,²⁴ so for a while the subject was not popular. Some evangelists saw no need for the girls to learn Chinese characters and offered only romanized Chinese. The missionary women naturally hoped that their pupils would convert to Christianity, and as the Christian community increased, they saw a need for educating the children of converts in a Christian environment. Ideally, the graduates would become the wives of Christians, establish a Christian household, and rear their children as Christians. Women, it was asserted, were the principal upholders of idolatrous rites in the home. Only by converting women to

Christianity could China become a civilized Christian society. A few talented or dedicated students might become assistants to the missionary wives in their teaching and evangelizing; others might become Bible women, who made contacts for the missionaries, taught Bible lessons and hymns to women in their homes, gathered audiences, and occasionally led meetings of women and children. For a widow, employment as a Bible worker could mean welcome release from a difficult position in the home of her in-laws, where she was often considered a burden.



Bible women with missionary Emily Hartwell - Emily Hartwell Papers, YDSL RG 8

Women were educated to fulfill roles, not to develop their fullest potential as individuals. Julia and Calvin Mateer, pioneer Protestant educators, believed that girls should not be educated beyond the modest expectations of the typical Christian; in school, they should spend as much time on learning to cook, sew, and

keep things clean as on mathematics and science.²⁵ Rudolf Lechler described his concept of a girl's education. "We have chiefly religious education in mind: the catechism, Biblical stories, songs and aphorisms." The curriculum should also instill "Christian discipline, order, and chastity through work oriented around cooking, house keeping, and field work. The latter was occasioned by the desire not to alienate them from their status as peasants."²⁶ The girls might be instructed in arithmetic, geography, history, and composition, but since "the girls need not know all that the boys have to learn, and have besides to learn women's work, the separation of boys and girls schools is to be recommended."²⁷

Parochial education for girls was nevertheless revolutionary in its implications, a fact not always appreciated by missionaries with little knowledge of Chinese tradition and a conviction of the superiority of Western mores and Christian ideals. Chinese, however, were quick to perceive formal education for education for women as a challenge to existing social structure, to widely accepted ideas about the role and status of women. Even such limited endeavors as the missionary wives' first classes for girls were not welcomed by most Chinese. They saw little need to educate women, and more importantly, they had no desire to see their daughters convert to Christianity or adopt Western mores. Attending school meant that the girls must either go out in public or board under the control of foreigners. Neither was considered desirable, especially since rumors about the sexual appetites of foreign males abounded. As a consequence, pupils in the first schools were either the daughters of converts, beggar children and other street girls,

or females from families so poor that they were willing to take the risk of conversion for the sake of being relieved of the care of an excess daughter.

In order to secure pupils, the pioneer girls' schools, had to provide free tuition, board, and sometimes clothing. Eliza Bridgman of the American Board, for example, opened a school for a few beggar girls in Beijing in 1864. For thirty years, the school gave primary training in the Chinese classics, Christianity, domestic science, and mathematics.²⁸ Enrollment remained low; averaging around eighteen pupils; the Chinese perception that education of girls was a waste of effort and the withdrawal of the girls as soon as they reached marriageable age contributed to the school's inability to retain students. In 1863 when Rudolf Lechler recruited girls among Christians in northeast Guangdong for Marie Lechler's school in Hong Kong, several fathers-in-law volunteered their little daughters-in-law. The girls would thereby be supported by the mission until they were old enough to fulfill their roles as wives and housekeepers. The rest of Marie Lechler's pupils were destitute children; several were blind beggars. The academic training was limited: elementary courses in reading, writing, and arithmetic, classes on the Bible, Christian teachings, and domestic skills took up at least half the school day. In deference to Chinese insistence on separation of the sexes, most schools were segregated.

Secondary education for women and eventually higher education became more feasible as Chinese reformers advocated women's education at the turn of the century and the Chinese government adopted a national school plan that included

education for women in 1903.²⁹ Then, it became possible for the parochial schools to attract girls from middle class families, achieve a higher retention rate, and found middle schools. Education of women, however, continued to be conceived of in terms of roles, that is, wives and mothers. New was the concept that literate wives and mothers would help strengthen the nation. Not only could they do a better job of training their sons, but information on hygiene and domestic science, plus physical education would enable them to bear and rear healthier babies. Education of women for their own individual development would be advocated by activists of the women's liberation movement during the 1920s, but was slow in gaining acceptance. Like individualism and individual rights in general, they gave way before the demands of nationalism.³⁰

Practice frequently overran theory, however. In this sphere, the parochial schools outpaced government institutions. Even during the nineteenth century, girls destined to become teachers in their alma maters were given extra training and a few of the missions had added secondary schools. The curricula of five representative Christian girls' schools in 1900 included Bible and religious studies, Chinese classics, mathematics, history and geography, and subjects in the sciences such as physics, chemistry, biology, and geology. Music and singing were taught in four schools, and two schools offered English as an optional subject.³¹ Institutional pride and ambition on the part of administrators led to rising educational standards and even dreams of college status.

Most of the Christian women's colleges did, in fact, evolve out of the early

primary schools. By 1895 Eliza Bridgman's few classes had grown to become Bridgman Academy and was beginning to offer work at the secondary level. Luella Miner, Eliza Bridgman's successor, steadily raised academic standards and broadened support among women's missionary societies in the West. The institution assumed the title North China Union College for Women and in 1909 graduated the first four students to have completed the full college course.³² The institution was later incorporated into Yenching University, which thereby became one of the early coeducational universities in China. Women's missionary societies in the U.S.A. and Great Britain were rapidly becoming major benefactors of women's parochial education abroad, and it was through their support that Hwa Nan was able to evolve out of several primary schools in Fujian.³³ Ginling, one of the few women's institutions to be founded as a college, had to offer preparatory courses for several years before it could open its doors to its first freshman class in 1915.³⁴

Even as segregated, lower-level institutions during the nineteenth century, the schools served as quasi-public stepping stones from inner to outer sphere for women. By the twentieth century unprecedented crossing of boundaries was occurring and was even becoming acceptable. In their courses the girls gained access to information, not just about Chinese history and literature, but Western geography and culture. The religion classes, though designed to inculcate Christian teachings, told of another civilization, another realm of the world, another history and chronology, and another value system. Intellectual horizons were being

broadened. Missionary wives might not be feminists, but they were fulfilling the roles of teachers, administrators, and promoters. Far from being confined to the inner chambers, they organized religious activities and voluntary services for the poor and needy; they itinerated to nearby settlements, sometimes with their husbands and sometimes only with Chinese assistants. By the late nineteenth century, an increasing number of single women with professional experience offered other role models; many of the volunteers were physicians, teachers, and social workers, for whom their specialized work was a form of evangelism.



First graduating class of Ginling College - Archives of the UBCHEA, YDSL RG 11

College students participated in the YWCA and Bible study circles where they learned to speak before an audience, to organize and lead meetings, and to keep financial and membership records. Administrators tried to inculcate an ideal of

service and self sacrifice in their pupils; they encouraged the students to organize Sunday schools for the children of the college workers, literacy classes for adult women, and relief for the poor.

Women were moving into the public arena even if gendered activities were the rule; they were assuming a new role as social housekeeper. “They thought of themselves as the housekeeper not merely of the home but also of society. The nation was seen as a macrocosm of the home that needed women’s special abilities to cope with human problems,” according to Ethel Klein.³⁵ Operating in their separate sphere, they were acquiring a sense of the worth and dignity of women. Laura Haygood, recruited as the first principal of *Zhongxi nüshu* (Sino-Western school for girls or McTyeire School), founded in 1892, hoped to give students the capacity to understand and serve both Chinese and Western cultural traditions. She expressed her dissatisfaction with traditional women’s education shortly before departing for China, “Why have we not told her [the student] that to grace her home, to make it bright and beautiful and good, is indeed womanly and wise, but for most of us need not, ought not, *must not* absorb all of love and time and mind? Why have we not made her feel that for her as truly as for her brother there is need of earnest, honest, thorough work, because the world has need of her?”³⁶ Laura Haygood would experience many frustrations as she tried to implement her goals in the restrictive Chinese environment, but her statement indicates the broadening of goals since the first parochial girls’ schools began in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Attending a church school sometimes meant a new physical mobility along with social mobility. The little daughters-in-law recruited by Lechler for education in Hong Kong would not have previously ventured more than a few miles from their natal village and that of their adopting family. Secondary schools were ordinarily located in market towns or larger urban centers. Transfer to a middle school, even if it were segregated by gender and even if the girls were insulated from outside contacts, brought new sights and sounds. Under pressure, primarily from Chinese, the schools offered English language courses and classes in Western literature. A number of exceptional students were able to go to Japan or to the West for special education. Among these were five who studied medicine in the United States under mission auspices. They returned to work initially in mission hospitals, but they were so successful in making Western medicine acceptable among Chinese women that increasing numbers of women patronized the hospitals and eventually even allowed treatment by male doctors. Many of the Chinese women physicians were able, in time, to develop their own practices and train their own assistants. One of Marie Lechler's blind girls was trained at the Philadelphia Institute for the Blind and became one of the first teachers of the blind in China.

For girls as well as boys, parochial schools provided a means of social mobility. Missionary educators of the nineteenth century did not intend to educate girls beyond their status, but relatively few graduates married farmers or laborers. Among the resource gems of the Day Missions Library are a couple of yearbooks from the Berlin Foundling Home. Data from these yearbooks illustrate the

significance of mission education in offering an exodus from poverty. Most of the children who came to the home were abandoned babies, infants saved from infanticide, beggars, or girls slated for sale as servants or prostitutes. The Berlin home's report for 1910 listed 94 former pupils who had married. Almost all had married Christians and of those whose husband's occupation was given, over half had married teachers, doctors, pastors, or mission assistants. Less than fifteen per cent had married farmers, workers, or artisans.³⁷ The numbers are few, but the statistics resemble those for graduates of other parochial elementary schools.



Exercise class at day school supervised by the Ginling College YWCA - Archives of the UBCHEA, YDSL RG 11

The Christian families so ardently desired by the missionaries and so vital to church stability and continuity were being established. One serendipitous sequel to

mission education for girls in southeast China was their popularity as wives for overseas Chinese. With their knowledge of English and Western mores, they could be an asset to overseas traders, and, in fact, the latter's demand for parochial school graduates as mates drove their bride price up so high that Christian parents protested that they could not afford wives for their sons. As already indicated, many of the schools steadily raised academic standards and ambitions. Teaching and educational administration were the most popular professions of graduates, though a significant proportion entered religious work or social service. A high percentage of the college alumnae gained advanced degrees, often from overseas universities.³⁸

Finally, the church itself should be mentioned as a stepping stone to the public sphere. Just as women had traditionally visited temples, so women left their homes to attend church service. As members of Christian congregations, however, they experimented with new social roles: organizing choir groups, teaching Sunday school, visiting the sick, holding women's prayer meetings, and so forth. Some became Bible women. Though these were gendered activities, women gained an enhanced sense of their ability. Women in the church formed a community which gave them the moral strength to participate in and even lead reform movements such as the anti-*niu zai* and anti-footbinding campaigns. Tensions, of course, remained. Though women formed the majority of church members and were the mainstays of congregations, church structure remained patriarchal. To some extent, Christianity was feminized, as in the role accorded Mary and in the emphasis on the

compassion of Jesus and his work among women.³⁹ But the basic androcentric bias of Christianity remains dominant.

Chinese Christians, like Christians throughout the world, continue to translate Christianity so that it has meaning and relevancy within their own cultural context. Western missionaries did provide a stimulus for change and offered alternatives from their own heritage; both were disruptive of Chinese tradition and not always welcome. Historical and economic transformations made reforms possible, but the Chinese themselves determined the character and extent of reform. Footbinding has disappeared, but the bride price survives, especially in rural China, and the practice probably will continue so long as there is a preference for sons and an imbalance of the sexes. The Filipino maids who serve in Hong Kong and Taiwan homes and the farm girls working for urban, well-to-do families on the mainland more nearly resemble indentured servants than slaves, but their lot is hard and their rights are few. Minor marriage is less favored than formerly, partly because required primary education has reduced the usefulness of little daughters-in-law as servants, but it has not disappeared among certain ethnic groups and certain poor segments of society. Among urban dwellers, divorce is now preferred over concubinage and infanticide has largely given way to birth control and abortion. Change has come more slowly in the countryside. Free access to schooling for both sexes is the goal of the government, but consistent underfunding of education has meant that few schools are, in actuality, tuition free. Since parents consider it more important to educate sons, girls are much less apt to graduate from

middle school or attend college than boys. Chinese society in general, along with the official church, is hierarchical and patriarchal. The home churches, on the other hand, are often under lay administration and here women often play leadership roles. Healing the sick and a personal relationship with God rather than doctrine or institutional structure, are dominant. Diversity characterizes China today despite the communist party's attempts at ideological control and social regulation.

Endnotes

1. By 1891 there were 34 American women's foreign mission societies with hundreds of branches; the societies altogether raised over one million dollars per annum and they supported 926 men and women abroad. Shirley S. Garrett, "Sisters All. Feminism and the American Women's Movement," in *Missionary Ideologies in the Imperialist Era: 1880-1920*, ed. By Torben Christensen and William R. Hutchison (Struer, Denmark: Christensens Bogtrykkeri, 1992), p. 222. The societies frequently published their own journals and the Day Missions Library of the Yale Divinity School holds many of these magazines: *Women's Missionary Friend*, *Women's Missionary Advocate*, *The Helping Hand*, *Women's Work*, for example. For detailed studies of women missionaries and the changing ideologies of women's missions, see Leslie A. Fleming, ed., *Women's Work for Women, Missionaries and Social Change in Asia* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989) and Patricia R. Hill, *The World their Household, the American Women's Foreign Mission Movement and Cultural Transformation, 1870-1920* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1985).

2. See Weikun Cheng, "Going Public through Education: Female Reformers and Girls' Schools in Late Qing Beijing," *Late Imperial China*, 21.1 (June 2000): 107-09.

3. One of the best known anti-Christian tracts was *Bixie jishi* (A record of facts to ward off heterodoxy). It was translated by Shandong missionaries under the title, *Death Blow to Corrupt Doctrines: A Plain Statement of Facts* (Shanghai, 1970). For discussions of the anti-Christian tradition, see Paul A. Cohen, *China and Christianity: The Missionary Movement and the Growth of Chinese Anti-foreignism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963) and Lu Shiqiang, *Zhongguo guanshen fanjiao di yuanyan, 1860-1874* (Causes behind the Chinese gentry-officials' hostility towards Christianity, 1860-1874) (Taipei: Academia Sinica, 1966).

4. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), pp. xvii, 7.

5. For biographical material on Zhang Fuxing, see Theodor Hamberg, "Halbjähriger Bericht des Missionars Th. Hamberg auf Hong Kong," January 1853, Archives of Basler Missionsgesellschaft, China: Berichte und Korrespondence, 1847-54 (hereafter BMG); A-1.2, no. 23; Heinrich Bender, "Lebensskizze des verstorbenen Tschong Fuk-hin," Tschongtshun, 18 June 1880, BMG, A-1.14, no.70; Otto Schultze, "Geschichte der Basler Missionsstation Tschongtshun zum 25 Oktober 1889," *ibid.*, 1889, A-1.23, no. 120. Also, Jessie G. and Rolland Ray Lutz, *Hakka Chinese Confront Protestant Christianity, 1850-1900* (Armonk NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1998), pp. 32-54.

6. Winnes, "Sieben Sonntagen in Tschong-lok," 10 April 1863, Lilong, BMG, A-1.5, no. 17.

7. Susan Mann, "Presidential Address: Myths of Asian Womanhood," *Journal of Asian Studies*, 59.4 (November 2000): 857-58.

8. Kwok, *Chinese Women* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), see esp. p. 101.

9. *Records of the General Conference of the Protestant Missionaries of China held at Shanghai, May 10-23, 1877* (Shanghai: Presbyterian

Mission Press, 1878). See esp. the speech of Alexander Williamson, p. 138.

10. Kwok, *Chinese Women*, p. 110.

11. Ryan Dunch, *Fuzhou Protestants and the Making of a Modern China, 1857-1927* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 33.

12. Smith, "The Chinese Church, Labour, Elites and the Mui Tsai Question in the 1920s," *A Sense of History* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Educational Publishing Co., 1995), pp 240-65.

13. Kingston, *Woman Warrior*, pp.90-97.

14. See Nicole Constable, *Maids to order in Hong Kong: stories of Filipina workers* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

15. Hamberg, "Halbjähriger Bericht," January 1853.

16. Gustav Gussmann, trans. and ed., "Selbstbiographie des Lai Hin lyam," *Nyenhangli*, 1877, BMG, A-1.12, no. 68; *ibid.*, 1878, nos. 84, 87.

17. For a picture of such a "baby tower" in Beijing, see the Papers of Bertha and Frank Ohlinger, Record Group 23, Day Missions Library.

18. Eitel to Inspector, Lilong, 1865, BMG, A-1.5, no 20.

19. For more on the career of Wang, see Zha Shijie, *Zhongguo Jidujiao renwu xiaozhuan* (Concise biographies of Chinese Christians), (Taipei: China Evangelical Seminary Press, 1983), pp. 39-43.

20. Wiest, *Maryknoll in China* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1988), p. 143.

21. Elisabeth Croll, *Changing Identities of Chinese Women* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1995), pp. 111-117.

22. Drucker, "The Role of the Y.W.C.A. in the Development of the Chinese Women's Movement, 1890-1927," *Social Service Review*, 53 (1979): 425.
23. See the discussion in Jane Hunter, *The Gospel of Gentility: American Women Missionaries in Turn-of-the-Century China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), pp. 174, 200, 214.
24. Smith, *A Sense of History*, pp. 266-275; also, Carl Smith, *Chinese Christians, Elites, Middlemen, and the Church in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 169-70.
25. Irwin Hyatt, *Our Ordered Lives Confess* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), p 83.
26. Lechler to Inspector, Pukak, 7 February 1856, BMG, A-1.3, no.50.
27. Lechler, "On the Relation of Protestant Missions to Education," *Records of the General Conference, 1877*, 166.
28. ABCFM, *Annual Report*, 1866, p. 132; Margaret E. Burton, *The Education of Women in China* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co, 1911), pp. 50-51, 55-57.
29. The first national plan in 1903 prescribed only primary education for girls and this was placed in the category of domestic instruction. Secondary education in form of normal schools was not included in the national blueprint until 1907.
30. Margery Wolf, *Revolution Postponed: Women in Contemporary China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985).
31. M. Melvin, "The curricula of five representative mission schools for girls in China," *Woman's Work in the Far East*, 21.1 (May 1900): 5-16, cited in Kwok, *Chinese Women*, pp. 107, 138.

32. *Yenching College, Peking, China, 1905-1921* (Promotional brochure, New Brunswick Theological Seminary); Miner, "Women's Work in Education," *China Mission Year Book*, 1910, pp. 299-300; Miner, "The Higher Education of Women," *ibid.*, 1917. pp. 384-85. By 1920 the school was known as Yenching College for Women.
33. ABCFM, *Annual Report*, 1882, pp. 56-57; "Hwa Nan College, A Statement of the Founder and First Principle, Miss Lydia A. Trimble," 1920 (typewritten MS; Yale Divinity School, Day Missions Library, United Board Papers).
34. *Ginling College, Report of the President*, 1915-16, p. 3; Matilda Thurston, "Ginling College," *Educational Review*, 10 (1918): 242-43; *Ginling College, a Six-Year Review*, 1915-1921 (Nanjing, 1921), Day Missions Library, United Board Papers..
35. Ethel Klein, *Gender Politics: From Consciousness to Mass Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 83, quoted in Kwok, *Chinese Women*, p. 108.
36. Heidi A. Ross, "'Cradle of Female Talent': The McTyeire Home and School for Girls, 1892-1937," in *China and Christianity from the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, ed. by Daniel H. Bays (Stanford: Stanford university Press, 1996), p. 212.
37. *Findelhaus Bethesda auf Hongkong*, 1910, pp. 32-37, Yale Divinity School Library, Special Collections, HR1046.
38. Jessie G. Lutz, *China and the Christian Colleges, 1850-1950* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), pp. 137-38.
39. See Kwok, *Chinese Women*, ch. 2, "The Feminization of Christian Symbolism."

