

## **Christian mission and education in China: Impact and lessons**

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### **Introduction**

My paper will look briefly at Christian missions in China, especially at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the early half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in terms of their impact on Chinese society and to draw some lessons for today.

There were many waves of Christian missions in China. One of the earliest missionaries were the Nestorians. During the Tang Dynasty, Alopen, the Persian Bishop, began the Nestorian mission in Chang-an in AD 635. There were converts but after about AD 845, religious persecution led to the suppression of Christianity in China.

Other waves of mission succeeded it: Franciscan missionaries were active from 1294 to 1368 during the Yuan Dynasty, under Mongol rulers. After the establishment of the Ming Dynasty however, Christian missionaries were again expelled from China.

In 1582, the Jesuit, Matteo Ricci tried to convert the imperial court where he was highly respected as a scholar. By 1605, Ricci claimed there were more than one thousand Chinese converts. The Pope, however, publicly criticized the Jesuits for being too acquiescent to Chinese culture and compromising gospel truth. In 1724, the emperor looked unfavorably at Christianity and China's three hundred churches were destroyed or confiscated.

In the 1840s, at the height of Western imperialism in Asia, China was defeated by the British in the so-called "Opium Wars". Britain had declared war on China after the latter had tried to stem the illegal opium trade from India that was undermining its economy. After its defeat at the hands of a militarily superior Britain, China was forced by unequal treaties to cede Hong Kong to the British. Besides the large-scale importation of opium from India, China had to tolerate the stationing of foreign troops on Chinese soil, concede extra-territorial rights to foreign powers and allow the entry of Christian missionaries. Thus, in Chinese perceptions, the spread of Christian missions in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries have been very closely entwined with the semi-colonization of China. Ships arriving in Chinese ports would unload opium on one side and biblical tracts on the other.

### **Education and the impact of the missionary movement**

The situation in China at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the last dynasty (Qing) was in rapid decline bore some similarities to the early 16<sup>th</sup> century in Europe. There was no educational system of public schools and learning was limited to wealthy families of merchants and city elites.

Poverty was widespread in China in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hunger and famine were commonplace. There were missionaries who went to remote rural areas to start schools and orphanages and this contributed to literacy among ethnic minorities. On the other hand, there were missionaries who believed that Christian higher education, especially the introduction of Western science and technology, would contribute to China's modernization.

Whether it was in the countryside or in the cities, the focus on education was very strong among all denominations. There was a proliferation of Christian mission schools, and western influence in education began to spread, especially after the revolution of 1911 when a Republican government emerged. In the 1920s, at the height of the missionary movement in China, records show that there were 130 denominations present.<sup>1</sup> During that era, there were at least 43 Protestant mission societies present in one single province, Guangdong (or Canton), which is near Hong Kong.

Mission schools were considered prestigious and the upper classes began sending their children to these schools. The large-scale involvement of Christian missions in education was reflected in the number of personnel employed in this task. In the case of the Protestant Episcopal China Mission, for instance, 75% of salaried personnel in churches were involved in education. The work of missionary societies in education and medicine thus became a stepping stone for the Christian Church to influence Chinese society.<sup>2</sup>

Christian schools and universities cultivated prominent personalities who exerted an influence in society especially during the Republican era (1911-1949). Prominent citizens included Madam Wu Yi Fang, the first woman principal of Ginling Women's College and one of only four women who signed the UN Charter, the Soong sisters, Christian scientists, ambassadors and Bishop K. H. Ting, the last Anglican bishop of China. Mission schools thus spread "Christian influence and presence in the upper echelons of society."<sup>3</sup>

### **Women and the missionary movement**

It should be emphasized that women in the missionary movement played a significant role during this historical period. Women missionaries were seen as necessary in the strategy to reach the Chinese people. In China, due to cultural norms, male missionaries could not interact with Chinese women and thus the

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<sup>1</sup> Wing-Hung Lam, *Chinese Theology in Construction*, Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1983, p 105

<sup>2</sup> Edward Yihua Xu, "The Protestant Episcopal China Mission and Chinese Society" in Philip L. Wickery, ed., *Christian Encounters with Chinese Culture: Essays on Anglican and Episcopal History in China*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2015, p 29.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

evangelical work among women was the responsibility of missionary women. By the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, major mission societies formally recruited single women as missionaries – the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society in 1858, the London Missionary Society (LMS) in 1875 and the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in 1887. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, women numerically dominated Christian missions in Asian countries: for instance, some 60 percent of British missionaries in the Indian subcontinent and in China were women.<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that “The education of ‘native’ girls and women had been a part of the British Protestant missionary enterprise in Asia from the early nineteenth century. From India (1800s) to the Straits Settlements (1820s), the treaty ports in China and Hong Kong (1840s) and Japan (1870s), mission schools for girls were set up soon after opportunities were made available.”<sup>5</sup>

Women missionaries were recruited so they could preach and convert “native women.” These Chinese women converts were then trained to be Bible women who were so effective in spreading the gospel, they reached thousands of women in a very short time.<sup>6</sup> The major duties of these bible-women included home visits, visits to women’s wards at a government hospital and female prison, evening meetings with women in churches and visits to villages. In this respect, schooling and education for girls and young women was a major contribution to the liberation of women *and* the growth of Christianity in China.

As the number of women missionaries increased and more Chinese women began to participate in church life, tensions in the church grew over the role and status of women. In Hong Kong, the important role of women led to the earlier ordination of women in the Chinese Anglican church. In 1944, Bishop R. O. Hall, then the Anglican bishop of Hong Kong and South China, ordained Li Tim Oi as a priest, claiming the shortage of clerical personnel during the war. She was the first woman to be ordained in the Anglican Communion.<sup>7</sup> After the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War ended, there were objections from Canterbury and other parts of the

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<sup>4</sup> Patricia P. K. Chiu, “Female Education and the Early Development of St. Stephen’s Church, Hong Kong (1865-1900s)” in Philip L. Wickeri, ed., *Christian Encounters with Chinese Culture: Essays on Anglican and Episcopal History in China*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2015, p 48.

<sup>5</sup> Patricia Chiu, op.cit., p 47.

<sup>6</sup> Christina Wong, “Church Hierarchy and Women’s Agency: A Case Study of the Subtle Continuation of Bible Women in the Hong Kong Anglican Church”, unpublished paper presented at an international academic conference “Christian Women in Chinese Society – The Anglican Story” held in Hong Kong June 26-27, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Philip L. Wickeri, “The Ordination and Ministry of Li Tim Oi: An Historical Perspective on a Singular Event”, unpublished paper presented at an international academic conference “Christian Women in Chinese Society – The Anglican Story” held in Hong Kong June 26-27, 2015.

church. Rev. Li finally withdrew from her position. Her priestly orders were restored only in 1984.

In the education of girls, women missionaries taught home economics, which was then the emphasis in girls' schools in the West. The original intent was to train good Christian wives for Christian men, to ensure the propagation of good Christian families. According to its critics, the teaching of home economics to Chinese women led to the institutionalization of domesticity.

However, the teaching of Home Economics, with its emphasis on hygiene and nutrition had a liberating impact when applied to the margins of society. In Ginling Women's College, in Nanjing, where it was taught, students were brought to visit families in the slums and poverty-stricken areas, to encourage hygienic practices and better nutrition. This exposed the students to the terrible conditions among the poor and led to the rise of social and political awareness of the revolutionary movement that was engulfing the entire country.<sup>8</sup>

### **The gospel message and the marginalized**

The gospel message was most appreciated and received at the margins of society: women who had been abused, former slave girls, abandoned children and ethnic minorities eventually joined the church. For those who attended mission schools, education and social engagement became instrumental in transforming their perspectives on what the church ought to be. In a study of St. Stephen's church in Hong Kong, Patricia Chiu has traced the movement against foot binding and slave girls in the church to its encounter and work with the socially marginalized.<sup>9</sup> Some women missionaries started vernacular schools that taught in Chinese. This approach proved effective in the specific social context. Missionaries acquired the Chinese language and built up strong connections with local women. The vernacular curriculum kept the girls in touch with their cultural roots. Thus, in some local congregations there were women who were not wives or mothers: the widowed Bible women and day school teachers who chose to remain single after resisting betrothal to non-Christians. "A Christian education provided them with a "position of usefulness" beyond their traditional domestic role."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Helen M. Schneider, "Raising the Standards of Family Life: Ginling Women's College and Christian Social Service in Republican China" in Hyaewool Choi and Margaret Jolly, *Divine Domesticities: Christian Paradoxes in Asia and the Pacific*. ANU Press, 2014. Available online at <http://press.anu.edu.au/apps/bookworm/view/Divine+Domesticities+Christian+Paradoxes+in+Asia+and+the+Pacific/11241/preface.xhtml>

<sup>9</sup> Patricia Chiu, op. cit., pp 63-64

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

The rise to prominence of women missionaries gave rise to missionary opposition to Chinese foot binding. Male missionaries often considered footbinding as a matter of conscience rather than a sin against God, but female missionaries vehemently opposed the custom.

Until 1945, slave girls or *mui tsais*, kidnapped and sold into domestic bondage or as concubines in wealthy families was still a practice throughout China. Through Christian education in schools, congregations in Hong Kong, for instance, began to take part in campaigns against this system, leading to its abolition. <sup>11</sup>

### **Christianity, Western imperialism and National Identity**

In many ways, the success of Christian education and mission schools contributed to the rise of anti-Christian sentiments that intensified in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

“The infamous volume, *The Christian Occupation of China*, published by the China Continuation Committee, fed the imagination of many who had been suspicious of the missionary enterprise in the country. This survey reported the numerical strength and geographical distribution of Christian activities in China. It recorded about 7,600 students in 265 mission middle schools scattered over nineteen provinces and 2,000 in mission colleges with sixty-six percent professing Christians. From 1907 to 1920 the student population in mission schools increased by over 300 percent. Over 130 denominations were present in China, and in Kwantung province alone forty-three protestant mission societies were stationed. The terrific growth caused discomfort to those who regarded the Christian occupation as “spreading infection of religious poison.” <sup>12</sup>

In most mission schools, there was an emphasis on the use of western language. “Evangelical priority was kept by emphasizing compulsory worship service and Bible courses. Many non-Christian students regarded them as a coercive device of religious proselytization. Chinese studies occupied only a small section of the schedule. Long hours were spent in teaching English, which was often the medium of instruction. As a result, the curriculum was regarded as inadequate in fostering national consciousness and cultural characteristics among the students.”<sup>13</sup>

Chinese nationalists also objected to the autonomy of Christian education under foreign auspices. “How could the mission schools produce good Chinese citizenship to aid the task of national salvation?” <sup>14</sup> It was said: “It is shameful that China has allowed foreigners to seize national rights for religious propagation, as if China had “no civilization of her own” and “ no men of

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Wing-Hung Lam, op. cit., p 105.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid pp107-109.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid p 106

learning.”<sup>15</sup> A further criticism was: “The Christian religion is exclusive in nature and does not tolerate the presence of other faiths, like Confucianism and Buddhism.”<sup>16</sup>

For many Chinese, the issues of imperialism, Christianity and de-nationalization became closely intertwined. “One more Christian, one less Chinese” was a common refrain. China’s experience highlights the problem of Christian evangelization in Asian countries with long histories and strong civilizational culture such as India, China, Japan and Korea.

### **Mission and contextualization**

“Today, despite its considerable growth in ‘peripheral’ parts of the world, most of the earth’s inhabitants still regard Christianity as a Western religion, propagated from Europe.” Julio de Sta Ana has emphasized that “...the first great challenge facing ecumenism consists in overcoming its Western character.”<sup>17</sup>

In China, the Three-Self principles have become a key characteristic of the Church today. The principles of churches becoming self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating had been initially proposed by some early missionaries, but taken up by Chinese Christian leaders who initiated the Three Self Patriotic Movement in China.<sup>18</sup> This has become very much embedded in the present perspectives and practice of the Chinese churches.

The Three Self Movement not only stressed church unity but also necessitated that the church grow roots in its local context and shed the image of Christianity as a foreign religion. Thus the Three Self Movement was an essential part of the Chinazation of Christianity and its contextualization in China.

Bishop K. H. Ting, the prominent church leader who has been most influential in the development of Chinese Christianity since the 1950s until his death 3 years ago, believed that Christianity is essentially a missionary faith. But his understanding of mission was very much shaped by his participation in the global ecumenical movement and especially through his involvement with the World Student Christian Federation.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid p 107

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Julio de Santa Ana, ed., *Religions Today: Their Challenge to the Ecumenical Movement*, Geneva: WCC Publications 2005, p 294.

<sup>18</sup> Philip Potter, who was the third General Secretary of the World Council of Churches (1972-1984), posits that the Student Christian Movement, as part of the World Student Christian Federation, had been a significant school for enabling students “to devote themselves in every land to a church which is self-governing, self-propagating and self-supporting”. See Philip Potter, “The Student Christian Movement and the Chinese Church”, *Chinese Theological Review* 10, pp. 75-76.

For Bishop Ting, being a church that adheres to the Three-Self Principles never meant closing the doors to cooperation with Christians from other parts of the world. However, he expressed the hope “... that Western Christians will honor the desire of Chinese Christians to make the churches in China Chinese and look for alternative ways of giving help.”<sup>19</sup>

The formation of Amity Foundation (now one of the largest faith-initiated NGOs in China) and the new experiment in partnership with overseas churches had a tremendous impact on the search for new ways for churches to relate to one another in the ecumenical movement. For overseas church organizations, working with Amity in the Chinese context was an experiment in practicing a new understanding of Christian mission. Reminiscing about the Chinese-European dialogue that accompanied the founding of Amity in 1985, Gerhard Kobelin (then the EMW representative from Germany) noted that it aimed at developing “a relationship of partners, a reciprocity of giving and receiving, involving equality, mutuality and trust.”

There was a very conscious attempt to get rid of the old, colonial model of mission that had alienated many Chinese in the past and to introduce a new way of doing things that was mutually respectful and empowering.

### **Diakonia and developing contextual theology in China**

Membership in Chinese churches has grown exponentially since the 1980s, especially in urban areas, drawing into their midst intellectuals, workers and business entrepreneurs. Officially, there are 30 to 40 million Protestant Christians in China but the actual numbers are higher. Churches, with increasing resources derived from large congregations (large urban churches may have congregations ranging from 1,000 to 5,000), have begun to be involved in social services. Since 2003, there are now more churches that run health clinics, support HIV-AIDS work, run facilities for seniors and engage in environmental issues.<sup>20</sup> As churches engage with the poor and vulnerable groups such as orphaned children, migrant workers, the disabled and the elderly, they are beginning to understand and to interpret their theology in the larger context of Chinese society.

In a sermon preached at Riverside Church in New York in 1979, Bishop Ting said: “In the gospels we often find comments on the compassion of Jesus for others. What we see is not pity, not just almsgiving or condescension, but identification with the weak and poor and hungry, with those deeply hurt by an unjust system, who as ‘non-persons’ are alienated, dehumanized and

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<sup>19</sup> K. H. Ting, “Prophetic Challenges”, in Raymond L. Whitehead, *No Longer Strangers: Selected Writings of K. H. Ting*. New York: Orbis 1989, pp. 108-9.

<sup>20</sup> Bingguo Xie, “Love Never Fails: A Look at Sinicization of Christianity from the perspective of Social Charity” in *Ecumenical Review*, Vol 67 Issue 1, 2015.

marginalized – in short, those who have been badly sinned against.”<sup>21</sup> If I understand Bishop Ting correctly, it is out of praxis, through identification with the weak and marginalized that the substance for the Chinazation of Christianity emerges. In the same sermon delivered in New York, he said, “It is when men and women who are sinned against become our concern that God can put in our mouths the word that witnesses to Christ, the savior of sinners.”<sup>22</sup>

The challenge for Chinese churches today is how to develop contextual theologies that can reflect the mission of the church in a rapidly changing society. Diakonia can serve as a bridge between Christian culture and Chinese culture. “China is entering a transformative period and is being impacted by various kinds of modern values, the market economy and the vulgarization of values.”<sup>23</sup> Some Christians believe that “Christian morality and values can play an active role in the moral reconstruction of Chinese society through the church’s social service.”

With the growing wealth in China, the space for public philanthropy has grown. Those from the middle class, including young entrepreneurs are much more willing to give to worthy causes. The focus is on developing a more caring and kinder society. One of the words used for philanthropic concern is “love” in Chinese, very much akin to the understanding of “agape”. Bishop Ting’s theology which centers on God’s love for all strikes a responsive chord among the new generation who seek meaning in the midst of the materialistic demands, pressures and brutish competition of a market economy.

### **Accepting Christianity: the role of Chinese scholars**

In recent years, Chinese scholars of religion have given more positive assessments of Christian social engagement. They view it as a channel for greater acceptance of Christianity by Chinese society.

It should be noted that after 1949, Christian schools and hospitals were closed and missionaries were expelled from China. It was only after 1978 that Chinese Christians were allowed to come into contact with churches overseas. Research institutions were then reopened and allowed to begin research on religion. Interestingly, one of the pioneer organizations in research on religion and especially of Christianity has been the Institute of World Religions of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, a government think tank. Since the 1980s, the Institute has been prolific in the production of translated Christian literature,

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<sup>21</sup> K. H. Ting, “The Sinned Against “(1979) in Raymond L. Whitehead, op. cit. pp 72-73.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Weiwei Kou “Christian Social Responsibility: Practicing Love and Serving Neighbors“ in Theresa Carino, ed., *Christianity and Social Development in China*, Hong Kong: Amity Foundation, 2014. p.

academic papers, documentation and reports on the state of religion in China. Its present Director, Xiping Zhuo has enumerated the contributions of scholars in the study of Christianity over the last 30 years.<sup>24</sup> Today, all key universities in China have departments of Philosophy and Religion that include the study of Christianity. They have covered fields that include the history of Christianity, Christian dialogue with Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, contextual theologies, “the meaning and function of Christianity in the clash and melding of civilizations, and the prospect for the influence of Christianity on the future development of China.”<sup>25</sup>

In retrospect, the research institutions have enabled the spread of more information and hence more knowledge about religions in China. This has led to more space for the study and understanding of religion in a largely atheistic, secularized environment. Many of the well-known scholars look at the resurgence of religion in a positive way and in the last five years, there have been a slew of conferences on the role of religion in development. More recently, the focus of research has shifted to folk and popular religions and the idea of a “Believing China.”

In the midst of the present call for *chinazation* of Christianity by the Chinese state, there is a concurrent attempt by academics to review the history of Christian missions in China in a more nuanced way and to acknowledge the useful contributions particular foreign missionaries have made. They are generally hopeful about how religion can play a positive role in China’s development. According to Xiangping Li, a professor from East China Normal University, “Frankly speaking, the current scene of religious social service and rescue in China is a lively one and there is a surging tide for social construction filled with love and care for life and thundering with the strength of faith... This, probably, is the road Chinese religions should take to transform charity into public welfare and ultimately into a force for social construction.”<sup>26</sup>

In China, the interaction between churches and the academe is important. Seminaries have, until very recently, been isolated from universities, research and scholarship. Now, Chinese seminaries in China have begun participating in seminars and conferences with academic scholars and have invited them to church-sponsored conferences as keynote speakers.

The church must begin to acknowledge that Chinese scholars of religion have contributed immensely to enlarging the space for religion and contributing to the

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<sup>24</sup> Xiping Zhuo, “The Study of Christianity in China Today” in Janice Wickeri, ed., *Chinese Theological Review*:15, 2001, pp 1-18

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Xiangping Li, “Distinctions between Religious Philanthropy and Public Charity From social assistance to social construction” in Theresa Carino, ed., op. cit. p 149.

understanding of Christianity in China. Being part of the academe, they have more freedom to do so. Thus, the contextualization of Christian theology in China has to include a process of interaction and cross-fertilization with scholars of religion.

## **Conclusion**

Christian missions in China have left a rich legacy and a checkered history. They have contributed immensely to the modernization of China through the introduction of science and technology and a modern education system. Many of the top state universities in China today have mission origins. In recent years, the state and institutions of higher learning in China have begun to acknowledge the important contributions of Christian missionaries to the establishment and development of education in China.

Historically, the gospel message was most effectively spread when transmitted by women and this happened mainly in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Lay Bible women were the most effective evangelists, an aspect that has been the least studied and the most under appreciated. It should be said that the role of Christian women evangelists in the propagation of the gospel remains just as important today as it was in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Women missionaries from the West saw themselves as having a "civilizing mission". They essentially introduced Protestant middle-class culture to China, educating Chinese women and "elevating their gender." Their advocacy of equality for women played a major role in campaigns against foot binding and women's slavery in Chinese society.

Mission education was transformative for those who taught and those who received the education. If we take a cross-cultural perspective, their experience in China changed women missionaries and their understanding of mission, just as Chinese Christian women were transformed and empowered through education. The Reformed tradition and the Protestant faith profess the primacy of human dignity. Human beings are created in God's image and imbued with inviolable dignity. Poverty and underdevelopment devalue humans and violate God's created order. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus indicates the great importance of the poor in the development of his ministry - it is to them that the Kingdom of God is announced.

Today, the church's practice of diakonia and its impact on theological thinking can lay the foundation for a contextual theology that reaches out to the marginalized and which transmits the core message of the gospel in a language, in symbols and culture that resonates with the Chinese people. A Chinese theology based on diakonal praxis can be a contribution to contextual theologies in Asia. This can be further developed as churches become more exposed to interactions with the academe in China and theological schools in different parts

of the world. Diakonia and social practice is a way for Christian churches to transform society. The challenge is how to relate social practice to the life of the church. Furthermore, how can the church relate its praxis to the education and learning that takes place in seminaries and universities? This is a challenge not only for the churches in China, but also for the ecumenical movement.

*Theresa Carino: Twin Keynote address presented at the "International Twin Consultation on Reform, Education and Transformation" to celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant Reformation held in Sao Leopoldo, Brazil Nov. 19-23, 2015. My co-presenter was Dr. Esther Mombo, former deputy vice chancellor (Academics) of St. Paul's United Theological College in Limuru, Kenya.*

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