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Christianity and gender in South-East China : the chaozhou missions (1849-1949)

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Cover Page



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CONCLUSION

Located in the south-eastern corner of China, Chaozhou is a region with a long tradition of migration and internecine clan strife. In the early nineteenth century Western missionaries first met Chaozhou male emigrant workers in Siam, Singapore and Pinang. Later, they followed the emigration route in a reverse direction back to China and planted a mission station in Hong Kong, when it became a British crown colony after the First Opium War in 1842. After Swatow was opened as a treaty port in 1860, the missionaries reached the Chaozhou region itself and began to spread the Gospel among the local population.

Generally, when Chinese men chose to convert to the Christian religion, many of their female kin, wives, sisters and daughters followed. Hence although male authority could lead to women's conversion, it also barred women from conversion should her husband or father choose to adhere to Confucianism or the other religions. In Chaozhou, the chronic absence of male householders in the migrant families did give women some autonomy to determine whether to convert or not. This explains the fact that not a few widows and grass widows converted after coming in contact with female missionaries. Among other possible reasons for conversion, the biographies of these Chaozhou women indicate that in their eyes the choice of Christianity was closely related to their belief that this new faith had the potential to mitigate their sufferings and promise them a happier, more secure life.

Christianity enabled the local Chaozhou women, including (grass) widows, to embark on a new spiritual path. This embraced not only the basic tenets of the Christian religion, repentance and grace, but also a new lifestyle which was different from their earlier lives. The Western missionaries offered them the opportunity to receive an education and gain new experiences as Bible-women. In this way, they became the first generation of 'professional women', supporting themselves by the evangelical skills they acquired at the Women's School. This career gave them a sense of success and confidence and, even more importantly, they won the esteem of other people. Besides the spiritual benefits of Christianity, female converts learned all sorts of needlework skills from the Western women missionaries, thereby acquiring a new occupation to buttress the income of their family, allowing them some degree of economic independence.

The Christian doctrine of marriage which honoured the marital principles of monogamy and the indissolubility of marriage safeguarded the position of married Chinese women. In times of marital crisis, the Church offered the female partner a certain degree of protection. The Christian churches also propagated the idea of equality and companionship of husband and wife in marriage, prescribed regulations which forbade concubinage, bigamy and divorce. Christianity played a pioneering role in helping to introduce new marriage patterns into Chaozhou in the late Qing and the Republican period. Although Christian values about the sanctity of the bond of marriage in many respects conflicted with traditional Chinese customs pertaining to husband and wife, their aim was not to challenge male

authority in the Christian home. The self-denial and self-sacrifice expected of the ideal Christian wife by her husband in many respects harmonized well with Confucian ideas on the role of the female gender in the family.

In a similar fashion, the new careers of Bible-woman and needlewoman did not challenge male authority in the local society. Though Bible-women were not afraid to spread the Gospel outside their own family environment, in fact they had no power in the male-dominated hierarchy of the church not until the 1920s. To avoid conflict with the traditional customs which impeded the mobility of young women in the public sphere, most needlewomen preferred to work at home. Nevertheless, these new careers created occupational opportunities and new possibilities for emancipation among Chaozhou women. Many of them took advantage of these opportunities to develop their own, 'modern' identity, carefully making sure that they did not challenge male authority, or more exactly, that their doing so was welcomed by their male partners. Being a 'modern' Christian wife meant being well-educated, self-supporting and skilled in household management.

There were manifold differences and connections between the various Western missions at work in the Chaozhou region. Coming from different countries and attached to different churches, each mission placed different emphases, be these to do with a Christian lifestyle or with the management of the church. The discussions about concubinage are a good example to demonstrate the former aspect. The Basel Mission, the English Presbyterian Mission and the French Roman Catholic Mission each tolerated the existence of concubines, but their approaches were different. There were also divergences between the three missions in how a concubine should be dismissed. The differences can be largely explained by the different views Roman Catholics and Protestants entertained on marriage. In all churches, monogamy was seen as essential to the divinely constituted institution of marriage, but in the Roman Catholic Church marriage is seen as one of the seven sacraments and hence confirmed in heaven. This makes divorce impossible, not just an unfortunate incident as in the Protestant churches.

This study has also stressed how deeply the church was engaged in the needlework industry in the Chaozhou region. The craft was introduced by women missionaries in the mid 1880s but within thirty years it also became prevalent among non-converts. The differences and connections between the various Western missions were also reflected in the management of the needlework industry, with the ABM and MEP on the one side and the EPM on the other. This example reveals that the line of division not necessarily existed between the Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. It also demonstrates that copying successful strategies was another key characteristic of the rivalry, alongside the acknowledged rivalry between the missions for each other's converts.

The needlework business turned into a booming export industry, which changed the economic landscape of the Chaozhou region in the first half of the twentieth century. There was a clear gender division of labour in the putting-out system of this industry: needlewomen worked at home, while men worked as agents distributing the raw materials to the workers and collecting the finished products, as comprador for Western companies or even as manager of their own company. The enterprising

Chaozhou merchants even followed the emigrant tradition and established needlework companies in Shanghai, Hong Kong and the other coastal or inland cities in China. This commercial route overlapped with, or even helped to form, a new emigrant network in the 1920s. Emigrant workers and foreign investors also followed the inter-provincial and international routes to Swatow. All this helped to integrate the Chaozhou region into the world economic and colonial system.

Undoubtedly the missions were an important factor in stimulating Chaozhou women to rethink their roles in their family and society in a period of profound political and social transformation. Self-support in the economic sector and equality with their husbands in the family were key concepts in the lives of the female convert. In my point of view, the story of Auntie Xu whose conversion was highlighted at the very beginning of this study is exemplary of the first generation of women who chose to accept the Christian creed as the road to salvation as much as to an independent and self-sufficient life in this world.