

# Influences of Missionaries on the Ideological Liberation of Chinese Women in Modern China

Yunchang Shi<sup>1,a,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The High School Affiliated to Renmin University of China, Beijing, China

<sup>a</sup>shiyunchang12@gmail.com

\*Corresponding author

**Abstract:** In modern times, missionaries to China built hospitals and schools in China, which had an impact on women's emancipation, life and employment. This paper focuses on three aspects: the core measures of missionaries, the positive effects of the measures and the negative effects, and sorts out the impact of missionaries on the emancipation of women's minds in China.

**Keywords:** Missionaries, Modern Chinese women, Influence

## 1. Introduction

During my holiday, I saw several three-story western-style houses of main brick and wood structure with a modern basketball court in front when I strolled around the central axis in Beijing. After consulting the staff there, I found that it was the old site of a school. Nonetheless, how can there be a western-style school in the center of Beijing? With such a question in mind, I searched for information online and figured out that it was the Beijing Beiman Girls' Middle School, a school set up by the Christian Church in the middle and late 19th century, and a school where Bing Xin, a famous modern Chinese female writer, studied. After the further literature review, it is found that from the Ming Dynasty, many Western Christian missionaries came to China, spreading Christianity and bringing advanced western technology and ideas, which was enlightening for Chinese women who were deeply imprisoned by traditional Chinese ideas. Therefore, I came up with the idea of studying the influence of missionaries on Chinese women.

Chinese and foreign research in this field primarily focused on missionary measures and their influence on Chinese women. This paper explores the core missionary measures and their influences, both the positive and negative, to find out the influences of missionaries on the ideological liberation of Chinese women.

## 2. Core Measures

The core measures taken by the missionaries in China were conducive to the ideological liberation of Chinese women, which were reflected in two major aspects: cultural education and social organizations.

### 2.1. Measures in Cultural Education Aspect

Firstly, the missionaries made efforts to build the church schools to spread western advanced technology culture and knowledge and rigorous academic system to Chinese women, which was the most prominent contribution of the missionaries. Yin Yiting<sup>[1]</sup>, Yang Yuanmeng<sup>[2]</sup>, Wang Rui<sup>[3]</sup>, Huang Yinghong<sup>[4]</sup> et al, in their respective literature, mentioned that missionaries established church schools in many places in China, especially in trade ports and coastal areas. Before the establishment of the church schools, most Chinese women were indoctrinated with traditional ideas such as "Three Cardinal Principles and Five Constant Virtues", (Sangang Wuchang), and "Rule that a woman without talent is virtuous". As a result, in the initial stage when the schools were established, many women were averse to attending. To change the situation, missionaries offered free teaching and even distributed money to attract women<sup>[5]</sup>. The church schools offered courses on medicine, education and art in addition to the compulsory religious curriculum<sup>[6]</sup>. The Beijing Beiman Girls' Middle School was a typical case of church schools. According to Tong Meng's<sup>[7]</sup> article, Beiman curriculum was extraordinarily rich in the

later stage, including science courses like logic, algebra, and geography, humanities courses like world history, natural philosophy and Confucian classics, and physical courses like gymnastics, basketball and tennis<sup>[8]</sup>, which laid a solid foundation for the development of sports in China. Additionally, the missionaries also transmitted western femininity to Chinese women. They supported many female students to study abroad while running church schools. The first four Chinese students studying abroad, namely, Jin Yamei, He Jinying, Kang Aide, and Shi Meiyu, were outstanding representatives of Chinese women in the world<sup>[9]</sup>. On the other hand, the missionaries also provided special courses for deaf and blind children, with more female students than male. In Beijing, Guangzhou, Fuzhou, Hong Kong and other places, church schools for the blind and the deaf were built to teach those disabled students basic knowledge and skills, and to provide them toothbrush production and other work, so as to help them develop self-esteem and self-care<sup>[10]</sup>.

Secondly, the missionaries established newspapers and periodicals to propagate western ideas. Among the many newspapers run by the missionaries, the Multinational Communique founded by Lin Lezhi was the most influential one. In newspapers and periodicals, missionaries mainly propagated ideas like opposing foot binding, criticizing vulgar customs and setting up girls' schools<sup>[11]</sup>. With respect to rejecting foot binding, missionaries persuaded women to stop foot binding by expounding its harm to their body and beauty. In terms of running women's schools, the missionaries put forward the idea that education was beneficial for female families on the basis of identifying the traditional Chinese concepts, so as to encourage more women to receive education. Meanwhile, the newspapers involved the criticism of the abnormal marriage and family relations, such as concubines and child brides.

Finally, the missionaries took other measures to contribute to Chinese cultural education. For instance, they spread western culture to Chinese women with commodities as the carrier<sup>[12]</sup>, where the western image in commodity packaging and appearance had an impact on Chinese women. Also, they translated western works to keep Chinese women exposed to advanced western technology and to bring enlightenment literally<sup>[13]</sup>. In Zhao Yanqiao's<sup>[14]</sup> article, it was mentioned that taking literature as the carrier, missionaries brought ideological enlightenment to Chinese women in the aspects of social responsibility, marriage, family and self-cognition. Moreover, missionaries spread western culture, ideas and medical health content by holding lectures, opening museums and reading rooms<sup>[14]</sup>, and encouraged the development of domestic academic groups in literary and medical field by setting up bonus<sup>[15]</sup>.

## **2.2. Measures in Social Organizations**

Firstly, the most critical measure that the missionaries took in the field of social organization was the construction of church hospitals. Following the western advanced medical system, the church hospitals developed surgery, ophthalmology and other departments. In order to conform to the Chinese concept of "body contact is not allowed in handing over and taking over between men and women", the church hospitals set up specialized subdivided departments for women such as obstetrics and gynecology department. At the same time, church hospitals also provided free vaccination services<sup>[15]</sup>.

Secondly, the missionaries built special medical schools and nurse schools to train medical and nursing personnel. One of the most famous medical schools was the Medical Department of St. John's University founded by Wen Huanli, which introduced the western rigorous medical education system, and cooperated closely with Shanghai Tongren Hospital to cultivate a group of top medical talents. Meanwhile, Akakechnie brought western nursing concepts to China, and since then, specialized nursing schools have emerged in China, which cultivated many female nursing talents, and creates the nurse profession<sup>[15]</sup>.

Beyond the medical field, the missionaries founded many social organizations such as Tianzu Association and Foot Unbinding Association to forbid foot binding, and improved marriage customs and bad habits by banning men who took concubines and marry foot-bound wives from attending churches. The measure was particularly aimed at men in the Chinese upper class<sup>[16]</sup>. Moreover, the missionaries created charitable organizations such as female orphan homes and gospel houses to help girls, provided them with basic accommodation and education<sup>[17]</sup>, and did lots of things for the poor, such as feeding the poor and offering them protection and safety<sup>[18]</sup>.

### 3. Influences Of Missionary Measures

#### 3.1. Positive Influences

The positive influences of the core measures taken by the missionaries on the ideological liberation of Chinese women were reflected on the level of individual women and on the level of modern Chinese society.

##### 3.1.1. Influences on female individuals

Firstly, through establishing church schools, creating newspapers and other measures, the missionaries provided opportunities for Chinese women to receive education, so that females were exposed to the advanced western education system, and the rich knowledge. Then, by setting up natural science courses such as mathematics and science, women acquired the ability to think logically. By studying humanities courses such as history, geography and philosophy, women obtained a better understanding of the world, which inspired them to think about the world in depth. Whereas, medicine, nursing, and education courses helped Chinese females develop the professional skills. Based on the professional expertise, the establishment of hospitals and schools provided jobs for women, which enabled more women to gain jobs. Having a job gave women the ability to live independently, which also laid the foundation for their ideological independence. At the same time, articles in newspapers propagated unique Western ideas to Chinese women and connected them with the world.

Secondly, women's family status and social role improved. The breakthrough of the feudal medical thought and the establishment of the advanced medical system brought a safer medical environment and medical conditions for Chinese women, which thereby reduced the mortality rate of women in childbirth and other aspects, and better safeguarded women's right to life and health. The abolition of bad habits such as foot binding, child brides and concubines made women better control their own body, safeguard women's personal rights and health rights, and thus improved women's family status.

In short, the core measures taken by the missionaries broke through the shackles of the traditional feudal thought to some extent, which abandoned the original feudal ideas and bad habits and promoted women to come into contact with advanced cultural ideas. On the other hand, participating in social work provided material support for women to achieve self-reliance and self-improvement, and at the same time cultivated women's self-awareness. When they went out of the house, what they were burdened with was not only family responsibility, but also social responsibility, which would be conducive to cultivating their sense of social responsibility, and promoting the liberation of their thoughts.

##### 3.1.2. Influences on the Modern Chinese society

From the perspective of the society as a whole, the measures of the missionaries changed the social concept of Chinese traditional feudal ideas and bad habits to a certain extent, and enabled a increasing number of people to question the scientific nature of bad habits and feudal thoughts, and to think about the harm brought by bad habits to women.

First of all, the aforementioned measures change the social ethos, making the society more open and inclusive to women, and further accelerating the process of ideological modernization. To be concrete, more women had access to social work, which promoted gender equality, and enhanced female social status. On the other side, the western culture and ideas provided by the missionaries also affected the thinking of other classes of society on the problems of Chinese women. Officials, intellectuals and the peasant class all spontaneously relied on the strength of organizations or individuals to speak out for women and safeguard female rights, which promoted the emergence of subsequent reforms in China. For instance, Kang Youwei founded the Foot Unbinding Association in the 1880s in his hometown Nanhai County, encouraging women to free their feet<sup>[19]</sup>. Reformists such as Liang Qichao, Kang Youwei and others opened China's first female university in Shanghai—Jingzheng Female School<sup>[20]</sup>.

Secondly, the church schools provided education for women and trained a group of modern women. Their appearance not only promoted the development and progress of the society, but also encouraged more women to take them as the goal of receiving education, developing independently, and eventually growing into excellent modern women. Orphanages and other institutions established by the church improved the social welfare organizations, promoted the social attention to the vulnerable groups and lead to the development and progress of the society as a whole.

Thirdly, the establishment of church schools laid the foundation for the establishment of local schools in China. Many native schools, influenced by western enlightened ideas, began to imitate the western

curriculum of church schools. In the case of a primary school in Jiangyin, their courses did not focus on the study of traditional Chinese culture and Confucianism, and allowed foreign missionaries, Chinese men and women to sit on the same table when celebrating traditional Chinese festivals, which was unimaginable before<sup>[21]</sup>. Meanwhile, the introduction of western medicine promoted the further development of traditional Chinese medicine. For a long time in the past, traditional TCM and Western medicine were on the opposite side because the introduction of western medicine challenged the TCM. Whereas, in order to reduce the influence of Western medicine on TCM and seek further development, modern TCM integrated itself with Western medicine, and built many hospitals and schools to impart updated knowledge of TCM<sup>[22]</sup>.

Last but not the least, through the missionaries' continuous exploration in China, a balance between Christianity and the actual situation in China was found. In the 1920s, the localization of Christianity was basically completed, and the status of Christianity in China was finally determined<sup>[23]</sup>.

### **3.2. Negative Influences**

There are inevitably limitations along with the contributions made by the missionaries to Chinese women.

First of all, the utilitarian and religious nature of the missionaries were inevitable. The original intention of the missionaries who came to China was to spread Christianity and Christianize China. In this regard, all their measures promoted the role of God to different degrees, with a strong religious purpose. For example, in China, more than half of the Christianity believers firstly heard the Bible in the hospitals<sup>[24]</sup>. Again, the missionaries found female spiritual beliefs were dominant in their family relationships. Therefore, by helping women and making them believe in Christianity, the missionaries promoted Christianity among men, so as to achieve the purpose of Christianization in the whole China. Besides, in the context of Christian doctrine, what the missionaries spread was Western femininity rather than feminism. It can be seen from the idea that "there can be no doubt that our most effective and hopeful work is among the girls who shall become the future wives and mothers of China"<sup>[25]</sup>. Such missionaries also identify cultivating good wives and mothers as their task rather than cultivating excellent independent women. They encouraged girls to be educated and to work, but the goal was still to encourage women to shoulder their responsibilities as wives and mothers. When the spirit of the Reform Movement of 1898 divided the Chinese into traditionalists and modernists, western female missionaries chose to support the former, so it could be concluded that the western female missionaries were essentially a strong conservative force, which promoted the traditional social status of Chinese women, but hindered the Chinese women's revolutionary movement<sup>[26]</sup>.

Secondly, the missionaries themselves were the carriers of western colonial thought. They were stepping up their cultural and educational aggression against China under the coverage of religion, with women as the starting point of their aggression. For instance, Yü Chia-chu believed that church schools were not conducive to the development of Chinese nationalism, and to the unification of Chinese education<sup>[27]</sup>.

Furthermore, the missionaries inevitably conflicted with the original Chinese political ideas while spreading the religion and Western ideas. The most typical example was the Chinese and Western definition of "home". Western thought paid more attention to the family, while the Chinese patriotism thought made people focus more on the country and the nation.

## **4. Conclusion**

To sum up, the missionaries were beneficial to the ideological liberation of Chinese women, which made prominent contributions to Chinese women in cultural education and social organizations areas, in particular the establishment of schools, newspapers and hospitals. These measures challenged to dominant position of the traditional Chinese feudal thought and bad habits, made women understand the western culture and thought, obtain employment opportunities, promote female family and social status, and thus liberate female ideology. Meanwhile, more groups began to pay attention to the survival status of Chinese women, and the social atmosphere was becoming increasingly open and inclusive, and thus promoted gender equality and social progress. However, the religious attributes of missionaries and western colonialism endowed the above measures with inevitable limitations, which negatively affected Chinese society.

On the other hand, the positive influence of the missionaries on the emancipation of women's thought

also contributed to a certain extent to the modernization of thought and to the modernization of our country. Although social scientists differ in their views on how values and attitudes change, there is a school of thought that believes that changes in attitudes and values are a prerequisite for creating a modern social, economic, and political system. Thus, while missionaries have contributed to the emancipation of Chinese women and to the modernization of thought, they have also inevitably had a negative impact due to their limitations, but some of their initiatives have undeniably contributed to the modernization of China.

## References

- [1] Yiting Yin, *New Women in modern China in "Others' minds: Taking the female missionaries of the Church of the England as the case"* [J]. *Religious Studies*, Issue. 1, 2022, pp. 222-229.
- [2] Yuanmeng Yang, *Christian missionaries and the modern Chinese female vulgar culture change* [J]. *Journal of Western*, vol. 2, Issue. 10, 2019, pp. 69-72.
- [3] Rui Wang. *The role of female missionaries in Sichuan during the Republic of China period: Taking West China Union University as the center* [J]. *Journal of Yangtze Normal University*, Issue. 6, 2018, pp. 52-61, p. 120.
- [4] Yinghong Huang, *The influence of modern Quanzhou Church School on women's education* [J]. *Identification and Appreciation to Cultural Relics*, vol. 5, 2020, pp. 47-49.
- [5] Yuanmeng Yang, *Christian missionaries and the modern Chinese female vulgar culture change* [J]. *Journal of Western*, vol. 2, Issue. 10, 2019, p.70.
- [6] Rui Wang. *The role of female missionaries in Sichuan during the Republic of China period: Taking West China Union University as the center* [J]. *Journal of Yangtze Normal University*, Issue. 6, 2018, pp. 55-56.
- [7] Meng Tong, *Christian women's education and female liberation in Modern China* [D]. Jinan University, 2015.
- [8] Meng Tong, Xi Chen, *Look at women's sports in modern Beijing from Beiman Girl's School* [J]. *Beijing Archives*, vol. 8, 2014, pp. 58-60.
- [9] Xueli Deng, *Western missionaries and modern Chinese women's education* [J]. *Reform and Opening Up*, vol. 2, 2011, pp. 175-176.
- [10] Haipeng Wang, *Research on women's cause of Modern Christian church in China (1840- -1920)* [D]. *Shandong Normal University*, 2004. pp. 63-65.
- [11] Xiaoling Zhou, *Modern Chinese missionary newspapers and Chinese female concept enlightenment* [D]. *Liaoning University*, 2011.
- [12] Yiting Yin, *New Women in modern China in "Others' minds: Taking the female missionaries of the Church of the England as the case"* [J]. *Religious Studies*, Issue. 1, 2022, pp. 223-224.
- [13] Zhongyu Gu, *The spread of missionaries and western female views in China* [J]. *Journal of Beijing Institute of Technology, Social Sciences*, vol. 3, 2002, pp. 44-46.
- [14] Yanqiao Zhao, *Missionary female enlightenment literature translation and Chinese women's modern enlightenment* [J]. *Journal of China University of Geosciences, Social Sciences*, vol. 6, 2017, pp. 145-157.
- [15] Luhua Chen, Liyun Chen. *Spreading of religion beliefs, medicine and science: the development of church hospitals in Modern China* [J]. *Negative*, Issue 6,2021, pp. 49-54.
- [16] Guoying Xu, *On the influence of missionaries to China on Chinese women's marital life during the Ming and Qing Dynasties* [J]. *Heilongjiang Chronicles*, vol. 19, 2014, pp. 46.
- [17] Rui Wang. *The role of female missionaries in Sichuan during the Republic of China period: Taking West China Union University as the center* [J]. *Journal of Yangtze Normal University*, Issue. 6, 2018, p. 56.
- [18] Spees, Lisa p, *Missionary Women in China: Changing China, Changing Themselves* (Emory University, 2014). p. 3.
- [19] Shuguang Cong, Xingwang Qiu, *Christian missionaries and modern Chinese women* [J]. *Journal of the CPC Jinan Municipal Party Committee*, vol. 2, 2006, pp. 94-97.
- [20] Wenlian Chen, Hua Yang, *The concern of missionaries in China to women's problems in modern China* [J]. *Journal of Hengyang Normal College*, vol. 4, 2008, pp. 112-116.
- [21] Spees, Lisa P, *Missionary Women in China: Changing China, Changing Themselves*. (Emory University, 2014), p. 6.
- [22] Chen, Lyu-Hua and Chen, Li-Yun. *Discussion of Medicine and Religion: Study of Missionary Hospitals in Modern Shanghai, China* [J]. *Chinese Medicine and Culture*, vol. 5 , no. 2, pp. 77-83.
- [23] Wang, Chen Main. *Seeking Balance between the Church and State: A Review of Christian Higher Education in China in the 1920s* [J]. *Journal of Intercultural Communication Studies* vol. 4, no. 1, 1994,

p. 97.

[24] Zhang TT, Wu J. *Coexistence and complementarity: pattern and resource interaction of medical philanthropy in modern Shanghai* [J]. *Med Philos (a)* 2018;39 (12): 87–93.

[25] J.M.W. Farnham, "Woman's Work for Woman." 1842, *Chinese Recorder and Missionary Journal*. (Retrieved March 31, 2007, from <http://chnm.gmu.edu/wwh/modules/lesson10/lesson10.php?s=1>).

[26] Yuqing Feng, *American female missionaries and Chinese women liberation in the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China* [J]. *Trade Union's Tribune (Journal of Shandong Trade Union Management Cadre Institute)*, vol. 5, 2011, pp. 141-143.

[27] Wang, Chen Main, *Seeking Balance between the Church and State: A Review of Christian Higher Education in China in the 1920s* [J]. *Journal of Intercultural Communication Studies* vol. 4, no. 1, 1994, p. 90.