

Introduction

In recent decades, more and more female scholars have tried to write women into history.¹ Scholars of Chinese history are placing women back at the center of China's past in order to gain a renewed understanding of it.² In her book *Women and China's Revolutions*, historian Gail Hershatter writes: "A history that neglects gender and the role of women in a profoundly gendered society is going to miss or misperceive some of the most fundamental ways that people made sense of their tumultuous environment."³ She adds that the symbol of the "Chinese woman" has helped to "hold the empire together, bring it down, and underwrite nation-building, socialist construction, and capitalist growth."⁴ It has always been "a flexible symbol of social problems, national humiliation, and political transformation."⁵ Women's issues were used to strengthen each movement's need for legitimacy, but when the movement was consolidated, women were again encouraged to double up the labor, both at home and work, and to sacrifice for the larger common good. Almost at every turn of China's modern history, women found their rights for equality come in second to another more sublime goal. Nevertheless, even these failures to fulfill gender equality need to be integrated into a coherent historical narrative.

In the subfield of the history of Chinese Christianity, however, scholarly efforts at restoring the role of women have been scant. One primary reason is that for over a century, the most prominent narrative in the history of Chinese Christianity (in the English-speaking world) has been that it was the foreign missionaries, including men and women, who made history. The indigenous Chinese remained largely a faceless multitude. Feminist theologian Kwok Pui-lan writes that "the relation of women to the unfolding drama of the missionary movement in China has never been recognized as the *problematik* of serious scholarly study."⁶ In his 2012 book *A New History of Christianity in*

China, historian Daniel Bays recalls that in the early 1980s, studies in the history of Chinese Christianity mainly focused on the foreign missionaries and what they did in China.⁷ Bays's own work did include some female figures, but it largely perpetuated the existing narrative.⁸ Women's experiences have been trivialized, fragmented, insufficiently documented, and ignored.⁹

The task of writing Christian women into the history is important also for tracing the beginning of modern China. Some historians propose that it was the arrival of Protestant missionaries after the Second Opium War.¹⁰ Given the centrality of the woman's question to China's modernity, the date should be around the 1880s, when an influx of Western women missionaries mingled with indigenous women to push for substantive and institutional reforms. At different times, Christianity has acted as a catalyst to raise women's consciousness of their social and religious exclusion. Consider the following assessment by two Chinese women scholars:

Despite the missionaries' teaching of conservative family values and women's submissive roles, their women converts and students excelled in life and work outside their homes. They became the first Chinese women evangelists, teachers, nurses, and doctors, and ironically, many modeled themselves after the single women missionaries and chose to remain single . . . a quiet gender revolution took place in society. There were not only escalating demands for women's education but also for women's reading materials such as women's magazines, family handbooks, and women's fiction, which addressed the many adjustments that women needed to make regarding their new added responsibilities.¹¹

There is a reason why the challenge of modernity in China began with "womanhood." As historian Jessie Lutz argues, although missionary education projects emerged out of the needs of the missionaries rather than a result of the demands of the Chinese,¹² the timing was perfect. As historian Philip A. Kuhn also puts it, "A dynasty already weak was confronted with a radically new challenge in the form of militant Western expansionism."¹³

Another reason that the history of Chinese Christian women lapsed into obscurity is that even when the topic of Christian indigenous leadership is introduced, scholars tend to favor the narrative that it was a select group of Chinese men who made history. Whenever indigenous leadership in the Chinese church is discussed, names of well-known male leaders are the first to be mentioned.¹⁴ Take revivalism, for example. Silas H. L. Wu once asked, "Why were the major Chinese revivalists before 1927 predominantly women, and why after that date did female Chinese revivalists suddenly recede into the background in the next stage of Christian revivalism in China?"¹⁵ She points to a "marked shift of gender selection," which elevated male figures such as Watchman Nee, Wang Mingdao, and John Sung to the forefront. Even

some male leaders' sexual abuses of women coworkers were ignored. The most illustrative example is that of Watchman Nee.¹⁶ Although in the 1950s the allegations of sexual abuses were tried by court, evidences exhibited to the public, and Nee himself was excommunicated by his own church, house churches continued to sideline this story about Nee.¹⁷ As a result, new converts to the house church tradition tend to defend Nee on the ground that the abuses were fabricated by the communist regime. Even when they were brought to light again in the 2010s by ethnographer-historian Lily Hsu's new book, *The Unforgettable Memoirs: My Life, Shanghai Local Church and Watchman Nee*, there was a lot of heat in the Chinese diaspora defending Nee. Hsu herself received criticisms and fervent attacks.¹⁸ The same pattern repeated itself when it comes to other prominent house church leader who either allegedly abused women or covered up abuses.¹⁹ Recent scholarly works concerning contemporary leadership figures in China also named only men.²⁰ Therefore, until today, the stories of Chinese Christian women have suffered the same lack of scholarly attention. As historian Janet Moore Lindman writes, "Institutional church histories may mention particular women, usually noted for their piety or wifely connection to a famous divine, but women in general are not central to the narrative."²¹ The current history of Chinese Protestantism is deficient because it marginalizes women's lives and contributions.

Nevertheless, a more careful examination of this history reveals that many important male leaders of the indigenous Chinese church were first nurtured in some women-founded ministries. For example, the well-known evangelist John Sung, before becoming known as the most well-known charismatic preacher in all East and South Asia, was first recruited by Shi Meiyu (Mary Stone) into her Bethel Mission team. The story of how Dora Yu's ministry led to Watchman Nee's conversion in 1920 has been widely told. The renowned Chinese theologian T. C. Chao (Zhao Zichen) was from early days mentored by female educator Zeng Baosun. Likewise, Christian literary critic and scholar Wu Ningkun returned from America to teach at Yenching University because of a job offer extended to him by leading English literature scholar Zhao Luorui (also known as Lucy Chao, daughter of T. C. Chao). While the names of the men were later elevated or even enshrined in the history of Chinese Christianity or Chinese intellectual history in general as iconic figures and household names, the names and stories of their female mentors faded into obscurity.

When it comes to the more contemporary scene, women are pushed even further to the margins, despite Christianity becoming relatively feminized in mainland China and in diaspora Chinese communities.²² Whether in popular media or scholarly works, the role of Chinese Christian women has largely been minimized.²³ Chinese Christian men have increasingly become the gatekeepers of the institutional church, theologies, and even scholarship.

Consequently, the history of Chinese Christianity has formed its own boundaries, canon, and iconic figures that continue to exclude women. To a certain extent, the paucity of Chinese women scholars or their marginalization has contributed to the lack of research on women's history in the Chinese faith community.²⁴

In her 1983 book *Women and Ideas and What Men Have Done to Them*, Australian scholar Dale Spender recovers the lost intellectual history of women and explains that the absence of women's voice is fundamental to the perpetuation of patriarchal power.²⁵ If one integrates women's history, some of the most dramatic transformations need to find more thorough, nuanced explanations, not only in politics, but in employment, family life, and religious activism. In other words, writing a women's history would often be a game changer in certain spheres of power. But as Harvard religion scholar Catherine Brekus claims, "if historians do not become more self-conscious about who is included in their stories and who is not, they will perpetuate the fiction that male leaders alone have made history."²⁶ In explaining the same neglect of women's role in American religious history, Brekus offers several reasons, one being the fear that "women's history will contribute to the fragmentation of older narratives, making it difficult to tell coherent stories about the past."²⁷

This book attempts to retrieve and recover a women's history of Chinese Protestantism.²⁸ Seeking to interrupt a hegemonic and positivist framework of writing the history of Chinese Christianity, it is largely a reconstruction which has been much needed in academia and the life of the Chinese church. As previously argued, although Chinese Protestantism has been feminized, historians have mostly written with an exclusive focus on prominent male heroes or institutional developments without doing justice to mentioning women, who sometimes were mentors and founders to these heroes and initiatives. The prejudice against female figures and movements has, at times, turned ideological. On another account, the social world of Chinese Christianity scholars has been dominated by men who are attracted to macro, binary frameworks such as church-state relations and civil society.²⁹ Motivated by a general illusion of Western-imported Christian nationalism, expressed in the assumption such as "Christianity may democratize China" or "China would become the most Christian nation," their narratives and analysis lack nuances and depth of thought.³⁰ The critical lens is often directed at the communist regime, not the power structure of the church itself. They instinctively frown at inconvenient issues such as abuses of women by prominent leaders in the Chinese church.³¹

Reconstruction of this history raises difficult contextual and historical problems. First of all, a frame of reference is needed to discuss the available historical evidence. "Historians who pretend to record nothing but pure

facts while refusing to acknowledge their own presuppositions and theoretical perspectives succeed only in concealing from themselves the ideologies upon which their historiography is based,"³² as Harvard feminist theologian Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza declares. I explore formal institutions and rules as well as social networks and social norms. Thus, gender is not the only analytical lens in this book. For example, in presenting how Christian women responded to Marxism, it is important to understand what the political, economic, and cultural context meant for them, and how the roots of ideological antagonism played out in Chinese women's lived experiences. In today's China, the heat of this encounter has not dissipated. As another scholar observes, "No other worldview shook world Christianity more seriously, and no other movement has had a profound an impact on so many. . . . Unless we struggle toward an understanding of the Christian encounter with Marxism, the entire Christian self-understanding in the late modern world will be inadequate."³³

Secondly, my approach is different from a secular feminist stance which risks becoming politicized. This book does seek to provide a coherent narrative which challenges the Christian religion, or more specifically Protestant mission, as legitimization of the patriarchal order and status quo. But I do not argue that biblical religion is inherently sexist. As Elisabeth Fiorenza says, "such a postbiblical feminist stance . . . too quickly concedes that women have no authentic history within biblical religion and too easily relinquishes women's feminist biblical heritage. Nor can such a stance do justice to the positive experiences of contemporary women within biblical religion."³⁴ A secular feminist stance sometimes challenges that Christian women ought not to socially comply and as a result they should relinquish their spiritual heritage. I would argue that this stance does not do justice to the positive experiences of Chinese women within their faith tradition. I also challenge the binary thinking of putting secular and sacred, or liberal and conservative on opposite ends. Reality is much more complicated. In this volume, the experiences of every Chinese woman had some liberation elements, but other themes (such as filial piety, patriotism, and even right-wing radicalism) exist too. It would be a form of oppression to deprive people of their history and the complexities that come with that particular history. In *History and Social Theory*, Gordon Leff offers some criteria for what makes a "good history." He considers historical "objectivity" to consist of the dynamic interrelation between the information gleaned from the sources and the "unifying vision" of the interpreter. "To make the past intelligible," the historian ought to go beyond the events in an act of "intellectual recreation."³⁵

A reconstruction of a women's history and Chinese Protestantism is needed in order to reclaim this history as the history of women and men.

Admittedly, the personal experiences and social location of a historian determine her assumptions and narrative rhetoric. I come to this work not only as a female scholar but also as a woman in the Chinese church for the past two decades. As a female scholar, I propose that a more fruitful scholarship is possible when we decenter past narratives and re-center trauma and abuses suffered by women and women's agency into the historiography of Chinese Protestantism. I write as a Christian woman who has witnessed the harm of male-dominated historiography which sometimes contributes to false public images of male leaders. But as long as the stories and history of women are not integrated into this history, narratives and traditions codified by men will remain oppressive to women. I believe that the history of the church, in general, will look quite different if we place the most vulnerable group and their agency at its center. This is an analytical lens for this entire project. Compared to the orthodox approach of traditional historians, cultural historians have tended to favor more nuanced and diverse presentation of who makes history. By exploring the lives of those who were once ignored, whether slaves, women or immigrant laborers, scholars are able to reshape the norm of historical narratives. Such efforts are driven by the common belief that "historical change does not only come from the top down, but also from the bottom up."³⁶ Consequently, stories of the marginalized do count as history. Social historians also favor this approach because they found quantitative data and social theory insufficient when trying to answer the most pressing question about how individuals made sense of their lives in certain historical contexts.

This book bridges the gap by presenting a social history of Chinese women pioneers in Chinese Christianity since the 1880s. A longitudinal evaluation of Chinese women's changing roles in the church needs to examine the deployment of gender in the narration of identity, the negotiation of power differentials between the powerful and the marginalized, and the reinforcement of patriarchal control over spheres such as family and culture. This book presents how indigenous Christian women created change in Chinese society, dealing with power structures in family life, professional work, and Christian ministry. It is time not only to challenge the traditional "master narrative" centered around indigenous male leaders, but also to diversify it, because histories that recognize the female presence are bound to be richer. Rather than placing either women or men at the center of my narrative, I hope to allow a more complex understanding of gender, power, agency, and institutional change. This multi-level landscape is more inclusive and more representative of the real lives of the Chinese people in the past. I also seek to contribute to a broader transnational women's history, helping our understanding of the impact Chinese Christian women have crossed national boundaries. Overall, this study is crafted to reintroduce Chinese Christian women pioneers not

only to women's history and the history of Chinese Christianity, but also to the history of global Christian mission and the history of many modern professions, such as medicine, education, literature, music, charity, journalism, and literature.

Women in Chinese society have lived through political upheavals that traumatically affected their lives. In the kaleidoscope of social change in China since the late Qing dynasty, when Protestant Christianity began to affect the lives of more ordinary Chinese, women as a social demographic group have experienced the most dramatic ups and downs. As historian Jessie G. Lutz says, it is important to understand "gender entanglements with politics, social structures and values, nation building, and even the economies of agricultural and industrial societies."³⁷ It is an attempt to recover the stories of indigenous women and to restore the historical significance their lives deserve.

This study assumes first of all that women have indeed participated in the creation of Chinese Protestantism. Secondly, it assumes that gender has affected the shape of Christianity in China. Finally, it affirms that a history of Chinese Protestantism includes the motivations, goals, theological assumptions, and reflections that Chinese women employed as they participated in this development. Thus, this book demonstrates how Chinese Christian women have at main points in time "made history" that matters for Chinese Christianity. By inviting the presence of these women pioneers, historical contours are enriched because "women's history demands that historians ask questions about the construction of gender and the political and social realities of women's lives and in relation to the religious community."³⁸

The stories in this volume span one and a half centuries, examining stories of Chinese women who lived across historical eras from late Qing dynasty, Republic of China, a totalitarian Mao era, to a post-reform China and then a globalized Chinese diaspora. Outlining social change within distinct historical phases is important because each phase poses unique challenges while offering unprecedented opportunities for Chinese women. These historical contrasts offer a broader picture of social change for the role of women in China. For example, in the late nineteenth century, I examine Chinese women who were mentored by Western women missionaries and accomplished pioneering work in medicine, girls' education, and social reform. They pushed through social hurdles such as foot-binding, illiteracy, domesticity, and equality rights for workers. After the founding of the communist regime, however, the focus shifts to politicized struggles along partisan lines. Challenges for Christian women came from a regime that discouraged elitism and foreign connections. Taking each historical period as one laboratory of institutional change for Chinese women, this approach helps to highlight the contrast within Chinese society during these periods. Despite these changes, there have been enduring themes in these women's pursuits—an identity that is not

simply defined by a woman's familial roles of daughter, wife, and mother, but rather as gifted individuals who can contribute to the common good. As historical actors, these Chinese women had diverse experiences, interests, and talents. Within various structural constraints that were characteristic of their times, these Chinese women pioneers achieved extraordinary levels of social and cultural participation.

I also ask challenging questions about traditional narrative frameworks that tend to be male-dominated: How did home-bound Chinese women, who were mostly illiterate, embrace Christianity when Protestant mission spread further into China in the mid- to late nineteenth century? How would historians have written about mission pioneers in the 1920s in China if they had explored the lives of women as well as of men? What would have been their main themes? What made Chinese Communism appealing to many Christian women pioneers in the first half of the twentieth century? How should the story of Christian women under Maoism be told? What expectations did women have for the New China that proved false in the 1960s? How did the professional skills of Christian women contribute to society despite the communist regime? How did the demarcation between Three-Self churches and house churches affect the Chinese church and women's experiences, including before and after the economic reform? What role did Christian women in the Chinese diaspora play after the 1990s, an age of transnational migration and globalization? How are Christian women finding opportunities to serve in the 2010s with China becoming the world's leading economic power? Lastly, did their gender make these women into political, cultural, and ecclesiastical outsiders in their society, or were they able to carve out new ways of engagement with public life? In all these attempts, the recovery of women's stories should lead to new narratives. Such knowledge is likely to transform our understanding of the historical landscape of Chinese Protestantism.

This study does not seek to offer an exhaustive history of Christian women leaders in China. Rather, it tells the stories of ten generations of significant yet under-recognized historical female figures. Each of the women selected occupied a unique position in a specific historical phase and left a legacy or a wider social impact. My selection was guided by archival availability and the significance of leadership in her way of life. Within each historical phase, particular women stood out as the pioneers and trailblazers of their time. I qualify such selectiveness by a few measurable criteria. First, each woman was baptized as a Christian believer and participated in faith communities. Secondly, during her lifetime, she enjoyed a national and global reputation in either professional expertise, evangelistic influence, or institution-building. For this reason, I exclude historical figures such as Lin Zhao whose influence came decades after her story was written.³⁹ Thirdly, among the married women, they achieved pioneering status in various fields quite independently,

without relying on the reputation of their husbands.⁴⁰ Therefore, I do not include women leaders such as Soong Mei-ling, whose life has already been covered by many China studies monographs.⁴¹ Apart from choosing figures whose contributions have been widely recognized, I have tried to select women whose life and faith journeys represent larger and complex issues at the crossroads of Christianity and the Chinese society.

On a deeper level, the recovery of women's history in Chinese Protestantism also allows us to rethink many assumptions about the crises of modernity in Chinese society. At the center of these women's stories is power relationships with the state, patriarchy, and social norms as the Chinese society transforms from imperial order to modernity, communism, postmodernity, and then global diaspora. These women acted as cultural interpreters between East and West as well as between old and new. In their explorations of selfhood, gender roles, nationalistic consciousness, and Christian identity, many were cross-cultural synthesizers who formulated their own distinct expressions of the Christian faith. Because of these multifaceted processes, the women in this volume did not live without controversy. Their stories can reveal both the promises and perils of Protestantism Christianity in the Chinese society.

This book is structured to include an introduction, three main parts including ten historical chapters, and a conclusion. The chapters that follow are organized more or less chronologically. Each offers historical background which situates the women's stories in their political and social contexts. Although the periodization largely maps onto how historians perceive Chinese history, the re-centering of women's experiences may also challenge or even subvert previously held narratives. Within each historiographical chapter about women who belonged to a particular generation, there are three parts. First, I locate the main figures in the social context of one specific historical era. Exploring the setting from which the history of Chinese Christian women emerged is essential to understanding their stories. Next, I give historiographical accounts of their lives, drawing extensively on materials written by the women themselves and by their contemporaries in both the English and Chinese languages. The research materials include newspaper and magazine accounts, personal memoirs and diaries, and ministry reports. I use their biographical accounts as "case studies," integrating historical examination of the larger social forces that shaped their understanding and pursuits. Although being active agents of change, their lives also bear the indelible imprint of the ideas, practices, and movements of their times. Lastly, I resituate and evaluate the significance and implications of these women in the broader historical trajectory. I discuss how their agency interacts with broader currents in each historical phase.

Part I spans the Era of Revolutions from late Qing to early communist China (1880s–1953). Missionaries, physicians, and reform-minded educators are the main focus in this section. Under the section title, I offer a short