Scholars of religion in Qing dynasty China have long been in need of a book like this (which is a hardcover reprint of the 2010 initial publication). Knowledge about Christianity in China at that time is centred largely on male missionaries, occasionally their male converts or indigenous co-workers, but with a few notable exceptions, women are mostly missing. Jessie Lutz’s edited volume is a bold attempt to redress the balance despite the difficulties of working in this area. She has devoted her career to the study of Protestant missions in China and this collection contains contributions from many leading scholars of Qing dynasty Protestant and Catholic missions’ history.

The avowed aim is to “bring Chinese Christian women into the history of women in China and the history of Chinese Christianity” (p. 14) from the start of the Qing until 1919. This is essential since as the book’s title suggests, many were pioneers in carving new spheres for their fellow countrywomen. The volume highlights the astounding upward social mobility which took place in some families benefitting from Protestant education. By the early twentieth century, the granddaughters of illiterate women were attending college or studying abroad. Although the careers of Shi Meiyu and Kang Cheng/Aide (both featured), are well known, the biographical snippets of others, many unnamed, demonstrate the depth of missionary impact on rural non-elite Chinese women.

The volume’s seventeen essays are divided into seven different sections with the main four (Parts II to VI), preceded by an introduction from the editor. Most of the first half centres on Catholicism whereas the latter is dominated by Protestantism. This division is logical since it follows the chronology of missions’ history in China.

Arguably the most significant missionary influence on the lives of Chinese women provides the starting point for the book, namely, the inroads made into the bastion of universal marriage (Part II). European Catholic missionaries from different orders assisted the development of the role of Virgins, women who chose to remain unmarried and devoted themselves to religious matters. They faced a tough battle to win social acceptability. Eugenio Menegon reveals how Catholics in Fuan (Fujian) employed a missionary discourse drawing on the cult of female chastity to carve out a place within Confucian mores. When not restrained by priests, Virgins did much evangelistic work as Robert Entenmann shows in his essay on Sichuan. Gary Tiedemann reveals their importance for the spread and maintenance
of Catholicism in China and the tension they created among male priests, who often considered them “a necessary evil” (p. 98).

A more general study of the lives of Protestant Christian women is provided in Part III. Since statistical evidence is hard to find for the non-elite, these studies are based on small samples. Joseph Tse-Hei Lee examines female converts in the Chaozhou-speaking region of Guangdong and Margo Gewurtz those in rural northern Henan. Peter Chen-main Wang points out the similarities between ideal gender roles in Confucianism and Protestant Christianity by comparing biographies of women in China Church Year Book and Lienü zhuan (Biographies of Exemplary Women).

Part IV serves as a very limited introduction to evangelism. Converts fulfilling this function in Protestant missions (known as Bible women) were mostly widows. The section underlines the importance of widows to the spread of Christianity because of the spatial freedom they enjoyed.

The second half of the book (Parts V, VI and the Postscript) examines the gendered impact of two types of missionary institutions - schools/colleges and hospitals. Missionary education (here Protestant), the only one available to most non-elite girls until the 1907 education reforms, provided upward mobility. This came through the career prospects created (jobs as doctors, nurses and teachers) or simply better marriage prospects. As Lutz points out in her introduction to Part V, female doctors, both Chinese and Western were accepted earlier in China than in the West. This emancipation was the outcome of social restrictions imposed on Chinese women through gender separation. Drawing on his excellent research from Fuzhou, Ryan Dunch demonstrates the instrumentalisation of missionary education by converts (Part VI). He reveals how demand from converts catalysed the widespread founding of mission schools for girls and argues that many women used them as part of a marriage avoidance strategy.

This book should be read by students of gender in the late Qing, whether or not they are interested in missionary history. If they are, the volume will complement Gary Tiedemann’s foundational Handbook of Christianity in China, Volume II, Otherwise it stands


as a fascinating contribution to social history with insights into the lives of the late Qing rural non-elite, even if not all essays offer the same depth and quality. Menegon’s rounded chapter gives a clear glimpse of the way forward, showing the interaction between the Christian subculture and Chinese mainstream. Two omissions are worthy of note. Firstly, the missed opportunity for a comparative approach such as, for example, one involving the three different types of single women mentioned - Virgins, faithful maidens and “mothers to their country” (Protestant). This collection’s bias towards Protestant missionary history may explain the second omission, that of the orphanage/foundling home. As a missionary response to Chinese female infanticide, these are vital for any study of gender and missions. Not only did such institutions (and there were hundreds of Catholic ones) generate large numbers of Chinese female Christians (including Virgins), they also affected the Chinese discourse and rural society. Nevertheless, this volume offers a valuable introduction to gender and Christianity in the late Qing and early Republican eras.

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