

# Bible Women

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## THE EXAMPLE OF SIU KEIN

A CHRISTIAN WOMAN OF AROUND FIFTY WENT TO SHANTOU (SWATOW), Guangdong, to learn to read the hymns and the compendium of the Gospels. After some training under the American Baptists she was sent out to work as a Bible woman. This woman, by the name Siu Kein, was born in Sieh Tie, a town forty miles from Shantou. We know nothing about her parents, her father's occupation, or her childhood except that she was brought up carefully, which is another way of saying that she was brought up according to Confucian conventions of womanly conduct. A turning point came to her life at sixteen when she lost her mother and her father, soon thereafter, brought another woman home. Nothing was told about her relationship with her stepmother. That she was married off in the following year to a young peasant in the village of Chiam Po, three miles from Shantou and about thirty to forty miles away from her hometown would probably be a fulfillment of the marriage contract between the two families. It was not unusual for girls at that time to be married at that age. But Siu Kein's marriage may also be suggestive of a less than happy relationship between stepmother and daughter. Whatever the situation was, we do not know for certain if she was happily married or she just accepted docilely what was arranged for her.

Life did not seem to be kind to Siu Kein. In a few years' time she was widowed. The need to bring up her children, a boy and a girl, would have galvanized her to bear up with firmness instead of indulging herself in sorrow. When her son attained the age of twenty, she got a wise and obedient wife for him. Six years later, because of a lineage feud, her son received a fatal wound on his knee. The loss of her son, the sole source of financial and emotional support to her, proved to be devastating and the grief that followed was too much for her. In her bitterness she turned her back on those gods whom she had worshipped for years. She asked an old neighbor to take her to the foreign chapel in the district city across the river from their village. She was the first female convert in that church, which had then

consisted of seventy members. That was the year 1868 and she was forty-nine years old.<sup>1</sup>

Siu Kein's experience resonates with that of other Bible women of her time. Many of those women did not live ordinary lives of mothers and daughters, mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. Theirs were tragic lives of women crushed by misfortunes but never resigned to circumstances. Their adventure in Christian faith in their middle or their old age took them into a kind of work touching thousands of women's lives, something that they could scarcely foresee. It is the focus of this chapter to examine who these women were, why they were needed, what role they played in the Chinese church in the late Qing period, particularly from the 1860s to 1911, and how they overcame both their own limitations and those restrictions imposed on women by the various Protestant denominations. My final question is whether they could resolve the tensions over the role of women in ministry.

### WHO WERE THE BIBLE WOMEN?

They were Chinese Christians who, after several years of training by missionaries, were employed by the missions or supported by the Chinese church as evangelists. They were women like Siu Kein, who had faced tragedies in their lives. Many had been married to men unworthy of them and had eaten the bread of bitterness in their homes. Some had children who were a grief to them while some had lost children who were a joy to them.

Most of the early Bible women were well into their middle or old age. They might be widows, wives, or mothers of preachers or catechists. They became Christians because of the persuasion of their husbands, children, kinsmen, or friends. Some had experienced or witnessed the healing power of God whereas others were convinced of the futility of idols. When they were recruited as Bible women, they worked mainly under the supervision of female missionaries acting as their assistants. There was a Mrs. Zhang, née Lai, a native of Fujian, who was converted by her husband. When her husband became a Christian, the first convert in the family, she followed him to walk about three miles to the church on Sunday. Their newly found religion greatly enraged their clansmen, who expelled them from their home village. While her husband was serving as an evangelist, Mrs. Zhang entered a woman's school and later became an exhorter doing itinerant evangelism. Their Christian faith bore fruit at home; two of her sons became pastors.<sup>2</sup> Some Bible women started working as evangelists after their preacher husbands died. Such was the case of a woman, surnamed

Wang, a native of Shangyu, Zhejiang. She was married into the Bao family at the age of seventeen. Mr. Bao was converted during the turmoil of the Taiping Rebellion when he was separated from his wife. Around 1873 he became the pastor of a church in Xinshi, Hunan, and served until 1889 when he died of exhaustion and a protracted disease. Mrs. Bao then became an evangelist and was in charge of a girls' school until she was obliged to retire at an advanced age.<sup>3</sup>

Another similar but even more interesting account was Mrs. Wong Yu Ang's story. Yu Ang, orphaned as an infant, was adopted by the Kwoh family. When she was thirteen, her adopted mother died; her adopted father died a year later. Yu Ang stayed with an elderly woman for four years and was married to Wong Yu Hong at eighteen. Mr. Wong was a seeker for truth who had joined a vegetarian sect at sixteen. Then at twenty-nine he hoped to find salvation by joining the Zhejiang Vegetarian Sect, which insisted on sexual abstinence, but he was dissuaded from doing so by his wife. It is not clear whether he finally became a sect member or not. At any rate, he left his home and went to the Buddhist monastery at Kushan to become a priest and obtained a priest's credentials without shaving his head. He returned home three months later and entreated his wife to become a vegetarian herself. When Mrs. Wong was twenty-four years old, she heard a preacher talking about Christ in the street and recommended that her husband follow the "Jesus Sect." She even went to ask for some Christian literature from the preacher's wife and urged her husband to read it. Finally her husband went to the church to examine the doctrine and was eventually baptized. He became a preacher but died shortly thereafter in March 1874. Mrs. Wong was deeply grieved and in her sorrow received a vision to follow the Lord. Later she was made a deaconess in the Methodist Episcopal Church, working incessantly for the conversion of women.<sup>4</sup> It is evident that some Bible women like Mrs. Bao and Mrs. Wong were determined to follow in the footsteps of their husbands and remain faithful to their husbands' belief.

Before conversion, some Bible women had been the missionaries' wash-women or their cooks. When they became earnest Christians, they were made Bible women.<sup>5</sup> Others had been reduced to poverty and had become beggars or had been sold as slave girls.<sup>6</sup> Chin Li-Si, a native of Xiamen, was sold by her parents as a slave girl to an officer in Gutian, Fujian, at fifteen. Two years later, she became the wife of a Mr. Tiang. The latter had a fight with his neighbors and was put in jail with Ka In, the preacher and student helper of the Gutian Methodist Episcopal Church. Ka In was alleged by those who were against the "Jesus doctrine" to have distributed poison powder. Visiting her husband in prison, she came to know Ka In and was impressed by his example in prison. She was thus converted and appointed a deaconess by the church later.<sup>7</sup>

Some Bible women had been spirit mediums and had been possessed prior to their conversion. Others had been Buddhist or Daoist sect leaders before they were converted. In the province of Henan, there was a Mrs. Zhang, a widow, who came from Hopi Village and was a committed member of the Shengdao Sect (or the Sage Sect), a variant of the Heavenly Gate Society operating especially in the Lin County in North Henan. Mrs. Zhang, a seasoned “woman preacher” of a Buddhist sect, was able to step with ease into the role of Bible woman after her conversion to Christianity.<sup>8</sup>

In some cases the loss of eyesight was no handicap to a Bible woman. In Jianning, Fujian, a Bible woman, who had only a glimmer of sight in one eye, did a fair amount of village itinerating without the aid of the bamboo rod. As she was nearly blind, she had to use Braille type for her writing and reading. Sometimes she took another blind woman with her for a day’s preaching.<sup>9</sup> In the same city Guang-Seng, another Bible woman, who had lost all her eyesight, led prayer meetings and itinerated in the rural area with a sighted companion; she exhorted the backsliders to repent and encouraged the beginners. She worked in a village of blind people and as a blind leading the blind, her work bore fruit. When she died in July 1918, a feast consisting of many tables was prepared in the Blind Village before the funeral procession started. This showed how successful she was in her work there.<sup>10</sup>

The itinerant nature of their work required Bible women to be regularly away from home for days or for weeks. Some Bible women like Aunt Luck, the helper of the American Baptists in Shantou, walked fifteen to twenty miles a day spreading the Gospel.<sup>11</sup> Obviously not all women were suitable for the job. Only those who were tough, modest, conscientious, and relatively free from family obligations were employed as full-time workers. But there were some who volunteered to do itinerant witnessing in gratitude to the grace of God.

### WHY WERE THEY NEEDED?

Bible women were employed in various missions in South China in the 1860s. In 1865 Mrs. John B. French of the American Presbyterian Mission in Guangzhou reported that she had hired a Bible woman supported by Mrs. Ranyard of England.<sup>12</sup> Both the Church Missionary Society (CMS) and the American Baptists in Ningbo also mentioned their Bible women in the late 1860s.<sup>13</sup> The American Reformed Church appointed the first Bible woman in 1879.<sup>14</sup> In those places where missions had established a foothold, women missionaries were beginning to train their own female native assistants during the 1860s. A decade later, the training of Bible women was

gradually institutionalized.<sup>15</sup> It was the time when China was further open to missionary endeavor with a pressing demand for native helpers. The China Inland Mission (CIM) was beginning to bring in single women to China and woman missionary societies began to mushroom in North America. Woman's work for woman became the dominant force in Protestant movement throughout the world. By 1900 there were more than forty denominational woman's missionary societies in the United States.<sup>16</sup> The coming of single missionary ladies in the 1870s and 1880s resulted in the expansion of woman's work in China, which necessitated the employment of native agents doing the woman's work.

There was another reason for missionaries to employ Chinese women as helpers. In many of the missionary accounts in the period from the 1870s to 1890s the degradation of Chinese women was perceived to be the greatest obstacle to missionary work.<sup>17</sup> In matters of religion Chinese women were held as "the citadel of heathenism" because they were the strongest supporters of Buddhism and almost every form of idolatry and superstitions. The missionaries had no doubt that until Christianity had entered the homes of Chinese women and until the mothers, wives, and daughters of China had become converted to Christianity, their evangelistic efforts among the people would never be permanently successful and there would not be a second generation of Christians in the Chinese church.

For the church to survive, the conversion of women was regarded as necessary. It was difficult, however, to induce a woman to be a probationer. Her husband might insist that she hold onto the traditional beliefs either because of the matter of "face" or because of the need to maintain domestic harmony. Besides, it was not decent for a woman of a better social class to be seen on the street walking a long way to the church. It would be all the more outrageous if women were seen to be worshipping with men in a public place. Even if her husband allowed her to attend the church, she would hardly find the time to do so because the responsibility of the entire household fell on her.<sup>18</sup> To teach those women at home, therefore, evangelistic agents had to be employed. Unmarried Chinese preachers, however, could hardly teach them in a sex-segregated society. Thus the missionaries' perception of Chinese women as both victims to and as stronghold of heathenism not only gave validity to woman's work but also opened the way for the Bible women to participate in evangelism.

Although women missionaries were called to do the woman's work, the first-termers were too tongue tied and preoccupied with language studies to do any work at all whereas those who were experienced were much overworked. Women missionaries, married and with children in addition to the care of schools, had enough family responsibilities to worry about. In many instances, their physical health cracked under constant exertions and some gave way to nervousness and depression. For this reason the early female

missionaries' labors yielded little fruit because of the rapid turnover of missionaries due to death or premature retirement on account of health. Many of the early missionary wives hardly survived to complete the language studies.

There were other practical considerations, which were equally important. A Bible woman could do a better job than missionaries because she had several advantages. First of all, she had the command of the language or dialect and was familiar with the ethos, life, and the mode of thought of her fellow sisters. She could, therefore, present the Christian truth in a more forceful manner than any foreigner. Second, she could go to places where access to foreigners was denied and antimissionary sentiment was rife. Third, she could reach a large number of people with a relatively small outlay of money. Her employment was regarded as a cost-effective way of doing evangelism and would enable the mission to use effectively the first fruit of labor without having to wait for years for a highly educated class to be raised up through formal schooling.<sup>19</sup> Finally, missionaries could reach the rural villages by mobilizing the Bible woman's own lineage network or connections, which would allow the former to cover a lot of ground. For the above reasons Bible women were coopted into the woman's work for woman.

### WHAT WAS THE ROLE OF BIBLE WOMEN?

The term "Bible woman" encompasses a variety of roles. In some places the Bible women were entrusted with the entire supervision of the woman's work when the hands of the missionaries were crowded to overflowing.

Primarily Bible women did evangelistic work as faithful witnesses of Christ. Medical Bible women went with medical missionaries to hospital to minister to those who were sick or dying. They also read and talked to those out-patients, who awaited their turn to see the doctor in the waiting room in dispensary or hospital. Others accompanied missionary ladies, single or married, on itinerant trips and introduced the first-termers to Christians in the country. They helped correct the missionaries' language mistakes, translate the missionaries' academic language into the vernacular, amplify their ideas, and answered the questions raised by women.<sup>20</sup> As for those working in the cities, they visited their neighborhood, read, and explained from the catechism or the life of Jesus. For this reason they were sometimes known as the Bible readers.

When the Bible women went about witnessing, they helped dispelling superstitions. Speed, a female volunteer evangelist of Shantou, went to visit women in Am Choi Village, where a large dragon god was worshipped. Local inhabitants were afraid of the dragon but Speed punched holes into the

dragon's bamboo body with her umbrella and destroyed it. The onlookers were amazed and many asked her about the God who protected her.<sup>21</sup>

Some Bible women played the role as teachers. A few were employed as Chinese language teachers of women missionaries whereas most of them taught Sunday School classes and the girls' day schools. The latter were usually centers of evangelistic work for women. Bible women combined teaching girls with visiting their parents in their homes. They also taught the Romanized system of reading and writing in Chinese to women or girls at their homes or in the chapels.<sup>22</sup> Sometimes women missionaries had to rely on their Bible women to do this on account of their inadequacy in the language.<sup>23</sup> Some Bible women helped missionary ladies to teach station classes and others were matrons of the Bible women's training schools.

Bible women did pastoral work short of administering sacraments. As assistants to local preachers they went to the homes of the converts to demolish idols.<sup>24</sup> They prepared women for admission to the church as probationers, nurturing and building up Christian women. In some village chapels in the remote area, they would conduct church services on Sunday when male preachers were not available. Some of them accompanied male missionaries and their assistants on preaching tours.<sup>25</sup> Besides ministering to the sick, they comforted at funerals, made merry at weddings, and rejoiced at the arrival of babies. They prayed for women for deliverance from the possession of the devil.<sup>26</sup>

Bible women did the work similar to that of the contemporary social workers and counselors. They listened to the woes and griefs of women and cared for them. Some worked among the lepers and social outcasts.<sup>27</sup> Some helped female opium addicts to get rid of their addiction in the opium refuges.<sup>28</sup> Mrs. Lau, a member of the Baptist church in Taiyuan, Shanxi, worked in an opium refuge for thirty years. During the Boxer Uprising she risked her life to protect the women from being defiled by the Boxers.<sup>29</sup> The wife of Pastor Xi Shengmo of Shanxi was also involved in the opium refuge work. She left her home to travel from the Qi County on the Pingyao Plain down to the distant Huanghe area doing the work of a Bible woman. She conducted Sunday services, gathered the converts around her, superintended opium refuges for women and trained woman to carry on her work.<sup>30</sup> There were other Bible women who attempted to rescue widows from committing suicide; those women were betrothed but before their marriage their fiancé had died, and their relatives tried to sell them or get them to remarry. They were thus driven to committing suicide or marrying the spirit of the departed.<sup>31</sup> Some Bible women played the role of chaperons to girls and match-makers helping the church workers and Christians to find their spouses.<sup>32</sup> They also attended wedding ceremonies to give support to those Christian girls who were married against their will to heathen families. On

the whole, Bible women played multiple roles serving as guides and advisers to their sisters on a host of matters.

## HOW TO OVERCOME THEIR LIMITATIONS?

Being women, Bible women had more limitations than men when they were carrying out their work as evangelists but they sought to overcome their limitations. This experience ultimately empowered them.

### 1. PHYSICAL LIMITATIONS

On account of their age ranging from their late forties up to their seventies or eighties, their increasingly declining health seemed to be a handicap. But their age can be double-edged. At that age they had long passed the child-bearing stage, and were, to a large extent, free from family cares and obligations. In addition, old age also won for them respect from men and women alike in a country that had a profound respect for the aged.

Besides the consideration of age, bound feet were supposed to keep them close to their home and bound feet were certainly a handicap to travel. Although many missions would prefer women with natural feet, they had a limited choice of candidates, especially in the 1860s and 1870s before a greater number of Bible women came out from the Bible women's training schools. Despite their physical handicap many of those with bound feet had access to places, could enter homes and penetrate the women's quarters, which were off limits for male preachers.

In many places Chinese women seldom went beyond their own village or traveled from place to place except on important occasions. Their work mainly centered on service to their own families. Bible women, however, had to work outside their homes and traverse miles upon miles. Formerly they might have served their mothers-in-law by waiting on the elder women's personal needs. As Bible women they worked for the good of other women and served an extended Christian family larger than their own.

### 2. MENTAL AND INTELLECTUAL LIMITATIONS

Many of them were illiterate before becoming Bible women. Their intellectual capacity might have remained undeveloped or stupefied by years of child-bearing and domestic labor. The multiplicity of family cares and anxieties together with grinding poverty might have taxed their energies and sapped their strength. After their conversion those women were encouraged to learn the Romanized and/or written scripts, the skill denied to the



majority of the lower-class women in China in the nineteenth century. Through several years of training in Bible women's classes or schools, they became instructors of faith, teaching women to sing hymns and read the Bible in the woman's schools. Many also conducted literacy classes in chapels and at the believers' homes.

### 3. PSYCHOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

Many Chinese women considered themselves ignorant because they were told from childhood that they were stupid and it was useless for them to read. Those who came to the station class conducted by missionaries were settled into the belief that they were "women only" and not worth bothering with studying. But with the inspiration and encouragement of women missionaries, many of these women regained their self-confidence. Their employment as Bible women enabled them to broaden their networks and widen their concern beyond the inner chamber. It offered them a career option, which was a career with respect among Chinese Christians. Being teachers and instructors of faith also enabled them to assume leadership role among women in church. It was indeed an empowering experience, which ultimately boosted their self-esteem.

### TENSIONS OVER THEIR ROLE IN THE MINISTRY

Bible women were recruited to do woman's work. In fact, woman's work for woman was a rationale to give women a unique place in the mission enterprise.<sup>33</sup> This strategy also represents the success of women missionaries in the late nineteenth century to carve out their own mandate parallel to that of men. Such a delineation of work between men and women, however, could not resolve the tensions over the role of women in ministry.

In the nineteenth century women could not be ordained and were not licensed to preach. The restrictions on what missionaries were allowed to do in China varied from mission to mission. In general missionary women were assistants to men. A married missionary woman was considered just a man's wife, not a true missionary. But in the second half of the nineteenth century women outnumbered men and they were in places where supervision of their work became a problem. Among the missions the CIM sent the largest number of women to China. Many of them were single women. This was justified on the ground that women would have more openings than men in some parts of the country and they were less suspected of being political agents. The influence of their visits would prepare the way for their male colleagues to follow. The CIM ladies, in addition, were given considerable freedom in their work; one of such free-

dom was the unsupervised itineration of single women.<sup>34</sup> To the extent that they were blazing a trail for men, they provoked shock and indignation among the missionary circles. Many of their contemporaries found their aggressive way of doing evangelism a violation of female propriety and that it was prejudicial to missionary work in general.

American Baptist men were highly critical of the CIM ladies. They did not allow their missionary women to preach. Neither did they allow their women colleagues to speak before audiences that contained men.<sup>35</sup> Some Baptist women often found it hard to conform to the norm dictated by men. In North China women missionaries were found preaching in chapels, on village streets, market towns, and at great fairs.<sup>36</sup> Their rationale was that as there were not enough men to do the job and if women did not rise to the occasion, many Chinese men would be damned forever. Even if some of the Baptist women were courageous enough to defy the prevailing norm, they took care to defend their case and apparently not to tread on the rights of the male. A case in point was Lottie Moon (1840–1912), a Southern Baptist, who had worked in Dengzhou (Tungchow) for most of the years between 1873 and her death. In a letter she offered a robust and spirited defense of her preaching to a group of people, which included men, saying sharply that it was not her fault because men chose to listen to her address. A party of men followed her to another village in order to hear more about the Gospel.<sup>37</sup> In another letter written to Dr. R. J. Willingham in November 1901, she pointed out to the mission board that country work was crucial to the mission because most of the Chinese Christians came from the rural area and this necessitated a lot of itineration work on the part of the ladies.<sup>38</sup> Moon's colleague Willie Kelly (1893–1937), serving as teacher, principal, secretary, bookkeeper, banker, lawyer, counselor, preacher, deaconess, nurse, and mission administrator, set an example of leadership for her Chinese counterpart. She also campaigned for a greater role for Chinese women in the church.<sup>39</sup>

The position of American Methodist women was no better than that of the Baptists. American Methodist men on the field initially believed that the introduction of single women into the China mission was a mistake.<sup>40</sup> They became, however, more open to women in the 1880s. Under the influence of the deaconess movement in the United States, women missionaries were accepted as evangelists, and the Bible women in Fuzhou were designated as “deaconesses.”<sup>41</sup> At the other end of the spectrum, in those missions with a hierarchical structure such as the Church Missionary Society, restrictions on women were more rigid. The CMS, like the American Methodists, had strong objections to the inclusion of young women as missionaries.<sup>42</sup> In 1887 the Society had only nine women working in China (including Hong Kong) and not surprisingly, the number of the female communicants was appallingly few.<sup>43</sup> The CMS was reluctant to recognize

that the woman's work had an important place in the mission until the late 1880s. If the CMS men wanted to keep their women within bounds, ironically, they had contravened the Chinese conventional norms in a segregated society. They had done the woman's work themselves by their direction and superintending of Bible women under their care. It was when strong objections were raised against their contact with Chinese women that they gave up the work solely to missionary ladies.<sup>44</sup> In the following decade when the CMS ladies in Fujian went to some villages with a Chinese preacher or catechist for an open-air meeting, they were not permitted to preach. Their presence would simply draw a crowd while the men preached.<sup>45</sup> Their subordination to men can also be seen in the memorandum of 1896 regarding woman's work in Fujian. According to this document the ladies of the CMS and the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society had to confine their work among females and to submit to the decisions of the male clerical missionary in charge of the district even if the latter was young and inexperienced.<sup>46</sup>

American Presbyterians, likewise, did not allow women to engage in public evangelism. Their single ladies were sent to China as teachers and physicians and not as evangelists although married women were appointed to do evangelistic work as assistants to their husbands.<sup>47</sup> Despite these apparent rules many woman educators were doing evangelistic work among Chinese women. A case in point was Mary L. B. Vaughan, who worked in Yantai and Qingdao from the period of 1902 to 1913. She was sent as an educator but later became a powerful revivalist, holding large-scale revival meetings in various parts of Shandong.<sup>48</sup> However, the male disapproval of single women traveling and visiting alone remained strong in the Shandong mission. If single ladies went on itinerant journeys, they were urged to go in company with a preacher and a good servant and were to avoid markets and public places. They were also to confine themselves to those places where native Christians could be found.<sup>49</sup> Such a patriarchal attitude was hard for some determined women to swallow; the men's injunctions were often ignored.<sup>50</sup>

The Bible women's role in woman's work was more ambivalent than that of the women missionaries. As we understand, the term "Bible woman" is a gender laden word. Unobtrusively and out of the purview of men, a Bible woman was to confine her work among the women and to teach them the Bible. She was employed, however, as an evangelist, and could do the work that a woman missionary was not permitted by convention to do. Although she was not supposed to preach to men, on many occasions her audience included men and she spoke to them as well. Sometimes upon the invitation of men she visited their homes, and the men and their neighbors or friends were there to listen to her preaching.<sup>51</sup> In some missionary societies where power was less structured than that of the CMS, women had

greater flexibility in their work. The ladies of the CIM and their Bible women used the word “preach” more liberally and their work was not strictly confined to women.<sup>52</sup> In some cases the American Baptists and the CIM women taught Bible to classes of men in the 1880s.<sup>53</sup> It was clear that many women missionaries were doing the thing they were not allowed to do at home, thus setting an example of crossing boundaries for their helpers.

It became evident that as times changed, the role of the Bible women was extended to suit the situation or to meet expediency of the church in China. In the 1890s the work of Bible women was so successful that American Baptist men affirmed that their role in direct evangelization in the towns and villages in Shantou area was as crucial as that of the native preachers and missionaries.<sup>54</sup> In Fujian more and more Bible women of the CMS were found preaching in public places such as markets on their itinerant trip in the 1910s.<sup>55</sup> It seems that missionary men were more willing to give concessions to Bible women who were doing the man’s work. Even more interesting was that some denominations supported these wider boundaries for woman evangelists particularly in places where male workers were insufficient. This was the case with Sik-die (meaning “Tucked away”), a Bible woman of the American Board in Fujian, who was sent to teach women up and down the mountain near the Pagoda Anchorage (Ma Wei). She ended up teaching male inquirers as well as those men who chose to come to join the evening worship during the week. She also took the preacher’s place on Sunday and conducted services for girls and women who could not walk the several miles up the steep mountain slope to the nearest chapel.<sup>56</sup> In the 1920s it was more frequent for the Bible women to be sent to rural areas where no preacher could be spared for teaching and shepherding the scattered congregation thus blurring the distinction between woman’s and man’s work.<sup>57</sup> By then more and more Chinese women were, on equal terms with men, enrolled in theological schools. They began to play a more important role in the church as deaconesses, treasurers, and revivalists.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Bible women had no decision power in the male-dominated hierarchy of the church. On account of the division of labor between men and women, however, Bible women had borne a large degree of responsibility for women’s conversion and nurturing, thus enabling them to exercise “some power” over those of their own sex. As they were released from church administration and responsibility concerning church buildings, church growth, and financial matters, they were free to attend to those people in need and were able to concentrate on personal work in a way that their male counterpart could not do.

Bible women were not only evangelistic agents but also worked unconsciously as civilizing agents. In the 1880s and 1890s many Bible women

began to unbind their feet despite the excruciating pain of doing so, and they also encouraged their female converts to follow suit. Some even cut out the pattern of the reformed shoe, showing the would-be-disciples how to make it and telling them the best way of doctoring their poor, crippled feet.<sup>58</sup> They exhorted the believers not to bind the feet of their daughters. Some Bible women rescued the lives of new-born girls whose mothers would try to put them out of existence.<sup>59</sup> Despite the intent to liberate the Chinese women from such evil customs as foot-binding, female infanticide, or child marriage, it is doubtful how much they could do to improve the lot of their fellow sisters. Solution to the problems that confronted the Chinese women were not so simple as loosening of a few bound feet, rescuing a few baby girls, or a dozen widows. The reality was more difficult for them to do anything about it and resistance to change was strong when it came to questions like marriage and divorce, early betrothal and child marriage, the rights and the treatment of wives and widows, and so on.

Adele Fielde, an American Baptist missionary, told a story about a young widow, who walked miles from her home to hear a Christian sermon on Sunday but was reviled by her brother-in-law, who had long wanted to get rid of her and take her property and her son. She was finally sold for sixty-eight dollars to an old widower. Her property was taken from her and her boy was kept in his uncle's family.<sup>60</sup> The church could not intervene on her behalf. Another case involved a girl of nineteen who entreated the missionary to take her as an adopted daughter. She was betrothed to a man who had developed an incurable disease and the man's parents would not give up the betrothal. The girl's mother told her to kill herself if she did not want to marry the man. The missionary tried in vain to negotiate the case and several weeks later the girl was taken to the house of her husband's parents. She died soon afterward.<sup>61</sup>

Such tragedies were common among Chinese women and the Bible women could not do much to help the unfortunate with whom they came into contact. Even among the Christians, the idea of a Chinese woman as a sort of chattel and the slave of her husband died hard and the beating of a wife was not uncommon. Such was the case in Jinhua, Zhejiang, in 1891. A Chinese convert of the American Baptists thrashed his wife; consequently he was publicly rebuked and was dismissed from the church. He, then, had the liberty to enjoy beating his wife undisturbed.<sup>62</sup> Undoubtedly, it took a prolonged struggle for the Chinese church to deal with these vices within the Christian community.<sup>63</sup>

The role of Bible women as arbiters of faith and of new values brought them domestic tensions, which were very trying for them. In spite of their exhortations concerning family peace and submission of women to men, they were hardly exemplars of domestic harmony. Their newly found faith was in conflict with the traditional values of womanly conduct ("fudao").

As Christians they refused to prepare the rites of ancestral worship at home. They were seen attending church and associating with the hated foreigners. They worked outside their homes and violated all taboos on public speech. Their liberated feet carried visual symbols. Their transgression of fundamental human order, as perceived by their unconverted family members, was abhorrent to Confucian morality. They, therefore, were blamed for every misery and misfortune that came to visit upon their families or clansmen. Their conversion to Christianity had resulted in domestic disharmony and without the conversion of their household their family life could be like hell. Their newly found faith would be a source of their sorrow and would make their lives more wretched. Bible women had to be prepared to pay the price of renunciation by their families and friends unless the latter were converted.

Outside their homes their perceived lack of morality because of their contact with men within and outside the church made them targets of attack. They were sometimes driven from house to house and often encountered verbal abuse and vile language in regard to their character. But many Bible women were so certain in the knowledge that the love of God was the most exalting experience of life and that the cause to which they devoted themselves was worthy of any sacrifice. The Christian community to which they were attached, also offered them a refuge from domestic violence and strained relationship.

## CONCLUSION

Bible women were primarily evangelistic workers. Many of them were of humble origin and some of them were from disreputable backgrounds. They were not ordained and were on the lowest hierarchal ladder of their mission churches. Despite the fact that they did not have the same training and status of the male evangelists their knowledge of human nature and their cleverness about practical life made them effective agents of evangelism. Although handpicked by missionaries to be their assistants with a role invented for them, they were no passive agents of the former. Most of the Bible women had to overcome their own limitations as women and the constraints of denominational ideologies and strictures on female workers. In places where missionaries and male preachers were not available, they played a dominant role in religious life among the scattered congregations.

Their contribution to church growth cannot be measured by the total number of calls, the number of hearers, or the number of miles they had traveled as recorded in missionary records. Their itinerant journey helped the extension of the church into the rural parts of the country. Their presence in the remote places enabled women to attend chapels without being

exposed so much to the base criticism of the people. In places where faithful Bible women were at work the interest of women was aroused.<sup>64</sup> But in places where woman's work was not evident and where no Bible women were at work the number of women converts was obviously small.<sup>65</sup> Their work in the rural areas helped to break down prejudice against Christianity, leading many to send their daughters to the day or boarding schools run by the missions. The role they played in the woman's work opened a wedge for women in church ministry.

What did the experience of being Bible women mean to themselves? Those few who left behind their verbal testimonies told in a modest and characteristically self-deprecating tone that they could not do much. They apologized for the disadvantage of the female sex as if assuming the collective guilt of being worthless women.<sup>66</sup> They did not want to offer themselves as exemplars but only as the ones chosen by God, although some were hailed as illustrious models.<sup>67</sup> As much as they touched many women's lives, it is perhaps true to say that they could not change the plight of those women as women. Even when a Christian woman or a female inquirer suffered family violence because of her faith or her interest in the faith, the Bible women appeared helpless. They could do little for her. They would only persuade the victim to turn the other cheek and bear graciously the pain of persecution.<sup>68</sup> No matter how powerless they might appear to the one who suffered physical or verbal abuse, they had offered her a choice although it might be one that would spell utter misery for her and for her family. She might be beaten to death on account of her faith as in the case of a woman convert in Shandong.<sup>69</sup> Her husband might be scorned and mocked; his life might go to pieces because of his wife's conversion. This is the sort of dilemma that the Bible women had to face. Among the Christian women they would be much cherished as their mentors or role models whereas among the unbelievers their unconventional behavior would be reviled and cursed as a bad example. For this reason they elicited both love and friendship as much as they provoked hostility and social ostracism. They might not have been aware of the sweet-bitter irony of the impact of their work. Many of them, however, did their work splendidly and never gave way to despondency or fatigue.

## NOTES

1. "The Autobiography of Siu Kein," translated from her verbal narration at Shantou (20 October 1878) by Adele M. Fielde, *The Missionary Magazine* (hereafter *MM*) 59, 3 (March 1879): 60–61.
2. "Mrs. Zhang, nee Lai, The Obituary of Christians" in *Zhonghua jidujiaohui nianjian* (China Christian Year Book, hereafter *Nianjian*), ed. C. Y. Cheng (1927), 261.
3. "Mrs. Bao, nee Wang, The Obituary of Christians," *Nianjian*, 1927, 88.

4. Mrs. S. Moore Sites, "Letter from a Chinese Bible Woman," *Heathen Woman's Friend* (hereafter *HWF*) 7, 6 (December 1875): 128; "On the Presiding Elder District no. II," *HWF* 8, 3 (September 1876): 57–59.

5. F. Johnson, "Stories of the Year at Kien-ning," *India's Women and China's Daughters* (hereafter *IWCD*) 19 (February 1899): 41.

6. In 1909, a Bible woman, who was then working in the Tah-Ding Hospital, had been a mandarin's wife. She became impoverished after the death of her husband and went about begging. She went to the hospital as a patient with her children and was almost dying of starvation. She became a Christian and later was made a Bible woman, helping with the Mandarin-speaking patients at the hospital. See "The 29<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting at London held on 5 July 1909," *IWCD* 29 (June 1909): 85–86.

7. Mrs. S. Moore Sites, "Our Chinese Deaconesses," *HWF* 7, 10 (April 1876): 226.

8. Jonathan and Rosalind Goforth, *Miracle Lives of China*, 46–52; also, see Margo Gewurtz, "The 'Jesus Sect' and 'Jesus Opium': Creating a Christian Community in Rural North Honan, 1890–1912," in *The Chinese Face of Jesus Christ*, Monumenta Serica Monograph Series, 50/2, 700–701.

9. Mary E. Darley, "'Living Epistles' at Kien-ning," *IWCD* 30, 289 (July 1910): 107–9.

10. Mary E. Darley, "Guang-Seng," *IWCD* 39, 389 (February 1919): 11.

11. Adele Fielde, *Pagoda Shadows: Studies from Life in China*, 161.

12. Board of Foreign Missions, the Presbyterian Church in USA (hereafter BFM), vol. 7, Reel 196, China letters, C. F. Preston to Walter Lowrie, 6/10/1865. Preston did not mention the initials of Mrs. Ranyard. It was most probably Ellen Henrietta Ranyard (1810–1879), the wife of Benjamin Ranyard, a philanthropist. Mrs. Ranyard was the founder of the Bible women's movement in London.

13. The American Baptists in Ningbo mentioned the employment of Bible-readers side by side with the Bible women to do woman's work as early as 1865. It seems there was little difference between Bible women and Bible readers. "Letters from Mrs. Knowlton. 28 February 1865, Ningbo Mission," *MM* 10 (October 1865): 378–80. The CMS employed a Bible woman to go out with Mrs. Anna M. Gough in 1869. See the Church Missionary Society Archive (hereafter CMS), CCH 041/1–7, Reel 219, Mrs. Gough to Mr. Venn, 3/25/1869.

14. Gerald De Jong, *The Reformed Church in China, 1842–1951*, 131.

15. In 1873 a Bible woman's training school was set up under Adele M. Fielde in Shantou and a year before a boarding school had been established by the American Presbyterians in Guangzhou. Later a woman's department was added offering a three-year course for the training of Bible women. See Benjamin Crouch Henry, *The Cross and the Dragon*, 262.

16. Dana L. Robert, *American Women in Mission: A Social History of Their Thought and Practice*, 129.

17. L. N. Wheeler, "The Women of China," *HWF* 4, 4 (October 1872): 343–44.

18. L. D. Patterson, "Woman's Work in China," *China Christian Advocate* (hereafter *CCA*) 4, 12 (January 1918): 5.

19. Sarah F. Keely, "The Work of Bible Women," *HWF* 15, 12 (June 1884): 282–83.

20. Report on Swatow, China, 78th Annual Report at the Baptist Missionary Union Meeting held on 24 May 1892, *MM* 72, 7 (July 1892): 286–89. Also see Wayne Flynt and Gerald W. Berkley, *Taking Christianity to China, Alabama Missionaries in the Middle Kingdom 1850–1950*, 61–62.

21. Fielde, *Pagoda Shadows*, 169.

22. Harriet L. Osborne, "Diong-Loh Bible Women and Station Classes 1907," *Foochow Messenger* (hereafter *FM*) 5, 2 (April 1908): 41.



23. BFM, Reel 209, China vol. 29, Cental China Station 1894, no. 31. Miss Edwina Cunningham to Robert Speer, 6/15/1894.
24. Mrs. George H. Hubbard, "Pagoda Anchorage, Bible-woman's Work, 1907," *FM* 5, 2 (April 1908): 37.
25. Mr. John Knowlton, "Letter from Mr. Knowlton," *MM* 49, 1 (January 1869): 23–25.
26. Benamina Newcombe, "Sang Glory, a God of Deliverance," *IWCD* 25 (June 1905): 140.
27. BFM vol 54, China, Reel 246, The Annual Report of the Canton Mission for the year ending October 1901, p. 20, Dr. Niles' Report.
28. "More about Opium Smoking," *IWCD* 26 (November 1906): 171.
29. "Mrs. Liu, nee Kang, Obituary of Christians," *Nianjian* 1918, 241.
30. Mrs. Howard Taylor, *Pastor Hsi: Confucian Scholar and Christian*. 245–47.
31. E. P. Kingsmill, "In Foochow City," *IWCD* 30, 283 (January 1910): 12.
32. "The Woman's Hospital, Foochow City," *IWCD* 26 (September 1906): 138.
33. Robert, *American Women in Mission*, 254.
34. In January 1876 there was only one unmarried CIM lady on the field. By 1893 there were 220 single ladies. In the same year there were 106 principal mission stations, in eighty of which ladies were working and twenty of the latter in six provinces, were superintended by them alone. Geraldine Guinness, *The Story of the China Inland Mission*, 359.
35. Wayne Flynt and Gerald W. Berkley, *Taking Christianity to China*, 231.
36. *Ibid.*
37. In her letter to Dr. Tupper, dated 5/10/1879, she mentioned her work in a village in Tungchow including teaching men and boys in an inn until nine o'clock in the evening. Lottie Moon, *Send the Light: Lottie Moon's Letters and Other Writings*, 90.
38. *Ibid.*, 312.
39. *Ibid.*, 228–29, 232.
40. Walter N. Lacy, *A Hundred Years of Chinese Methodism*, 226.
41. Robert, *American Women in Mission*, 178.
42. A. J. Broomhall, *Hudson Taylor and China's Open Century*, Book Five, *Refiner's Fire*, 144.
43. There were two women in Hong Kong, four in Fuzhou, two in Mid-China, and one in North China. See "A Letter from Reverend W. Bannister of Kucheng, dated 5/17/1887," *IWCD* 7, 42 (November-December 1887): 186–87. In a letter of appeal from Reverend F. E. Wigram to the American and English missionary societies advocating the employment of women as missionaries, dated 5/3/1887, it was recorded that the number of Chinese men receiving Holy Communion in Fuzhou was 163 while that of women was six. "Come and Help us," *IWCD*, *ibid.*, 184–90.
44. Bible women in Fujian were under the supervision of a missionary man or his wife. "A Letter from Reverend W. Bannister," *ibid.*, 186–87.
45. Such was the case with Miss Mabel Whiterby and Miss A. Hankin when they were stationed at Dang Seng, Fujian. See Mrs. H. S. Phillips, "A Gentleman of Hinghwa," *IWCD* 54 (February 1934): 32–33.
46. CMS Reel 232 B, p. 359, Memorandum re: Women's work in Fukien 1896, CMS sect., London to Miss E. S. Goldie, dated 6/12/1896.
47. Appendix C. Presbyterian Missionaries in China, 1837–1953. See G. Thompson Brown, *Earthen Vessels and Transcendent Power*, 334–55.
48. BFM vol. 124, Reel 258, Shantung Mission 1909, no. 1, C. E. Scott to Brown, 1/30/1909, 15–18.
49. BFM vol. 18, Reel 205, China Letters 1884 no. 244, Hunter Corbett to Ellinwood, 6/7/1884.
50. Jennie Anderson, who worked with the Presbyterians in Shandong (1878–1899) had been fiercely criticized by Hunter Corbett because of her itineration. She threatened to re-

turn home if she could not have a challenging job. She did continue to travel and when she became Mrs. Laughlin, the second wife of John H. Laughlin, nobody objected to her itineration. BFM vol. 19 Reel 205, China Letters 1885, No. 18, Jennie Anderson to Ellinwood, 1885 (no exact date).

51. L. Mitchell, "Woman's Work in the Villages—from the Diary of Miss L. Mitchell," *China's Millions* (hereafter *CM*) (November 1885): 140

52. F. M. Williams, "Greater Things," *CM* (June 1897): 75–76 and "Country Work from Mrs. Casels, Paoning," *CM* (May 1889): 67.

53. "Missionary Correspondence, Miss M. E. Thompson, dated December 25, 1884 at Mun-Keu-Ling," *MM* 65, 4 (April 1885): 101–2; Cassie Fitzsimons, *CM* (October 1890): 138.

54. "The South China Mission, Swatow Department, the 79th Annual Report, 79th Annual Meeting of the Baptist Missionary Union held on 26 May 1893," *MM* 73, 7 (July 1893): 301.

55. M. E. Darley, "God's Over-rulings in Kien-Ning," *IWCD* 33, 320 (February 1913): 33–36; also see F. M. Williams, "Greater Things," *CM* (June 1897): 75–76.

56. Mrs. George H. Hubbard, "Station Classes," *FM* 4, 2 (April 1907): 38–40.

57. "Gleanings from China," *IWCD* 46, 472 (May 1926): 94–96.

58. Mrs. George H. Hubbard, "Bible Women," *FM* 4, 2 (April 1907): 36.

59. *Ibid.*

60. Fielde, *Pagoda Shadows*, 8–9.

61. *Ibid.*, 9–10.

62. "The 77th Annual Report, Baptist Missionary Union Meeting, 5/25/1891," *MM* 71, 7 (July 1891): 304.

63. The American Baptist Church in Shantou appointed a committee to conduct investigations into those problems. Debates and discussions were held with Chinese preachers and foreign missionaries. See William Ashmore, "A Discussion of Marriage Question," *MM* 76, 11 (November 1896): 533–35.

64. This was typical of the outstations of Guangzhou in 1904. Hundreds of women attended church service whereas in previous years there were hardly any female converts. This was attributed to the work of the Bible women. See BFM Reel 244, vol. 44, China Letters, Canton Mission 1904, no. 75, A.A. Fulton to Brown, 8/1/1904.

65. In Tsim Shik, Hoi Ping, Hoi Hau Tau, Kwonghoi, and Sham Tsing, the outstations of Canton, there were no Bible women to do woman's work. The number of women attending church was small. *American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions*, Reel 261, Vol. 5, South China 1892–99, Brief Report of the work of C. R. Hager during the year 1899, Hager to Dr. Smith, 3.

66. Tong Chio, "Letter of Tong Chio, translated by S. H. Woolston," *HWF* 7, 4 (October 1877): 80.

67. "Mrs. Lin, nee Wang, The Obituary of Christians," *Nianjian* 4 (1917): 230–31.

68. "Letter from Mr. Partridge, Swatow, dated 9 August 1876," *MM* 56, 12 (December 1876): 441.

69. A woman convert was beaten to death by her husband because she refused to participate in ancestor worship during the Chinese New Year. BFM 41, China 1876–1901, Reel 213, Shantung mission, no. 124, R. T. Miller to Dr. Brown, dated 12/12/1896.

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