Beyond Missionary Studies: New Approaches Toward Using Missionary Archives for the Study of Asia

Conference Paper Abstracts

The Catholic Circle Around Su Xuelin’s *Jixin (Thorny Heart)*

Zhange Ni

*Jixin* (Thorny Heart) is an autobiographical novel and a female Bildungsroman by Su Xuelin (1897-1999), a Chinese woman writer/critic/scholar who converted to Catholicism in France in the 1920s. Originally published in 1929 and expanded in 1957, the novel is a product and encapsulation of Su’s Catholic circle consisting of French women providing public service and pursuing missionary work, Chinese Catholic intellectuals devoted to indigenization projects, and European missionaries contributing to the criticism of Chinese “New Literature” by attempting to censor it for the Chinese Catholic readers. The 1957 edition further enacts the competition between the Catholic Church and Comintern in interwar Europe to mobilize youth, including international students from China. Although Su converted to Catholicism because she viewed it as a women’s religion, she was attacked for having been corrupted by the Church and as a result made into a “conservative” antagonizing left-wing literature. It is the same Catholic-Communist competition that trained missionaries to be literary censors/critics, because one of their jobs was to build libraries, edit journals, and run reading clubs to win the hearts and minds of the youth in Europe and China.

Was the first Bengali novel missionary?

Parna Sengupta

There is some controversy over whether Hannah Catherine Mullen’s book, *Phulamani o Karunar Bibaran* (1852; “An Account of Phulmani and Karuna”) was the first Bengali novel. Although chronologically first, scholarly dissent has centered on the European background of the author and the degree to which the text departs from the conventional form of the novel, specifically because of its un-novelistic “didactic and proselytizing aim.”

Yet what is most interesting about *Phulmani O Karunar Bibaran* is its anomalous character; in this sense it is not “first” insofar as it inaugurates a form that is taken up or emulated by other Bengali novelists or other missionaries. Yet it challenges both those histories. The questions raised about the book speak to the persistent unease over how to handle the place of the missionary archive in Indian historiography. I would further argue that our sense of what constitutes the Indian modern shifts when we begin with the premise that one of its earliest manifestations was a book addressed to poor, lower caste, rural, Christian women.
Sympathetic Resonance: Missionary Essay Contests and Literary Effectiveness in Modern China

Gal Gvili

The architects of China’s revolution from Liang Qichao to Mao Zedong all perceived literature as the ultimate means to awaken the masses into social revolution. Yet, the question of literature’s operative function—how exactly it achieves this feat of awakening the masses—merits further exploration. The paper traces the conviction in the powers of literature in China to nineteen-century missionary essay contests. Held in sites of imperial encroachment around the world, these contests promoted fiction writing as a miraculous endeavor. Similar to the way that reading the scriptures was supposed to produce a sense of connection to the great beyond, so too was the spiritual message of literary texts believed to ignite a “sympathetic resonance” (gongming) between authors and readers that would propel the latter to action. This model of literary effectiveness emerged from an encounter between evangelistic practices of conversion and pseudo-scientific discourses on vibrations, telepathy, and animal-magnetism. Various interpretations of this idea informed Chinese national literature from the early days of the Republic until the post-Mao era. The paper draws upon archival materials relating to missionary essay contests to highlight the central role of religious thought in the larger debates on the mobilizing powers of literature.

Technologies of the Sacred:
Situation and Recalcitrance in the Production & Destruction of Sacrality

David Morgan

By ‘technologies of the sacred’ I mean the cultural techniques whereby something is set apart as special and made powerful in the process, or, by contrast, drained of or denied power. The particular instrumentality of such things is highlighted when they cross the boundaries of geography, spatial setting, religious rivalry, and cultural location. In the experience of some Protestant missionaries in Asia and the South Pacific, re-purposing sacred objects often meant the ‘hard’ iconoclasm of destroying them, in which case they become technologies of the counter-sacred, erasing the old to install a new and rival conception of sacrality. But the re-utilization of the objects could also sometimes mean the ‘soft’ iconoclasm of appropriating them for a new use, according to which the object were ‘dispatched’ to London for display in the Missionary Museum as ‘trophies of Christianity.’ They were eventually de-accessioned and re-tasked once again as ethnographic artifacts, and in some instances as works of art. Nowadays, an additional chapter in their cultural biography is unfolding as some objects are returned to their points of origin as patrimony. At every stage, their specialness was recoded. What survives over all this time? What does the fluidity of the sacred imply? Shifts in spatial setting trigger corresponding taxonomic shifts that redefine sacrality by deploying artifacts in new conceptual and spatial circumstances. But just as space serves to stabilize the experience of the sacred as evanescent, so also its change destabilizes and redefines sacrality.
'Sacred, the Laborers': Writing Chinese in the First World War

Yurou Zhong

This article focuses on the Chinese laborers in World War I France and their writing activities there. It examines how writing became central to them and to the very program under which they were recruited. Between the laborers and a group of volunteers sent by the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), there emerged the first modern Chinese mass literacy program. Writing became, on the one hand, a technology that maintained the Allied war effort; on the other, it afforded a medium through which the laborers performed a test run of the new modern Chinese language that ushered in Chinese linguistic and literary modernity. An invaluable piece of writing produced by one of the laborers demonstrates how the “sacred laborers,” not unlike their intellectual counterparts, drove home the critique of the Great War and a particular version of the Chinese Enlightenment.

Framing Mission: Visual Practices, Material Afterlives, and American Missionary Imaging in 20th Century China

Joseph W. Ho

This paper will discuss the photographic and filmic visual practices that paralleled American Protestant and Catholic missionary experiences in 20th century China. I will examine missionaries’ vernacular visuality alongside global developments in imaging technologies and the shifting identities of modern Christian missions in China. In doing so, I discuss the many ways in which American missionaries visualized their personal experiences and perceptions of Chinese Christianity, drawing from diverse original materials held in both private and institutional collections – many only recently uncovered. Examples include private photographic albums, color slides, and 16mm motion picture films, including some previously considered effectively inaccessible or “lost.” The paper will present selected case studies that trace these materials from their creation through their intended uses (as far as these can be recovered), in parallel with their makers’ experiences in North and Central China between approximately 1922 and 1949. With these historical registers in mind, I will also touch on the multilayered afterlives of missionary visual materials. Speaking from my prior research experiences across archives and family collections, I will discuss the re-interpretations of missionary images in various historical contexts, questions of material preservation and accessibility, and open possibilities for further scholarship on missionary visual practices in East Asia.
Crossing the Lines: 
Korean Women, Christianity, and the Impulse to Claim New Space

Hyaewol Choi

From the late nineteenth century Protestant Christianity was one of the most crucial forces in shaping modern Korea. From a gendered standpoint, mission schools were dominant in women’s education. It was primarily through missionary encounters that certain ideas of morality, domesticity, fashion, literature, and aesthetics were introduced and promoted while others were discredited. Moreover, the missionary network served as a channel through which young women could experience the world beyond the national border by either studying overseas, attending international conferences or engaging in evangelical activities globally. However, Korean historiography concerning Christianity has generally featured hagiographical, male-centered and nationalist viewpoints. It typically bypasses the complex history of women, in which encounters and activities with missionaries and Christian organizations provided a fluid space to experience the interplay between the local, the national and the global.

In this paper, I specifically focus on Pahk Indŏk (1896-1980), who became a protégé of missionary teachers in Korea, obtained a B.A. and an M.A. in the US, travelled the world twice as a representative of a mission organization, and engaged in the rural revitalization movement in Korea. She came to be known as “Korea’s Nora” after her sensational divorce, and she was eventually labeled a “collaborator” due to her cooperation with the Japanese imperial power during the Asia Pacific War. To be sure, she had an extraordinary life, and a deeper understanding of her fame and notoriety helps us gain insights into the ways in which women had to navigate conflicting options in life, cope with old and new challenges and position themselves in the midst of turbulent political changes. Using Pahk’s life story as a case in point, I discuss the critical role of the Protestant mission in the gender history of Korea within the broader context of Korean nationalism, Japanese colonialism, and transnationalism in the early twentieth century. I also touch on the politics of mission archives in terms of what is preserved and what is not. Since the voices of local women are often absent or skewed in missionary representations, intentionally or not, it is incumbent upon us to think about how to recover or excavate the voices hidden in mission archives and what alternative sources can be utilized to bring out a fuller picture of the encounter between local women and missionaries.
‘Records of Practice’: Hospital Reports and Missionary Medical Training for Women in China, 1915–1930

Shing-ting Lin

This paper examines medical training techniques and methods that were brought to China by American Protestant missionaries in the early twentieth century. It focuses on gynecological and obstetric training at the Hackett Medical Complex, the first and leading medical institution for women in the southeast treaty-port of Canton (Guangzhou). Drawing evidence from American Presbyterian archives—in particular, Hackett’s hospital reports—I seek to map the diversity of social and clinical activities in the colonial encounter between American missionaries and Chinese women. As I shall argue, hospital reports constitute a particular genre of writing—what I term “records of practice”—that documents the daily interactions between American missionary women physicians and their Chinese women assistants. A textual and visual analysis of hospital reports thus helps understand how missionary medical education was carried out at the grass roots; it also reveals everyday practicalities of medicine in a cross-cultural context.

Pawns of Immortality: The Consequences of Soteriological Care in Japan’s Modern Tuberculosis Epidemic

Elisheva A. Perelman

The tuberculosis epidemic of Meiji and Taishō helped to define the relationship between Japan’s government and foreign evangelical organizations that had recently arrived on the archipelago. For those willing to undertake medical missionary work, particularly concerning public health issues that the government chose to ignore, tuberculosis provided an arena in which to prove both utility to the nation and enthusiasm for Japan’s industrial modernization. But without the antibiotics that would later come to conquer the scourge, medical work, evangelical or otherwise, remained primarily palliative. Theirs was also a utilitarian mission—more converts would mean more funds for the mission, either from the pockets of the recently converted or from foreign supporters who were bolstered by promising statistics. Yet evangelists who tended the tubercular offered another form of care, the soteriological. While the body, ravaged by illness, declined, evangelists endeavored to heal the soul, in the hope that, should death follow, the patient would live on, spiritually. For some patients, the promise of immortality provided comfort, despite the fact that their existence (physical and spiritual) was often used to mediate the relationship between their government and their caretakers.
Adopted by the World: the American-Oriental Friendship Association and the Chinese Origins of International Adoption and Child Sponsorship

Jack Neubauer

In 1947 the Southern Baptist missionary J.R. Saunders founded the American-Oriental Friendship Association (AOFO), which operated orphanages in China through what it called the “adoption plan” for international child sponsorship. Under the adoption plan, private citizens around the world “adopted” Chinese children by paying for them to live at orphanages in China while exchanging frequent letters using familial terms of address. In addition to voluminous missionary records, my paper traces the history of the adoption plan through the scattered yet extensive paper trail the AOFO left behind in the archives of the Chinese government bodies and private organizations with which it interacted. Resituating the adoption plan within its Chinese social environment, I argue that it was in fact based on highly similar programs developed by Chinese child welfare institutions during the Sino-Japanese War, which in turn drew upon Chinese practices of child sponsorship dating to the late imperial period. As the AOFO and similar organizations spread across Asia during the 1950s, they played a key role in transforming what began as Chinese child welfare practices into the vast global phenomena of international adoption and child sponsorship. My paper aims to show that by remapping the relationship between Chinese archives and missionary records, we can move beyond the well-researched topic of how Chinese actors localized Christian practices to study also the reciprocal processes through which Christian missionaries adapted Chinese practices that now circulate around the world via missionary and philanthropic networks.

Children of the Lone Island: Christian Child Welfare Relief in Shanghai, 1938-1941

Margaret Mih Tillman

Abstract: This paper explores the effect of war on the politics of Christian children’s charities in Shanghai. In the wake of war with Japan, philanthropists of all backgrounds joined together to provide aid to war victims and Nationalist soldiers. When the Nationalists retreated from Shanghai and left the “lone island” of the International Settlement in the purported hands of the Western semi-colonists, Christian welfare organizations like the China Child Welfare, Inc., had more freedom to experiment in ways that were then independent from the Nationalist government. Although in some ways benefitting from their status, Christian converts nevertheless also had to contend with the Japanese propaganda against Western colonial influence. This context highlighted some of the tensions in using treaty-port privileges as a venue for saving Chinese children—especially as a metaphorical reference for protecting China’s future from the ravages of war and Japanese occupation.