

Breaking Barriers: Women, Education, and Evangelization in Kulangsu International Settlement

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In the 19th century, the Qing dynasty faced numerous crises stemming from both interior regions and coastal areas. Internally, the dramatic increase in population from last century fuelled emigration and heightened societal tensions, presenting considerable governance challenges. Externally, the late 18th century marked the beginning of an escalation in the opium trade along the coastlines. The expansion caused multiple confrontations with foreign powers, culminating in the Opium Wars. The aftermath of these conflicts resulted in China becoming more open to foreign influences and decriminalization of missionary activities within the country. A succession of agreements continuously reshaped the religious rights in China. The Treaty of Nanjing indirectly contributed to the spread of Christian doctrines. The Huangpu Treaty granted Western powers the rights to engage in missionary activities in China and to establish churches in coastal port cities. Furthermore, the Treaty of Tianjin expanded these provisions, allowing Christianity to be freely disseminated throughout the inland territories of China and mandating non-interference by Chinese officials with missionaries. The advocacy and support of Western powers, churches, and governments behind missions to the East contributed to the rapid development of Christianity in China.

The emergence of the Concessions as “a paradise of adventurers”¹ first came to attention in the wake of the Opium Wars. It was a period that not only enhanced China’s involvement into international trade but also exposed it to geopolitical vulnerabilities and compelled a degree of cultural assimilation. Xiamen, a port city with strategic geographic advantages, has long been a focal point of international interest and was among the inaugural Chinese ports to embrace foreign trade. With its opening, two concessions were founded. The first was a coastal area ceded to the British government, known as the Xiamen Bund. It primarily served commercial purposes with an array of offices, warehouses, and various enterprises. The second concession, the Kulangsu International Settlement, was an island

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1 Description from G.E. Miller’s book, *Shanghai, the Paradise of Adventurers*, New York: Orsay Publishing House Incorporated 1937.

of cultural diversity and a preferred residential area for foreigners. This settlement stood out as a unique cosmopolitan enclave, blending varied cultural influences and ways of life.

During the age of exploration, Dominican missionaries capitalized on the Spanish colonial expansion to traverse eastward, promoting and disseminating their religious beliefs. The work of figures like Francisco Zea and Manuel Prat Pujoldevall were instrumental in establishing the Dominican presence in Kulangsu. Francisco Zea's early undertaking in transforming a ruined house into a church and engaging with the heterogenous communities on the island laid the groundwork for future missionary work. Manuel Prat Pujoldevall, in the early 20th century, expanded these efforts by constructing new churches, establishing schools, and launching periodicals. The school founded under his guidance primarily enrolled female students, integrated cultural, religious, and music education, while also mandating weekly Mass attendance. The educational institution was led by women equipped with specialized training. He employed a multifaceted approach to propagate the mission, with an emphasis on education and the nurturing of Christian values.²

For the missionaries representing diverse churches who successively arrived in Xiamen, a common initial task of their work was local language acquisition. This required their meticulous attention to the speech of native language users, dissecting unfamiliar phonetics, lexicon, and transcribing these orally conveyed tongues into written records. Their efforts led to an extensive collection of linguistic documentation, including dictionaries, syntax guides, and teaching manuals. While preaching in Xiamen, the missionaries encountered the obstacle of low education levels and widespread illiteracy among the local inhabitants. To overcome this, they devised a set of spelling rules, including a system to transcribe the Southern Fujian dialect, commonly referred to in Chinese as *baihua zi* 白话字. The method converted Chinese ideograms into Romanized script, akin to *pinyin* 拼音, facilitating a fast learning process by beginners within mere months. It was taught in primary schools, in churches on Sundays, and in homes on weekdays.

Within the broader context of the sanctioned missionary activities, a substantial influx of missionaries into the treaty ports provided a vantage point to closely observe the everyday lives of the common people and to come into close contact with Chinese traditions, precipitating a series of cultural shocks. A notable manifestation of this period in Xiamen was the campaign movement against foot binding, decried as the “cultural distortion”, spearheaded by the couple John MacGowan, who were affiliated with the London Missionary Society and resided on Kulangsu. Following the anti-foot binding initiatives, the MacGowans established The Heavenly Foot Society (drawing on the term “tianzu” 天足, meaning “natural feet”). This organization served as a voluntary nexus for reform, inviting participants without compulsion. It became a forum for engaging dialogues, challenging entrenched cultural mores and advocating for the abolition of foot binding – a practice both deeply rooted and controversial within the community.

2 Information about Bishop Manuel Prat Pujoldevall (1873–1947) and his missionary activities in Fujian Province can be found in the Archivo de la Provincia Dominicana del Santo Rosario [Archive of the Dominican Province of the Holy Rosary], section 34, Spain.

In terms of its impact, the campaign was undoubtedly successful; their efforts not only secured support within the Island but also echoed throughout China, transforming the anti-foot binding movement into an emblem in the wider crusade for women's rights and liberation. The educational establishments on Kulangsu arose as a hub for the propagation of these forward-thinking ideologies, empowering women to critically evaluate and contest longstanding society norms. However, this movement, propelled by missionaries and progressive intellectuals, encountered resistance due to insufficient engagement with the ingrained local traditions, particularly those affecting women with bound feet. Still, this recognition and realization steered China towards modernity and ultimately became as an element in shaping the ideology of the contemporary nation-state as more inclusive and enlightened.

In addressing the critical issue of female infanticide in Xiamen, missionaries embarked on a dual-purpose mission by adopting abandoned infant girls. This act of care necessitated the establishment of educational institutions and orphanages which served both as centres for modern education and as platforms for religious indoctrination. This strategic integration was indicative of the missionaries' broader objective: the dissemination of Christianity alongside the provision of modern learning. For the women in the Kulangsu region, the missionary-led educational reforms represented a gateway to modern education. These reforms instigated a transformation in societal norms and values, fostering an environment for a unique cultural synthesis that integrated Eastern and Western traditions. The introduction of Western educational paradigms was a key factor in catalysing social change and evolution. It ushered in a new era of advanced thought among the local populace. This transformation in concept extended beyond the confines of the Island and influenced adjacent areas, thereby contributing to widespread cultural shifts in the early 20th century.