

Invisible and Invincible: Changing Female Roles in the Chinese Protestant Church and Their Perceptions

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Introduction

Ever since the reopening of churches, women have played a significant, if not dominant role in Chinese Protestant church life. However, in spite of being visibly active, female Christians have not been the subject of much research. Speaking from a scholarly angle, Chinese Protestant women are almost invisible as opposed to groups such as Christian entrepreneurs, intellectuals, ethnic Miao people, migrants or even factory workers and fishermen, all of which have received specific scholarly interest. This lack of material on women could suggest that gender roles within the Chinese Protestant church are so equal that gender does not lend itself as a framework to examine the role of women in the church. However, the contrast between the real-world phenomenon and its non-existence in the scholarly world is so great that there seems to be more to it. I suggest that the blind spot which women constitute on the research agenda is an outgrowth of traditional Chinese religious role models, where women were invisible in the public domain.

Interestingly, a second trend seems to be at work which feeds into the same vein of women's empowerment versus conservatism or visibility versus invisibility. While Christianity continues to be liberating or empowering for many Chinese Christian women, conservative female roles and the corresponding theology are gaining ground in parts of the Protestant landscape. This "new conservatism" threatens to make women in the Chinese church more invisible, both factually and as a research subject.

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The author would like to thank the following persons for information, comments, suggestions and help in retrieving literature: Theresa Cariño, Johanna Lüdde, Alek Stypa, a Chinese reviewer who wished to remain anonymous and three female Protestant interviewees in Guangxi.

Based on a review of the existing literature, I describe the situation of women in the contemporary Protestant church, explore the various gender roles espoused within parts of the Protestant landscape, and make suggestions for potential areas of research. Instead of offering a single coherent understanding of the role of women based on one underlying theory, I see the task at hand as more exploratory; this paper is therefore rather cursory and preliminary in nature. Due to the sociological bent of my approach, any further research would likely include methods such as participant observation and interviews. Since the available literature resources cover both registered and unregistered Protestant churches, this article will refer to both groups and differentiate where necessary.

Fraught with Ambiguities: The Female Face of Chinese Protestantism

While the earliest churches that were reopened in the late 1970s were located in cities, the massive growth of Protestant Christianity throughout the 1980s and 1990s happened in the countryside. Here, the Christian faith had survived clandestinely during the Cultural Revolution among small groups of believers, many of them women.² Hence, the early face of the newly emerging Chinese Protestant church was an overwhelmingly female one. Chinese observers of the 1980s and 1990s who coined the word “Christianity fever” also liked to speak of the “*san duo*,” the “three manys.” Congregations consisted almost exclusively of elderly women believers, often in a bad state of health; hence, there were “many elderly, many women, and many illiterate persons.”

From the outset, women took on leadership roles as preachers, choir masters, leaders of Bible study groups and prayer meetings. In a sense, their sheer numerical dominance paired with the need for leaders and volunteer workers created social openings for women to become active in their congregations. For many rural women, their involvement in church had empowering effects, be it through improved literacy thanks to Bible classes or by enabling them to take on roles often not otherwise available to women in a conservative rural setting. Findings from the Catholic context support this view of Christianity as conducive to female empowerment in rural areas. Kong Kit-Fan describes the role of Catholicism for some rural Cantonese women in the late 1990s as status enhancing. Not only did some of the older women acquire literacy skills thanks to Bible classes, but in Kong’s exploratory study Catholic women were also more assertive in choosing their own spouses than their non-Catholic counterparts. While, also due to Catholic doctrine, the roles women could take on in church were limited, Kong describes her interviewees as active participants in ritual life as opposed to the marginal status of non-Catholic women in traditional Chinese ancestral rites.³ However, in Kong’s study both Catholics and non-Catholics retained the strong cultural preference for boys. Kong sees the greater autonomy

2 Cao 2013, p. 153.

3 Kong 2003, p. 93.

of these women not as a result of Catholic dogma, but of practices of the faith community and its rituals.⁴

In the case of the re-emerging and growing Protestant church, the preponderance of lay leaders with little theological education had and has its pitfalls, though; until today, pseudo-Christian sects remain a threat both to Christian congregations and the general public. At the same time, the rural demographics of the church had implications for the perception and function of women within their congregations. The fact that most elderly rural women were illiterate or semi-literate contributed to an image of the church as a place for people with little education.

Besides acting as lay leaders, women pastors and elders have been working as ordained church leaders in the official church since the 1980s,⁵ and, at least officially, the ordination of women is not questioned. However, according to recent figures given by Xie Bingguo, head of the Shanghai Christian Council, only about one-tenth of all 3,800 official pastors are women,⁶ while (according to my personal estimates) female students make up about half of all theological students. This discrepancy points to a continuing problem of acceptance of women pastors at the grassroots. Theoretically, a system of endorsement by the sending congregations aims at ensuring that students of theology, females and males alike, are later taken back by their home congregations where they will be ordained after a suitable period of probation. In reality, many women theologians report having to wait for much longer than the recommended minimum of two years for ordination or are not ordained at all. Often, established lay leaders in the congregations oppose the ordination for fear of seeing their own influence dwindle. Similarly, while the China Christian Council had a woman president in the early 2000s, lower echelons of the church hierarchy are still dominated by male leaders. Within the official church structure, the China Christian Council's Commission on Women's Work and the YWCA offer channels for women to be involved but also nurtured in church-related work. While the YMCA/YWCA has a long history in China, the Commission on Women's Work was only established in 1993.⁷

With a Protestant revival propelled largely by women, images of female spirituality and the ideal woman believer started to emerge. Specifically, the term "Martha" or "Sister Martha" (modelled on the biblical figure of Martha as in Luke 10, 38-42) has become a synonym for the devout woman believer.⁸ Throughout the late 1990s, the official church magazine *Tianfeng* used the hypothetical model believer Martha to enlighten and instruct semi-literate readers by means of a cartoon which prominently featured "Sister Martha."⁹ Similarly, Cao Nanlai reports for Wenzhou that women volunteers in church are called "Marthas" for the household duties they fulfil in church.¹⁰ Obviously, contradictory values

4 Kong 2003, p. 97.

5 Cao 2001, p. 66.

6 Xie Bingguo, personal information at the international workshop "Religion and Tradition – Critique and Critical Perspectives in China and Europe," August 20–22, 2014 in Hamburg, Germany.

7 Cao 2001, pp 65ff.

8 Hence, Jin Yanyan speaks of the "Martha phenomenon" in her article about the conversion of rural women to Christianity: Jin 2005.

9 Dunn 2008, pp. 15f.

10 Cao 2011, pp. 99f.

are attached to the role model of Martha. On the one hand, “Marthas” are praised for their housewifely qualities and are presented as spiritual role models of devotion, based on the biblical Martha who occupies herself with serving Jesus rather than sitting down to listen like her sister Mary. On the other hand, through taking on housewifely duties women easily acquire a second-class status, both practical and spiritual, in church life. Cao Nanlai reports for Wenzhou that the “homemaking” church duties on Sundays often keep women from fully participating in the services.

All over China, women Christians are also strongly linked with forms of religious life that resemble traditional folk religious practices, including healing prayer and prayer on behalf of others. While especially rural Protestantism derives much of its vitality from these practices, the fact that they are often performed by women reinforces the image of women as uncultured, traditional and perhaps even prone to syncretistic interpretations of Christianity.

Given the above observations, the female face of Chinese Protestantism is fraught with ambiguities. Seen from the angle of church development, women exhibit both strengths and weaknesses. While women are the motor behind the Christian revival, often do the brunt of congregational work and are praised for their devotion and spiritual gifts, they are also associated with religious practices that seem dubious from an orthodox Christian viewpoint. Church life strengthens women and empowers them up to a certain point, yet also limits their roles when they are expected to be “Marthas” rather than “Deborahs,” housewifely assistants rather than ordained pastors.

Finally, it has to be noted that the “three manys” that once characterized the church no longer hold true for urban congregations, which now feature men and women in much more balanced proportions, as well as believers of all age groups and educational backgrounds. A large increase in urban congregations over the past decade, many of them unregistered, has raised the general educational level within congregations as well as their financial standing. In the cities, it is now young academics and the educated middle class who convert to Christianity. Besides creating congregations that are in themselves more socially diverse, this change has brought about congregations with distinct social and theological profiles. It remains to be seen whether this diversification has also brought about a diversification in female gender roles and if so, what these gender roles are.

Literature Overview

In how far does the existing literature accurately reflect the role, theology and perception of women in the Chinese Protestant church? Given the dominant role of women in the early phases of the Protestant “Christianity fever,” the most surprising fact is that women hardly feature at all in the available literature on contemporary Protestantism. Instead, some of the more substantial scholarship about Chinese Protestant women refers to their historical role. Examples would include Jessie G. Lutz’s work, who has described the historical importance of women for the early stages of the Protestant church in China,¹¹ and

11 Lutz 2010.

Kwok Pui-Lan, who also offers insights into the historical role of women in the church.¹² Chinese conference proceedings have added to this area of research.¹³ Finally, a number of papers and books introduce specific women and their contribution to the Chinese Protestant church.

Among the few specialized pieces that are concerned with women in the contemporary Protestant church, quality varies and some pieces are obviously written not only with a scholarly agenda in mind.¹⁴ Also, ethnic minority women seem to find overproportional interest.¹⁵ A more solid, albeit brief example is Monika Gänßbauer's assessment of the situation of women in the Chinese Protestant church at the beginning of the 21st century.¹⁶ One early Chinese text on the "feminisation" of Christianity¹⁷ is mentioned in Hunter and Chan's classic *Protestantism in Contemporary China*; unfortunately, I was unable to retrieve this article.

Indeed, some of the most interesting recent findings about women in the Chinese Protestant Church have come about as by-products of research directed at other questions. In particular, Fredrik Fällman's insights into Chinese New Calvinism and Cao Nanlai's findings about Wenzhou Boss Christians have revealed interesting trends to which we will turn later. Specifically, their findings suggest that besides the empowering effects of Protestantism there is a second, opposite trend at work which relegates women into more traditional roles.

To examine contemporary Chinese Protestant theology for its feminist implications would be a task of its own. Suffice it to say that, among the various theological developments of the past years both in the church and the academe, feminist theology does not play a prominent role. Few Chinese theologians explicitly voice feminist theological concerns; examples from the official church include Peng Yaqian, Wu Jinzhen, Wang Peng, Chen Kuanrong, Chen Meilin and Cao Shengjie.¹⁸ In spite of these individual voices, the Chinese church is still far from developing a theological vision that is both genuinely Chinese and feminist.

Besides formulating tentative reflections about feminist theology, female church representatives also voice concern over the continuing influence of traditional notions and behaviour in grassroots churches, for example the preference of boys over girls, the traditional practice of arranged marriages, and the low self-esteem of women.¹⁹

Does the dearth of material about women believers mean that the Chinese Protestant church is a church where gender does play a role which remains as yet unexplored? Or is it ungendered, meaning highly equal in the roles women and men perform? Anecdotal evidence suggests the opposite. Women report difficulties in being accepted as congreg-

12 Kwok 1996.

13 See, for example, Tao – Huang 2005.

14 See, for example, Ng 2007 or Wommack 2006.

15 For a recent example, see Wang 2014.

16 Gänßbauer 2001.

17 Xu 1990.

18 For a selection of their writings, see for example, volumes 15 and 17 of the *Chinese Theological Review*.

19 Wu 2001, pp. 78 and 84.

gational leaders or in being ordained, while husbands of women pastors feel that their role as ordinary believers in a congregation led by their wife constitutes a loss of face. On the other hand, male seekers who feel attracted by congregational life are put off by the numerical dominance of women believers, and men who consider becoming full-time evangelists face the problem that they are still expected to be the main breadwinners. As Cao Shengjie admits in her introductory piece about the role of feminist theology in the Chinese church,

Many people's thinking at the time [in the late 1980s/early 1990s] was that since men and women both participated in the work of the church, there was no need for a special category of women's work.²⁰

More than twenty years later, both are still needed: gender-specific work within the church and also the theological, pastoral and scholarly reflection about it – not least because over the past years, gendered church spaces have become more prominent in parts of the church.

Gendered Church Spaces in China: Wenzhou Boss Christians

A typically Chinese brand of Christianity which has received much scholarly attention of late for its combination of Christian ethics and business are the “Wenzhou Boss Christians.” The Wenzhou church model (with its mostly unregistered, but visible churches) is of interest here because it provides an example of a highly gendered church²¹ which can, especially by contrasting it with the New Calvinist approach which we will discuss later, serve to deepen our understanding of gendered identities and theological visions in the Chinese Protestant church.

In his highly inspiring account of Wenzhou church life, Cao Nanlai characterizes the practical, spiritual and theological gender roles of women and men as follows: Although women outnumber men in church, it is the men who take on formal leadership roles and feel entitled to make moral judgements.²² Women carry out “homemaking” duties in church such as cleaning, cooking, and the overall creation of a homely atmosphere.²³ While men are judged by their professional success, Wenzhou church women tend to be viewed more by their family lives and connections. Men are seen as rational, where women are linked with (or, by some, suspected of) emotionality.²⁴ Correspondingly, men favour textually centred church activities such as theological study sessions and publishing work,²⁵ while female church life in Wenzhou revolves around experientially based activities such as spiritual cultivation meetings and prayer sessions. Women experience spontaneous and uncontrolled forms of spiritual expression such as speaking in tongues,

²⁰ Cao 2001, p. 63.

²¹ Of which separate seating in church is perhaps the most obvious sign: Cao 2011, p. 97.

²² Cao 2011, pp. 99 and 110.

²³ Cao 2011, p. 99.

²⁴ Cao 2011, p. 99.

²⁵ Cao 2011, p. 101.

weeping and crying, while male religious life emphasizes control of self and others. In a problematic reading of the experiential, charismatic religiosity they exhibit, women are also associated with folk religion and superstition.²⁶ Elite males create exclusive social occasions such as invitation-only banquets that serve as social markers.

Hence, male religiosity expresses itself in forms of hierarchy, rationality, control and exclusivism, while female Protestant religiosity in Wenzhou creates bodily experiences, vulnerability, intimacy and inclusion. In an interesting opposition of roles, even food comes to be associated with the different gender constructions, with elite banquets for church males on the one hand and female fasting on the other hand.

In the secluded and almost exclusively gendered religious spaces which they inhabit, Wenzhou women believers are empowered; they connect with God and their fellow sisters (and a few brothers) in strong ways, and spiritually gifted women such as “prayer women” hold positions of spiritual authority. Ultimately, however, it has to be noted that it is only in these gendered spaces that Wenzhou sisters experience this form of liberation.²⁷

It is in the charismatically inclined parts of the Wenzhou church that the female proclivity for experiential spirituality is explicitly valued and sometimes even sought after by males, for example with specific prayer requests. However, at least from the majority male perspective there is a hierarchical value attached to this ranking of activities which sees the male brand of church life as superior. In fact, strong notions of class accompany the male vision of church life, with men denigrating the traditional female backbone of the church as “low *suzhi*” believers (i.e. believers of lower educational background) who are simultaneously denied access to elite male church activities. Cao therefore characterizes the “repositioning of Christian faith and refashioning of elite male Christians” in Wenzhou as “often deliberately at the expense of the poor, elderly, female believers.”²⁸

As Cao Nanlai points out, the gender role ascribed to women in the Wenzhou case has many parallels in the patriarchal Confucian tradition which places a similar emphasis on “submission, subordination, purity, piety and domesticity.”²⁹ Wenzhouese Christian men and women perpetuate the traditional emphasis on bearing sons, with the additional twist that Christian interpretations are superimposed on the childbearing process. Traditional ideas of “efficacy” of god(s) and the preference for males thus mix with Christian themes of grace, temptation (for abortion) and faith. The ultimate replication of traditional gendered behaviour appears in the form of elite male banquets for which young, beautiful women are required, albeit only in lowly assistant functions:

*The ability to command the bodies of tall, pretty, sweet-sounding women, whether in the church or at work, is another status symbol for these men.*³⁰

26 Cao 2011, p. 110.

27 Cao 2011, pp. 112 and 115. Cao interestingly quotes women as using the term *shifang* – “to release,” “to set free” – in this context.

28 Cao 2011, p. 106.

29 Cao 2011, p. 100.

30 Cao 2011, p. 108.

Gendered Church Spaces in China: New Calvinism

Another interesting trend within Chinese Christianity of recent years has been the emergence of what Fredrik Fällman labels “New Calvinism”.³¹ As a Christian subculture that emerged among elite intellectuals, Fällman understands it both as a development of and a counter-movement to the Culture Christians of the 1980s and 1990s. Like the former Culture Christians, this new generation of Chinese Christian intellectuals is ultimately driven by the search for a vision for their country and society; however, in its sources and content it differs markedly from the early Christian academics. While the Culture Christians derived much of their inspiration from theologians like Karl Barth, Jürgen Moltmann and Emil Brunner, the New Calvinists draw on reformed theology, in particular the original writings of early reformers. The resulting ecclesiological, social and political vision encompasses strict moral codes for personal and public behaviour, including a strict church discipline, rigorous sexual mores and clearly delineated roles for men and women.

It is this latter point which makes the emergence of New Calvinism remarkable in the context of Chinese women believers. China’s New Calvinism is particularly attractive for lawyers and similar elite intellectuals who are used to rational thinking and for whom the rational exploration of theology constitutes one part of the attraction of Calvinism.³² As Fällman puts it,

*It is surprising that young well-educated women in contemporary China, brought up in a secular and comparatively equal context, can voluntarily choose to join a religious congregation where they are not equal to men.*³³

One of the most prominent examples of this trend is Shouwang Church in Beijing. This non-registered congregation received international attention in 2011 due to its prolonged struggle with the Beijing authorities over the use of a property the congregation had acquired but was ultimately denied access to. According to the Shouwang rules, even women who were ordained elsewhere before joining the congregation only assume the title and role of “teacher” (*jiaoshi*) within the Shouwang congregation. They are expected to be submissive to male authority in church.³⁴ Fällman explains the assigning of differing roles to men and women with the importance of complementarianism in some strands of Calvinism, namely the idea that men and women fill different roles that complement each other.

The rising popularity of Calvinism raises a number of questions that go beyond the mere male-female divide. The Calvinist idea of complementarianism has its correspondence, of course, in Confucian gender roles and can even be read as a wider representation of dualist *yin-yang* thinking. As such, the Chinese New Calvinist “counter-movement” is one further building block in the ongoing re-traditionalization of Chinese society. Among China’s intellectuals with their varying visions for China – the New Left, the Liberals, the

31 Fällman 2013, p. 155.

32 Fällman 2013, p. 160.

33 Fällman 2013, p. 163.

34 Fällman 2013, pp. 163f.

Neo-Confucians –, the New Calvinists certainly endorse a conservative worldview and are probably closest to the Neo-Confucians.

What remains is a “paradoxical representation of individualism and modernity”³⁵ which needs further exploration. It is probably safe to assume that the deliberate conservatism exhibited in New Calvinism is a reaction to the sexual and moral permissiveness that pervades parts of Chinese society. A widespread practice of kept mistresses (*ernai*), often linked with corruption, and the overall commercialization of women’s bodies are part of this new permissiveness. Many of the social phenomena against which New Calvinism is directed have a crippling effect on female gender roles, be it the increase in “second wives,” the rise in student prostitution for luxuries or the trend towards cosmetic surgery as a means of career-building. Why do elite women, then, chose a form of Protestantism that also imposes restrictions on women? Two important differences exist between the retrenchment of female roles in wider Chinese society and in New Calvinist congregations. One is the degree to which women’s roles are curtailed. The lasting commercialization of women and their bodies as exhibited in wider Chinese society is certainly of more damaging impact than separated seating in church or submitting to male leadership “only” in church. The second important difference lies in the voluntariness of the submission paired with a situation of choice. Even if student prostitution, relationships with “sugar daddies” and cosmetic surgery are similarly voluntary decisions, these decisions spring from less privileged positions than the women that join Calvinist congregations presumably do hold. Incidentally, the retrenchment of female roles that is currently happening in parts of Chinese society may be a phenomenon that is newly emerging after the Maoist era with its planned economy, yet it is not modern in the ordinary understanding of the word. Perhaps the explanation lies in the emergence of a different kind of modernity in China.

Tradition, Religion and Chinese Women: Invisibility and Invincibility

In how far does the emergence of gendered church spaces confirm or reject Chinese religious tradition? In the past, the pillars of Chinese ritual life were embedded in the patriarchal tradition of society. Confucian public rituals by office holders as well as the more important forms of ancestor worship were carried out exclusively by men. With its preference of men over women as well as clearly delineated gender roles of men as “public” and women as “private” persons, the dominant Confucian ideology prevented women from taking on ritual leadership roles. Ancestor worship, as an outgrowth of indigenous traditions overlaid with Confucian ideas and folk religious practices, was also dependent on men for all important rites such as ancestor veneration on Qingming, and as a result contributed to the overpowering emphasis on male offspring in Chinese family life. Community festivals also relied on men, the visible und public figures, for all important functions.

35 Fällman 2013, p. 164.

However, besides the Great Tradition of Confucianism as well as the rites relating to patrilineal ancestor worship, a parallel strand of religiosity was and is at work, the so-called Little Tradition of popular religion, which was accessible to women and is, in fact, largely maintained by them. Ways of “doing religion” (to use Adam Chau’s expression) that are practiced by women include daily ritual offerings to ancestors in the home, offerings to the Hungry Ghosts, divination, exorcisms and participation in individual or joint temple worship. In everyday life, therefore, women were and are active as “religious specialists.”³⁶

There also existed and exist specifically feminine forms of religiosity, with female mediums, shamans and the like, and also in the form of religious communities for women. Historically, one of the most interesting examples, often highlighted for its liberating, empowering role, were the marriage-resisting Buddhist sisterhoods of Guangdong, the *zi-shunü*.³⁷

Chinese tradition therefore offers both areas of “invisibility” and “invincibility” for women. Women, though they produced and brought up the male offspring so desperately needed for much of ritual and religious life, remained invisible in the public religious domain. In the private domain as well as in specialized areas, women were visible and important, though, holding spiritual positions of authority or even using religion as a means of self-liberation from traditional gender roles.

In many ways, Chinese Protestant Christianity mirrors traditional Chinese patriarchy and traditional religious role models. When, as Cao describes, spiritually gifted women believers perform religious services at the request of men, they take on a role traditionally filled by women in the family.³⁸ Likewise, the separation of “inside”/private and “outside”/public of Protestant church life as described for Wenzhou mirrors the traditional religious division of labour between women and men. The marginalization of women in leadership roles and their specialization as “prayer mothers” or healers follows traditional patterns of the male Great Tradition and the female Little Tradition, as does the emergence of exclusive female spheres in prayer meetings which Cao Nanlai describes for Wenzhou.

I suggest that the little scholarly attention Chinese Christian women find is a product of the traditional religious perception of women. The connection with popular religious culture carries with it overtones of feudalism, superstition and a general lack of education as opposed to the Great Tradition of Confucianism, which is connoted with philosophy and education. Especially in the early phases of the “Christianity fever,” this perception applied to Christian women with their “three manys.” Secondly, the emergence of gendered church spaces such as Wenzhou Boss Christianity or New Calvinism constitutes a modern interpretation of Chinese tradition with its differentiated roles for men and women.

Preliminary Interpretations

The examples examined here at some length, New Calvinism and Wenzhou Boss Christianity, reveal a number of parallels, but also exhibit important differences. Both churches

36 Hunter – Chan 1993, p. 174.

37 For a summarizing account of this practice, see Watson 1994.

38 See Cao 2011, p. 100; and Hunter – Chan 1993, p. 174.

present themselves as modern, progressive and rational, and there is some emphasis on “culture” and “self-cultivation.” However, for the Wenzhou Boss Christians this impetus derives from the fact that as newly rich, these elite men have to assert their high cultural status, while the New Calvinists mostly stem from an academic elite. Both the New Calvinists and the Wenzhou Boss Christians do not practice female ordination and maintain highly gendered religious practices in their church life. Yet when it comes to personal morality, there seems to be more allowance for the business practices of the contemporary Chinese mainstream in the Wenzhou case, in particular with regards to sexuality, than in the case of the New Calvinists. Wenzhou men speak of a “flexible study and application of the Bible,”³⁹ and double sexual standards apply for men and women.⁴⁰

One interesting aspect in Wenzhou Boss Christianity is the way in which men and women submit to the will of God. Women feel God’s presence and God’s will transmitted through bodily sensations, while men see the successful implementation of their personal and business plans as signs of God’s will and divine blessing for their ventures.⁴¹ While men interpret “God’s will” flexibly, women put more emphasis on following God’s will and finding it out in the first place, although there are also women who state that “the method of God’s work has changed,”⁴² meaning that the emotional signs of God’s work as typically experienced in charismatic forms of religiosity have diminished in favour of rationality.

These two different approaches to understanding God’s will ultimately point to different images of God, and one wonders whether a perceived rise in rationality in the way that God works also means that God becomes, in the eyes of these believers, more “male,” “rational” or “exclusive.” And like the Wenzhou Boss Christians, the New Calvinists stress submission under God’s will. Along similar lines, the voluntary submission of female Calvinist believers under the authority of their male counterparts and God raises questions about their image of God. Is their God, by implication, male?

In an authoritarian political system like the Chinese, it is hard to overlook the fact that questions of submission and authority play an important role both for the New Calvinists and the Boss Christians. Although intellectuals such as the New Calvinists do concern themselves with questions of governance and ideal political systems, it seems that they are victims of an authoritarian system that ill-prepares them for the challenges of a truly liberal democracy. Similarly, the Boss Christians adhere to traditional forms of authoritarianism both in the family and in church. It seems that China’s political authoritarianism leaves both groups bruised and runs, in consequence, like a subcurrent through their theological thinking. Observations from other churches around the globe confirm these findings and place Chinese churches within the broader canvas of charismatic churches. Writing from the perspective of global Pentecostalism, Bernice Martin remarks that gendered hierarchies bloom in authoritarian surroundings.⁴³

39 Cao 2011, p. 125.

40 Cao 2011, pp. 117 and 115.

41 Cao 2011, p. 11.

42 Cao 2011, p. 117.

43 Martin 2013, p. 118.

Linked to the question of authoritarianism is the question of subjugation. While all Chinese Protestants with their evangelical heritage strongly propound believers' subjugation under God's will, the New Calvinists and the Boss Christians place additional emphasis on the subjugation of women under men, and women comply voluntarily with these precepts. Obviously, the voluntary aspect is of extraordinary importance if we feel compelled to judge the role of women and men in these churches from a gender-sensitive perspective. Still, the puzzle remains as to why women choose these restrained gender roles for themselves, particularly in the case of the "high-powered" New Calvinist congregations. In the case of Wenzhou, it seems likely that women either never left their traditional roles entirely or returned to them early on in the economic development process. Cao emphasizes the domestic orientation of women's work in Wenzhou which includes assisting men in their businesses from the home.⁴⁴ Again, the theme of invisibility crops up – it is noteworthy that the "Martha's" work that women do in Wenzhou, as church sisters, homemakers and breadwinners, is "invisible" from a wider societal perspective.⁴⁵

As others have argued convincingly⁴⁶ Chinese Protestantism is to a large extent Pentecostal in substance and appearance, even if Chinese Christians do not use the label "Pentecostal" themselves. It would probably be preferable to use the word proto-Pentecostalism to describe the Spirit-centred, charismatic type of Christianity that dominates many rural congregations and can still be found in numerous city churches. It is therefore instructive to revert to findings from global Pentecostalism to illuminate the gender-specific issues raised in this paper. In how far do our Chinese findings mirror phenomena found in global Pentecostalism?

Studies on Pentecostalism in Latin America and Mozambique suggest that the family values and sexual morality espoused by Pentecostal churches are more attractive to women than to men, since women welcome the corresponding curtailing of male privileges while men find them too hard to give up.⁴⁷ This is one explanation for the dominance of women among Latin American converts.

It seems that what matters is the point of departure in terms of female liberation before conversion. While both men and women have to submit to rather rigorous moral standards, in many parts of the world women who join Pentecostal churches start out from a marginalized position, which means that in the end they gain more than they lose, which is why Hefner speaks of the "Pentecostal bargain" and describes Pentecostalism as "gender gentle."⁴⁸ While some of these dynamics may also apply to Chinese women, especially rural ones, the question is likely more complex for urbanites. Do they also feel that in overall terms of male-female relationships, they gain more than they lose by submitting voluntarily to men in church and family life while asserting family and marriage-centred values? In the current permissive social climate of Chinese urban society, this may well be the case.

44 Cao 2011, p. 119.

45 Cao 2011, p. 119.

46 See Cao 2013 and Oblau 2005.

47 Hefner 2013, pp. 10f.

48 Hefner 2013, p. 28.

Another parallelism between Pentecostal churches elsewhere and many Chinese congregations is the fact that women take on important roles in church life, yet are often excluded from formal leadership roles.⁴⁹ Likewise, the gendered division into charismatic, “female” spiritual authority and scriptural, “male” spiritual authority found in Wenzhou is a phenomenon typical also of other Pentecostal churches and can be a source of competition and tension in similar settings elsewhere.⁵⁰ Finally, the simultaneous assertion and control of the body is a typical Pentecostal phenomenon.⁵¹

Towards a Research Agenda

A look at the existing literature about women in the Chinese Protestant church indicates that the topic has, so far, been researched from the historical, geographical and ethnic margins of Chinese society, with historical figures and ethnic minority women at the centre of attention. What is needed now is a look at the role of women, their self-perception as well as the roles ascribed to them, from within the heart of Chinese Christianity. In the light of our observations above, possible research questions include:

- What types of gender roles can we detect? Can we attempt a classification of different gender roles? Are there conscious efforts to counterbalance the existing role model of “Martha” by a role model of “Deborah,” as an article by Chen Meilin seems to imply?⁵²
- In Cao’s Wenzhou study, perhaps due to the researcher’s own gender, we learn more about male perceptions of women than female perceptions of men, and the male attitudes that Cao describes reveal what Wu Jinzhen states for other contexts: “Female worth was measured by male standards.”⁵³ To bring out the female perspective on women’s own as well as male gender roles is one of the foremost tasks at hand.
- Cao describes for Wenzhou that leading elite males seem to fear some of the qualities attributed to female religiosity, such as emotionality. Do women in turn fear the male brand of (Wenzhou) religiosity? In how far are different forms of male and female religiosity markers of gender identity?
- What image of God do female and male believers hold?
- What is the relationship between faith, authoritarianism and voluntary submission in the contemporary Chinese context?
- Given the question of voluntary submission as well as the general attractiveness of the traditionalist church models presented here, it would be interesting to know more about the socioeconomic and educational background of the women among Wenzhou’s Boss Christians and the New Calvinists. Are the women who submit voluntarily to the authority of men their educational and socioeconomic peers?

49 Hefner 2013, p. 12.

50 Martin 2013, p. 118.

51 Martin 2013, p. 118.

52 See Chen 2003, quoted in ANS 2003, p. 9.

53 Wu 2001, p. 77.

- One area of interest are the body images endorsed by different churches and their corresponding dress codes. Some congregations criticize women who dress up as “not spiritual”⁵⁴ and do not allow women choir members to appear with make-up; other congregations see well-groomed, carefully made-up women as giving glory to God and to the beauty God created. As we have seen, the trend towards female submission as endorsed by the Wenzhou Boss Christians can also encompass a physical component, when good-looking girls are used to “adorn” prestigious male-dominated events. Where is the boundary between using women and liberating them for their full female potential?
- The relationship between tradition and modernity in the contemporary Chinese Christian context. Wenzhou Christians describe their gender roles as “traditional,”⁵⁵ but apart from indicating their own traditionalism (for example with regards to seating), it remains unclear what type of “tradition” Wenzhou Christians refer to when they invoke it: the Christian tradition as imported by the missionaries? Or rather their own Chinese-Confucian tradition interpreted in a new Christian way? Would it perhaps even be possible to speak of an invented tradition?

Conclusion and Outlook

Besides women’s work as it is done through the Women’s Commission of the CCC, gender is not much of a pastoral or theological concern in the higher echelons of the official church. However, local congregations occasionally offer designated activities for women; in a number of urban centres, the YWCA offers activities for girls and women. While grassroots churches struggle with changing male and female roles in a context of social change and gender issues certainly play a role in everyday pastoral care, the topic has yet to be taken up in a more systematic way by the official church. Moreover, in the Chinese discourse, “gender” still means a single differentiation between (biological and social) male and female gender, while other sexual identities (Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender) are entirely excluded from the official discourse. Reflections aimed at gender justice are also implicitly equated with “feminist.” Like many churches elsewhere, Chinese Protestant churches still fall far from formulating theological and pastoral positions that offer people of all sexual identities dignity, support and true gender justice.

Also, gender stereotypes prevail even in texts that are explicitly aimed at providing a feminist perspective, as Monika Gänßbauer shows.⁵⁶ One example is Archie Lee, who sees women as embodying “compassion, goodness and the basic concern for life.”⁵⁷

It is interesting to note that perhaps the most successful Christian-inspired heretical cult of the past two decades in China is Eastern Lightning (also known as the Church of the Almighty God), which proclaims that Jesus returned as a Chinese woman. One wonders whether the female face of Christ propagated through the cult has anything to do

54 Wu 2001, p. 83.

55 Cao 2011, p. 97.

56 Gänßbauer 2001, p. 70.

57 Lee 1996, p. 259.

with the remarkable resilience of the group. In this sense, the success of Eastern Lightning can also be read as an appeal to existing churches for a theology and a church that are, if not feminist, more consciously feminine.

Instead, the images that women believers, the “Marthas” of the church, evoke, are often ambiguous. Women are linked with what we could term “feminine ways of doing religion” that include specific religious practices (some of them viewed as dangerously close to folk religion and syncretism) as well as “housewifely” duties in congregational life. In a recent article, Joy Tong and Yang Fenggang have added another reading to the dynamics of female gender and Protestant faith in the Chinese context. Describing a Chinese congregation in the US, they write about the “femininity” of Chinese Christianity. According to them, this refers to qualities of faith and faith expression usually perceived to be typically feminine, such as “passionate behaviour, emotional expressiveness, and authenticity.”⁵⁸ With this assessment, they echo other scholars’ descriptions of charismatic Christianity as feminine. However, Tong and Yang link this “femininity” expressively to Daoism. According to them, one reason for the attractiveness of charismatic Protestantism is its resemblance to traditional Daoist practices.⁵⁹

Despite its ongoing success in individual congregations such as the US-based one described by Tong and Yang, in mainland China there seems to be a trend for this “female brand of Christianity” or the feminine way of “doing religion,” with its body-centred, charismatic approach to spirituality, to be diminishing, both within congregations and within the proto-denominational landscape. As Cao Nanlai shows for the Wenzhou case, there is a process of theological rationalization in which the rural charismatic female movement is actively criticized⁶⁰ and which attaches less value to the charismatic approach to spirituality, up to the point where one woman believer asserts that “God’s way of working has changed” [to a less spirit-oriented, more rational way of communicating with humans]. Cao therefore sees the female charismatic form of Christianity as endangered.⁶¹ Again, we find an interesting analogy in global Pentecostalism. It is a well-known phenomenon that during the process of attaining more mature forms of establishment, Pentecostal churches tend to become “less charismatic, more hierarchical, and more masculine.”⁶²

On a larger scale, the emergence of more rational quasi-denominations in China such as New Calvinism alongside the existing charismatic, proto-Pentecostal type of Christianity matches the trend towards more rationality that we also find within churches as described for the Wenzhou case. Both within the larger Protestant landscape and in individual churches, a trend towards “masculinization” seems to be going on. It is also conclusive with trends in global Pentecostalism, where second- and third-generation former Pentecostals tend to lean towards other forms of Evangelicalism with the acquisition of

58 Tong – Yang 2014, p. 195.

59 Tong – Yang 2014, pp. 208f.

60 Cao 2013, p. 165.

61 Cao 2011, pp. 155 and 157.

62 Hefner 2013, p. 8.

formal education and relative wealth, which is why some observers already see Pentecostalism waning in Latin America.⁶³

The potential decline of the “feminine,” charismatic approach to spirituality is curiously echoed in the fact that in the official Chinese church, the short bloom of feminist theology was over before it ever really started. Already in 2001, Gänßbauer noted a decreasing interest in feminist theology and women’s issues as opposed to a few years earlier. “In view of the latest developments it may be presumed that the debate about – at least Western forms of – feminist theology in China has just been a short intermezzo.”⁶⁴

When it comes to predictions of future trends, it seems possible that for Chinese women Protestants, women’s liberation through the church becomes only one of several possible avenues. Rather, it seems that the liberating quality of the Christian faith applies only to some congregations and was, as a trend for “the” Chinese Protestant church, short-lived. The emergence of proto-denominations with more visibly gendered church spaces than is customary in China’s registered Protestant churches could also have implications for the relationship between and attractiveness of registered and unregistered churches. In many ways, the differentiation between them does not carry beyond the technical fact of registration, but the question of female ordination could become one of the clearest differences between the two.

In China, moral rigidity and Puritan teachings characterize all churches, be they more charismatic or more reformed in their theology and liturgy. Conservative values seem to form a large part of the attraction that churches have in the contemporary Chinese context. One might argue that all Chinese Christians endorse very conservative family values and impose strict mores on their members. In this sense, Chinese Protestantism is perhaps best described as Puritan, whether it appears in “Pentecostal,” “Calvinist” or other disguise. Ultimately, it seems desirable that churches offer various roles both for women and men, be they more complementary or equal in nature. What has to be avoided is the emergence of an environment in which only conservative, limiting options are available to either women or men. Matters of face and “the done thing” still are of extraordinary importance for individuals in Chinese society with its collectivist and Confucian heritage, and in the current climate of resurfacing traditions, the emergence of traditional role models as the dominant and only option seems to be a potential danger. It is to be hoped that in the future, Chinese churches open themselves even more for male and female interpretations of theology and will be more sensitive to female and male spiritual and pastoral needs.

Researchers should be careful not to replicate the myopia exhibited by elite researchers that echoes, in many ways, the Confucian disrespect of the less literate, and exclude Chinese Christian women from their research. Rather, the various mechanisms with regards to gender currently at work within different parts of the Chinese Protestant church raise a number of questions worthy of research, some of which have implications that go beyond the male-female divide. For example, one latent concern both among Boss Christians and New Calvinists are questions of authority. In both cases, female believers are expected to

63 Hefner 2013, p. 27.

64 Gänßbauer 2001, pp. 68 and 72.

submit not only to God's authority, but also to the authority of their fellow male believers. Wenzhou's Boss Christians create elite male social occasions such as invitation-only banquets that assert their power and function as social spaces in which male Christians set the rules and are in charge, unlike the wider rest of society where Christians are often disadvantaged when it comes to questions of power and authority.⁶⁵ The New Calvinists, on the other hand, espouse alternative political values which include, for some of the more prominent believers, an endorsement of egalitarian democratic values that seems to contradict the internal authoritarian structure of the church, both regarding the relationship between men and women and the congregation as a whole.

Altogether, when looking at the roles of contemporary Chinese Protestant women, tradition plays a twofold role: First, the wish for moral guidance and spiritual values which fuels the interest in Protestantism as a whole also propels a return of traditional religious roles which can be limiting for women. To some extent, women choose these roles and are part and parcel of this production of gender roles. Secondly, the little scholarly interest Christian women have received so far mirrors traditional perceptions of religious women as uneducated bearers of the Little Tradition who do not merit further attention. Both phenomena, the dynamic interplay between modernization and the resurgence of tradition in the female religious context on the one hand and the perception of it on the other hand, deserve to be addressed in more detail in the future.

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65 Cf. Cao 2011, pp. 107f.

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