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Women and the *Missio Dei* in China

Hope Bentley,
Guest Editor

華源協作
CHINASOURCE



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The photos that are used on the cover are courtesy of the *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity* and two friends of ChinaSource, Ray Smith and Randy Posslenzny.

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EDITORIAL

Women with a Harmonious Purpose—The *Missio Dei*

By Hope Bentley, Guest Editor

In this issue of *ChinaSource Quarterly*, all the articles are written by women who share a common purpose—making disciples in China. Their paths may have never personally intersected, but there is harmony in their purpose. Their collective experience represents married women, married with children, single women, Chinese and Westerners. In their writings we can see what happens when women are located in the midst of the *missio dei*. They show us the beauty of God’s diverse peoples who make up his church, in particular the women in the body of Christ.



Many people believe that cross-cultural workers sacrifice conveniences and an easier life for life among unreached peoples. As you read, you will note struggles for sure, but the sacrifice evident in the women’s stories is that of a sacrificed life in love and on mission with God. They identify with their savior who in God’s wisdom, came into the world, and in humility suffered to the point of death (Philippians. 2:7-8). A life of convenience was not on the women’s agendas. Despite struggles, they show us what a life of obedience to Christ looks like. We can see his life of sacrifice continued in his children as they obey God’s commission to go into the world and to sacrifice themselves for the cause of Christ.¹

In the lead article, eL has created a panoramic look at the history of ministering women in China. There are great triumphs and immense challenges. She shows us how women have shaped the church in China in the past and now. She allows us to see an evolution of sorts of women in the Chinese church. One clear theme is that women did not restrain themselves even in hard times. They pressed forward for the gospel.

Rachel Wood shares a very personal account of ministering in China. She deftly takes us through the realities of married life, child-rearing, and church planting from her experiences, even when tragedy struck. Her missional mothering theme offers a glimpse into a very organic life melding God’s mission with family. Serving in China was indeed a family affair.

Skylar Nie offers us insights into the ups and downs of implementing strategy in China. She candidly speaks of learning how to minister cross-culturally. Hers is a story of seeking God’s wisdom to reach a remote people group. Interpreting culture was an essential exercise in order to contextualize the Word. The result of seeking his wisdom and yielding to his direction is as expected—fruitful and inspiring.

The third author, Joy Kwan, speaks to us as only a Chinese single worker can about the realities of serving in today’s China. Although younger than the rest of the writers, you will see her depth of insight, her zeal, and her thoughtful analysis of mission service in China. More of her journey is told in [“The Heart of a Single Servant”](#) on the *ChinaSource Blog*, where she writes of her desire to respond authentically to Scripture. She has developed a personal theology on how to launch into deep water.

Narci Herr reviews the book, *Blood Letters: The Untold Story of Lin Zhao, a Martyr in Mao’s China*, the stunning memoir of Lin Zhao, a young Chinese woman who uses her voice and her blood to

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Women in Ministry in China: The Past 50 Years

By eL

“A women’s ministry? Why would you want to do a ministry for women?” Asked in surprised tones, this question came from no less than a Chinese woman pastor. Perhaps more than anything, this snippet of conversation underlines the way in which women are widely overlooked in today’s Chinese churches, despite their being the majority in most congregations.



Image credit: Left to right, Mrs Sha I, Emma Ekvall and Dr. Hyla Watters via Ray Smith.

This “unawareness” of women as the larger component of Christ’s body is hardly a new phenomenon. Dr. Kwok Pui-lan has noted this lack from the earliest days of Protestant missionary work.¹ At the same time, Kwok and others point out how women contributed in enduring ways to the growth of God’s kingdom in China. In no less measure today, women not only populate China’s church but also stand as many of its pillars. This paper seeks to give a broad overview of the situation of women in the church in mainland China. It tries to confine itself to description rather than to analysis or prescription.

Alexander Chow’s article, “The Remarkable Story of China’s ‘Bible Women,’”² notes that since the 2000s, women in the surging urban house churches have tended to be discouraged from most leadership positions. Later, we will look at this development further, but Chow also contrasts this situation with that of the 1980s and 1990s when women were commonly accepted in leadership both in the official and unregistered churches. This contemporary downplaying of women’s public ministry after having enjoyed a season of widespread influence parallels previous eras in China’s church story.

From the 1860s onwards, education for women was offered by many mission agencies. Due to Confucian constraints upon male-female interaction, it fell to women themselves to promote the education of their sisters. Chinese women, taught by female missionaries, went on to transmit literacy, teach doctrine and hymn-singing, explain Scripture, and generally be enormously effective instruments in the spread of Christianity among half the populace. George K.W. Mak writes that in the 1910s, Bible women were reading Scriptures aloud to upwards of 3,000 women each month. Hundreds more each year were being taught to read for themselves. These figures are based only on statistics from the British and Foreign Bible Society.³ Probably the wider impact of Bible women employed or supported by other missions was even greater and not solely in the Christian sphere. The raising of women’s stature due to education eventually permeated all society, part of the tectonic shifts in worldview and cultural norms that the entry of God’s kingdom often brings about.

As the church progressed toward maturity in the late 1920s, men were its visible face. Watchman Nee (Ni Tuosheng) is a name known worldwide as a leader in China’s church. How many know the name of the woman to whom he attributed his conversion (Dora Yu),⁴ or that of another woman who profoundly shaped the nascent leader (Margaret Barber)?⁵ Elsewhere I have written of the steadfastness and indispensable ministry of the wife of the celebrated stalwart, Mr. Wang Mingdao.⁶

Liu Jingwen was surely not alone in being the chief enabler of the career of a famous husband as she, and many others, remained obscure. John Sung's wife was another who "stayed at home with the kids," but raised daughters who inspired house church folk for their unflinching integrity in the fires of post-1949 persecution.⁷ Thus the strong sisters of the twenty-first century church stand on the shoulders of their mothers, aunts, and "godmothers."⁸

The spirit of the "Bible women" did not die away with the emancipation of the female sex in the "New China" inaugurated by Chairman Mao in 1949. During heightened suffering and repression in the 1950s and 60s, while Christian men languished in prisons and labor camps, wives and daughters quietly and determinedly ensured that knowledge of God was not extinguished. Children were taught the faith of their fathers, or in this case, that of their mothers. Neighbors who knew that the man of the family was incarcerated would see in the lives of the womenfolk left behind that the suffering was for the sake of a savior who had suffered to bring life to the world.⁹

In countryside places far from official surveillance, women rose to be powerful leaders in what later came to be called "house church networks." One such woman, "Mama K," was almost certainly a principal instigator in one of the more dramatic episodes of the emerging "house church movement"—the smuggled delivery of a million Bibles in 1981.¹⁰

At the height of their influence in the 1980s and 90s, rural house church networks frequently were headed by a male atop a pyramid whose second and third tiers were staffed by women. These lieutenants functioned as the administrative executives directing the corporal life and ministry of the million-strong (sometimes multiplied millions-strong) networks. In those heady days, single women were dispatched in twos or threes as evangelists and teachers, just as were their brethren, and no one saw the former as lesser in ability or anointing than the latter. "We were given a 100 RMB and a one-way ticket to go to our appointed mission field," one sister recently told me. "There was no hardship we didn't endure, no work we didn't put our hands to."¹¹

This outgoing sister, who is now the mother of at least two school-age children, typifies many who began life in a village, often receiving the gospel as the first one in their family. She eventually led her mother and brothers to Christ before answering the call to full-time ministry. Preparation for such was in an unofficial ("underground") Bible school far from home. English was part of the curriculum, so she speaks enough to have facilitated her travel overseas to southeast Asian countries and to the Holy Land. Nearly 20 years ago she began factory evangelism in a sprawling suburban area; fruit was sparse. "We were strangers to them," she recounts. "It wasn't till we were able to rent our own place and invite people home and make friends with them that they began to listen to what we were saying about Jesus." One of the male co-evangelists married this woman, and they have planted several congregations in the district. Though himself a country man, her husband has been a diligent student, as has his wife. "Our church members all are college and technical school graduates," she says. "We have to keep learning. My husband understands how strategic literature work is, but not many pursue it, so he has his own website and posts lots of articles. ... Theologically we are balanced. We don't ban the spiritual gifts, but we don't overemphasize them either." This latter remark reveals the Pentecostal roots of many major, rural-based house church networks.

By contrast, Reform theology has emerged among the gatherings of urban elites in the new millennium.¹² As recently as the middle of the first decade, women sharing leadership in city house churches was not uncommon. By the end of the decade, however, well-educated younger men, hewing to

doctrinaire Calvinism, viewed their pulpits as male preserves. Women were obliged to accept less visible roles in the name of complementarianism. “Invisible,” yet irreducible, women have continued to run the Sunday Schools and childcare programs of city churches (where such may still be possible in the strict new post-2017 environment); they run visitation ministries and practical care outreaches and are often at the forefront of burgeoning mission involvement by their congregations.

These women will continue to benefit most from healthy interactions with outside sisters. We can fellowship with them most readily due to geographical access and cultural affinity. While many of them have already benefited from theological training, courses tailored to the needs of urban working women have yet to be designed and presented. Child-rearing, family management, and work-home balance are topics which would most strengthen our sisters (not to mention some men as well). More than theology, life-on-life walking with our sisters will bring the encouragement that will firm their hands. It will not be a one-way transfusion either. Their lives and commitment to Christ shine with a vibrancy that cheers us on as well.

Outsiders like to observe that most of China’s Christians are in house churches. This fact, though true, unthinkingly belittles God’s presence and work with his people in the congregations under the Three Self and China Christian Council. Since the TSPM’s resurrection in the early 1980s, open churches have often had women at the helm, and so it is today. In a comprehensive article, “Two Small Copper Coins and Much More,” Dr. Fredrik Fällman cites the cases of prominent women high in the TSPM. “The TSPM/CCC is actually far ahead of the Chinese party-state system, which still has a long way to go, as only one out of 25 persons in the Communist Party of China (CPC) politburo is currently a woman, and two out of 34 in the State Council.”¹³ Rev. Cao Shengjie “was the first national woman church leader ever in China, and one among still rather few in the world. She was the CCC chairperson 2002–2007.”¹⁴ House churches and foreign evangelical supporters considered Cao to be another tool of the Communist Party, but Fällman makes a point we should not ignore: “...the mere fact that the largest organized Chinese Church has had a woman chairperson is a strong statement.”¹⁵ Perhaps more noteworthy, especially compared to seminaries outside China, estimates are that up to a third of TSPM seminary faculty are women.¹⁶ Need we say that the hand that rocks the cradle of theological training rears the church of tomorrow? We cannot write off all TSPM leaders as puppets of godless communism. Many, women and men alike, have courageously taught truth under pressures that most of us, who are not in their shoes, have no idea of.

Outside Zhenjiang, a river town 250 km from Shanghai and the burial place of Hudson and Maria Taylor, a cathedral-sized new building, the Xuande Church, also houses the only public memorial to these missionaries in China. The fact that it was opened in 2018 amid increasing restrictions on Christian witness has not a little to do with the strength of personality and diplomatic finesse of the female head of the CCC in Zhenjiang and senior pastor of the church, Pastor Yin.¹⁷ Other indefatigable women serve their flocks in out-of-the-way corners. “I didn’t want to come back here,” one young pastor in a dusty township sanctuary told us, “but I knew that this is where God is calling me to serve him and build up his people.”¹⁸ Her faithfulness has chosen the narrow road.

God is building his kingdom in the midst of our messy realities. It would skirt an uncomfortable truth to end this essay without referencing the social and interpersonal challenges which many sisters navigate routinely. While the evangelical view of contemporary mainland Christianity remains rose-tinted, a few have written of failures within the church. In the 1950s and earlier while the Little Flock

was a well-known “denomination,” there were some who, with reason and justification, pointed out the ethical failings of its founder, Watchman Nee.¹⁹ Similarly, in the heyday of the rural house church “revival” in the late 1990s, the head of the sprawling South China Church, Pastor Gong Shengliang, was found guilty of molesting female church members.²⁰

While it remains difficult to discern accurately all that occurs in the multi-layered world of Chinese Christianity, nonetheless it is a valid critique to point out that the reassertion of male leadership makes it even easier for men to take advantage of their female fellow servants. It should be more of a scandal than it is that Chinese believers often take the cultural low road and refuse even to mention some of the problems of misconduct and abuse within Christian circles. Chinese society is not worse than any other, but it is steeped in traditions of Confucian “morality” and “face-saving” which work against openness and transparency.

In, and in spite of, this unpropitious milieu Christian women’s steadfastness and strength shine on undaunted. Here we have sketched the merest glimpse of the blessings God has poured out on his people in China through his daughters. In seeking to affirm our sisters in all the potential God intends for them, we would do well to ponder and pray how to appropriately promote their progress toward the day when the shackles of culture, tradition, even “theology,” fall off.

Change will not come fast, but God’s Spirit sovereignly works from within cultures to transform fallen human ways and bring about the beauty of the New Creation ordained from before the foundation of the world.

¹ Kwok, Pui-Lan. “Claiming our Heritage: Chinese Women and Christianity.” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 16, no.4 (1992): 150-153. Dr Kwok has pioneered research into women’s roles in Chinese Christian history.

² Chow, Alexander. “The Remarkable Story of China’s ‘Bible Women,’” March 16, 2018 at <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2018/march/christian-china-bible-women.html>.

³ Mak, George K. W, citing BFBS China Agency Report 1910-19, in Philip Clart and Gregory Scott, eds., *Religious Publishing and Print Culture in Modern China 1800-2012*. Boston, de Gruyter, Inc., 2014. pp. 31-32.

⁴ eL, “Women in China’s Protestant Church and Missions,” “The Chinese Church and Its Historic Past,” *ChinaSource Quarterly*, Vol.19, No.3, Sept 18, 2017 at <https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/women-in-chinas-protestant-church-and-missions/>.

⁵ Covell, Ralph, “Margaret Barber, British missionary educator in China” from the *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity* website at <https://bdcconline.net/en/stories/barber-margaret>.

⁶ eL, Op.cit. “Women in China’s Protestant Church and Missions.”

⁷ Author’s observation based on conversations with house church laity and leaders in the 1980s.

⁸ Aikman, David, *Jesus in Beijing*. Regnery Publishing, 2006, chapter 5.

⁹ Author’s observations based on interactions with house church believers in the 1970s.

¹⁰ “Open Doors: Project Pearl—25th Anniversary of Delivering 1 Million Bibles to China,” June 24, 2006, *Christian Today* website at <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/open.doors.project.pearl.25th.anniversary.of.delivering.1.million.bibles.to.china/6713.htm>.

¹¹ This sister’s remarks here and in the following paragraph are from a personal conversation with the author in December 2019.

¹² Fulton, Brent, *China’s Urban Christians*. Pickwick Publications, 2015, p. 116.

¹³ Fällman, Fredrik, “‘Two Small Copper Coins’ and Much More: Chinese Protestant Women and Their Contributions to the Church—Cases from Past and Present.” *Religions & Christianity in Today’s China*, Vol. VIII, 2018, No. 3, pp. 39-55,

ISSN: 2192-9289 at <https://www.china-zentrum.de/issues/2018#c687> p. 46.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 45.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 45.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 53.

¹⁷ For more information on this event, see “Hudson Taylor Memorial Tower Opens in China,” *China Christian Daily*, June 7, 2018, http://chinachristiandaily.com/news/church_ministry/2018-06-07/hudson-taylor-memorial-tower-opens-in-china-7298 and “A Visit to the Hudson Taylor Memorial Building,” *China Christian Daily*, September 12, 2019. http://chinachristiandaily.com/news/ministry/2019-09-12/a-visit-to-the-hudson-taylor-memorial-building_8571. While neither article mentions Pastor Yin by name, she is in the picture included in the first article, identified by the author of this article.

¹⁸ From a conversation with the author, 2016.

¹⁹ Doyle, G. Wright, “Watchman Nee” from the *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity*, <http://bdconline.net/en/stories/nee-watchman>.

²⁰ “URGENT: Imprisoned South China Church Leader Gong Shengliang Paralyzed by Stroke; Family’s Request for Medical Parole Rejected,” *China Aid*, Dec. 14, 2012, <https://www.chinaaid.org/2012/12/urgent-imprisoned-south-china-church.html>.

eL has been engaged with China since the 1970s—in hands-on-ministry herself and in getting others to pray, give, send, and go. Now she seeks to develop more programs for deeper discipleship among women.

Women with a Harmonious Purpose—The Missio Dei

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write the story of being a Christian during Mao Zedong’s regime. Her poetry expresses the depth of her commitment to Christ— “Shattered jade is what I will to be, [o]ffered to China as a sacrifice.”²

Love for Christ and a strong call enabled the women to wade into deeper water. They do not simply do missions; it is who they are. Their missional activities are a concrete expression of something that runs much deeper³—their identity in Christ. Their stories tell only a part of the narrative of women serving Christ in China. But, in their writing we see something of a portrait of many other women who have lived and served in China, and whose stories are yet to be told.

For this issue of CSQ, we are primarily using historical photos of women—both local and expatriate—who have served in China. The pictures come from several sources, the *[Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity](#)*, and three friends of ChinaSource, Randy Posslenzny, Ray Smith, and Gaylan Yeung. We hope these images will stir your heart to praise God for the ministries of women in China over the years.

¹ Ralph Winter and Steven Hawthorne, *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: Reader and Study Guide*, (William Carey Library, 2012), Kindle Edition.

² Xi Lian, *Blood Letters: The Untold Story of Lin Zhao, a Martyr in Mao’s China*. Basic Books, 2018, p. 135.

³ Flemming, Dean. *Recovering the Full Mission of God: A Biblical Perspective on Being, Doing and Telling*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, Kindle edition, p. 258.

Hope Bentley (pseudonym) served in East Asia for thirty years. She has been involved in teaching and training throughout her cross-cultural career.

Women Contextualizing the Gospel in Cross-cultural Settings

Hope Bentley

Contextualization makes a way for the gospel to speak to other cultures.¹ It is relational—one life intersecting with another in such a way that a holy, transformative conversation supernaturally effuses. Cross-cultural workers understand that contextualization is holistic integration of the gospel message into the warp and woof of particular cultures in which Christians live.² One issue we explore in this *ChinaSource Quarterly* is how women working cross-culturally in China learned the process of crossing a culture with the gospel.



Image credit: Randy Posslenzny and Ray Smith

To be effective church planters in the local context, all cross-cultural workers must learn the importance of culturally integrating, without misrepresenting, the gospel message. These Christian workers are characterized by mission strategists in various ways—cultural insiders, outsiders, or near-culture outsiders.³ In modern-day church planting, it is beneficial to examine the impact that cross-cultural workers, both near-culture and outsiders, bring to the mission conversation. The labels identify the relationship the worker has to the people she is serving. The labels also communicate context. For the purpose of this discussion, near-culture workers like Western Chinese or other Asian women such as Koreans, look as though they could be from China, but they have social, cultural, or linguistic differences. They have the benefit of being able to enter villages and homes without the same scrutiny outsiders might face.

Contextualization and Communication

How have women who are outsiders to a culture become effective church planters in China? Skylar Nie⁴ is an example of a fruitful, near-culture church planter who served among the Zhuang. She began to learn how to communicate effectively with Zhuang women. Gradually, as she observed, listened, and reached out in love, she learned how to be more contextual in her approach. Over time, an epiphany of understanding came as she spent time listening to the struggles and hopes of the women she came to serve. While she could never be an insider, she strove to become an acceptable outsider. She became a little sister to the older women and auntie to the children. It took courage and persistence to learn how to contextualize the gospel in their setting.

As she began conversing with other women in the local context, their everyday concerns, physical needs, or emotional struggles tumbled out as they talked. She found that the message of hope more naturally emerged in the process of friendship and conversation. This is the process of contextualization in its simplest form.

Contextualization and Language

Contextualization is tied to language. The language of a people is like a cultural dictionary defining and labeling relationships, geography, philosophy, natural phenomena, politics, social order, and so much more. An outsider to the culture can succeed, but it will require humility and perseverance. Rachel Wood was an outsider to Chinese culture, and she struggled to learn Chinese and a local dialect. While near-culture workers seem to be able to learn a language much faster, Rachel often bumbled through her rehearsed gospel presentations. One day, as she just sat and listened to the local

women talk about children's education, marriage, and money struggles, she realized she had many things in common with the women even though the context was different. She realized it was an honor to sit among them, to listen, learn, and begin to understand what their lives were really like. It then became easier for her to introduce the stories of the Bible into their conversations. Though Rachel learned how to relate, Skylar, being a near-culture worker, had fewer barriers to overcome.

Contextualization and Biblical Truth

We have mentioned that contextualization is relational. It is also theological. The process of entering a culture, learning the language, and building relationships is paving the way for a contextual theology. Out of meaningful cultural dialogues with Scripture, the worker, and the people, a theology begins to emerge within the context.⁵ Skylar and Rachel learned to keep the Bible as the primary source and to show others how to handle God's Word and see it as a guide for life.

Typically, evangelicals view the practice of witnessing to the truth as a Bible-to-life exercise, which is how Rachel began her ministry.⁶ While beginning with biblical teaching and then applying it to life is perfectly warranted, at times it is risky telling people what to believe before stopping to listen to what they are experiencing and why, or hearing what they may already believe.⁷ A Bible-to-life approach can fail to meet people where they are and the tensions they are living with.⁸

While a Bible-to-life approach is important for evangelism and discipleship, sometimes a life-to-Bible approach, which is what Skylar utilized, is more effective. Consider Paul in Athens. Paul perceived that the people were religious. He first interacted with the people in their context, within their own understanding of a god or gods. He addressed the issue they presented—there is an unknown god. In a sense, he contextualized the gospel life/context to biblical truth. He moved into the Athenians space and spoke in a way they could understand.

Contextualization and Adjustment

Cultural adjustments are inevitable. Letting go of or adjusting popular methods in church planting strategies might be necessary. Christian workers who deploy as church planters are often faced with the reality that relationships are more important than methods. The bridge to the gospel is better laid with a mindset of relationship rather than one of methods. Asian cultures are typically relationally oriented, while Western cultures are often methodical. Methods may bog down. The time spent in life-on-life conversations often bears fruit. In a real sense, women deploy as relationship builders. Church planters learn that cultural success requires dying to self and to the ways that seem most natural. They cannot simply rush in and take action as the women sometimes tried to do.⁹ Miriam Adeney warns against making people a project. Instead, workers need to be willing to go through the death and rebirth that is part of adapting to a culture; the yield in God's good time will be a hundredfold—brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers.¹⁰ Christ's humility must be imprinted on the worker's heart. Only then can she step into someone else's space as a learner, a friend. The Holy Spirit is a constant guide providing insights into the discipleship and church-planting process.

Contextualization Is Relational and Spiritual

When we read the women's stories in this issue of the *Quarterly*, we see how they intentionally moved into the space of Zhuang, Tibetan, and Chinese women. Their selfless and incarnational involvement tell a story that is like that of thousands of near-culture and outsider women who have done similar work. They persisted in fulfilling God's call on their lives. They sometimes clumsily

crossed cultures and made mistakes along the way yet all the while improving their cultural intelligence. They danced, planted, and harvested alongside local women. They squatted by streams with them and studied how to wash clothes like they did. They were present during life events such as marriages, births, sicknesses, and deaths. They sat by fires and listened to women until they began to see their context more clearly. Over time, the compelling draw of Christ's love in action took hold. The incarnate Christ led with kindness and love, not with ropes. These women acted as Christ would have, held the local women close, and fed them with God's word (see Hosea 11:4).

Skylar, Rachel, and other women workers like them, have experienced what it is like to rely on the Holy Spirit. Conversations among animists, for example, reveal the culture's understanding of a god, spirits, and demons. Through Spirit-led dialogue, the truths of Scripture are shared. The workers experience what Andrew Walls describes as the Christian faith being continuously translated into vernacular culture.¹¹ Contextualization begins as a relationship and persists into theological conversations that lay the groundwork for a local theology to emerge.

Contextualization and Incarnation

Contextualization "incarnates" the Christian faith into a particular culture.¹² Jesus is our example; he moved into our context. He miraculously bridged the gulf between people and himself. He became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). The Incarnate One became a servant and "...made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant" (Philippians 2:7). Jesus was present with people and is present as his Holy Spirit orchestrates and guides cross-cultural experiences. Jesus sat down with sinners and hurting people, saying he came not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance (Matthew 9:13). The sinless Jesus became our sin so that we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21). He touched lepers, ate with a loathed tax collector, and forgave a woman caught in adultery. His selfless, purposeful presence in people's lives is imprinted on today's cross-cultural disciples.

Whether near-culture or complete outsiders, culturally attuned women, and men, have been vitally important, uniquely gifted, and powerfully effective in church planting. Skylar, Rachel, and many other women have modeled the process of crossing cultures with the story of salvation. Now God will, and is, raising up a host of Zhuang, Tibetan and Chinese women who are also obeying God's call to go and make disciples.

¹ Matthew Cook, Rob Haskell, Ruth Julian, Natee Tanchanpongs, eds. *Local Theology for the Global Church* (William Carey Library), loc 5008 Kindle edition.

² Ibid, 93.

³ A cultural insider is one who is part of that culture, an outsider is one from another, very different culture, while a near-culture outsider is also from another culture but one that is similar to the culture being entered, for example, a Korean living in China.

⁴ Named workers are referred to by pseudonyms. You can read more about their ministries and experiences in the articles they have written for this issue of the *ChinaSource Quarterly*.

⁵ John Mark Terry, ed. *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Mission*, (Nashville, B&H Academic, 2015), p. 37.

⁶ Darrell L. Bock discusses cross-cultural communication of the gospel from a Bible-to-life and life-to-Bible perspective.

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Missional Mothering in China

Rachel Wood

Women have a unique and influential role in ministry, in marriage, as singles, in their families. Add missional engagement in unexplored frontier areas of China and the results are an adventurous journey following God and relying on his grace and strength. In this article, Rachel Wood shares her personal encounters with God's guidance, grace, and power throughout her experiences in pioneer church planting and raising a family in China.

Missional Mothering

Mothering our three children while their dad traveled every month was difficult, but the highlights from my opportunities to actively join in the ministry brought meaning and a depth of purpose to our lives overseas. This “missional mothering” was different in terms of challenges and anxieties as my children grew, but the main commonality has been purposeful living—the intentionality to include outreach and discipleship among my home responsibilities.

Whether at the market, in taxis or on buses, at the park, or in homes, I sought to engage those around me in conversations that would lead to spiritual questions and gospel sharing.

We lived in China for more than two decades as church planters. During that time, the abnormal became normal for our family. Normal to us was haggling with outdoor market vendors on the prices for just picked fresh fruits and vegetables that lay beside trays of pig heads, entrails, and basins of flapping fish. Our firstborn son had just turned one when we arrived in China. As our family grew, he and his younger sister and brother thought nothing was unusual about riding on yaks at horse festivals or gulping down five or six wooden bowls of salty and buttery tea with their barley flour paste. Instead of ice cream trucks and hot dog stands, our children enjoyed fresh cut pineapple on thin wooden chopsticks and steaming fluffy meat buns. With no wedding cake in sight, they gobbled up fried bee larvae served at our local friends' weddings. They assumed the rest of the world also went to school with classmates from over eighteen countries.

When my children were babies, I toted them inside my cloth baby sling strapped tightly to my torso. We joined local students for the Friday and Saturday night traditional minority circle dances. On evenings like this, sometimes my child would fall asleep as I engaged the students in spiritual conversations.

The people group we worked with lived two to three days' bus ride from our home in the city. My husband faithfully took ten- to fourteen-day ministry trips outside of our city each month. For safety, he usually travelled with a teammate or ministry team. While he travelled, my days were filled with caring for three young children and language learning. I practiced speaking with local friends. I organized a mom and child prayer-group that rotated to fellow workers' homes and the homes of local women with whom we were developing relationships.

I felt a particular kindred spirit with Wendy (pseudonym), a local mom. Our daughters were the



Image credit: Florence Drew via Randy Posslenzny

same age. God was pleased to draw her to himself, and we became sisters in Christ and close friends. When Wendy's father was hospitalized for liver cancer treatments, she asked me to share the gospel with him.

Partnering as a Family

Instead of balancing my time devoted to each of my roles as a disciple of God, a wife, mother, and cross-cultural worker, I found that the seasons of life required a juggling of the various responsibilities of each role. When my children were young, I invested more of my time in the home. If I was not able to venture out to the community, I knew I could at least bring the community into our home. I sought to use our home as a safe place and a serving place. I have memories of guests holding our newborn daughter or son while watching the *Jesus Film*, and of cooking and cleaning up together over discipleship conversations. We played games with our children in between Bible study at our dining table. These moments brought joy and meaning to my early days of missional mothering.

As our three children grew older and began to attend the international school in our city, I found that the equation began to shift now that I had more time to devote to opportunities outside my home and in the community. The children became less needy of me and were able to stay with my husband while I was able to tag team with him making monthly trips to villages. Like my husband, I sought to travel with another teammate or ministry partner for safety but also for the opportunity to work together. We disciplined and trained women in the local churches that had been planted. The times when I travelled led to precious bonding times for dad and the children at home. It gradually became okay with me to leave them together as I surrendered control and allowed that while I was in villages our house would be messier, the children's meals would include ramen and soda, and there would be less frequent baths. The children cherished these times with dad so much that when my husband was heading out for one of his trips, all three children would exclaim, "Can't it be mom that goes on the trip?"

Eventually my husband and I were able to take our children with us to the villages. We committed every Thanksgiving break to travel to villages as a family. Our children grew to love those areas and peoples. Now our children are in high school, college, and graduate school. Our local partners and the people in the villages still ask about them.

Transforming Lives

Opportunities to fellowship with local believers and do life-on-life ministry with them—even digging potatoes together, planting barley, picking walnuts, sharing our lives, and praying for their needs and sick family members—allowed our relationships to deepen and we became true brothers and sisters in Christ. I have witnessed the Holy Spirit change people's hearts and lives testified by their actions and words. One example is the opportunity I had to know Andrew (pseudonym), a believer who suffered for the Lord. Our relationship with Andrew began at a training event where the women had brought new believers from their village to join us.

During a break between a chronological storying session and evangelism training, I asked Andrew, then a relatively new brother in Christ, to share his testimony with me. He said:

Sister Rachel, before I came to Christ, I used to come home drunk most nights and beat my wife, my little daughter, and even my father-in-law who was living with us. My daughter would run and try to hide in our little home whenever I arrived. However, when my friend shared the gospel with me and I became a believer, my life changed. Now when I go home, I hug my wife and father-in-law, and my daughter even comes running into my arms.

A year later Andrew and the other believers in his village tried to build a church for their gatherings,

but the local monks came and tore it down They beat Andrew and the other believers. When I met him a couple of weeks after that incident, Andrew recounted how he and fellow church members had tried to block the monks from tearing down their simple church building. He told me they punched him, hit him in the face, on his mouth, and even knocked out some of his teeth. He said, “The whole time they were beating me, I remembered how Christ was beaten for me, and thought, ‘This is a little bit of how my Lord must have felt.’”

After almost two decades of frontier church planting, we saw God raise up local believers with a heart for cross-cultural outreach. They were ready to begin sending out workers. My husband and I hosted a conference for a large church-planting network and trained leaders to select, teach, send, and support their own members. I facilitated a sharing time with the single women evangelists, pastors’ wives, and wives of the sending center directors. As we shared and prayed for one another, I realized that they struggled with some of the same challenges that my fellow expatriate women and I struggled with. These conflicts occurred as we gave our best to the Lord, our husbands, our children, and those we were called to serve. Even though our language and culture were different, we all experienced similar joys, struggles, anxieties, inadequacies, guilt, and blessings.

Suffering and Bearing Fruit Together

The greatest challenge we faced was when our youngest son, Ethan (pseudonym), was ten years old. As they grew up in China, Ethan was the most spiritually sensitive of our three children. At four, he had told us to “speak the language” and share the Christmas story to evangelize the local guests we had invited for dinner. He always asked every guest who joined at our dinner table—which averaged a couple of times each week—“Do you know Jesus”? Then one night Ethan complained that his foot hurt. We assumed that since he was a healthy and active ten-year-old boy, he must have sprained his foot riding his bike, running, or playing soccer with his friends. The following day Ethan still complained of his aching foot. We gave him a pain reliever and put him to bed. That night he cried in unbearable pain. The next day, we took him to the medical clinic in our city that was run by an expatriate Christian doctor. He was unable to give an accurate diagnosis but took blood samples. Unexpectedly, the bloodwork results indicated a malignancy. The doctor advised us that if Ethan were his son, he would take him to Hong Kong for a check-up as soon as possible. Within twenty-four hours, three Hong Kong oncologists had all diagnosed Ethan with cancer that needed immediate treatment. We soon found ourselves back in the United States facing a long road ahead of chemotherapy and radiation for acute leukemia.

While Ethan continued therapy, I returned to China to close down our home of almost eighteen years. It was Wendy and other dear local partners who came to pray with me and for what lay ahead. My fellow workers, who had become like family to me, helped with the sorting, packing, moving, and storing of our family of five’s household goods. I could not have accomplished this in less than a week without their love in action—whether dealing with apartment utilities and phone bills, providing meals, boxing and taping, hauling furniture and books, and even driving me and two bags of our family’s most precious mementos, along with Ethan’s special books and toys, to the airport for the long trans-Pacific flight back to the USA. At that time, Ethan was just one month into his three-and-a-half-years of chemotherapy and radiation treatments. We praise God that Ethan is now in remission. After four years, we were able return to China. Our local partners and the churches that had been planted were still standing strong.

My life’s journey has led me toward a deeper understanding of God’s grace, sovereignty, and faithfulness. I have experienced the depths of his faithfulness. Even through sickness, governmental restrictions, and natural disasters (an earthquake during our third term) nothing done in his name and

for his kingdom is wasted. It is hard and challenging work, but as we take up our cross daily, we know that our “labor in the Lord” is not in vain and that “at the proper time we will reap a harvest.” It is worth it because the precious spotless Lamb is worthy. God’s presence and power were evident in spiritual valleys and mountaintop experiences of ministering cross-culturally. It has been a joy and privilege to follow God’s leading.

Rachel Wood (pseudonym) has lived in East Asia for over 25 years and has been involved in full-time ministry since 1997. In addition to being a wife, she is mom to two adult children, a new daughter-in-law, and a high schooler who is with them overseas. Her passions and interests are missions, women’s leadership development, spiritual formation, grief/loss, and training up the next generation of cross-cultural workers. Currently, while serving overseas, she is pursuing a PhD in Intercultural Studies at Biola University. Rachel always has time for a good cup of tea with friends whether it be chai, brown rice green tea, pu’er, bubble tea, or English Breakfast—with milk and sugar of course.

Women Contextualizing the Gospel in Cross-cultural Settings

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Cultural Intelligence: Living for God in a Diverse Pluralistic World (Nashville, B&H Academic, 2020).

⁷ Ibid, p. 91.

⁸ Ibid, p. 98–99.

⁹ Miriam Adeney. “Why Culture Still Matters,” *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 32.2 (Summer 2015): p. 97.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Andrew Walls, *Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of the Faith*, (Mary Knoll, Orbis Books, 1996), Kindle edition. (from the chapter “Humane Movement and the Missionary Movement”).

¹² Darrell L. Bock. *Cultural Intelligence: Living for God in a Diverse Pluralistic World* (Nashville, B&H Academic, 2020) p. 92.

Hope Bentley (pseudonym) served in East Asia for thirty years. She has been involved in teaching and training throughout her mission career.

Lives Transformed and Treasured

Skylar Nie

During our family's eight years of serving among an unreached people group in China, we often felt lost, bewildered, lonely, and discouraged; nevertheless, we never stopped learning about Christ's way of using every opportunity to train his disciples to know, believe, and understand him. We lived among people who were so different from us, seemingly very far from God, and where Christians stood out radically from their neighbors. As those sent to spread the gospel message, we learned over the years that the way we delivered this message was of critical importance. We have seen how the faithful teacher, the Holy Spirit, guided us with wisdom.



Image credit: Dr. Hyla Watters, chief surgeon, Wuhu Methodist Hospital via Ray Smith

The way we shared Christ was key to becoming an effective witness for him. Isaiah 43:10-11 says, "You are my witnesses, declares the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he.... I, even I am the Lord, and apart from me there is no savior." We found that first we needed wisdom to know God, and then to know how to communicate his love to an unreached people group. In her memoir, *The Savage, My Kinsman*, Elisabeth Elliot writes that the word "missionary" does not occur in the Bible; however, the word "witness" does.¹ How could we be an authentic witness in the context where we found ourselves? We needed wisdom.

Wisdom in Contextualization

When we first started, we did not really know what we were doing. We naively thought that the gospel would somehow automatically zap people into changing what they believed and how they lived. But how would they need to change their lives? Why was this gospel good news to them? What were their hindrances to belief and discipleship? We did not know. We did not even know we needed to know that.

In the beginning, we shared the gospel as if it were a sale at a store that was too good to pass up. We had reduced it to a sweet deal, a limited time offer. This was due to our misunderstanding of the gospel itself. Though genuine in heart, we were misguided in theology. Problems arose when these people saw that following Christ required changes in their lives, values, and even their schedules. Being a Christian was a burden, a foreign addition to their already busy lives. They thought we represented an agenda and pushed us more to the outside.

We learned to slow down and observe the culture. We asked questions like, "What makes them afraid?" "Where do they turn when they are in trouble?" and "How do they view people of authority?" These questions helped us to observe the culture and enjoy it. At times we lost patience and were tempted to hurry. But we learned to leave the slow, but sure, work of Christ up to Christ. In time, people came to us at points of crisis in their lives when they had nowhere to go. Somehow, we had become friends throughout the years, and this became a mutual gift. The Holy Spirit began to

open their eyes during those trusted talks, and that was the beginning of new lives being born.

Wisdom in Discipleship

Through being a part of this culture, we soon noticed that the women had a tremendous hunger for relationships and eventually for the gospel. I cannot explain what drew some of them and sustained them in their faith except for the effectiveness of God's calling of his own children.

These minority women lived in an agrarian society where most of the household and village duties fell on their shoulders. Households simply could not function without their serving hands. Aside from daily domestic functions, women were expected to carry out village ancestral and temple worship rites. New women believers often faced opposition from their husbands, in-laws, and even the entire village since they could no longer participate in these rites. Initially, the pressure was tremendous on those new believers when their only support was the foreign worker family. Some often stumbled along the way.

I remember one of our new believers who walked into my house to confess the immense guilt she felt for going to the market to buy incense and then burn it at the temple. She said she felt so afraid of God the whole time, but she could not bring herself to tell her mother that she could not do this anymore. I had a choice then to falsely "affirm" the guilt as from the Lord and admonish her to obey better next time, or I could listen to her struggles and extend comfort first. I chose the latter.

The Eastern culture is already shame-ridden and fear-driven.² We must be careful to discern Christ's instructions in this context. Yes, God's word commands us to stay away from idols, but instead of just telling this woman rules, it was crucial for her to understand why Jesus wants this for a minority woman. To understand that, many questions needed to be asked and answered. A renewed mind over time was the focus, and joyful obedience would follow later. Now, she has been a believer for eight years, and since that initial year, she has not bought incense nor helped with any kind of idol worship. If you ask her today why she is able to obey, she would credit her actions to the gentleness of Christ and not a desire to make the foreigner happy.

Nowadays, you will often find her happily cleaning more chickens than anyone else and washing extra loads of dishes at the village gatherings. This is how she serves her family and neighbors instead of performing the temple duties with other women. Discipleship is a long road of obedience, and we must be careful to not build upon shame since it is actually a hindrance to the gospel.

Wisdom in Understanding and Applying Scripture

Throughout the years, many other women came to us with issues that ranged from church conflicts, family tensions, raising children, being in debt, and living with abuse. These women needed help to balance and negotiate meaning in light of their old worldviews and God's will in scripture. However, they often made assumptions about Christ that predominantly consisted of a mixture of their old worldviews, superstitions, spiritism, and moralism. The minority people we served are a very "spiritual" people in that they believe different mediums can "speak" to them. Initially, due to low literacy in this agrarian society, cross-cultural workers and leaders emphasized sharing encouragement or personal insights drawn from scripture as opposed to thorough exegesis and teaching of scripture. When our church gatherings first focused on spiritual (but simplistic) exercises such as sharing how they *felt* encouraged by God, we were alarmed by how they interpreted scripture to be about themselves. They sought emotionalism, spiritualism, and religiosity rather than Christ. Who can blame them? These were our blind spots that we gave to them in the beginning.

However, the Lord was merciful. Several years into our work, he gave us opportunities to collaborate

with Chinese house churches that had learned from their mistakes. They reminded us that though semiliterate people may see the Bible as challenging due to their literacy limitations, there is still no substitute for the written word of God. They may struggle with reading, but their understanding is not limited.

However, since we initially underestimated their ability to understand God's word, we had chronologically taken them through paraphrased versions of Bible stories. With literacy levels that ranged from illiterate to third grade among the women, and some higher for men, we wrongly assumed that they could not handle the biblical text. After realizing our error, we started to take them through the Bible, verse by verse, starting with Genesis 1:1 and aiming to go as far as we could. We read, interpreted, and applied biblical teaching together, spending the majority of our time on interpretation and sound hermeneutics.

Wisdom in Waiting for Transformation

After a year, we had covered from the beginning of Genesis to the end of the book of Ruth. When they could not understand something, we read it to them and then explained it as we went along. We read through the awkward sounding names and hard to understand illustrations word for word. In the following year, we struggled through the metaphors in Psalms and the logic in Romans. For a minority farmer, those metaphors and logic can seem very far removed, but God himself was very near to us all those years. This slow, but sure, work of God was by far the most rewarding and foundational part of our years there. The Holy Spirit was a faithful teacher. He helped us to be faithful to the text by not skipping over historical contexts, by seeing Christ in the passages, and seeing our fall-
enness through it all.

Six months into our study, we saw light bulbs turn on in them. They began to have a sovereign view of Christ and, in turn, saw their own need to repent of old worldviews and actions. A most memorable experience came while studying Deuteronomy 23 together where the instruction on what to do with human waste was given specifically. Something I always did when we gathered for worship in a village home was to sweep the place and tidy up first. I thought the worship time should be special and I wanted to create a place that reflected the posture of our hearts. But mess and dirt were not a big deal to this people group. They often slept right next to farm equipment and their pigs. I was not sure if cleanliness was just a Western worker's idiosyncrasy, so I never advised them to prepare for our gatherings like I did.

When we came across this passage, however, they all realized, almost simultaneously, that the place we gathered was not suitable for a holy God to come and meet with us. If this God had a plan so detailed as to account for the proper disposal of human waste, then he must be a God who wants our outside to reflect our inside posture. After that day, they kept the place for our worship meetings clean by tidying up and sweeping. Later on, they also began to prepare various teas and refreshments for the fellowship meeting so we could enjoy each other's company before the Lord. The major difference we saw was that scripture began to build in them a worldview that permeated everything they did.

We have witnessed many other times when God's word accomplished its purpose. It was, and is, our job to faithfully equip, explain, teach, and feed, first ourselves, and then his sheep with it. God's grace and patience taught us—the inexperienced workers—to become skilled at handling his word. By his grace, he steered us away from trying to transform our lives through shame, guilt, morals, and appeasing spiritual leaders. By his grace, he taught them (and us) that his word is our hope and

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Single Women Ministering in China

Joy Kwan

Despite some unique challenges, serving God as a single woman in China is a journey of experiencing God's faithfulness. By looking at the background and situations of Chinese female ministers, we can clearly see God's sufficient grace and inexpressible joy which keeps them going and bringing glory to God. Knowing more details will hopefully inspire each one of us to pray for these women and encourage us to walk in fuller obedience.



Image credit: Florence Drew via Randy Posslenzny

Background

According to data listed in The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China website,¹ there are about 23,050,000 Protestant Christians and about 37,000 pastors/ministers serving in Three-self churches. But there is no recent, updated information on the website and very little information anywhere to determine how many female ministers there are in China. However, a few stories can help us gain a glimpse of single women ministering in China.

Women's Changing Status in History

When speaking of women's roles at church, we must first look at women's roles in China overall. For a very long period of Chinese history, women have been considered lower than men. Women were somehow meant to be servant-like in a family and only as part of a family. Mostly, they did not have much say in anything. With the development of China in recent years, women's roles have improved. Now they can receive a good education and have a career; they are more respected than before. However, according to a gender gap report through *World Economic Forum*, China ranks 103 out of 149,² which means that the place of women in China is still lower than in most countries. This, of course, influences women's roles at church.

Women in Today's Church

For the most part, there are more female than male believers within the Chinese church. More women are serving in churches, Sunday schools, and fellowships than men. However, when it comes to leadership, there is an expectation and a hope that men will lead.

The roots of Confucianism are key to understanding the traditional roles of men and women. In society, women were identified within the family structure as a daughter, wife, sister, daughter-in-law, or mother. In each of these roles, women had duties and responsibilities to fulfill. The early church also had role expectations. There is biblical support for the idea that male leaders are ordained by God in a special way to lead and shepherd the church; there are cultural and traditional reasons that women are considered as helpers and not leaders—especially when men and women are involved at the same time. First Timothy 2:11-12³ is preached to believers to explain that women are not supposed to teach on a public platform. Generally, women are not encouraged to lead a church, but they are supported to lead as part-time volunteers at church in areas such as leading Sunday school and small groups. All in all, the roles available to women in churches are not equal to those of men, especially in areas of leadership due to historical, cultural, and other reasons.

Single Women in Ministry

For single women in China, whether in the church or society, there is much pressure coming from

families, friends, and society. Women are expected to be married before they are 25 years old; otherwise, they are called “left-over women.”⁴ Therefore, single women in ministry face a great deal of pressure. Besides the fact that they are expected to get married at a certain age, single women in ministry are limited in their ability to reach certain groups. For example, a single woman would not be recommended to be in family or marriage ministries since they do not have marriage-life experiences.

Moreover, single women in ministry face other challenges. Without a spouse, a coworker, or an understanding family member, it is sometimes difficult to find someone with whom to share the joys and struggles of ministry. They often lack a support system, a community, mentors, financial support, and prayer support. In addition, there are times of loneliness that few people would understand.

Since there are strong societal reasons for marriage, many Chinese people have little respect for single women. Often single women are not considered to be whole or complete persons. Therefore, there is a great need to care for single women in China overall as well as single female ministers.

On the positive side, single women in ministry can contribute in many ways since they have more time and flexibility. It is easier for them to move around a city or go to other countries to share the good news, to do disciple-making, participate in mission trips, retreats, and trainings. Being a single in China is not easy in many ways, but it is a special blessing that can be used by the Lord.

Momentum that Keeps Single Women Going

In addition to the family and societal pressures already mentioned, varying levels of persecution also impact Christians in China. Being a single minister amid persecution is an additional challenge for women ministers. In the face of such challenges, what are some specific reasons why single ministers in China are able to keep going? Let us look at some real-life stories.

God called Ma Lin in her late 20s. She serves as a single minister in a city far from her home. Some believers were critical of her as her preaching was not always clear due to her accent and style of speaking. Others misunderstood her since they did not know her local culture and background which were different from their own. Because of her low income, she lived in a room inside the church; later she was told she had to move out because it was not safe for a single person to stay there.

Ma Lin has continued to serve at the same church for quite a few years now. She has not been able to meet many men at her stage of life, let alone get to know someone with the same calling that would lead to marriage. Even though there are times she is misunderstood by her family, and even by her church family, she is joyfully active in various ministries at the church.

Yu Jun was also called in her late 20s to do outreach ministry. Her calling was not fully understood by her home church, but she was given opportunities with another church to reach into different ethnic groups. Stepping into full-time ministry has brought about the most difficult years in her Christian life so far, yet they have been the most amazing years. She is filled with God’s promise that he is with her wherever she goes. By God’s grace, she has reached and discipled about 150 people in the past two years.

In an interview with Ma Lin and Yu Jun, I asked them what keeps them going. Here are their answers. Their responses are true for many female ministers in China.

1. A calling and vision from above: If it is the Father’s calling and work, however impossible and difficult it may seem, he will strengthen those who are called to live for his eternal kingdom.
2. Listening and obeying: Sometimes, even if church tradition suggests that women are not sup-

posed to serve full time as a leader, if God calls, you just obey and follow.

3. Cultivating a relationship with the Lord: Apart from the Lord, we can do nothing. Only by dwelling in his words and unchanging presence can we keep going. When we are close to him, we know it is not only about doing, but about being. Whatever we do, we do it with joy, bringing glory to him, and blessings to others.
4. Understanding the main focus: Bear in mind that the very core and focus of our beliefs and work is that he will increase, and we will decrease. (John 3:30)
5. Knowing needs will be met: Whether there are spiritual, emotional, or physical needs, God is always faithful to provide. Counting his blessings daily enables us to keep going. Through it all, we know that God is with us always, and he alone is what we truly need.
6. Partnering with others: Accept encouragement from those who understand you, even if there are only a few. It is very important to have a team to walk with. Alone, we can walk fast, but together we can walk further. We do not need the whole world to agree with us, but when the Father provides a few to walk alongside us, it is enough.
7. Valuing supporters: Regular support from mentors and fellow believers is important. Supporters can pray, give financially, or encourage. We should cherish them greatly and praise God out loud daily for them! His grace is always sufficient.

Serving God in China as a single is a journey of experiencing God's faithfulness, his sufficient grace, and inexpressible joy (1 Peter 1:8).

Conclusion

Once others understand more about women's roles in China and in the church, we can get a sense of what real life ministry is like for single women. The greater the challenges faced, the more miracles there can be. The single women ministers represented in this article are provided for through God's love, mercy, peace, and joy. In my experience as well, I can say confidently that it is a privilege to serve as a single woman in China. Let us be inspired and encouraged by the single women who minister in China. Remember them in your daily prayer life. We need to praise God for using women, including single women, in China for his glory.

¹The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, "An Overview of Religion in China," 2013 at http://www.gov.cn/test/2005-06/22/content_8406.htm.

²World Economic Forum, "The Global Gender Gap Report 2018," <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-global-gender-gap-report-2018>.

³1Timothy 2:11-12, NIV: "A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent."

⁴Different terms are used for "left-over women" as they get older. Women from 25 to 28 years old would be called primary left-over; 28 to 32 junior left-over; 32-35 senior left-over; and those who are above 35 are called special-grade left-over. 剩女 on 百度百科 Baidu Baike, <https://baike.baidu.com/item/剩女/7352570#1>.

Joy Kwan (pseudonym) is a minister to women and youth in China following God's call to serve him full time. She works primarily with women, discipling them; she is also involved in student ministry, sharing Christ with college students. Joy loves God's creation and often spends her free time collecting things from the natural world and photographing them. She loves inviting others into her home looking for how God might guide her to minister to them.

Editor's note: Excerpts from a newsletter Joy Kwan wrote in 2020 are found in "The Heart of a Single Servant," Chi-naSource Blog, March 24, 2021.

BOOK REVIEW

Poetry in Blood

Reviewed by Narci Herr

Blood Letters: The Untold Story of Lin Zhao, a Martyr in Mao's China by Lian Xi. Basic Books, 2018, 352 pages. Available on [Amazon](#).

Blood Letters: The Untold Story of Lin Zhao, a Martyr in Mao's China by Lian Xi was published in 2018, fifty years after Lin Zhao's sentencing by the Military Control Committee and execution in Tilanqiao Prison, Shanghai (p. 231). Lin Zhao was posthumously rehabilitated by the Chinese government in 1981. It is possible, however, that the publishing of this book would have held more value for her than her exoneration.

Near the end of her life, in a blood letter to her mother, Lin Zhao wrote, "In the future, they [her blood letters written home] will make up yet another volume of either my complete published works or a posthumous collection of my papers" (p. 216). Her purpose for writing those letters was stated on another occasion as, "[not] only are they true records of my life and feelings during this period, they are also forceful denunciations of these totalitarian thieves!" (p. 212)

Lin Zhao wrote throughout her life, but during her seven years of imprisonment,¹ she wrote, first in hope of impacting Communist leaders, including Mao himself,² leading to their repentance; then, she wrote in defense of herself and others; finally, she wrote simply to make her voice heard.

Lin Zhao was silenced by death but now, through Lian Xi's meticulously researched and beautifully written book, her life and excerpts of her writings are available to the English-speaking world.

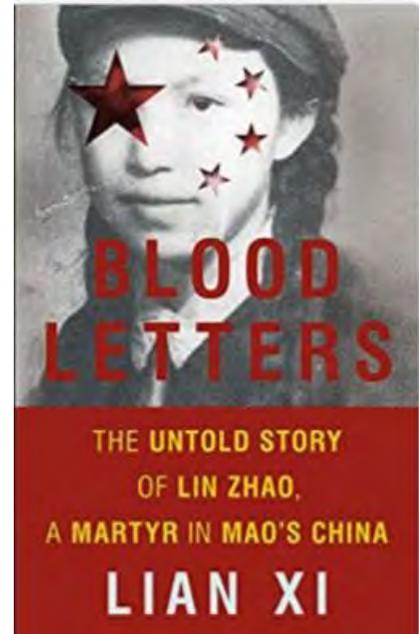
Biography

Xi's book about Lin Zhao is far more than a biography, although it is a somber, unsparring, and ultimately inspiring account of her life.

Xi recounts the story of Lin Zhao's life from her time as a student at the Laura Haygood Memorial School for Girls—a Southern Methodist mission school for girls from upper class families (p. 16)—through her years as a proponent, and sometime member, of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), into her disillusionment with the CCP and its leaders, leading to her denouncement as a Rightist and her subsequent arrest, years of imprisonment, conviction, and execution.

He traces her initial steps of faith including her baptism at the Laura Haygood school (pp. 18, 19), the time of distancing herself from Christianity—or at least hiding her faith—during her active involvement in the CCP, her return to a more public faith as a student at Peking University, and the deepening and open witness of her faith during imprisonment. There may be some question as to whether or not she turned from her faith while serving the CCP, but it is clear through her prison writings that it was her faith that sustained her through that time and gave her the courage and strength to continue to stand against Mao's regime.

Because of the impact of the choices of her family and friends on her life, and reciprocally the impact of her choices on them, Xi includes events and details of their lives as well, adding breadth and



depth of understanding to Lin Zhao's story.

Difficulties with alcohol, relationships, depression, possible mental illness, and recurrent serious physical illness (tuberculosis) exacerbated by ill treatment and deprivation in prison are also documented. Xi gives a full picture of a real young woman in an extraordinarily difficult time. This is not hagiography.

History

Blood Letters is also a book of history. Xi often fills in fascinating details about the times in which Lin Zhao lived. For instance, when describing the horrific use of handcuffs during Lin Zhao's detention,³ Xi includes a brief discussion of punitive handcuffing in China and history of the use of extortion in extracting confessions through torture in China beginning with the Western Zhou Dynasty (pp. 129-131).

In telling of Lin Zhao's use of her own blood for writing (both out of necessity and as an extreme form of protest), he includes historical background on the tradition of blood writing in China, tracing it back to an early Buddhist expression of devotion (p. 135-136).

Xi also includes historical background on the various political movements, campaigns, and other events that Lin Zhao lived through and that impacted her. Reading *Blood Letters* is like reading an overview of that time but personalized by the impact it had on Lin Zhao, her family, and her friends.

Poetry

Blood Letters is also a book of poetry and other literature.

One thing I did not expect to find as I read *Blood Letters* was beautiful poetry and explanations of literary allusions, both Chinese and Western. Somehow, all I expected of writings in blood were the frantic scribbles of an abused and desperate prisoner trying to somehow communicate her extreme distress. Indeed, Lin Zhao was abused and desperate to communicate to those who had wrongfully imprisoned her and to others whom she hoped could somehow extend her aid from outside China and then to her family. However, there is far more here. In addition to her studies at the Laura Haygood school, Lin Zhao was admitted to the Chinese department at Peking University as a journalism major and was an accomplished writer and poet. She had used her writing skills as a student at the CCP School of Journalism and for a time wrote "revolutionary prose" (p. 39). Then, during her studies at Peking University and her consequent denunciation, she returned to writing essays, a play, and poetry—often in strict classical style, often with historical or literary allusions. For instance, Xi tells us:

Lin Zhao's "Self Eulogy" was a four-character rhyme of sixty-four lines and employed the oldest Chinese poetic form, dating from almost three millennia ago. "Once straying down the wrong path," she wrote, "I have now turned back!/ . . . My young heart was then pure as water, / Heaven, bear me witness against their attack!" Like the ancient Jing who had sung his heart out on the streets of Yanjing (now Beijing) before setting off on a doomed attempt to assassinate the monstrous, future First Emperor of Qin, Lin Shao, he too, had "sung my songs on Yanjing's streets." Lin Zhao also had "no regrets to be the prisoner from Chu," a reference to Zhong Yi, the faithful minister of the feudal state of Chu in the sixth century BCE, who never forgot his home state while serving as a prisoner of war. She continued:

Freedom is without a price,

yet within bounds my life lies.
Shattered jade is what I will to be,
offered to China as a sacrifice!" (pp. 134–135)

"Self Eulogy" was written just before she had attempted suicide and while she was brutally handcuffed. This was not an isolated occurrence; she often wrote in equally horrific circumstances with equally eloquent results. I did not expect this in Lin Zhao's story.

Trivia

Finally, *Blood Letters* is a book of detail and even bits of fascinating trivia. The book, while well-written and engaging, is also an academic project with detailed documentation. The text, including introduction and afterword, is 247 pages long. The notes, bibliography, and index require an additional 78 pages—almost a quarter of the whole book is documentation and references.

In addition to having access to the collected prison writings of Lin Zhao which were released to her family at the time of her rehabilitation,⁴ Xi also interviewed surviving friends and family of Lin Zhao, fellow prisoners, and others with knowledge of her life and circumstances. The text is filled with quotations from her own writings and conversations with those who went through her life experiences with her.

There is also the occasional unexpected detail. For instance, we are told that the architect of the No. 1 Detention House, the first facility where Lin Zhao was imprisoned in Shanghai, was designed by a relative of the renowned architect I. M. Pei and used indigenous forms of architecture (p. 126). That would make a great question for a China-history trivia night.

In recent years, China as a society, and Christians as part of that society, have been subject to increasing government pressure and control. As the Chinese Communist Party under Xi Jinping has sought to reassert party control over all aspects of society, the specter of repression and imprisonment looms large. Indeed, church leaders have been arrested and detained as have leaders in other sectors of society. Some have said China is facing the worst repression since the Cultural Revolution, in other words since the time of Lin Zhao. Being able to read of Lin Zhao's faith, courage, and resolve at this time in China's history is a gift. It is a gift to those who personally are facing harsh times in China and to those of us who need to be praying for them.

¹ Lin Zhao was arrested in October 1960 and executed in April 1968. During that time, she was held at three different prisons in Shanghai and was released briefly on medical leave due to her tuberculosis.

² Lin Zhao's responses to Mao's rule and to him as a human being were complex. She denounced him, defaced his image, ridiculed him, and prayed for him. (pp. 164-165, 169, 212, 138)

³ At one point, Lin Zhao was manacled for six and a half months. (p. 140)

⁴ *The Collected Writings of Lin Zhao* was privately published in 2013 and includes prison writings, other works, and correspondence. A portion of Lin Zhao's prison records have not been released and remain inaccessible as classified documents. (p. 9-10)

Narci Herr lived for just over 30 years in Hong Kong. She and her husband, Glenn, were first involved in working with the church in Hong Kong and then for the last 20 years of their time in Asia served workers living in China. She is now involved with ChinaSource publications.

has the power to change us. By this same grace, he will faithfully lead us to our mutual heavenly home.

¹ Elisabeth Elliott, *The Savage My Kinsman*, New York: Harper, 1961, p. 20.

² Jayson Georges, *The 3-D Gospel: Ministry in Guilt, Shame, and Fear Cultures*, 2014, Tim& 275; Press, p. 11. Georges identifies three types of culture. *Guilt-innocence cultures* are usually individualistic societies (mostly Western) in which lawbreakers are found guilty and seek justice or forgiveness to rectify wrongs. Then there are *shame-honor cultures*, usually collectivistic (common in the East), where people shamed before a group seek to restore their honor before the community. Finally, *fear-power cultures* have animistic contexts (typically tribal or African), where people are afraid of evil and harm so pursue power over the spirit world through magical rituals. For further information see Barnabas, Roland, "Communicating the Gospel with Power among China's Animistic Peoples," *ChinaSource Quarterly*, March 19, 2018, <https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/communicating-the-gospel-with-power-among-chinas-animistic-peoples/>. See also Christian, "Challenged by different Ways of Seeing, Part 2," *ChinaSource Blog*, July 29, 2019, <https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/blog-entries/challenged-by-different-ways-of-seeing/>

Skylar Nie (pseudonym) is a mom of three who loves coffee, hikes, and simple meals with her family. She has been fortunate to spend part of her life with her family among the UUPG of China where God taught her how to love the church with truth and action. The women and men there forever impacted the way she thinks about church, theology, and discipleship.

CHINASOURCE PERSPECTIVE

Tea and Evangelism

By Joann Pittman

This issue of the *ChinaSource Quarterly* takes a much-needed look at the vital role that women play in ministry in China, both in the church and outside, both Chinese women and foreign women. In the more than twenty years I was in China, I saw first-hand Chinese Christian women serving in their churches (as both pastors and lay workers), doing evangelism in their communities, and being salt and light in their workplaces. Unencumbered by the debates that rage in churches in North America, they did not seem to question their role in fulfilling God's purposes in China.



Image credit: Gaylan Yeung

My first glimpse of women in the church was in Zhengzhou, Henan Province in the fall of 1984. My American teammates and I had to get permission from our college to attend the recently re-opened registered church in the city. A clear memory of that visit was being ushered to the front row of the church just as the little old ladies in that row were ushered away from their seats. We were horrified, but Chinese notions of hospitality dictated that the foreign guests be given the place of honor, no matter the inconvenience to the women who had most likely arrived hours before. Another memory was that almost all the people in the service were elderly women. There were only a handful of men. All the ushers were women.

During the 1990s I lived in Changchun, Jilin Province, in China's northeast. I was a Chinese language student, so attending church services gave me a chance to practice my Chinese. My classmates and I would bike across town on Sunday mornings to the main registered church, one that had been established by Lutheran missionaries in the early part of the 20th century. Like the church in Zhengzhou, the congregation was predominantly female. But here men and women were separated, with the few men in attendance relegated to the small section at the right side of the sanctuary and the women taking up the rest. All the ushers were women.

During my time in Beijing, I attended two different registered churches. The ratio of men to women in the congregations were not nearly as imbalanced as the churches I had attended earlier in Henan and Jilin; however, as in those other churches all the ushers were women and half of the pastoral staff were women. I once asked a female lay worker to give me an estimate of the percentage of women pastors in the registered churches in China. After assuring me that she was only guessing she said it was probably fifty percent or more. Clearly, in the registered churches in China, women are at the heart of the mission and work of the church.

It was at one of those churches that I also became aware of the key role that women were playing in the spread of the gospel outside the church boundaries. God gave me a wonderful friendship with Sister M., a young professional teaching "tea" at a local vocational school. At the time "tea culture" was beginning its return to northern China. Little tea houses were beginning to pop up all over town where people could sit for hours drinking tea or engaging in traditional tea ceremonies. Sister M. was teaching young girls from the countryside the history and art of the tea ceremony. Being a member of the Hani minority nationality, from the *pu'er* region of Yunnan Province, her specialty was, naturally, *pu'er* tea. Shortly after I met her, she opened a small teahouse in a "tea mall" in Bei-

jing.

Sister M., however, was more than a “tea teacher” and shop owner; she was, at heart, an evangelist, and her teahouse became a launching pad for the gospel. She was able to get her teahouse designated as a registered meeting point of the church, which meant that she could legally conduct religious activities there. These ranged from pastor-led services for professionals who could not attend church on Sundays to small groups to Bible studies. When not being used for gatherings, interested tea drinkers would wander in to sample her *pu’er* tea and she never missed an opportunity to share the gospel with them. I was sipping tea with her one afternoon when she led a mall cleaning lady to the Lord. I must admit to being a bit skeptical about the simplicity of it all, but when I asked about the woman a few months later, Sister M. told me she had been baptized and was now attending a small group fellowship.

Sometimes Sister M. would disappear for weeks at a time, on evangelistic trips into the small towns and countryside villages around central and south China. Upon her return I would meet up with her at her teahouse to hear about the places where she had preached and the people who had believed. It was always a time of amazement and encouragement.

During a visit to Beijing in 2018, I had the opportunity to see Sister M. She was battling cancer and had just gotten out of the hospital where she had nearly died. I was in her home, and as we sat drinking tea together, she told me of the opportunities God had given her in the hospital during the previous two weeks to share the gospel with others in her cancer ward. A dozen had prayed to receive Christ. She whipped out her phone and showed me short videos of her fellow patients praying, reading the Bible, and worshipping together. “Obviously,” she said to me, “God still has work for me here.”

In August of 2020, that work ended; God called her home. There are hundreds, perhaps thousands of believers in China today because of the faithful work of this woman. One of the great privileges of my time in China was knowing her and I miss her dearly. But I know that God used her to fill China with the knowledge of his glory. She offered to me a glimpse into how the gospel was spreading in China, for there are probably thousands of evangelists just like her, faithfully preaching the gospel.

Joann Pittman is Vice President of Partnership and China Engagement and editor of *ZGBriefs*.

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