

Western Missionaries and Chinese Women's Right to Education Between 1840 and 1930

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Abstract. From the mid-19th to the early 20th century, China underwent significant transformations in women's education, greatly influenced by the decline of the Qing dynasty and the founding of the Republic of China. Historically, educational opportunities for women were limited predominantly to the elite. The onset of Western thought, introduced primarily by missionaries, played a pivotal role in reshaping the Chinese perspective towards women's education. The aftermath of the Opium War and the consequential Treaty of Tianjin in 1858 opened China to external influences, resulting in the establishment of numerous missionary girls' schools, marking the genesis of modern female education. By the early 20th century, accelerated by the diminishing Chinese sovereignty and catalyzed by the infusion of Western ideologies, women's higher educational institutions emerged. Concurrently, the Republic of China adopted laws promoting women's education. This paper delves into the Western influence on Chinese women's educational rights from 1840-1930, postulating that missionaries' efforts and Western ideologies were paramount to the evolving educational landscape. Primary sources, including government archives, prominent intellectuals' works, newspapers, and missionaries' memoirs, serve as the foundational evidence for this research.

Keywords: Qing dynasty, Women's education, Western thought, Missionaries, Opium War.

1. Introduction

With the decline of the Qing dynasty and the founding of the Republic of China, the mid-19th century and the early 20th century was a transitional period in the development of Chinese women's education. As the concept of education in China gradually evolved with the introduction of Western thought by foreign missionaries, Chinese society slowly began to accept that women should have an equal right to education.

Prior to the mid-19th century, Chinese women's right to education was restricted, with only a small number of women from rich and noble families being granted access. Some upper-class women did have the opportunity to study literature and poetry with private tutors. In the 17th century, for example, women who had access to education were mainly from wealthy merchant families in the regions south of the Yangtze River. These women represented a cross-section of elite society and their education served to help them publish books of poetry that promoted their family's cultural heritage. More commonly, before the 1840s, most traditional Chinese families believed it was unnecessary for women to receive an education. There were almost no girls' schools in China then, and most Chinese women never even went to school. Most women in China at the time could not even access education, let alone take a selective exam. Although the imperial civil service examination, which originated in the 7th century, was open to most educated men, Chinese women and some of the lower social classes had always been prohibited from taking it. With a pass rate of only 1%, these notoriously rigorous exams were a necessary prerequisite for placement in administrative and government positions, and required formal study at an institution of higher education, none of which were willing to accept women. Because men and women's right to education in China remained unequal at that time, the establishment of girls' schools by missionaries encountered many obstacles.

Then around 1840, once the British forced China to open its markets as a result of the Opium War, Shanghai, Ningbo and other ports of commerce began to attract more foreigners to China, which brought about changes to every facet of Chinese society.

As China was gradually forced to realize the shortcomings of its technology, institutions and culture, the reform of its backward education system became to the center stage. One of the primary factors that contributed to the expansion of women's right to education in mid-18th century and early

20th-century China was the arrival of Western missionaries, who were the first to establish church schools for women. In September 1835, the wife of Charles Gutzlaff, a German missionary and interpreter for the British, opened a reading class in Macau which enrolled several girls. Nine years later, in 1844, Mary Ann Aldersey, a member of the British Oriental Women's Education Association, opened up the first girls' school in Ningbo.

Then, with the signing of the Treaty of Tianjin in 1858, more ports of commerce were forced to open, and missionaries from various countries were free to preach. On the other hand, missionaries from the Western Catholic and Christian Church began to admit female students into St. John's College in Shanghai, Gezhi College in Guangzhou and other schools, and the idea of women's education began to be accepted into wider society. From 1840 to the 1870s, Catholic and Protestant missionaries established a total of 11 girls' schools offering free education in the five trading cities of Guangzhou, Xiamen, Fuzhou, Ningbo, Shanghai and Hong Kong, and in 1890, Young Allen, an American missionary and promoter of Western culture in China, founded the international Women's School in Shanghai. The establishment of these missionary girl schools marked the beginning of modern women's education in the country.

With the weakening of Chinese sovereignty following the signing of the Peace Protocol of 1901, missionaries had more freedom of movement in China. They increased their efforts to establish church schools in China. This was when women's schools of higher education began to appear, including the North China Union University for Women, which later merged with several other schools to form Yenching University. Shortly thereafter, the passage of an educational decree in 1907 allowed for the establishment of girls' primary schools and normal schools specializing in training female teachers, so that by 1918, there were 14 church universities in China which admitted women, including Yenching University, Aurora University, Jinling University, and St. John's University.

At the same time, influenced by Western ideas, local Chinese began to establish their own private girls' schools and in 1912, the newly established Republic of China enacted a series of laws which were specifically intended to support the development of women's education in China. Although women did not yet have the same educational opportunities as men, the increasing awareness that women should also be able to study science at school laid the foundation for China's first law recognizing men and women's equal right to education.

The educational approach introduced by Western missionaries in the mid-19th and early 20th centuries played an important role in the establishment and promotion of Chinese women's right to education and can be seen as central to the development of women's education in modern China. This paper will focus on the development of the dissemination of this educational approach. Specifically, it divides the period 1840-1930 into three time periods, corresponding to the early introduction, the middle development, and the late achievement of Chinese women's concept of education. This paper argues that women's education in China was primarily driven by Western ideas introduced by foreign missionaries. The introduction of women's right to education and girls' missionary schools not only changed the traditional idea that women should not be educated, but it also emancipated the way students thought as Western missionaries replaced the traditional curriculum and teaching methods then prevalent in China. During this time, prominent intellectuals such as Liang Qichao advocated the importance of women's education to the overall development of the country under the impact of Western missionaries. In addition, the continuous improvement of girls' schools by missionaries further influenced the Chinese government to legislate and reform women's right to education, thus cultivating more independent and great women for China. Overall, the early 20th century was a transitional period in the development of women's education in China, and women's education itself played a crucial role in China's steady march toward gender equality.

In terms of source material, government archives have been cited as evidence for the educational policies of the Qing dynasty and the Republic of China, as well as for the government's gradual acceptance of educational equality between men and women. Publications by such well-known thinkers as Liang Qichao have been referenced to analyze the attitudes of different classes towards

women's education as well as the impact of these attitudes on China's educational system. Newspaper articles have also been cited to analyze the establishment and development of women's schools by Christian churches and local Chinese organizations. Finally, this study draws from the memoirs of foreign missionaries like Timothy Richard (1845-1919), who played an integral role in the development of women's education in China.

2. Organization of the Text

2.1. The Dissemination of the Idea of Female Education and The Establishment of Girls' Schools Brought by Early Contact with the West (1840-1900)

The introduction of the idea that women's education as a right and the establishment of church schools by foreign missionaries in the mid-19th century shaped Chinese women's education for years to come. Initially, traditional Chinese education did not include women, and Chinese women had no significant access to education until these missionaries established girls' schools. In ancient Chinese feudal society, which lasted for more than 2,000 years, women were bound by the ideas of "male superiority and female inferiority" and "Three Obediences (obeying her father before marriage, her husband when married, and her sons in widowhood) and Four Virtues (good morals, proper speech, modest manner and diligent work)", and receiving education was never considered a woman's right. At that time, for most ordinary families, it was against the moral norms and meaningless to let their daughters receive an education, because not only women could not take the imperial examinations and then serve as officials to rule the country like men, but they also were considered to be more likely to have a mind of their own which would promote them to disobey their husbands and feminine virtue after receiving an education. Unlike in the West, where the Enlightenment led to the idea that women have the same talents as men and should have access to the same education and training as men, the Chinese had never spontaneously realized this. Except for some aristocratic and wealthy families who were willing to give their girls some education to demonstrate good breeding and to better inherit the family culture, the rest of the ordinary families were almost unwilling to spend money on female education that seemed to have no insignificance to them. Thus, the missionaries' recruitment of female students to missionary school was resisted hugely by the lower classes at the beginning.

The number of female students who enrolled was initially small, but these mission schools were the first to reflect the idea of education as a right for all Chinese women. Founded by Mary Ann Aldersey in 1844, Ningbo Women's School is widely considered to be the first girls' school in the Chinese mainland, and was of pioneering significance for the development of women's primary education in China. Yet as mentioned earlier, initially, the establishment of girls' schools was resisted by the Chinese population. For one, under the traditional belief that women should not be educated, the Chinese idea that women should only learn those skills necessary to raise a family was prevailing. For another, the Chinese did not like foreign missionaries. In fact, when missionaries first came to China following the passage of the Treaty of Tianjin in 1858, they were constantly attacked by the villagers, who were suspicious of Western ideas and their influence in China. At the time, China had just been forced to open its doors to Western goods, culture, and ideas, but most Chinese still considered these ideas to be incompatible with traditional Chinese culture and tended to be hostile to them. There was even widespread rumor of missionaries offering the eyes of girls who came to school to God. Even if very few parents sent their daughters to girls' schools, most girls dropped out because they could not withstand the pressure associated with public opinion around them.

Though initial enrollment was extremely difficult, Western missionaries had been working hard to find ways to dispel the inherent Chinese prejudice that women should not be educated. Western missionaries made a concerted effort to encourage Chinese school-age women to enroll in their schools, often promising to subsidize the families in the form of money and food, some even using the method of letting missionary schools offer free lodging to attract poor families to enroll their girls. Arguing that women would only be able to educate their children and contribute to the country if they

were educated themselves, they also hoped to help Chinese people understand and accept the teachings of Christianity while counteracting feudal superstition with basic scientific knowledge. This is also exactly why people like Jane Edkins, a British female missionary who came to China in 1859 with her husband, began to establish seminaries which exposed girls to Western science and technology while allowing them to practice useful life skills such as cooking and sewing and even converting some to Christianity. At the same time, missionaries sought to mitigate the traditional hostility toward women's education in more subtle ways. Mary Ann Aldersey, for example, taught classes in Chinese, which won the goodwill and trust of students and parents to help her enroll as many as 80 female students. Other church schools offered courses in ancient Chinese Confucian classics to win the support of the government and the people. The work of Western missionaries thereby laid the foundation for the governments of the later Qing and the Republic of China to recognize the benefits of educating women and to eventually affirm education as a fundamental right for women.

The introduction of the idea that women should be educated and the move to establish girls' schools in China by missionaries also inspired well-known Chinese intellectuals and politicians such as Liang Qichao (1873-1929) to realize the importance of educating women. For Liang, the purpose of women's education was not only to satisfy the needs of the family, but also to meet the needs of China's economic development. Believing that women's education was necessary to improve the quality of the population, Liang wrote newspaper articles demanding that Chinese society attach greater importance to women's education while criticizing those who contended that education was only for men. Many other intellectuals like Liang also began to speak out in favor of women's education publicly.

Soon enough, under the influence of Western missionaries and the awakening of Chinese intelligentsia, domestic women's schools founded by Chinese people and based on the Western educational model introduced by the church schools began to emerge throughout the country. In 1898, the first Chinese-founded women's academy, the Chinese Women's Institute, officially opened in Shanghai, offering courses in medicine, mathematics, and law. Shortly after its founding, the Chinese Women's Institute attracted the attention of the media and gained instant fame, inspiring the establishment of other women's schools in Suzhou and Guangdong. The establishment of these institutions, borne out of the widespread realization that women should also have the right to be educated, would not have been possible without the initial efforts of the missionaries.

It can be said that the missionaries not only pioneered universal female education in China, but also, through their influence, greatly contributed to the expansion of women's right to education and the popularization of female education at all levels and in all regions.

2.2. Initial Educational Legislation and Curricular Reform under Missionaries' Influence (1900-1912)

As the establishment of church schools gradually changed people's views on whether women should be educated, prompting the government to also begin to formulate corresponding laws and policies to give women more opportunities to receive an education, the missionaries' reform of the curriculum content further liberated the minds of Chinese women at this time.

In 1907, shortly after the North China Union University for Women was founded in Beijing, the Qing government enacted two charters, the Charter of Women's Primary Schools and The Charter of Women's Teacher-Training Schools, which represented the first time that Chinese women's right to education had been recognized and codified into governmental documents in Chinese history, laying the foundation for the Republic of China to do so as well. However, the scope of this right remained limited. According to the Charter of Women's Primary Schools, the purpose of girls' primary school education was to strengthen the moral education of women so that they could abide by traditional norms and improve women's physical fitness, while the goal of the Charter of Women's Teacher-Training Schools was to produce qualified female teachers. The right to education established under these two charters remained limited to primary and junior teacher-training schools, while other forms

of education, including general secondary education, industrial education and university education, continued to be accessible only to men. Finally, boys' and girls' schools were strictly segregated, teaching positions at girls' schools could only be held by women, and contact between male and female students was restricted.

Female education concept was still mostly limited to the idea of educating women to become better mothers at that time. Such ideas were reflected in the types of courses available to women of Chinese girls' schools at the time. Female students were still required to study traditional women's books like *Lessons for Women*, which were written during the feudal era to train "good wives and good mothers" to be "submissive to men". In addition, most women's schools mainly taught classes on basic common sense and family affairs, knowledge necessary to make women better mothers, such as sewing, needlework, housekeeping, gardening, etc., and the level of modern curricula in women's schools was still limited, excluding more advanced ideas and technologies. In fact, the limitations of the curriculum at that time did not only lie in the girls' schools, but also in many traditional private schools for men, which only taught Chinese Confucian classics such as *Mencius* and *The Doctrine of the Mean*, mainly used to cope with the imperial examinations and by successive feudal dynasties as the spiritual pillars of the ruling people, with very little modern scientific knowledge. Such curricula greatly confined people's minds to complying with the already irrational feudal rites.

The missionaries recognized the limitations and drawbacks of the traditional Chinese curriculum long before, but in order to combat hostility and to adapt to the Chinese situation so that more people could accept church schools first, the previous curriculum of the missionary girls' schools had been primarily based on religious courses and traditional Chinese culture and Literature, followed by scientific and cultural knowledge in a secondary place. Even so, scientific knowledge and curricula introduced by the Western missionaries broaden the horizons of the students insofar. In the case of the Chinkiang Girls' School, for example, in addition to Chinese national studies and the Christian Bible curriculum, its teaching content also included basic knowledge of geometry, algebra, botany, and general history of the world, which was very different from what was taught traditional Chinese women's education and in most Chinese private schools.

When women's education became more and more acceptable in China, the missionaries began to make further reforms in the teaching methods and curriculum content of the missionary girls' schools because they didn't have to worry much about strong resistance, modern scientific and cultural knowledge gradually becoming the dominant curriculum. One of the most prominent institutions of higher learning around this time was the Shanxi Academy founded by Timothy Richard in 1902, which applied Western educational techniques to teach mathematics, physics, chemistry and geography. The scientific knowledge introduced by Richard and other missionaries then became the driving force behind the modernization of China's education system as well as the establishment of education as a women's right. The curriculum at these schools was also designed to meet the needs of girls and women in everyday life.

Generally speaking, unlike the previous primary and junior education, which was mainly based on the teaching of religious and Confucian classics, after entering the twentieth century, missionary girls' schools emphasized more on vocational subjects and higher education, and encouraged co-education. Such reforms in teaching content not only enhanced the scientific literacy and learning ability of female students, but also liberated them from the idea of being dependent on men for survival. Female students were gradually becoming independent and complete personalities who dared to blossom in their own dominant lives.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the perception of women's education evolved further in Chinese society as missionary schools transformed their curricula by foreign missionaries, and the subsequent policies and decrees introduced by the government were the direct result of these efforts. Missionaries and other thinkers thereby played a crucial role in promoting the widespread recognition of women's right to education, laying the foundation for Chinese women to receive higher education in the early 20th century, which was later acknowledged by the Chinese government.

2.3. Further Improvement of Education Policies and Educational Achievements Inspired by Missionary Schools (1912-1930)

After the Qing Dynasty was replaced by the Republic of China in 1912, the newly established state sought to promote China as a modern nation and reforming the education system was a top priority. Inspired by the reform of the curricular system in the previous phase of the missionary girls' schools which was intended to improve higher and vocational education, the establishment of the School System of 1912-13 recognized women's right to receive general secondary school education as well as higher teacher-training and secondary vocational education. In addition, the Secondary School Order also recognized girls' secondary schools as having the same legal status as those for boys, while the Order for Normal Schools allowed for the establishment of girls' higher teacher-training schools and the Order for Industrial Education established women's right to vocational education.

The government of the Republic of China adopted a new education policy aimed at promoting women's education. A group of forward-looking people actively established various types of women's schools to broaden the scope and field of women's education. For example, in March 1912, Chen Wanyan, who had participated in the Revolution of 1911, founded Fuxin Women's School in Nanjing, whose mission was to introduce Western civilization and modern knowledge to Chinese women. In Shanghai, Min Lanyan and others founded the Shanghai Women's School of Law and Politics, which was dedicated to helping Chinese women develop their legal talents. According to statistics, by 1915, there were 3,766 girls' schools nationwide, accounting for 2.9% of all schools, and 180,949 students were enrolled in these schools, accounting for 4.2% of all students. The statistics showed a substantial increase compared with those of the late Qing Dynasty. However, at that time, most of these girls' schools were elementary and secondary schools, and college education was nearly inaccessible for Chinese women.

After the May Fourth Movement of 1919, with the further emancipation of the mind and the development of women's education, more and more intellectuals dedicated themselves to advocating that women should be entitled to college education. For example, a popular periodical named "New Youth", by taking Europe and the United States as examples, argued that "the true equality between men and women in education does not lie on the type of education that they can receive, but on equality of personality. Namely, if men are entitled to receive college education, so are women." In 1919, more than 30 young women jointly appealed to Peking University to accept female students. The appeal of young female students helped. In 1920, Peking University began to admit female students, making it the first coeducation university in China. After that, more than 10 universities successively admitted female students. Coeducation in universities became more and more popular, and more and more women were able to receive higher education.

In 1922, the Republic of China then officially began to implement the Renxu School System as well as the "Six-three-three-four" School System, which granted women access to six years of primary school education, three years of secondary education, three years of high school education, and four years of university education. Under this system, limitations on enrollment in institutions of higher university education based on gender were almost eliminated, and the Republic of China expanded the recognition of women's right to education, effectively doing away with the Qing government's belief that women should only be taught to be better mothers. The growing recognition of the importance of women's education in China was also informed by the impact of Western thought on Chinese intellectuals. And all of this would hardly have happened in just over a decade if the earlier missionary school's reforms to the content of the curriculum, freeing women from feudal mindsets, hadn't inspired the Chinese government to improve its policies, allowing more women to enjoy advanced education.

Between 1920 and 1930, many of the first Chinese women to study abroad returned to serve their country. The continuing efforts of the missionary schools and the new women's education system reformed by the Chinese government under their influence were bearing fruit at this time. The previous education for Chinese women who studied abroad received in the missionary schools helped them to build a solid academic and linguistic foundation that made their studies in foreign countries

much smoother. And some women who received secondary and higher education in China also entered various professions and made great achievements. In this sense, the Western missionaries further trained many women for China, enabling them to make important contributions to the country's development. One of the most well-known of these early pioneers was Lin Huiyin (1904-1955), whose enrollment in Beijing Peihua Girls' School in 1916 allowed her to become China's first female architect. Beijing Peihua Girls' School was a church school founded by the daughter of British missionary, William Edward Soothill, in 1914, which helped Lin gain admission to the University of Pennsylvania School of Art in 1924. Upon graduation, Lin went on to make important contributions in both architecture and art design, participating in the design of the national emblem of the People's Republic of China and as well as the Monument to the People's Heroes in Beijing. Lin was also actively involved in the conservation of China's ancient buildings and other historical sites.

In short, the establishment of the Republic of China in 1912 marked a turning point for women's education in China. Under the influence of the precedent set by the missionary school, the new government recognized women's right to receive general secondary school education as well as higher teacher-training and secondary vocational education. With the implementation of the Renxu School System and the "Six-three-three-four" School System, limitations on enrollment in institutions of higher university education based on gender were effectively eliminated. As a result, women's education in China expanded rapidly, and more and more women were able to receive higher education. This development enabled many Chinese women to make important contributions to the country's development, such as Lin Huiyin, who made outstanding contributions to the construction of Chinese architecture. Overall, the recognition and promotion of women's education in early 20th century China was a crucial step towards gender equality and the modernization of the country, thanks to the missionaries and missionary schools for their previous educational accumulation and influence on China.

2.4. Conclusion

The development of modern women's education in China was largely inspired by Western thought, as the idea of equal educational rights for men and women arising out of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution gradually spread around the world with the help of Western missionaries. Modern women's education in China originated in the 1840s with the establishment of women's schools by foreign missionaries which attempted to integrate Western ideas about education with local Chinese conditions. The signing of the Treaty of Tianjin in 1858 allowed Christian missionaries to establish the first schools open to female students. This was followed in the early 1900s by the establishment of women's schools by local Chinese, reflecting the changing perceptions of women's education under the influence of Western thought. Yet men and women remained largely segregated during this period, and women continued to be excluded from higher education. Realizing the problem, the missionaries further reformed the content of the curriculum of the missionary schools, greatly liberating women's minds and ways of thinking while promoting higher education. As a result of the missionaries' continuous efforts, the Chinese government was influenced to establish the Renxu School System in 1922, which finally legalized the notion of educational equality in China. Actually, it is the increasing acceptance of these missionaries and their institutions by Chinese society that in turn paved the way for educational equality to be recognized under Chinese law. The Western ideas introduced by these missionaries thereby set a precedent for the establishment of women's education in China, while nurturing many great Chinese women who played an important role in its development and even in the development of China's construction.

In fact, in addition to China, many other countries were also in the process of offering women greater access to education under the influence of Western ideology. In Egypt, for example, the introduction of Western liberal ideas caused long and intense discussions among intellectuals concerning whether women should have a right to education. With the widespread acceptance of Western ideas and culture, Japan also began to reform its own system of women's education after the

Meiji Restoration. Although the conditions of Egypt and Japan were quite different from those of China, the system of modern education for women in each of these countries can all be traced back to common Western roots.

Once the West recognized the benefits of educational equality between men and women, technical advances in transportation allowed Western missionaries to establish church schools for women around the world. The establishment of these schools in turn allowed the idea of equality in education between men and women in the West to spread, laying the foundation for the legal recognition of women's right to education in China and for the personal development of Chinese women beyond. Thus, foreign missionaries were central to the spread of Western Enlightenment ideals, which played a pivotal role in the development of women's education and the rise of feminism on a global scale.

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