

## The Nameless Majority – Impressions from a Workshop on the Role of Women in the Chinese Churches

*Dirk Kuhlmann*

*Translated by Piotr Adamek*

Under the motto “I have called you by name’ – Contribution of Chinese Women to the Church” the Monumenta Serica Institute (Sankt Augustin) invited fourteen scholars from PR China, Germany, Sweden, Taiwan and the United States to Sankt Augustin as lecturers at an international workshop from 25th to 26th September 2014. The workshop was co-organized by the China-Zentrum and the Philosophisch-Theologische Hochschule SVD (both Sankt Augustin) as well as the Monumenta Serica Sinological Research Center and the Academia Catholica of the Fu Jen Catholic University (both Taipei, Taiwan). Sponsors were Aid to the Church in Need (Königstein/Germany), the Institute of Missiology Missio e.V. (Aachen/Germany) and the Foundation MSSRC Fu Jen Catholic University (Taipei). The workshop was attended by over 40 participants from the academic and ecclesiastical sphere. A spiritual approach to the conference theme was offered by an ecumenical



Women to the front – participants of the conference. Photo: Monumenta Serica.

service on Isaiah 43,1 (“I have called you by name; you are mine”) on the first evening. The workshop was accompanied by an exhibition at the Museum “Haus Völker und Kulturen” (Sankt Augustin) on the role of women in Church and society in China from the 17th century to the present.

The opening lecture “Women in the Church according to *Mulieris Dignitatem*” by **Ana Cristina Villa Betancourt**, director of the Women’s Section in the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for the Laity, illustrated the intra-Catholic perspective on the role of genders. In this Apostolic Letter written by John Paul II in 1988, the role of women was theologically founded and recognized, and the differences between both sexes were interpreted in a complementary perspective: from both versions of the creation in Genesis John Paul II concluded that man and woman should form a unity in diversity, as they are called to help each other with their gifts. The particular dignity of women was stressed as God entrusted human life to them: in their own offspring but also as part of the theology of salvation in the person of Mary, Mother of God. Villa Betancourt emphasized that Mary is also the biblical model of the missionary church and the reference point for a “theology of women” for Pope Francis.

Five panels reflected the workshop theme. The **first panel** was devoted to **women in the young Chinese Church of the 17th century**.

The biography of Candida Xu (Xu Gandida 徐甘地大, 1607–1680) was presented by **Gail King** (Brigham Young University, Utah, USA): The granddaughter of the famous convert Xu Guangqi 徐光啟 (1562–1633) initially followed the conventions of traditional Chinese society in marriage and motherhood. However, when she was widowed at age 46, she circumvented them more and more and used her wealth to promote the Catholic faith in Shanghai and the lower Yangzi region. Candida Xu supported the construction of churches and gave alms for the poor; furthermore, she taught Christian midwives the rite of baptism in case of emergency and built an orphanage in Songjiang. For the further development of the Catholic Church her role as a spiritual teacher was of particular importance: Candida Xu gathered young women in her house who were taught to distribute food gifts and medicine, and also to spread the Christian faith in Shanghai and surrounding settlements. This group of women was a precursor to the later consecrated virgins (*beatae*), whose importance was emphasized several times during the workshop.

**Claudia von Collani** (Julius Maximilian University of Würzburg, Germany) in “Christian Heroines in China: Expectations, Images and Examples” analyzed images of Western and Chinese women in the context of missionary publications in China and Europe. The *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses* by Charles Le Gobien and Jean-Baptiste Du Halde (founded in 1703) as well as *Der Neue Welt-Bott* by Joseph Stöcklein (published from 1726 to 1758) included biographies of Chinese female converts for the edification of Western readers: The main virtues of Chinese female Christians were primarily passive in nature, such as modesty, restraint and chastity. The latter could have an active component, when a woman of her own will vowed lifelong celibacy and chastity or refused to marry a non-Christian partner and thus turned against her family and the Confucian tradition.

**Women in the 18th and 19th centuries** were the focus of the **second panel**.

**Huang Meitin** (Monumenta Serica Sinological Research Center, Taipei, Taiwan) presented in her lecture “Women and Church in the Court” the situation of female Catholics at the Ming Court. First baptisms among court women were made by eunuch converts as early as in the years 1638–1642. Since Western missionaries could not visit the women’s quarters, the newly baptized women could neither participate in the sacraments nor in church life. They were supposed to live their faith in private, and move the emperor to conversion through their example. Some convert women are known under their baptismal names, e.g., the concubines Lucia, Caecilia and Thecla, but the sources of research for their spiritual life are extremely poor. More deeply explored are the senior converts at the court of Yongli 永曆 Emperor (1623–1662). In addition to 50 concubines also the inner circle of the imperial family converted: the Empress Dowager (baptismal name Helena), the birth mother of Yongli (baptismal name Maria) and his main wife (baptismal name Anna). Because of her status, Helena could get into direct contact with the Jesuit missionaries Andreas Xavier Koffler (1612–1652) and Michael Boym (1612–1659). The latter was commissioned by her to a diplomatic mission to the Roman Curia under Pope Innocent X for securing alliance partners against the advancing Qing troops.

“Little Flowers: Chinese Christian Women in Northeast China” by **Li Ji** (University of Hong Kong) drew attention to the mission of the Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP) in Manchuria in the second half of the 19th century. Women, in the first place the consecrated virgins, had a central role in the dissemination and transmission of the Catholic faith in the region: They baptized, taught the catechism, shaped the religious life significantly and established charitable and educational initiatives on the spot. In the year 1881, MEP missionaries tried to reduce the high level of autonomy of virgins through the establishment of “rules of life,” to institutionalize the authority of the Western missionaries towards them and to limit their number by restrictive admission criteria, e.g., virgins should originate from rich families, nominally in order to ensure their financial independence. At the same time they tried to involve young women in religious orders, the most successful here being the French Community of Les Soeurs de la Providence de Portieux (since 1875 in China) and the indigenous communities of the “Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Mary” (est. 1858) and “Sisters of the Holy Family” (est. 1934), whose charismas were mainly in catechesis, education and care.

**Kang Zhijie** (Hubei University, Wuhan, China) outlined in her epoch-spanning paper “They are Bright Lilies: Characteristics of the Work of Chinese Catholic Virgins” the role and function of consecrated virgins: Both the Jesuit missionaries as well as the Dominicans adapted themselves to the strict gender segregation in China: sacraments, which required physical contact, including the Eucharist, were given to female believers as seldom as possible. At the same time it was essential to reach the women because they were responsible for the transmission of religious traditions to children within the families. Virgins were therefore important mediators between missionaries and female lay believers. Within the church, virgins were involved in the liturgy: they rendered supporting services such as the preparation for communion and making of liturgical vestments. As prayer leaders and liturgical singers they could also have a public role within the communities. The virgins



Kang Zhijie explains the relevance of the consecrated virgins for Catholic Church life in China. Photo: Josef Tang.

acted in a missionary way in neonatal baptisms and catechetical lessons, the latter being taught from the second half of the 19th century also for non-Christians, as well as in teaching home economics, handicrafts and care services since the 20th century. In the current Catholic Church in China their importance has declined compared to that of sisters' congregations. However, even today there are still Catholic women becoming consecrated virgins, for example, as a transitional period before entering an order, or on the recommendation of a priest not to enter a convent but stay in the parish and work there, as well as because of traditional ties to their own family and home community.

The **third panel** on the situation of **women in the churches of the 20th century** (Part 1) was opened by **Rolf Gerhard Tiedemann** (Shandong University, Jinan, PR China), whose paper "Female Propagators of the Faith in Modern China: The Transition from the 'Institute of Virgins' to Diocesan Religious Congregations" deepened the specifics of the Chinese Catholic virgins in a historical overview. This spiritual way of life was first introduced and propagated by the Dominican mission in Fujian Province in the middle of the 17th century and was based on the Spanish tradition of *beatae* who followed the rules of the third (lay) order, but lived as celibates in their families. In 1744, the MEP missionary Joachim Enjobert de Martiliat adapted this model for the Province of Sichuan and institutionalized it with 25 rules of life: These were based on monastic precepts, and were meant to encourage the young women to live a quasi-monastic, isolated, contemplative life within their families. An effective control of these rules by Western missionaries was almost impossible as long as missionary and public Christian activities were prohibited in China, a period which lasted from 1724 to 1846. Jean-Martin Moÿe MEP (1730–1793) authorized the virgins for the first missionary work: to baptize critically ill infants. In this case, the zeal of the young women was so great that they wanted to expand the area of their work constantly, despite their bound feet. Until the official lifting of the ban on Christianity, the virgins had acquired both independence and status in their communities, and in some communities they had even taken up the duties of priests. Attempts of Western missionaries in the second half of the 19th century to weaken the position of the virgins or integrate them into Western religious communities, were met with fierce resistance by

local Catholics. This opposition only waned because of the increasing political instability of the Qing Empire, during the rebellions of the Miao (1854–1873) and the Taiping (1851–1864).

An insight into the history of the Protestant church was offered by **Fredrik Fällman** (Göteborgs Universitet, Sweden) with “‘Two Small Copper Coins’ and Much More: Chinese Protestant Women and Their Contributions to the Church – Reflections from the Past and Present.” Like the eponymous two small coins of the poor widow whose gift initially seems small, but is in fact much greater than that of the rich man (Mark 12,41-44), the main contribution of Chinese Protestant women to the vitality of the church was rarely honored appropriately in the sources. They assumed and still assume, however, a variety of roles: 1) Caregivers, such as the physician Dr. Liu Baozheng (1900–1984). Together with her husband she extended the Kangsheng Hospital, Jingzhou (Hubei Province), originally founded by Swedish missionaries, to a full-fledged clinic, which was a leading institution in Liu’s specialist field – obstetrics. Nevertheless, her name is not mentioned in the history of the hospital, and to this day, even the characters of her name are unknown. 2) Missionaries, like Yu Cidu 余慈度 (Dora Yu, 1873–1931), the mentor of Ni Tuosheng 倪柝声 (Watchman Nee, 1903–1972). 3) Leaders: Since the second half of the 20th century, women more and more assumed leading positions especially in the ministry and church executive board. Thus, the first woman in the Anglican Church, Florence Li Tim-Oi 李添嬿, was ordained in Hong Kong (1944). 2002–2007 Rev. Cao Shengjie 曹圣洁 (b. 1931) was Chair of the highest body of the official Protestant Church in China, the China Christian Council. 4) Preachers and teachers, such as Ge Baojuan 葛宝娟 (b. 1952), who came from a Catholic family and following her spiritual vocation converted and studied Protestant theology at the Jinling Union Theological Seminary (Nanjing), after its reopening in 1981. She is now a pastor and professor of New Testament theology at the Zhongnan Seminary in Wuhan. In contrast, a more recent trend in the Protestant Church in China is “New Calvinism,” especially popular among Christian intellectuals, which assigns a complementary, i.e., in fact subordinate, role for women within the community; “New Calvinists” in particular reject the ordination of women. In addition, women are supposed to focus on the family. This “re-traditionalization” is justified by a reformed theology. An example of such a group is the Shouwang Church in Beijing.

The view into the **20th century** was continued in the **fourth panel** with the presentation of an indigenous religious community:

“The Role and Importance of the Sisters of Our Lady in the Church in China” by **Sr. Yan Xiaohui** (Congrégation Notre-Dame, Hebei, PR China). The order goes back to the Congrégation of Notre-Dame, which was founded in the late 16th century in France. The education of girls, worship of the mystery of the Incarnation and the Eucharist and a Marian spirituality formed the charism of this order. In 1926, the first convent of this order was founded in today’s Hebei Province, four years later the first Chinese novices entered. Despite the expulsion of foreign religious sisters from China and the dissolution of the order in 1953, Chinese sisters kept their spirituality alive until the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), and took over the pastoral care in parishes or in their

workplaces. After the Cultural Revolution, in the years 1979–1995, Sr. Wu Yongpo 武永波 (1916–2002), who had survived this period of persecution, became active again in the Catholic communities of the former area of her order. Together with another survivor, Sr. Wang Wenying 王文英, she gathered the first novices again in Daming in 1985. Since the 1990s, the order is strongly engaged in the fields of social welfare and maintains in Daming and its surroundings an orphanage, a home for the elderly, a pastoral center and a counseling center for socially disadvantaged groups.

**Josef Tang** (Philosophisch-Theologische Hochschule SVD, Sankt Augustin) presented in “Challenge and Response Faced by the Catholic Church in China in the Late 19th and Early 20th Century – A Case Study in Xu Zongze’s Views on Women” contemporary debates on the situation of women in church and society of the early 20th century. The Jesuit Xu Zongze 徐宗澤 (1886–1947) published his opinion on this issue especially in the *Shengjiao zazhi* 聖教雜誌 where he had served as chief editor since 1924. His position can be described as a compromise between the concept of traditional Catholic woman and emancipatory approach: he contrasted the cultural concept of “appreciating men and depreciating women” with the Christian principle of the equality of both sexes as God’s creation. Xu did not refuse the employment of women in principle, however, they should enjoy a special protection, e.g., a working time not exceeding eight hours per day, and should be entitled to approximately the same salary as men. These proposals were based on a socio-political and functional framework, which was strongly influenced by traditional gender roles, i.e., women should be able to provide adequately for their families and children in addition to their jobs. A key concern of Xu was the education of women, as it could release women from traditional dependencies and make them more autonomous. At the same time education was a way of moral self-cultivation, which prepared women for their role as educators of their children. Women should be able to afford this pedagogical contribution also in the church, so Xu Zongze called for a comprehensive catechetical education of women.

From 1926, Xu Zongze stood in close contact with the woman writer Su Xuelin 蘇雪林 whose relationship to Catholicism and links to Catholic circles were presented by **Barbara Hoster** (Monumenta Serica Institute, Sankt Augustin) in her lecture “‘A Fortunate Encounter’ – Su Xuelin (1897–1999) as a Chinese Catholic Writer.” Su belonged to the first generation of modern Chinese writers. While studying in Beijing (1919–1921), she met leaders of the May 4th Movement such as Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962) and Chen Duxiu 陳獨秀 (1879–1942) as her professors and was deeply involved in the intellectual debates of this period. From 1921 to 1925, she went to study abroad at the Institut Franco-Chinois in Lyon, where she converted to Catholicism in 1924. After returning to China, she worked as a teacher and author. From 1931, she served as professor for Chinese literature at Wuhan University, where she became an authority on literary criticism and the *Chuci* 楚辭 (Songs of Chu). As an outspoken opponent of communism, she left China in 1949 and eventually moved to Taiwan. Only in the recent past was she rediscovered in the PRC as a representative of the “Catholic literature of China” (*Zhongguo gongjiao wenxue* 中国公教文学). Particularly representative for her encounter with Catholicism is Su Xuelin’s first and only novel *Jixin* 棘心 (The Heart of the Thornbush, 1929), which has strong autobio-

graphical elements. The protagonist of this Bildungsroman, Xingqiu 醒秋, embarks on a “spiritual odyssey” during her studies in Lyon: First, in the spirit of the May 4th Movement, she adopts a rationalist and atheistic attitude towards the omnipresent Catholic religious culture. The correspondence with her fiancé, who studying in the USA recognizes more and more positive aspects of Christianity, and encounters with a nun and a Catholic teacher make Xingqiu have doubts about her previous attitude. Several personal crises lead eventually to her conversion to Catholicism. Furthermore, the time after Xingqiu’s conversion is described with its alternating phases of euphoria and doubt and it is unclear whether Xingqiu will remain a Catholic after her return to China. Su Xuelin moved in the Catholic intellectual milieu of the late 1920s to the 1940s. She wrote the introduction to the handbook *1500 Modern Chinese Novels and Plays* (Beiping 1948) of the Belgian missionary Joseph Schyns CICM and pleaded as a delegate of the “National Congress on Catholic Education” (Shanghai, February 1948) for a profound teaching of Chinese language and literature in Catholic schools. In the years 1949–1950, in her activities in the Catholic Truth Society in Hong Kong, she addressed herself to religious themes and published a treatise in which she tried to prove the existence of a monotheistic religion of the “Lord of Heaven” in China, and the Chinese translation of the autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux.

The **fifth** and final panel directed attention to **the present and the future**. “The Spirituality of Chinese Women in the Holy Spirit – A Spirituality of the Holy Spirit,” by **Sr. Madeleine Kwong Lai Kuen** (Holy Spirit Seminary College of Theology and Philosophy, Hong Kong) added an impressive theological perspective to the workshop theme. The vocation of women is – according to Sr. Kwong – to be virgins, wives and mothers. As mothers, they bring forth new life, specifically in children, but also spiritually by teaching and promoting the growth of understanding, affection and feelings and in this they shape a human society. As a special gift, Chinese women bring for this vocation, among others, characteristics such as simplicity, humility, gentleness, willingness to work, perseverance and hospitality, thus also enriching the spiritual tradition of the universal Church. With its focus on the mystery of the Holy Spirit, who is invisible, faceless and without a name and is similar to the *qi* 氣, the spirituality of Chinese women is contemplative and adoring. It remains open to the experience (the miracle) and is not looking for dogmas. It strives for a unity of God, man and creation. Biblical model for the spirituality of Chinese women is Mary, who as the Mother of God led by the Holy Spirit realizes the path of a virgin, wife and mother in a perfect way.

**Piotr Adamek** (Monumenta Serica Institute, Sankt Augustin) presented another Christian denomination: “Unworthy to Be Quoted among the Believers – Worthy to be Quoted among the Martyrs. Women in the Orthodox Church in China.” Although it must be assumed that Chinese women, as in the Catholic and the Protestant church, made a decisive contribution for the transmission of the faith and for the life of communities, for a long time they were not mentioned in the history of the Russian Orthodox Church in China. The first Orthodox Church in China was founded in 1685, when after the conquest of the Russian fortress Albasin by Qing troops, part of the fortress garrison were transported

to Beijing as prisoners of war and settled there. As Adamek pointed out by reference to various Russian sources, such as church histories and the journal of the Orthodox Church in China, *Kitajskij blagovestnik*, women came into focus more than 200 years later in the aftermath of the Boxer Rebellion: In 1900, about 200 Chinese Orthodox Christians – half of them women – were killed by the insurgents in Beijing and later canonized as martyrs. From the hagiographies of martyrs, the image of Chinese Christian women in the Orthodox Church can be completed: They could, like Tatiana Li (1856–1900), as wives of priests and sacristans support their husbands in pastoral work or, as the widow Ia Wen (ca. 1844–1900), act as teachers in a mission school for girls. Most of the women killed, however, are known only in their role as mothers or are referred to as faithful church members, such as Irena Gui (ca. 1846–1900) – “a simple woman who came to church every day.” After the time of martyrdom a blossoming of the Orthodox Church followed in China – from 200–300 surviving indigenous Christians in 1900 the community grew to 6,000 local Christians, more than half of whom were women, including Fiva (also Fila) Ming, the first Chinese woman to enter an Orthodox monastery (in 1905). In the wake of the October Revolution and the Civil War in Russia the number of Russian refugees grew in China, and the Chinese Orthodox Christians, men and women, were again forgotten by the Church. During the Cultural Revolution, the church life of the Russian Orthodox Christians came to a standstill. But also here women like Luo Qin (Russian name: Anna Romanova), who maintained their faith during the time of persecution, played a major role in the revival of Orthodox communities, inter alia, in Harbin, Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang since the 1980s.

“Invisible or Invincible? Changing Female Roles in the Chinese Protestant Church and Their Perceptions” by **Katrin Fiedler** (China InfoStelle, Hamburg, Germany) was a methodological exposition to record the current situation of women in the Protestant Church in China. Starting point was the hypothesis that the incomplete documentation of the role of women in the Church is not solely due to lack of source material, but that traditional religious role models in China do not admit women to prominent positions and thus produce an academic bias. Although Christian churches have a certain emancipatory effect by providing women with an opportunity of self-fulfillment outside their family, they also propagate more conservative role models. In the 1990s, the official Protestant church magazine *Tianfeng* 天風 presented the biblical figure of “zealous Martha” as a role model for female believers. The so-called “Boss Christians” in Wenzhou are characterized by hierarchical gender roles that are based on socio-cultural behavior models from business circles: separation of women and men in the church, reservation of management functions and prestigious events for men and restriction of women to assisting services. In the (male) internal perspective, this is the “traditional model,” although it is unclear whether this refers to a specific tradition (Confucian or conservative Christian), or whether it is rather an “invented tradition” (in terms of Eric Hobsbawm). Another conservative group, also mentioned by Fällman, are intellectual “New Calvinists” who support their perspective on gender complementarity with theological and philosophical arguments. According to Fiedler a research agenda could be guided by the following questions: Which gender roles and perceptions can be observed? Are there confessional specifics? How can the ac-



ceptance of a subordinated role in various groups of women themselves be explained? Is it possible to relate this ecclesiastical and theological phenomenon to the current socio-political developments, such as a resurgent authoritarianism?

**Li Wenxiang** (CFC North Church, Beijing) reported in “Women in the Catholic Church in China Today” on the concrete practice of the faith of women in the Beijing Diocese. The parish work is mainly supported by women: An important stimulus was – according to Li – studying the documents of the 2nd Vatican Council since 2004 and biblical evidences which stressed that women are capable to bear witness to the faith as well as men, and that women and men in the early Christian communities had equal rights. The tasks of the women in the parishes include service at Holy Mass (including the distribution of the Eucharist), public missionary work, social and charitable services, thematic prayer groups, services on religious solemnities. Taking care of their own families is the focus of the charismatic Catholic community “Couples for Christ” (CFC). The CFC approach echoes traditional Confucian thought, according to which the order of the family is the starting point for social renewal. Thus, the CFC has also proven to be a case study of a community in which women participate strongly and are proactive, while at the same time traditional roles such as the subordination of the woman to the man in the family are continued.

Two roundtable discussions picked up on the past and future of women in the churches of China. Stated as a central problem by the historical podium were conflicts between local Christians and Western missionaries after the lifting of the Christianity ban and the growing missionary presence in the Inland: In addition to the oft-mentioned large autonomy of Catholic virgins there was also the continuation of local traditions such as foot binding and female infanticide among Chinese Catholics. The modern panel addressed the issue of “simultaneity of the non-simultaneous” with a view to “re-traditionalization” of the sexes in the ecclesial communities and discussed different hopes for the future development such as a reinforcement of ecumenism between Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox Christians and an advanced reflection of gender roles and images of God in the churches.

The workshop ended with the public lecture by **Nicola Spakowski** (University of Freiburg, Germany) “What happened to ‘half the sky’? Women in Socialist and Post-socialist China,” a historical overview of the role of women in Chinese society from the emancipation movements of the Republican period and the Maoist phase of the PRC (1949–1976) to re-feminization and re-traditionalization of the image of women in the Reform period (since 1978) under the influence of commercialization, market mechanisms and the resulting marginalization of women in the workplace.

A main tenor of the workshop was that research on the situation of women in the churches of China is far from being explored. It is, rather, a topic in which many questions remain not only unexplained but partly still not yet put forward. Therefore, a systematic study of the sources and extensive field research are both desiderata in this area. Thus the research in Chinese archives could contribute to once more give a name to a larger number of Chinese female Christians. A publication of the workshop papers is planned to carry this momentum into the academic world.