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Women Hold Up Half the Sky: *Exploration and Calling for the Prospect of Chinese Feminist Theologies*

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ABSTRACT: In most Protestant churches in China, women make up approximately 70% of the Christian population and have historically played a crucial role in establishing and growing these communities. Despite their significant presence and contributions, women's participation in church decision-making remains limited, and their experiences are often overlooked in theological reflection. This paper argues for the importance of establishing Chinese feminist theologies and highlighting their vital contributions to Chinese female communities and global feminist theologies. By examining the development of feminist theology in Europe, North America, and Asia, this paper focuses on the emergence of Chinese feminist theology. Grounded in the lived experiences and substantial contributions of Chinese Christian women, I explore the potential for constructing a robust Chinese feminist theology. Such a theology requires inheriting the rich traditions established by Chinese Christian women, engaging in ongoing dialogue with both Chinese culture and Christian faith, and integrating theological theory with practical ministry. It calls for a unified effort between men and women, with a global perspective, to foster a theology that advances within China and contributes to broader global theological discourses.

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Introduction

The phrase “women hold up half the sky,”⁵⁷ a view reflecting that women are strong and offer an equal role and contribution to society, is widely recognized in China. Yet, within the Protestant Christian Church in China, women hold up more than just half of the sky—they shoulder an even greater share of responsibility. Women constitute approximately 70% of the Christian population in China’s Protestant communities.⁵⁸ The predominance of female students over male students has become one of the defining characteristics of seminaries in China.⁵⁹ This increasing presence of female theology students has naturally led to a higher percentage of female clergy. Around 30 percent of ordained pastors are women.⁶⁰ Since the

⁵⁷ A famous quote by former Chinese Communist Party chairman Mao Zedong.

⁵⁸ Cao Shengjie (曹圣洁) and Gao Ying(高英) both mention this. Cao Shengjie, “Feminist Theology and Chinese Church (妇女神学与中国教会),” *Nanjing Theological Review* 2 (2002):34. Gao Ying, “Women’s Ministry in the Church of China under God’s Providential Care and Grace (在上帝眷顾和恩典中的中国教会妇女事工),” *Tian Feng* 3 (2003):19. Cao Shengjie served as the President of the China Christian Council from 2002 to 2008, becoming the first female president in the history of the China Christian Council. Gao Ying held the position of Vice President of the China Christian Council from 2008 to 2018. She also previously served as the Executive Vice President of Nanjing Union Theological Seminary and the President of Beijing Theological Seminary.

⁵⁹ Cao Cao Shengjie, “Reflecting on the Tradition of Women’s Ministries in Christianity of China (回顾国基督教妇女事工传统),” *Tian Feng* 7(1995):10. Gao Ying, “Women’s Ministry in the Church of China under God’s Providential Care and Grace,” 18. Cao Shengjie notes that, according to statistics from the end of 1994, female students comprised 56.5% of the total student population in seminaries under the China Christian Council. Gao Ying highlights that this predominance of female students has become a defining characteristic of seminaries in China. By the end of 2022, female students accounted for 75% of the total student body at Henan Theological Seminary, which is located in central China.

⁶⁰ Gao Ying, “Women’s Ministry in the Church of China under God’s Providential Care and Grace,” 18. Gao Ying notes that, according to statistics from the China Christian Council around 2000, there were 378 female ordained pastors nationwide, making up 24% of the total number of ordained pastors. Additionally, statistics from the Henan Christian Council in 2019 reveal that there were 128 female ordained pastors in Henan Province, accounting for 47% of the total number of ordained pastors in the region.

1980s, through the efforts of many theologians and ministers, the status of women in the Protestant Christian Church in China has greatly improved. However, compared to women's proportion in the church and the extent of their work in ministry, their participation in church decision-making remains insufficient. Theological education often centers the male experiences as the norm, and, as Hong Kong-born feminist theologian Kwok Pui-Lan (b. 1952) observes, few seminaries prioritize hiring more women or offering courses in feminist theology. Theological reflection from a female perspective is frequently dismissed as a fleeting trend rather than a serious academic pursuit.⁶¹

To foster the development of the Chinese Church, it is crucial to reform theological understandings, dismantle patriarchal structures, and create more opportunities for women to realize their potential and contribute meaningfully and more fully to the church. In this paper, by exploring the development of feminist theology in Europe and America, Asian feminist theology, and Chinese feminist theology specifically, based on the experiences of Chinese Christian women and their contribution to the church, I argue for the importance of establishing Chinese feminist theologies and highlighting their vital contributions to Chinese female communities and global feminist theologies.

Feminist Theology, Asian Feminist Theology, and Chinese Feminist Theology

Feminist theology encompasses diverse perspectives, ranging from the viewpoints of African, Latina, Euro-American, and

⁶¹ Kwok Pui-Lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*, (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), 101.

Asian women to those spanning conservative, moderate, and radical approaches. The breadth of these differences makes it challenging to encapsulate the entire field in a single statement. At the 2010 Society of Biblical Literature Meeting, Lutheran pastor and Old Testament scholar Monica Melanchthon (b. 1962) proposed a working definition of feminist work. She argued that feminist work must challenge and subvert women's subordination, honor women's experiences by recognizing their capacities and agency, be attentive to both immediate and broader contexts, resist oppression and violence, and strive to transform religion, society, and politics.⁶² American feminist scholar and Roman Catholic theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether (1936 – 2022) indicates that feminism is a critical stance that challenges the patriarchal gender paradigm.⁶³ Patriarchal stereotypes define males as superior and dominant, and males establish the rules and standards for society. According to Ruether, feminist theology “takes feminist critique and reconstruction of gender paradigms into the theological realm.”⁶⁴ It is a broad and multifaceted concept, making it challenging to define precisely. However, Ruether highlights common concerns among Christian women theologians, including the critique of sexist symbols in Christianity and the reconstruction of vital theological concepts—such as God, Christ, humanity, nature,

⁶² Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Between Movement and Academy: Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century,” in *Feminist Biblical Studies in the Twentieth Century: Scholarship and Movement*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Atlanta, GA: Atlanta Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), 4.

⁶³ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “The Emergence of Christian Feminist Theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, ed. Susan Frank Parsons, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 3.

⁶⁴ Ruether, “The Emergence of Christian Feminist Theology,” 3.

sin, and salvation—from women's perspective. This work aims to affirm the full and equal humanity of women.⁶⁵ She also underscores the critical role of theological education in the emergence of feminist theology in North America. During the 'first wave' of feminism from the 1840s to the 1920s, women gained access to higher education, property rights, and voting rights in the United States. Influenced by the feminist movement, women in Christian churches, especially within liberal Protestantism, gradually gained access to theological education and ministry beginning in the late twentieth century. By the 1970s, with the opening of ordination to women, more women entered theological schools, earned doctoral degrees, joined teaching faculties, and contributed to theological scholarship and church ministries.⁶⁶ Following the Second Vatican Council in the mid-1960s, many Catholic women also sought critical theological education at liberal Protestant theological schools. Although the Roman Catholic Church has not opened ordained ministry to women, this access to education allowed Catholic women to focus on theological reflection and writing.⁶⁷

As African American, Latina, and Asian women began to enter theological schools, feminist theology became increasingly diverse. These students realized that Euro-American feminist theology did not fully encompass their unique contexts and identities. By the 1980s, both white scholars and women of color critiqued the assumption that the

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶⁶ Ruether, "The Emergence of Christian Feminist Theology," 6-7.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

experiences of middle-class white women were universal.⁶⁸ It became clear that feminist theology could not have a future if it continued to "hear only the voices of white women trying to prescribe a universal feminism" for everyone.⁶⁹ Women from European, Latin American, Asian, and African backgrounds all sought to articulate their distinct feminist theological perspectives. Kwok Pui-Lan, a prominent voice in this discourse, identifies feminist theology as an intercultural dialogue.⁷⁰ She emphasizes that feminist theology is inherently contextual, pluralistic, and diverse and must consider differences in gender, class, race, and other social factors to remain relevant and inclusive.⁷¹

Influenced by the feminist movement and feminist theology in the West, Asian women recognized that both Western feminist theologians and Asian male theologians did not articulate their perspectives nor address their theological concerns. By the 1980s, Asian women began to advance their theological thought, advocate for women's ministry within the church, and create platforms for dialogue and action through conferences, publications, and women's organizations.⁷²

⁶⁸ Kwok Pui-Lan, "Feminist Theology as Intercultural Discourse," in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, ed. Susan Frank Parsons, (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 28-29.

⁶⁹ Kwok Pui-Lan, "The Future of Feminist Theology: An Asian Perspective," in *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader*, ed. Ursula King, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1994), 76.

⁷⁰ Kwok, "Feminist Theology as Intercultural Discourse," 23.

⁷¹ Kwok, "Feminist Theology as Intercultural Discourse," 23-24, 34.

⁷² Mary John Mananzan, "Feminist Theology in Asia: A Ten Years' Overview," *Feminist Theology* 4 (1995): 21-26.

Asian feminist theology exhibits several distinctive characteristics. First, in many Asian countries, the struggle for women's liberation was closely tied to anti-colonial and nationalist movements. Chung Hyun Kyung (b. 1956), an Asian feminist theologian, studies the characters of Asian feminist theology and points out that “Asian women's public visibility first occurred with the rise of the anti-colonial and nationalist movement” at the dawn of the twentieth century. Women fought alongside men to break the chain of imperialism and recover their countries' independence and self-determination. However, after many Asian societies attained relative peace through independence, other freedom movements subsided, and women were encouraged to withdraw back into their homes.⁷³ The struggle of Asian feminist theology intersects with broader social and political movements.

Second, Asian feminist theology centers on the lived experiences of women, especially their tears and suffering, which are deeply intertwined with the colonial and socio-economic challenges faced by many Asian countries. Women in Asia often endure multiple layers of oppression—both domestic and societal.

Third, Asian feminist theology is inherently contextual, acknowledging Asia's diverse religious, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Filipino Benedictine nun, theologian, and activist Mary John Mananzan, O.S.B (b. 1937) emphasizes that Asian feminist theology should not merely extend Western feminist frameworks but should be grounded in the specific experiences

⁷³ Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 11.

of Asian women.⁷⁴ Similarly, Kwok argues that Asian theology should have emerged from and responded to Asian realities.⁷⁵

Fourth, Asian feminist theology is dedicated to ensuring that the voices of Asian women are heard and recognized. Kwok highlights that women have often been marginalized and overlooked in historical narratives. This theological approach seeks to restore women's status as significant historical subjects.⁷⁶ She further asserts that if Asian women theologians hope to touch the Asian soul, they must develop their theologies within the context of Asian cultures and traditions and address the realities of impoverished women by speaking their language.⁷⁷

Fifth, for Asian feminist theologians, interpreting the Bible from a female perspective is paramount. Influenced by evangelical missionaries, many in Asia have traditionally approached Biblical narratives as scientific or historical accounts. Mukti Barton, a theologian from Bangladesh, emphasizes the need to understand the creation story as a text written in symbolic or pictorial language rather than a literal or historical account.⁷⁸ Constructing a relevant and culturally sensitive approach to Biblical interpretation is therefore crucial for Asian feminist theology.

⁷⁴ Mananzan, "Feminist Theology in Asia: A Ten Years' Overview," 25.

⁷⁵ Kwok Pui-Lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 31.

⁷⁶ Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 31.

⁷⁷ Kwok, "The Future of Feminist Theology," 66.

⁷⁸ Lee Oo Chuang and Asian Women's Resource Center of Culture and Theology eds., *Women of Courage: Asian Women Reading the Bible* (Seoul, Korea: Asian Women's Resource Centre of Culture and Theology, 1992), 42.

Most academic works on Asian feminist theology were published between 1990 and 2005. In the subsequent years, Asian theologians have increasingly focused on specific communities, striving to ensure that the voices of diverse female groups are represented. With 66.7 percent of the world's population residing in Asia, the region's vast diversity—encompassing numerous cultures, languages, religions, and traditions—necessitates a contextual approach to feminist theology. This approach involves developing theological perspectives that are tailored to the unique experiences of women in specific contexts, such as Korea, the Philippines, and India. This shift towards contextualized feminist theology reflects the broader trend of global feminist theology, signifying its growth and adaptation to varied cultural settings. By addressing the distinct realities of different communities within Asia, feminist theology not only acknowledges but also values the complex intersections of gender, culture, and tradition across the region.

When examining the field of Asian feminist theology, it is evident that substantial scholarly attention has been directed toward the experiences of Christian women in Korea, the Philippines, and India. Despite China representing nearly a quarter of the world's population, there is a striking scarcity of theological literature dedicated to Chinese Christian women. Chinese Christian women have contributed significantly to women's liberation and the development of Christianity in China. Their experiences and theological reflection hold the potential to provide invaluable insights and resources for global feminist theology.

The Starting Point of Chinese Christian Women's Theological Reflection

Protestant Christianity was introduced to China in the early nineteenth century, with Robert Morrison (1782 – 1834) becoming the first Protestant missionary to reach mainland China in 1807. During the first half of the nineteenth century, the missionary presence in China was predominantly male. Due to prevailing gender taboos in China at that time, male missionaries encountered considerable difficulties in engaging with Chinese women. This challenge underscored the critical need for female missionaries in the mission field. Initially, the earliest female missionaries in China were the wives of male missionaries. These women were expected to fulfill dual roles — managing their households while also contributing to evangelical, educational, and medical endeavors. When the demands of missionary work conflicted with family responsibilities, missionary wives often prioritized their domestic duties. Despite their desire to actively participate in missionary activities, many faced significant constraints imposed by their familial obligations. As a result, married missionary women became some of the earliest advocates within Christian missionary societies, urging for the deployment of single women to the mission field. Following the American Civil War (1861 – 1865), single missionary women from the United States began arriving in China, establishing long-term programs to engage and educate Chinese women.⁷⁹ According to Jane Hunter, professor of History Emerita at Lewis & Clark College, by 1890, women constituted approximately 60 percent of the missionaries sent from the United States, significantly

⁷⁹ Jane Hunter, *The Gospel of Gentility: American Women Missionaries in Turn-of-the-Century China*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 11.

contributing to the missionary efforts in China.⁸⁰ The Treaty of Nanjing in 1842 opened the treaty ports and allowed missionaries to legally enter these regions and expand their work. Gradually, Chinese women began to actively participate in the church, taking on roles such as Bible women. The earliest Bible women were often recruited from the employees of missionary households or from the wives and mothers of Chinese male evangelists.⁸¹ Their main responsibilities included teaching the Bible and preaching the Gospel to children and women. As their numbers and skills grew, these responsibilities extended to visiting the sick in hospitals and homes and supporting the church's educational, medical, and social ministries.⁸²

Over time, women missionaries recognized that training Chinese Christian women as Bible women was a more effective strategy for evangelizing their female compatriots. In his work “Gospel and Gender: Female Christians in Chaozhou, South China,” historian Joseph Tse-Hei Lee (b. 1971) highlights an essential characteristic of female Christian conversion in China. He notes that the Chinese tradition strongly emphasizes personal relationships as the primary means of disseminating the gospel. Everyone’s conversion was deeply influenced by their social connections, including acquaintances, relatives,

⁸⁰ Hunter, *The Gospel of Gentility*, 3.

⁸¹ Alexander Chow, “The Remarkable Story of China’s ‘Bible Women,’” *Christianity Today*, March 16, 2018, accessed April 15, 2024, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2018/march/christian-china-bible-women.html>.

⁸² Kwok Pui-Lan, “The Study of Chinese Women and the Anglican Church in Cross-Cultural Perspective,” in *Christian Women in Chinese Society: The Anglican Story*, eds. Wai Ching Angela Wong and Patricia P. K. Chiu (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2018), 19.

family members, and neighbors. Within this relational framework, Chinese Bible women played a crucial role in evangelizing and spreading the gospel.⁸³ Since then, Chinese women have never stopped engaging in the church's ministry. In many cases, women were the first members of their families to embrace Christianity, often becoming the catalyst for the conversion of their entire households. Chinese American theologian Alexander Chow underscores the significance of their contributions, asserting that "throughout the twentieth century, women played a vital role in spreading the gospel and nurturing new believers" and that "the history of Christianity in the world's largest country cannot be told without acknowledging the female evangelists and pastors who built its church."⁸⁴ These Chinese Christian women, along with Western women missionaries, helped lay the foundation for theological reflections from women's perspectives in China.

The women missionaries who came to China broke through certain gender limitations and gained greater opportunities for developing their potential. In her book *Women in Missionary*, historian Lin Meimei, an expert on the Episcopal church's missions in China, argues that in China, these women missionaries were no longer constrained or devalued by the cultural and moral values of their own country. They channeled the gender power they could not fully exercise in their native culture into education, healthcare, and missionary

⁸³ Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, "Gospel and Gender: Female Christians in Chaozhou, South China," in *Pioneer Chinese Christian Woman: Gender, Christianity, and Social Mobility*, ed. Jessie G. Lutz (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 2010), 185-186.

⁸⁴ Alexander Chow, "The Remarkable Story of China's 'Bible Women.'"

work led by their mission organizations in China.⁸⁵ They became teachers and principals in mission schools, hospital directors, and leaders within the church. They advanced women's education, advocated for natural feet and free choice in marriage, and strongly opposed the practice of infanticide. For example, Mary Ann Aldersey (1797 –1868), one of the first Christian women missionaries to serve in China, established the Zhu Du Qiao Girls' School in Ningbo, Zhejiang — the first school for girls in mainland China. This pioneering effort paved the way for more Chinese women to gain access to education in the years that followed. These missionary schools for women gave rise to the first professional women in China and equipped women for their emancipation. However, women missionaries still adhered to traditional Christian views of womanhood, embracing the "cult of true womanhood," which emphasized qualities such as piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.⁸⁶ They particularly valued the importance of a humble, wise, and well-educated mother within the family. These women missionaries brought more open views of women to Chinese society and introduced new resources and perspectives that expanded societal opportunities for Chinese women, enabling Chinese Christian women to become pioneers in publicly addressing issues of women's oppression and liberation. However, as Kwok argues, their advocacy of female

⁸⁵ Lin Meimei 林美玫, *Women in Missionary: The Study of the Episcopal Women Missionaries and Their Endeavors in China (1835-1900)* (《妇女与差传: 19世纪美国圣公会女传教士在华差传研究》), (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2011), 20.

⁸⁶ Kwok, "The Study of Chinese Women and the Anglican Church in Cross-Cultural Perspective," 24.

domesticity aligned with the traditional Chinese belief that a woman's place was in the home rather than contradicting it.⁸⁷

By the turn of that century, and especially during the first two decades of the twentieth century, China was undergoing significant reforms aimed at radical social transformation to ensure its survival. Chinese women who participated in the May Fourth Movement of 1919 and later in the Communist Revolution expressed more radical views on women's roles than many of the missionaries. During the May Fourth Movement, female students were at the forefront of mass demonstrations against foreign aggression, demanding sexual equality and recognition as individuals beyond the traditional roles of wives and mothers. Driven by a strong sense of patriotism, these women pursued equal rights with men, participating in street protests to defend national sovereignty and engaging in political and social reforms.

Kwok stated that these more radical views of womanhood clashed with the evangelical ideals of female domesticity and submissiveness. Many women missionaries did not support their students in taking part in political activities.⁸⁸ In her book, *Chinese Women and Christianity, 1860 – 1927*, Kwok argues that the Christian mission may well have paved the way for the women's movement by providing female education and calling attention to women's issues. But, gradually, “the Christian circle seems to have fallen behind the times to be criticized as both conservative and patriarchal by modern

⁸⁷ Kwok, “The Study of Chinese Women and the Anglican Church in Cross-Cultural Perspective,” 25.

⁸⁸ “The Study of Chinese Women and the Anglican Church in Cross-Cultural Perspective,” 25.

Chinese women.”⁸⁹ At the end of the nineteenth Century and in the early twentieth century, Christian efforts increasingly provided Chinese women with more opportunities to leave their homes and engage in education, evangelism, and medical services. Many Christian women, particularly those who received higher education, played active roles in social reform and national revival. They championed women's rights, explored their gender identity, and developed gender consciousness from their unique perspectives as women, Chinese, and Christians. These Chinese Christian women worked to advance women's education and leadership while advocating for their right to be involved in church ministries. In her paper “Women and Church,” Cheng Guanyi (Ruth Cheng 诚冠怡) questioned why women were not recognized for certain roles within the church and challenged the church to expand women's involvement in ministry.⁹⁰ Ding Shujing (丁淑静, 1890 – 1936), the first Chinese executive director of the YWCA, highlighted the revolutionary nature of Jesus' attitude towards women, contrasting it with Jewish traditions.⁹¹ Zeng Baosun (曾宝荪, 1893 – 1978), a Confucian Christian feminist,⁹² historian, and prominent educator, made significant contributions to this discussion. Graduating from Westfield College with honors in 1916, she became the first Chinese woman to receive a

⁸⁹ Kwok Pui-lan, *Chinese Women and Christianity, 1860-1927* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1992), 283.

⁹⁰ Cheng Guanyi, “Women and the Church (妇女与教会),” *Chinese Record* 53(1922): 530.

⁹¹ Ding Shujing, “Status of Women in the Church,” *Young Women's Journal* 7(1928): 22.

⁹² Zeng Baosun, *Confucian Feminist: Memoirs of Zeng Baosun (1893 – 1978)*. Translated and adapted by Thomas L. Kennedy (Philadelphia, PA: American Philosophical Society, 2002), the title of the book.

Bachelor of Science degree from the institution. Zeng Baosun dedicated her life to issues concerning Chinese women. In a speech to youth, she identified five pitfalls to avoid, one being the refusal of women to pursue education. She advocated for women's education and believed that women should not only focus on domestic roles but also aspire to be good citizens.⁹³ These reflections marked the beginning of Chinese Christian women's theological exploration. However, such theological thinkings and explorations have not been continuously developed.

The period from 1949 to the late 1970s in China was marked by profound political and social upheavals that deeply influenced the development of Christianity and theological research. Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, churches, seminaries, and related religious institutions became increasingly subject to the pressures of political movements, such as the Anti-Rightist Movement in 1957 and the Great Leap Forward from 1957 to the early 1960s. These movements sought to reshape Chinese society according to socialist principles. Consequently, theological education and church activities faced significant restrictions, leading to periods of stagnation. The situation reached a critical point during the Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976), a decade of intense ideological fervor aimed at purging elements considered counter-revolutionary or bourgeois. During this period, churches, seminaries, and Christian organizations were forcibly closed, and public religious practices were forbidden. Many pastors, ministers, and theologians were sent to rural areas for "re-education" through manual labor, particularly

⁹³ Zheng Ziyang, "The Speech of Zeng Baosun: The Wrong Way of the Youth," *师中季刊*, *Normal Middle School Quarterly* 21(1936): 52.

farming. This forced displacement disrupted theological education and severed the intellectual and spiritual leadership that had sustained the Christian community. As a result of these political and social interventions, theological research and development in China virtually ceased during this period, theological discourse was silenced, and the transmission of Christian teachings was mainly interrupted. Theological exploration from women's perspectives did not resume until the political climate began to shift in the late 1970s, leading to the reopening of seminaries and churches in the early 1980s.

Feminist Theology Development in China After the 1980s

In April 1979, the first church in Ningbo, Zhejiang Province, was reopened for Christian worship, signaling the start of a wave of church and seminary reopening across China. Alongside this revival, a growing emphasis on women and exploring feminist theology began to take shape within the church. In October 1980, the China Christian Council (CCC) was established, and its inaugural committee meeting was held in Nanjing on October 14. Of the 140 committee members, 17 were women, and Bishop K. H. Ting, a male, was elected as the council's president. Notably, two of the nine vice presidents were women,⁹⁴ underscoring the increasing recognition of women's status in the Chinese church and marking a significant step toward their involvement in church decision-making. The establishment of the Women's Ministry Committee under the CCC in 1993 further highlighted this progress. As the first national women's organization in the church of China since

⁹⁴ Sun Meici (孙美慈), "Contemporary Chinese Feminist Theology, 1980 – 1994 (现今中国妇女神学1980-1994)," in *The Status of Women in the Christian Church of China* (中国教会中妇女的境况), ed. Chinese Studies Group (Geneva, Switzerland: Lutheran World Federation, Dept. for Theology and Studies, 1997), 143.

1949, it signified a new chapter in women's ministry. Through the efforts of the Women's Ministry Committee, a conference on Women's Ministry and Theological Thought Construction was held in Shanghai in February 2000. This event was one of the few within the China Christian Council's framework that concentrated on women's ministry and feminist theology specifically. These articles produced from this conference were subsequently published in the second and third issues of *Nanjing Theological Review* that same year⁹⁵ and have since become key resources for the study of feminist theology in China.

In 1981, Nanjing Union Theological Seminary reopened, becoming the first seminary to do so in China. The inaugural class included 47 students, 18 of whom were women.⁹⁶ Shortly after that, feminist theology began to make its way into the seminary. In February 1982, Bishop K. H. Ting, the seminary president, delivered a lecture introducing students to the feminist theological movements that had emerged in Europe and America during the 1970s. This lecture marked the first time students at the seminary were exposed to feminist theological concepts.⁹⁷ By 1985, Bishop Ting further advanced this discourse with a lecture titled "God is Not Male," where he explored the understanding of God from a feminist theological lens. He emphasized that with the rise of the feminist movement, there was a growing conversation within the church challenging the traditional view of God as exclusively male.

⁹⁶ Sun Meici, "Contemporary Chinese Feminist Theology, 1980-1994," 144. Sun Meici and Gao Ying were in this class.

⁹⁷ Sun Meici, "Contemporary Chinese Feminist Theology, 1980-1994," 144.

Instead, he advocated for incorporating feminine and maternal imagery to deepen the understanding of God.⁹⁸ In the Fall Semester of 1993, Nanjing Union Theological Seminary offered its first elective course on feminist theology by an emerging scholar and lecturer at the seminary, Peng Yaqian (彭雅倩). Reference books included works by Letty M. Russell, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Chung Hyun Kyung, among others.⁹⁹ These reference books demonstrated that this course closely follows the latest developments of feminist theology in the West. The first issue of *Nanjing Theological Review* in 1994 focused on feminist theology. Peng Yaqian published a paper titled "Feminist Theology — A Reflection on Christian Tradition," which reexamined and responded to traditional Christianity from a feminist theological perspective. She argued that the aim of feminist theology was not to negate Christianity, as some might think, but to enable Christianity to emit a message and radiate relevance to the new era, making it more accessible and accepted by a broader audience.¹⁰⁰

Interactions with the global Christian community inspired Chinese Christians, theologians, ministers, and pastors to deeply explore the role of Chinese Christian women in the Church and the implications of feminist theology within the Chinese context. For instance, from June 22 to July 16, 1988, the China Christian Council sent a delegation of five women, including Cao Shengjie, to visit churches, seminaries, and institutions across the United Kingdom. During this period, feminist theology was gaining traction in the UK, although it

⁹⁸ "God is Not Male" was published as "Female, Motherhood, and Divinity" in *The Selected Writings of K. H. Ting (丁光训文集)* (Nanjing, China: Yilin1998), 229-233.

⁹⁹ Sun Meici, "Contemporary Chinese Feminist Theology, 1980 – 1994," 148-151.

remained relatively unfamiliar to Chinese Christian women outside of seminary settings. Nevertheless, these five women, despite not explicitly using the term, recognized that they shared a common belief with these British women: both men and women are created in the image of God. Consequently, women should not undervalue themselves but actively strive to fulfill God's mission in their respective roles. At that time, debates surrounding the ordination of women were prevalent in the UK. The Chinese women pastors in the delegation, by sharing their experiences, highlighted those women in China who also fulfilled pastoral responsibilities. This testimony was met with gratitude and praise from British Christians.¹⁰¹

In June 1990, a delegation of ten American theology professors and ten Asian women theologians visited China. Among them was Dr. Kwok Pui-Lan from the Theological group of Chung Chi College at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and Letty Russell from Yale University. They gave lectures to students and held discussions with some female students and faculty.¹⁰² Subsequently, in 1992, Kwok Pui-Lan's article titled "Feminist Theology" was published in the *Nanjing Theological Review*. At the end of the article, she said, "I hope that the Chinese church will establish a Chinese feminist theology."¹⁰³ These exchanges and visits broadened the perspectives of the Chinese church, especially for many female believers, ministers, students, and faculty in seminaries. They were prompted to reevaluate their theological perspectives.

¹⁰¹ Cao Shengjie, "Sister in Solidarity, Visiting Britain (姐妹联袂, 远访英伦)," in *Contextual Reflection—Collected Works of Cao Shengjie* (境遇中的思考——曹圣洁文集) (Shanghai, China: TSPM & CCC, 2010), 183-184.

¹⁰² Sun Meici, "Contemporary Chinese Feminist Theology, 1980-1994," 146.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

Based on the research above, feminist theology was effectively promoted and practiced in Chinese churches, seminaries, and institutions from the 1980s to the early 2000s. During this period, a small but active group of women theologians and ministers emerged, working to expand women's space in the church, particularly at the decision-making level. They sought to develop feminist theology within the Chinese context through theological research, education, and practical application in church life. However, after this period, feminist theology has seemed to be slowly slipping away from the Church, much like a passing trend, and has not developed into a Chinese feminist theology as some theologians had hoped. The reasons behind this trend are worth exploring.

During this period (from the 1980s to the early 2000s), there was a global emphasis on gender equality, and churches worldwide actively participated in it. The entire Chinese society was also eager to participate in and integrate with the global development trends. The promotion of feminist theology and the enhancement of women's role in the church had largely been influenced by these external factors. The United Nations designated 1975 – 1985 as the "Decade for Women." In 1985, after the closing events of the UN Decade, the Subunit on Women from the World Council of Churches (WCC) undertook a survey to evaluate the responsiveness of the churches to the concerns of the UN Decade. The Subunit reported in 1987 that there was little engagement with the UN Decade and concluded that rather than offering leadership in matters of justice for women, the churches were often lagging behind. The central committee, therefore, agreed to launch an Ecumenical Decade

of Churches in Solidarity with Women (1988 – 1998) “in view of the need for a long-term framework for addressing the concerns and perspectives of women.” The Decade was to be “addressed to churches and to women at the local level to empower women to challenge structures and to respond to the issues in the society around them.” It would focus on “the situation of women in the churches as well as the churches’ participation in improving the conditions for women in society.” The central committee further affirmed that as the Decade was implemented, the emphasis should be “on work with women and not for women,” with the intention of “encouraging every parish, community, diocese, and district to work out specific ways to bring about needed changes to ensure greater participation of women.”¹⁰⁴ In 1991, the China Christian Council participated in the WCC as a member. The Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women also encouraged the China Christian Council to give women more space in church, seminary, and organization. The Fourth World Conference on Women and the NGO Forum on Women, organized by the United Nations, were held in Beijing in September 1995. The China Christian Council participated in these events.¹⁰⁵ In preparation for these events, the July 1995 issue of *Tian Feng* focused on Christian women and their roles in church ministry. In 1992, Dr. Gunnar Stalsett, Secretary General of the Lutheran World Federation, first proposed a research project on China. This project was approved by the

¹⁰⁴ Gail Allan, “We Intend to Move Together: The Story of Ecumenical Women on a Pilgrimage of Gender Justice,” *International Review of Mission*, 104(2015): 9-10.

¹⁰⁵ Cao Shengjie, “The Role of Chinese Christian Women in Education (中国基督教妇女在教育与发展中的作用),” in *Contextual Reflection — Collected Works of Cao Shengjie* (境遇中的思考——曹圣洁文集), (Shanghai, China: TSPM & CCC, 2010), 191-200.

Executive Committee of the Lutheran World Federation in 1994. One of the themes of this research project was the situation of women in the church of China. The findings were published in 1997 under the title *The Status of Women in the Church of China*.¹⁰⁶ Gao Ying also pointed out that these external factors have played a greater role in changing the status of women in Chinese churches than internal factors such as church self-renewal and theological reflection. The elevation of women's status lacks the necessary theological depth and theoretical foundation.¹⁰⁷ Her commentary excellently points out why feminist theology has not gained deeper development within the Chinese church.

In mainland China, the churches and seminaries had been closed, and public religious practice was effectively halted for fifteen years during the Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976). The interruption of theological education and church ministries lead to the cessation of theological thinking. In the early 1980s, the seminaries and churches in mainland China reopened. However, for the next twenty years, the church focused on evangelizing, shepherding the congregations, and building churches. The seminaries also focused mainly on training pastors for the church rather than developing theologians. These circumstances led to a weakening of the theological heritage and theoretical foundation in China.

The construction of a comprehensive theological system requires the sustained efforts of more than one generation.

¹⁰⁶ Sun Meici, "Contemporary Chinese Feminist Theology, 1980-1994," 143.

¹⁰⁷ Gao Ying, "Women's Ministry in the Church of China under God's Providential Care and Grace," 19.

In churches that belong to the China Christian Council, women now have equal opportunities to enter seminaries for theological education, the ordination of women pastors is no longer controversial, and some women have gained a role in church decision-making. However, this progress does not signify that gender equality has been fully achieved or that the goals of feminist theology have been realized. The situation is far from ideal. Theological discourse remains predominantly male-centered, and women's experiences remain primarily excluded from theological reflection. Many women continue to see themselves as inferior to men, and numerous churches still hold the belief that the revival of male members is vital to the church's prosperity. Furthermore, teachings that emphasize a wife's submission and the notion that motherhood is a woman's most important role are still prevalent. Influenced by "Reform Theology" or "Calvinist Theology," women should neither preach nor play a leadership role in church but should only be church helpers or assistants.¹⁰⁸ Since 2018, with the rise of the #MeToo movement, feminist consciousness has been growing across Chinese society. Topics related to women, such as single women labeled as "leftovers," women's reproductive rights, and the tension between individual development and familial responsibilities, are being actively discussed on social media. In this context, the Chinese church must help women—both Christian and non-Christian—gain a deeper understanding of their gender identity. Additionally, it is crucial to develop a feminist theology that not only reflects the Chinese context but also engages with global perspectives.

¹⁰⁸ Kang Jie, "Theological Transformation and the Changing Role of Women in the Chinese House Church," in *Modern Chinese Theology Volume 2: Independent and Indigenous*, ed. Chloë Starr (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2023), 69.

Prospects for Chinese Feminist Theologies

When considering Chinese feminist theology, the first question is how to name theological reflections from Chinese women's perspectives appropriately. For many Chinese, the term "feminist" is perceived as too radical and challenging to embrace. Kwok Pui-Lan notes that "feminist" often carries connotations of militancy, man-hating, and separatism, particularly in the Western context.¹⁰⁹ Feminism is translated as the "women's rights movement" in the Chinese language, which carries political overtones that may further alienate potential supporters.¹¹⁰

Despite these challenges, Kwok Pui-Lan advocates for retaining the term "feminist" in Asian feminist theology, arguing that every group should have the freedom to use and redefine such terms within their own cultural context.¹¹¹ In this paper, I chose "Chinese feminist theology" as the appropriate designation, as it facilitates dialogue with both Asian feminist theologies and the broader global feminist theological movement. As we work to develop Chinese feminist theologies, I propose several approaches to initiate this critical discourse.

Interaction Between Chinese Traditional Culture and Christian Teaching

For Western missionaries, conversion meant a public declaration of faith in Jesus Christ as the Savior, actively

¹⁰⁹ Kwok Pui-Lan, "The Future of Feminist Theology: An Asian Perspective," *Feminist theology from the Third World: A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 65.

¹¹⁰ Kwok, "The Future of Feminist Theology," 65.

¹¹¹ Kwok, "The Future of Feminist Theology," 65.

participating in a Christian community, and breaking away from non-Christian beliefs and practices.¹¹² During the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, the dominant view was that Christianity and Chinese culture were fundamentally contradictory and in conflict. The arrival of Christianity in China was intertwined with colonialism, unequal treaties, and the imposition of Western culture. As a foreign religion, Christianity must take root within Chinese culture to thrive in China. Therefore, the Christian faith must engage with Chinese culture in its native context. As Chinese Christians, we are inherently tied to both our cultural heritage and our faith. Chinese feminist theology, therefore, has a dual role: to critique the oppression and discrimination of women within Chinese culture and to draw upon the unique resources that Chinese culture offers to the study of feminist theology. Moreover, Chinese Christianity should seek to value enculturation, and Chinese feminist theology could be at the forefront of this goal.

The ordination to the priesthood of Florence Li Tim Oi (李添媛, 1907 – 1992) in 1944 was an extraordinary event. She became the first woman priest in the Anglican Community.¹¹³ After Li Tim Oi's ordination to the priesthood, Bishop Ronald O. Hall spoke in May 1946,

I do not think that we need to be surprised that the ordination of women to the ministry of our

¹¹² Lee, "Gospel and Gender," 190.

¹¹³ Philip L. Wickeri, "The Ordination and Ministry of Li Tim Oi: A Historical Perspective on a Singular Event," in *Christian Women in Chinese Society: The Anglican Story*, eds. Wai Ching Angela Wong and Patricia P. K. Chiu, (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2018), 107.

Church should come first in China; . . . In many ways, Christianity has brought new freedom and opportunity for women in China, but Chinese civilization has always given a higher place to women both in culture and social life than any other civilization apart from Christianity. . . . Little wonder then that God should have used China's old culture and Cantonese progressiveness to prepare a woman to be called by Christ to his Ministry.¹¹⁴

As Bishop Hall appraised, women received higher status in Chinese civilization. Chinese culture can provide supportive resources to feminist theology. Therefore, when we try to do Chinese feminist theology, it is possible to find positive resources from within Chinese culture.

Wang Weifan (1927 — 2015), a professor at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, in his exploration of Chinese feminist theology, proposed that it should be centered around the concept of maternal love, a theme deeply embedded in Chinese literary tradition. He argued that maternal love, an idea that resonates profoundly with the Chinese people, should be at the heart of Chinese feminist theology—suggesting that Chinese feminist theology should be a theology of maternal love.¹¹⁵

The Reconciliation Between Man and Woman

¹¹⁴ Wickeri, "The Ordination and Ministry of Li Tim Oi," 112-113.

¹¹⁵ Weifan Wang 汪维藩, "Chinese Maternal Love Literature and Maternal Love Theology (中国的母爱文学与母爱神学)," *Nanjing Theological Review* 3 (1995): 1-7.

In her book *Struggle to Be the Sun Again*, Chung Hyun Kyung points out that Asian feminists should be in harmony with noble Asian culture and should not be confrontational.¹¹⁶ Many Chinese Christians perceive terms like womanist, feminist, and empowering women as indicative of a refusal to submit and a desire to challenge men's rights and authority. On one hand, Chinese women, with a noble culture that stretches back many thousands of years, aspire to promote women's flourishing and contribute to their development. On the other hand, they hesitate to identify as feminists due to the aggressive and militant stereotypes associated with the term.

Cao Shengjie advises against merely replicating Western feminist theology, urging Chinese women to use their unique gifts to cooperate with male counterparts to make meaningful contributions to the Chinese church.¹¹⁷ Wang Peng, a New Testament professor in China, suggests that feminist theology and hermeneutics in the Chinese church should emphasize the message of reconciliation and love in the Bible.¹¹⁸ Chinese feminist theology should not foster tension between genders but rather highlight their unity. Kwok explains that A and negation A must be exclusive in Western philosophy. The A and negation A are "correlated, interdependent, and interpenetrating in yin-yang philosophy."¹¹⁹ Kwok uses the "Power-with-others" of Rita Nakashima Brock (b. 1950). The

¹¹⁶ Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again*, 14.

¹¹⁷ Cao Shengjie, "Feminist Theology and Chinese Church (妇女神学与中国教会)," *Nanjing Theological Review* 3 (2000): 36.

¹¹⁸ Wang Peng, "Christian View of Women (基督徒女性观)," *Chinese Religion* 34 (2002): 28.

¹¹⁹ Kwok, "The Future of Feminist Theology: An Asian Perspective," 69.

emphasis is on the model of power-with-others rather than power-over-others. Power-over-others means to control and dominate. Whereas, power-with-others is based on the interconnection that exists between all who share in a community.¹²⁰ Lu Yifan uses Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's (b. 1938) "equal disciple" to stress that "equal but different" between men and women. She emphasizes that men and women both belong to humanity. When doing feminist theology, we need to respect women and men simultaneously and promote a mutual and interdependent relationship.¹²¹

For Western feminist theologians, feminist theology concentrates on critiquing patriarchy. Emphasizing reconciliation between males and females might lead them to fear that this approach risks diluting the critical edge of feminist theology. New Testament theologian Khiok-Khng Yeo (b. 1960) argues that the primary enemy of feminism is not men but the androcentric binary structure and thought.¹²² These systems of oppression and discrimination harm both women and men. Therefore, the vision of feminist theology should be to liberate all from these harmful structures.¹²³ If women adopt a self-righteous, self-centered attitude, treating their own experiences as absolute authority and opposing men, it is not a victory for feminism but a defeat. Khiok-Khng Yeo insists that feminist theology emphasizes co-humanity and liberates all

¹²⁰ Kwok, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*, 106.

¹²¹ Lu Yifan, "'Equal Discipleship': Exploring Chinese Feminist Theology," *The Ecumenical Review* 71 (2019):75.

¹²² Khiok-Khng Yeo, *Eve, Gaia, and God* (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2008), preface 5.

¹²³ Yeo, *Eve, Gaia, and God*, 24.

humans from gender stereotypes.¹²⁴ Therefore, feminist theology must persist in critiquing the androcentric and hierarchy system. However, it should not elevate women's experiences to an absolute authority or exclude other genders from the discussion.

For Chinese feminist theology, we need to ensure the flourishing of women's lives, to explore equal spaces to develop women's potentials. Meanwhile, Chinese feminist theology also needs to emphasize the cooperation and the reconciliation between men and women.

Integrating Women's Ministry and Feminist Theology

Gao Ying shows that practice always comes before theory in the Chinese church.¹²⁵ The Chinese church emphasizes practice rather than theory. From 1980 to 2010, the number of Christians in Chinese churches proliferated. Chinese churches did not have enough energy to construct their theological views, but instead, they focused on ministry. Cao Shengjie stresses that the Chinese Church should not only focus on women's ministry but also pay attention to the development of feminist theology.¹²⁶

Women's ministry and feminist theology can benefit each other. Feminist theology can help women value themselves, see themselves as equal to men, and acquire better self-esteem, self-confidence, self-reliance, and self-

¹²⁴ Ibid., 63.

¹²⁵ Gao Ying, "Discuss Women Ministry in Chinese Church," *Nanjing Theological Review* 3 (2000), 53.

¹²⁶ Cao Shengjie, "Feminist Theology and Chinese Church," 35.

improvement.¹²⁷ Feminist theology also can guide the church to deal with gender issues.¹²⁸ Experience is one of the significant resources for theological reflection. Women's ministry in Chinese churches can provide rich experiences to feminist theology and offer resources to Chinese feminist theology to develop its unique understanding. Christian women of today should inherit the useful experiences of female ministry so far. In Chinese church history, many Christian women, including Lin Qiaozhi (林巧稚), Shi Meiyu (石美玉), Wu Yifang (吴贻芳), and Florence Li Tim Oi (李添媛), have made remarkable contributions through their everyday lives. These women maintained their faith, served the church and society, and became lights and salt to those around them, benefiting others and bringing glory to God.

Chinese feminist theology should also take responsibility for liberating Chinese non-Christian women from the traditional Chinese preference for sons over daughters, sexual violence, domestic violence, discrimination against women in the workplace, especially against mothers, and discrimination against older leftover women.

Keeping the Global Vision

Chinese feminist theology must be rooted in the specific Chinese context, spread Chinese women's voices, and study theology from the perspectives of Chinese women. However, Chinese feminist theology must also keep its global vision. As Kwok reminds us, Feminist theology cannot just focus on the

¹²⁷ Yi Xiang and Cao Shengjie, "Let Women Play a Greater Role (让妇女发挥更大的作用)," in *Tian Feng* 3 (1994): 29.

¹²⁸ Gao Ying, "Discuss Women Ministry in Chinese Church," 53.

local situation but must have a global vision.¹²⁹ She argues that feminist theology in the past has challenged the tendency to universalize the self and highlighted the differences between other women because of class, race, age, and sexual preference. However, the notions of the multiple-subject positions of women and the hybridized self would open new possibilities for the overlapping of identities and for mutual engagement. It is important for women working across differences to challenge the binary and exclusionary construct of the self and the other and to begin to see the self in the other.¹³⁰

Women's issues are not a local issue but a global one. These issues, such as sexual violence and domestic violence, transcend national borders and cannot be resolved by any one country alone. Thus, it is essential to establish worldwide support and cooperation to address these issues effectively. Chinese feminist theology must be grounded in the specific needs of Chinese women while also considering the global context. When discussing Chinese feminist theology, it is crucial to recognize that Chinese women are part of the broader Asian community. Similarly, Asian feminist theology should not be framed in opposition to Western perspectives or Christianity. What is unique to a particular context can also offer valuable insights on a global scale.

Conclusion

¹²⁹ Kwok Pui-lan, "Development of Feminist Theology," *Regent Review of Christian Thought* 11 (2010): 6.

¹³⁰ Kwok Pui Lan: "Feminist Theology as Intercultural Discourse", 36.

By the influence of Western feminist theology and Asian feminist theology, with the rise of Chinese women's consciousness, Chinese feminist theology began to sprout. Some Chinese Christians, especially Chinese Christian women, had done some theological thinking from women's lenses. Doing Chinese feminist theology requires that Chinese Christians inherit the traditions of Chinese Christian women, continue to interact with Chinese culture and Christian faith, integrate the practice and theories, unite man and woman, and keep the global vision in order to continue to explore and develop Chinese feminist theologies that make a difference not only in China but also beyond.

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