

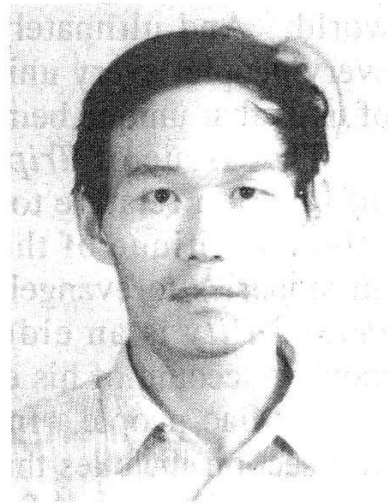
## *The Spread of Christianity and Cultural Evolution among Minority Nationalities in Southwest China*

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(Editor's Note: The following article is taken from *Studies in World Religions*, #56 (1993, #4). It was translated for English publication with the author's permission.)

After completing his study of the minority groups of Southwestern China in the early 1930's, Jiang Yingliang made the following observation: "Christian evangelization among them has created a new cultural entity." These words still retain a certain validity today. Unfortunately, very little research has been done during the intervening years to measure the profound influence Christianity has had in the past and continues to have in the present on these traditional ethnic groups. I hope this article may serve to reverse that trend by reawakening interest in China's southwest minorities and stimulating more scholarly exchanges on the subject.



Southwestern China describes a frontier area extending from the Yunnan-Guizhou plateau to the borders of Burma and Vietnam. Roads link the territory through Burma to India in the west, while the Jinsha and Changjiang rivers offer easy access to Hubei, Hunan, Jiangxi, Anhui and Jiangsu in the east and south. The region is, then, one of great strategic importance. This was a fact not lost on 19th century Western imperialists, who turned their attention to the area after they had annexed Burma and Vietnam. Driven by greed and bent on further colonization, the imperialists saw an opportunity to expand their influence deep into China's interior. Using both military and economic means to achieve their aims, they also flooded the area with large numbers of foreign missionaries. It was under these circumstances that Christianity came to gain a foothold in the region.

These missionaries, however, were not the first to arrive in the area. About 200 years earlier, during the Qianlong reign (1736-1796), at a time when Christianity was proscribed by imperial edict throughout China, a number of Jesuits fled to Yunnan province and surreptitiously took up residence in the city of Daguanting. While the Christians of the area trace their origins to these early missionaries, the Jesuit enterprise of the early Qing cannot be compared in numbers or impact to the great waves of Catholic and Protestant missionaries who began arriving in the 19th century, and with a notable difference. The Jesuits who had come earlier encountered a China with a strong centralized government whose sovereignty was intact and firmly in control. The early Qing government had made constant efforts to restrict any missionary movement and activity, at times even forbidding the preaching of Christianity entirely. As a result, the missionaries in this early stage made slow progress and the number of their converts were few and far between.

Following the Opium Wars, however, the Western powers through the Unequal Treaties wrested greater privileges from the weakened central authority and foreign missionaries were given more freedom of movement to preach and teach throughout the country. Large numbers of them headed for the Southwest. At first the missionaries directed their efforts to converting the Han, but having encountered strong resistance from traditional Confucian culture, they made little progress. It was then that they turned to the area's minority groups, who, because of their isolation were less educated and culturally less advanced. Minority group cultures had, in fact, been influenced hardly at all by the traditional humanism of the Han Chinese. This made it possible for them to convert to Christianity without experiencing any great loss of their own culture and its customs. However, their conversion to Christianity did not mean merely a change in religious faith but it also brought with it important political implications. Embracing Christianity served also to distance these border minorities from China's influence and make of them, as one Chinese researcher said at the time, "a people outside the boundaries of Chinese culture." Thus as they came more and more under the control of the foreigners their links with China gradually weakened until their lands in effect all but ceased to be under Chinese control and dominion. Fang Guoyu, just prior to the Liberation, pointed this out when he

said: "The Christian teachers in addition to poisoning and bewitching the people are scheming secretly to chart a course of separation by inciting the bandits to rebel against China." A missionary proclamation of the time underlined this same message when it stated: "Foreigners and their converts are not to be seen as under Chinese authority. Their lawsuits are not at the disposal of Han officials to judge. Taxes need not be paid to the government and they need not pay heed to any official communiques." The missionary Yang Zaiying told his adherents in Hushui: "What the government can do is limited, but there are no limits to what the Church can do."

As for minority converts, the tide of evangelization began to rise dramatically during the Tongzhi period (1864-1875). It experienced several new crests during the following decades, before finally ebbing to a trickle in the years following the founding of the People's Republic. Throughout this whole period, both Catholic and Protestant missionaries were quite active in the minority districts of the area. The Catholics, who represented French interests, were the more unified. Catholic activity, previously underground, began to surface during the early 1840's. But the bumper crop of conversions came during the final years of the 1870's when the Protestant churches became most active. The Protestant churches reflected the interests of the British and the United States. Called the "new" church, Protestants were split into many different denominations, with over ten major sects eventually working throughout the region. The most important and influential of these groups were: the China Inland Mission, the Methodists, the Anglicans, the Pentecostals, the Seventh Day Adventist and the Baptists. The Protestants arrived later than the Catholics but they made rapid progress. By the early 1920's Catholic influence was on the wane, while Protestant converts continued to increase right up into the 1950's when evangelization throughout China came to a virtual standstill.

Looking back into the history of the region, it must be said that Protestant evangelization produced amazing results among the minorities. While progress varied from group to group among the 20 minorities, as many as 90% of the members of some groups were converted. This made Christianity the religion of the entire ethnic minority. As for the number of churches to be found among them, they were said to be as

numerous as trees in a forest in the provinces of Yunnan, Guizhou and along both sides of the Sichuan border. There were 226 Gospel Halls on Kawa and Luohei mountains alone, and in the Miao and Yi districts of Guizhou in Sichuan the number of churches exceeded 40, causing one old timer to comment in awe: "Due to the efforts of their missionaries, the influence of the Catholic and Protestant churches remains great to this day within the walls of Miao and Yi villages."

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It is impossible to determine how many minority group Christians there are today. But we can surmise something of that number from the partial statistics that are readily available to us. At the time of the Liberation there were 5,000 Nu Christians in the counties of Bijiang and Fugong. This figure represented 61% of the population. In Weining, Guizhou, 45 of 50 Yi and Miao villages were registered as Christian. We also have the record of a passing missionary who in a two day period baptized 541 Miao converts in this area. Although Shimenkan was sparsely populated, still Christians there numbered between "40 to 50 thousand, mostly among the Miao." The 7,200 Christians of Hushui accounted for 80% of its total population.

There were many reasons for the widespread success of the missionaries among the minorities. China was a virtual colony of the imperial powers at that time, and the minorities themselves stood outside the sphere of influence of traditional Chinese. An additional and most important factor was to be found in the methods employed by the missionaries themselves. They made every effort to accommodate themselves and their message to minority life styles and local cultures. They wore the same clothing and learned to speak the same languages, and in this way forged a stronger ethnic identity among them. They creat-

ed phonetic systems to transcribe minority languages to transmit the Bible and other educational materials into written words. They also encouraged the formation and education of the young and introduced a "Miao teaching Miao" system of self-learning which involved the people in their own education. The missionaries drew heavily upon minority legends, myths and stories when preaching the Gospel which allowed them to feel culturally more at home in their new faith. They also built schools and hospitals to broaden and deepen their influence among the people; and they respected the existing social system, working primarily through their chiefs, courting and converting them and their families to their cause. In this way, they took advantage of the existing political and social patterns that centered authority in the person of the chieftain, a system which was also recognized by the Chinese imperial government. They were also quick to make use of local festivals and customs to proclaim their message and give it greater appeal. All in all, the missionaries proved themselves quite adept at turning the political and cultural situation of the minority groups to their own advantage.

Christian missionary methodology reflected a religious culture very different from that of the minorities in that it took hold of the centre of a convert's religious experience, infiltrating every aspect of his or her life. As a result, Christian converts actively distanced themselves from their traditional beliefs and former way of life. This led gradually to a major transformation in the cultures of these minorities.

Under the impact of Christianity, former religious beliefs began to weaken, as they were gradually replaced by the tenets of the new faith, which now became the espoused belief of a significant number of minorities. What Christianity replaced was, in most cases, a less sophisticated and more primitive form of tribal religion. Aside from the Tibetans who were Buddhists, some of the Lisus who were also Buddhists and the Hui who were Moslems, the religious beliefs of China's minorities, while differing in content and expression from group to group, shared elements common to all. Nature worship, reverence of deceased ancestors, ghosts and other spirits all played a major role. The transmitters of this ancient religious legacy were the shamans and they were referred to as "the preservers of traditional culture and historical legend." The beliefs and practices of the old faith were hard hit by the inroads of the new. As Christians

increased, the power of the shaman weakened. Among the Nu of Yunnan, it was said at that time that "sacrifices to the squatting god, the entrance god and the god of the hunt had all but vanished." The exalted reputation of the shaman suffered as a result, and "after the introduction of Christianity, his position could no longer be compared to what it had been."

Today over 80% of the Miaos in Fushi County are professed Christians with the Yi running a close second. Over 95% of the Lahus in the Nuofu district villages have converted to Protestantism. Christians comprise 90% of the Drung of Gongshan. These facts speak plainly of the decline of primitive religions among the minorities and their gradual transformation under the influence of Christianity.

One need look no further than the minority education system to see why Christianity has been so successful in attracting minority converts. If it is true that education organizes and conveys culture, then, in the development of culture, education plays the dominant role. Basically, it focuses on helping individuals to adjust to his or her natural and social environment. In primitive societies this goal remains the same, i.e. transmitting to its young the traditional religious beliefs, basic living and problem solving skills, attitudes, customs and lifestyles of the social group. While the goals may be the same, the style of education in primitive societies tends to be informal. It relies mainly on family living and the natural socialization process of the group. Among the Southwestern minorities, formal education was rare and children were exposed to a more primitive form, namely, they learned what they picked up through living in the family and in the narrow confines of their village group.

The Christian missionaries brought formal education to the minorities. They promoted schooling as part of their evangelical mission. "Schooling among the Miao barbarians began with the establishment of a school by the Protestant church in Anshun, Guizhou." Thus reads an official's report of the time. By the 1930's there were in the Anmenkan school system alone 52 primary schools with over 2,000 students spread over the three provinces of Guizhou, Yunnan and Sichuan. Missionaries also established schools among the Hani in Lunan, Lumei and Yichuang during the turn of the century. The system later expanded to include Qingshankou, Haiyi, Weize and other areas as well. Similar conditions could be found among the Jingpo

and Yi of Yunnan.

The purpose for establishing church schools was to aid in the spread of Christianity and the new ideas of Western culture. The Holiness Church stated that there were two good reasons for establishing a school: "One is to inspire the children at all times with the truth, helping them to receive excellent training on the road to attaining Christian truth; the second reason is to provide an opportunity to enter into discussion of the truth with the families of the students." A missionary pastor among the Miao in Guizhou said it even more plainly: "We are able through the students to make friends with their families and friends, and in this way the Gospel is preached in new places."

The form and content of such church schooling was profoundly influenced by its evangelical religious motivation. Church schools tended to have the following characteristics: 1.) the schools were owned by the church group which also provided for their financing; 2.) schools established among minorities accepted students first from the children of converts, with food, clothing and medical expenses all paid from church funds; 3.) the curriculum was Bible based, with "some courses in mathematics and geography thrown in", and the Bible was used also to "make up for student deficiencies in language and culture;" 4.) teaching materials in Chinese or local minority script were prepared and edited by missionaries; some examples were *The Bible, Poems of Praise, The Essence of the Gospel, Gospel Questions and Answers, A Textbook of Practical Hygiene, The Art of Calculating, World Geography*; 5.) Teachers were chosen from sincere believers, and were to be "evangelizers who use every opportunity to impart knowledge of God"; 6.) all school rules were in complete compliance with the laws and regulations of the sponsoring church.

If the most basic question of education is what kind of a person are we educating one to become, the answer in church schooling with its religious style and content is clear: he or she is to serve the needs of the church in spreading the Gospel. And this is the kind of graduate church schools did, in fact, turn out in large numbers: faithful and dedicated missionaries. Taking the school in Shimenkan as an example, statistics from a 1940's report state: "The school numbers among its alumni 5 university graduates, over 10 from senior high, 100 from junior high, and over 3,000 from primary school, having already produced a vast

host of missionaries." Among the alumni, it is also noted, were the second, third and fourth principals of the school itself.

While church schools, by promoting the movement away from primitive towards formal education among the minorities, had a vast effect on the minorities of the Southwest, they also weakened the ability of aboriginal education to insure and protect their own traditional cultures. Church schooling gradually opened a gap between formal education and primitive education, partially alienating those who received formal education from their native culture and traditions. A critic of the time wrote of these students: "Under the church's formation, they have become submerged in a religious atmosphere that reflects little of a national consciousness or identity. [The missionaries] see the school as a place of 'education for religion's sake' rather than 'education for the sake of education.'" With no pretense at being polite, we might say that the goal of church schooling was to provide the grave-diggers for the internment of minority traditional cultures. Thus we must regard the transformation of the minorities through formal church education more as a calamity for their traditional cultures than as a sign of social progress.

Another prominent example of the influence Christianity had on the lives of the minorities can be found in the evolution of traditional marriage customs.

Before the missionaries arrived, the minorities had fixed rules governing their marriage rites and customs. Marriage within and outside of the clan, marriages between first cousins, and those eligible to be given and received in marriage, these followed rules fixed by tradition. Monogamy, polygamy, the "common house" (a vestigial form of group marriage), and the growing trend in buying and selling brides all reflected the general development of marriage in minority cultures, revealing both modern traits and past traditions. The Christian church attacked and where it could smashed this system, leading converts to change their view and their behaviour to one that was in accord with church teaching. The church opposed concubinage and upheld monogamy. It forbade young people from taking part in 'common house' practices under threat of excommunication. Such rulings obviously strengthened the Christian consciousness of believers, however, the missionaries did use harsh methods to coerce ethnic converts to put away their concubines and break with 'the common houses'. On the other hand, histo-



ry also shows that only in rare cases did Christian converts take concubines. And where it did occur, the offending Christian did put away his concubine when confronted with excommunication and ask for readmittance into the church community. Among the Nu where the 'common house' system flourished, it was no longer found to be acceptable after a district became Christian. Thus was value of monogamy strengthened among Christian believers.

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The church maintained strict marriage codes: "A believer must marry a believer and only with permission of the minister; to take an unchristian spouse is grounds for excommunication." Other regulations concerning lineage and degrees of relationship forbade marriages of close relatives. The missionaries also intervened in marriage contracts and rituals in other ways. They demanded free choices be given to both men and women, that the bride's dowry should not exceed one cow or the slaughter of one pig which was to be used to feed the marriage guests. Some outlawed any exchange of gifts and demanded further that all marriages take place in church before a minister. These measures opposed the traditional customs of selling and buying brides, demanding excessive dowries (sometimes up to 30 and 40 cows), and marriages arranged by parents without the consent or against the wishes of those to be married. By this undermining of prevailing marriage customs the church gained further control over the people and many young men and women turned to Christianity as a form of protest against minority traditions.

Research studies have shown that the missionaries created a written language system for the Miao, Jingpo, Lisu, Dai, Lahu, Hani and Va, and perhaps for a few others as well. All were based on phonetic transcriptions of the mother tongue using the Latin alphabet. The system was simple and easy to grasp, and it

required only a few months for one to master both reading and writing. Naturally enough, this new written language, which was to transform the minorities from oral to written cultures, also became the vehicle for transmitting Christian literature, values and its world view. It opened the minorities to a vigorous Western cultural influence that represented something entirely different from their own. One of the important results was to be the erosion of traditional culture. As has been said: "Written and spoken language are the chief ingredients for assimilating ethnic groups. Whoever wants to eliminate the distance between races must first start working on language."

The efforts of the missionaries in creating written versions of minority languages proved highly successful. According to Yang Zhiyun, who was a missionary working among the Lisu, written Lisu became very popular, "with between 70 and 80,000 members now able to read and write their mother tongue". Among the Miao of the Wuding district, 9 out of 10 were able to read the Bible, and the Jingpo living along the Burma border were using the written language not only for church materials, but for turning out story books, expositions, letters and official government documents as well. While making the Bible available to these people was the main aim of the missionaries, the writings also conveyed notions about the superiority of Western culture. Written language also had the effect of reinforcing a common identity among members of the group. Missionaries spoke of how the Gospel was more readily accessible when transmitted in the local script, far easier than when reading the Han characters. Most missionaries were in fact not fluent in the use of Chinese characters, if they knew any at all. The minorities were thus turned away from Chinese characters and became biased against them, claiming they were too obtuse and difficult to understand. What gradually became more and more apparent was that the evolution of the minority writing had a marked religious character and it also served to disrupt the nurturing of a national consciousness.

The transformation of the consciousness of the minority national identity was indeed most profound. It marked a shift in the mood and mentality of the people, a change in the content of traditional culture and the consensus on which their national feelings were based. China is one country but admits of many different entities. The people of China are a composite of

various nationalities united in one body. To be a part of the whole, each minority must reach a consensus with China and the people of China, while at the same time seek an inner consensus among their own members. This forms the basis for a national identity and serves as the essential rule and guideline for relationships among all nationalities with each other as well as with the majority Han Chinese.

With the introduction of all kinds of new cultural principles and activities by the missionaries, a gradual but profound psychological change took place in the mentality of the minorities. It brought about an evolution in their self-understanding that threatened the traditional ties of a unified cultural consensus. First emotional conflicts arose within a given minority group between the Christians and non-Christians. Mutual consensus began to fragment as Christians turned their back on the past and non-Christians became more adamant in their loyalty to tradition, to their history with its legends, myths and ancient customs. Those elements within the minority group that mediated culture and consensus in the past now began to weaken and give way to the new emerging culture, a culture radically different, with Christianity as its nucleus, which began to vie for importance as an essential element in the formation of a new group consciousness. This presented various obstacles to a consensus on the national level. China found itself confronted and challenged by individuals among the minorities. There were those, usually non-Christians, who complained of neglect, saying: "Han officials have not come to us in years to see about the welfare of our children and grandchildren, our cattle and horses. They care nothing for us at all." If these complaints expressed a feeling of loss of strong feeling for the national consensus, believers went one step further. They denied any public alliance with the national consciousness and the Han government. They spoke only of the goodness of God and the goodness of America, of how strong and rich America was and how they had no choice but to rely on it for help in the future, especially since the Han were manifestly weak and unreliable. And what was the result of all of this?

In the early days of Liberation, many believers did follow the missionaries' call to break away from China and place their lands under England's jurisdiction.

Today the national consciousness of China's minorities

continues to evolve. On the whole, those of the Southwest have reached a firm consensus with the Chinese nation and their members have also agreed on maintaining strong relationships with each other within their minority group. Yet the evidence of the transforming effects Christianity has had on the minorities still remains, especially in their shift from a primitive individualistic cultural identity to a new consciousness of a national consensus.

The influence of Christianity on the minorities was not only seen in the shift away from national feelings and sentiments. These are the main elements in a national psychology and form part of the subjective consciousness of a nation. They are also responsible for the tendency among its people to affirm their own culture while rejecting all others as alien. When minority Christians moved away from their traditional past, they, too, affirmed the religious culture of an alien people. This opened them up psychologically to receive the non-religious elements of alien cultures as well. It was written of minority girls on the Burma border that they "wore Burmese clothing, combed their hair in style adorning it with flowers, wore fancy shoes and used rouge and lipstick." From religious views on faith and marriage to the smallest habits and conventions of day to day living, the national feelings and sentiments of minority Christians were indeed transformed by a shift in their affections.

To sum up, the spread of Christianity among the minority groups of the Southwest led to great changes in their traditional cultures and modes of social behaviour. It had a transforming effect on their religious beliefs, their marriage customs and rites, their modes of education and their new found written literature.

Through Christianity an alien culture took root in the minority cultures of China which led to large scale modifications of their traditional societies. In its most extreme form, this brought about the rejection of traditional culture and in some cases a partial realization of the missionary dream which was to convert entire nationalities to Christianity, a culture foreign to China.

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