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Saving the Damned: British Missionary Women and Visions of the East

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At the turn of the 19th century, Protestant and non-denominational missionary societies in Britain, having operated over the years to develop their evangelizing efforts at home, developed plans to expand their work throughout the British Empire. These missionary societies, such as the London Missionary Society, The Church Missionary Society, and the Baptist Missionary Society, traveled and took root in every corner of the British Empire and developed institutions that would allow them to spread not only Christianity but ideas of empire. Historians Emily Manktelow, Clare Midgley, Judith Rowbotham, and Delia Davin have written an incredible amount of work on the role missionaries societies—and the women in them—played in transmitting ideas of empire to not only the native populations they sought to "save" but also to population back home in Britain in the hope of garnering the public, and financial support needed to continue their missions. This essay will focus on the efforts of the Society for Promoting Female Education in the East (FES) in transmitting British imperial ideas of western domesticity throughout Britain and the colonies. Specifically, this essay will focus on the FES efforts in China. For most of the 19th century, female missionaries and missionary wives played a distinct role in the education of Chinese women to convert them into Christian models of civilization.

From the period of 1837 to 1889, the FES sent single women to various posts throughout China to work independently and alongside other Anglo missionary organizations working throughout China. Numerous scholars have explored the role of single women in the east. Recent research has argued that conceptualizations of race and gender in Anglo society played an essential role in the treatment of native populations, including their education. These women, working as agents of both mission society and imperialism, collaborated in published magazines in which they discussed their lived experiences within these populations. In 1854, the FES published the *Female Missionary Intelligencer*, a magazine written and funded by women missionaries and their supporters in the metropole. These publications offer a window into the thoughts and concerns British female missionaries had while working at posts from South Africa to North China. Most importantly, these magazines show how female missionaries transmitted ideas of race and gender, influenced by what they experienced in the many societies they worked in, back to London and the British heartland.

The FES, in their work of educating women and children in China, sought to promote the imperial idea of domesticity by creating Christian wives that would then, in turn, change Chinese society through the formation of Christian families.³ Additionally, the FES used the FMI to show their success in bringing British imperial ideas to the colonies. Therefore, this work will show how the two

factors of missionary work, and the transmission of that work to the metropole through the FMI, contributed to the formation of racial and gendered ideas of Chinese people. By using the archival sources found in the *Female Missionary Intelligencer* in the form of personal correspondences, memoirs, and reports on missionary efforts, the role missionary women played in furthering or hindering ideas of empire can be further explored.

This research hopes to contribute to the extensive list of scholarship that analyzes the linkages between missionary history and British imperial history. Historians have noted that missions occupy a special place within British imperial history as ideas of secular government sometimes conflicted with beliefs of what mission societies *should* look like to the many evangelical societies operating within the British Empire. By discussing the contradictions between the information transmitted in missionary publications with the real experience of missionaries themselves, this essay aims to illuminate how the often-intersecting ideas of empire and religion operated within a British and Chinese context. Although most of the current scholarship focuses on India due to its close relationship with the British empire as a full colony, China offers a unique perspective on women missionaries and the societies they worked in due to the distinctive relationship between China and Imperial Britain as it was never an outright colony in the British Empire.

In 1834, en route to the United States from China, American missionary David Abeel delivered a speech while in London titled "Appeal to Christian Ladies on Behalf of Christian Education in China and Adjacent Countries." In this famous speech, Abeel makes an emotional appeal to England's women, urging them to create a Christian education system in the east. To do this, Abeel highlights the supposed plight of Chinese women, arguing that the Chinese, by nature of their race, and their lack of Christianity, deprive their women of education and a basic standard of living. In his appeal, Abeel pits Chinese women against the societies they were born in and presents British women as having the means and the will to "save" them from their present condition— a condition he argues drives Chinese women to suicide or infanticide. Abeel states, "Nothing appears to be wanting but a prevalent system of education,— that instruction which Christianity alone can give,— to change the whole constitution of society, and mould it into a form, which it can only assume where women are admitted to their proper sphere and entrusted with the rights and offices assigned them in Scripture."

The overtly stereotypical characterization of Chinese men and women from Abeel was born from a plethora of reports written by missionaries operating in the east from the late 18th century. In one such report written by the Honorary Baptist Wriothesley Noel in 1824, he states, "Where women are so ill-treated, it is not surprising that female infants should be murdered. It is a general custom among the population of the city of Amoy...to drown a large portion of the new-born female children." Reverend Noel exhibits much of the same concern found in Abeels' speech, precisely the number of women in China suffering under the oppression of heathen society made it clear the

necessity for missionaries to formulate a plan to reach these women. Reverend Noel's statement places Abeels's speech in context and reveals his speech as clearly influenced by already present conversations occurring in mission societies. The sensationalism found in Abeel's speech was there by design and proved successful in increasing British women's engagement in both missionary work and the maintenance of empire.

The same year that David Abeel made his speech, and distributed it in pamphlets throughout England, the birth of the Society for Promoting Female Education in the East (FES) soon followed. Abeel's speech not only serves as the spark that created the Society for Promoting Female Education in the East but serves as evidence of the painting of the mission to civilize in language that served to elevate the roles and duties of middle-class British women, inspiring them to in higher numbers, serve as educators throughout the east. The FES itself attributed its creation to Abeel's pamphlet.⁶ The non-denominational society's stated purpose and goals were "to impress on all the saving truths of the Gospel, and a Knowledge of the sacred Scriptures, at the same time making every effort to educate and to civilize.⁷ Moreover, beginning in 1835, the FES sent single women to multiple locations throughout the east, such as Singapore, Malacca, and in 1837, China as educators and assistants to missionary wives conducting work in conjunction with their husbands.

The immediate appeal to women to carry out the work of spreading Christianity in heathen lands arose as difficulties faced by missionary men in retaining converts increased. According to missionaries working in India and China, many of their male converts reverted to paganism due to the influence of their wives. In both India and China, missionary men were barred from interacting with married women, and interactions with single women disapproved. Of course, this placed missionary men in an awkward position as the work in converting Indian and Chinese men had proved to be a prolonged process in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Additionally, missionary societies observed the disadvantage they held against some of their competitors, primarily the Roman Catholic church, which employed nuns to full effect to reach the native home. This disadvantage reveals the true nature of a societal shift in accepting women's roles in the mission to civilize. In combination with the imperial idea of British women as examples of a superior British civilization, male missionaries believed that women would be able to access the domestic "sphere" and, therefore, support missions. 10

Missionary women both married and single fulfilled many distinct roles in their work as "missionaries," but from the mid to late 19th century, they were explicitly barred from the act of preaching and administering conversions. Clare Midgley states, "Women...were excluded, or were in the process of being excluded, from preaching by all the mainstream British Protestant denominations." This was due to the gendering of missionary work itself, which was often considered part of the "sphere" of "men's work." According to Midgley, "only men could become the salaried employees of foreign missionary societies; and only men could perform that primary component of a missionary's role, preaching." In her article discussing the transmission of "women's

work" from India back to the metropole, Judith Rowbotham uses the example of Korean missionary Jane Perry, who received backlash from her peers and superiors for a deathbed conversion she administered. Rowbotham states, "[a] 'confession of Christianity' was only acceptably such when performed in a place of worship with a consecrated male missionary present." Although Perry went on to continue her missionary work, the situation reveals the lines drawn between the work of male missionaries and their female counterparts.

Women in early nineteenth-century missionary societies, however, played an essential role as wives and mothers to their missionary husbands, serving as models of family life, educators, and assistants. Early 19th-century missionary wives developed their roles as ministers by combining female domesticity with activism. As Emily Manktelow reveals, "Missionary women developed their own understandings of mission domesticity that integrated domestic reality into religious activism, a missionary model wholeheartedly accepted and supported by their husbands who desired more than a 'helpmeet'". The expanding role of British missionary wives occurred as internal debates within mission societies discussed the drawbacks of marrying native women. To retain the morality of both missionaries and settlers, men became pressured to bring their wives with them to their stations around the empire. It was in this role that the wives of missionaries began to use ideas of domesticity such as housekeeping, cooking, sewing, and other various activities in combination with religious education.

The workload of missionaries became ever more difficult due to the pressures of missionary work in foreign societies. This required missionary wives to expand their roles within the missionary home, which meant that the work performed by men and women in the missionary setting often intersected despite the overarching idea that their work remained separate. Often the work was simply to represent a model of good family life and to spread ideas of cleanliness in a colonial setting. The primary role of a wife and mother did not change, and missionary wives were expected to prioritize child-bearing over everything else. As missionaries' role became further institutionalized in British society, this eventually led to more single women entering the missionary-colonial space— a space the FES was created to fill.

Towards the mid-19th century as missionary societies throughout the empire continued to expand and, in turn, increase their work, single missionary women arose to bridge the gap between domestic and public work. Manketlow argues, "The emergence of single female missionaries, meanwhile, meant that one end of the female-missionary spectrum could be inhabited by missionary wives (the domestic end), while the other (the spiritually active, or "public" end) could be embodied by these new "lady" missionaries."¹⁷ The types of women urged to fill these roles came from middle-class backgrounds with experience in charitable and missionary work in the metropole. In the metropole, middle-class women had experience in constructing schools, educating the poor in health and hygiene, and even preaching—which was typically reserved for men in the early 19th century. These were the women who served as the base of recruits for many missionary societies such as the

London Missionary Society and the FES. Although throughout the mid 19th century, these women would continue to constitute the minority of people conducting missionary work, it was during this time that the foundation for the demographic change of missionaries would emerge. As historian Delia Davin noted, "By 1890 there had been a considerable change. Women outnumbered men 707 to 589. Of these women, 316 were unmarried. By 1907, women numbered 2481 of whom 1038 were single." The transition from missionary wives as the central force of the civilizing mission through female domesticity to the role of single women is vital in understanding how the "mission to civilize" adapted from the rise of middle-class women in the metropole. ¹⁹

Single missionary women did not enter the role of educators and civilizers without controversy. At first, it was important that missionary women entered the civilizing project first as assistants to missionary families under the belief that they required protection and posed a risk to the finances of missionary societies as Davin notes, "There was a fear that single women might be unable to stand the climate, or would fall ill and have to be repatriated. Alternatively, they might marry."20 For many missionary societies, the costs of employing single women outweighed the benefits. The FES, however, took the opposite approach and dedicated their society primarily to the employment of single missionary women. Although many London based societies would reject the inclusion of single women into the mission, societies such as the China Inland Missions led by Hudson Taylor would instead prioritize it, arguing that these women "did not excite suspicion that they were British agents."21 These arguments indicate that although the 19th century was when women primarily entered the civilizing mission, it was a gradual and relatively slow change. Women first entered this role as the wives of missionary men, but the pressures of missionary work soon led to the inclusion of single women in the mission. Although the FES was the vanguard in promoting the use of single women in missions, they would continue to be hampered by patriarchal ideas of the role of women in domestic and public life. Throughout the 19th century, the women of the FES practiced their work as a minority group. Nevertheless, the impact they made in creating a civilizing mission that combined ideas of spirituality with domesticity was in no way diminutive.

The work of single missionary women in the FES was primarily concerned with the education of women and children. Historian Patricia Chiu in her exploration of FES education, argues that FES education reinforced stereotypical gender roles while simultaneously creating a space for women and girls to forge new identities as Christians.²² One way in which they conducted this reconceptualization of identity was through the practice of marriage. British female missionaries believed that by taking in marginalized women and children, converting them into Christians, and then conducting marriages to a wide range of men, they would be saving not just the souls of the individual women they educated but the soul of the entirety of heathen lands. In a report featured in volume twelve of the FMI, Miss Lord, the superintendent of the Girls School located in Ningpo, China, after the passing of Miss Mary

Anne Aldersey, lists her success in recent months as not only developing girls for the prospect of marriage but the future potential these girls have in China. She states:

We have seven other dear Christian girls, who will in due time be married to members of the Church, and also will, I hope, be equally desirous of letting their light shine. Thus, you see, the benefit which the orphans receive is not the whole that is to be considered. Their future influence upon society is certainly of great importance.²³

The importance missionaries placed on marriages, and writing about the number of Christian marriages they arranged, is seen in some of the reports found in the FMI. One report on the Chinese Girls' School in Singapore, lists from the period of 1865 to 1869 fifteen marriages arranged by female missionaries. The author, listed as "MJO," notes at the end of the list that they decided not to make an official count of the number of marriages but that there existed more than there was listed. The author states, "I will not make any statement as to the number of believers, for when one goes to figures, Satan is at hand." Marriage was the primary tool in spreading and maintaining Christianity in the colonies, and the same holds for China. As discussed, missionary wives in their supportive roles implicitly and explicitly spread ideas of cleanliness, domesticity, and proper Christian marriage. However, in her exploration of the evangelical family model, historian Rhonda Semple shows that the Christian model of evangelical families never truly existed. Due to pressures of mission work, colonial mission families defined and practiced marriage liberally. What was necessary for the contributors of the FMI was the perception that many of these marriages were successful Christian marriages that fit within the mould of the imperial ideal.

Further in this report, Miss Lorde describes her inspiration found in the usefulness of converted native women in not only fulfilling roles that the mission needs such as educators and translators but also the importance of these women in changing the hearts and minds of the families they go back to at the end of the day. Women like the one Miss Lorde describes, are known as Bible women, Christian converts that occupy a very close role and relationship to missionary societies, especially to the women that occupy them. For example, in the *Female Missionary Intelligencer* edition released in 1880, Miss Cooke, the woman in charge of the Chinese Girls School in Singapore describes a young Bible woman simply named Kim and how she sincerely appreciated her help acting as a liaison between a previously uncontacted (by the missions) poor Chinese community in Singapore. She describes how Kim's command of her native language and English brought four other girls to the school. It is testaments like this that show that the role of missionary women included two parts, first the education of Chinese women and girls as wives, and as Bible women. Both roles would be used by the FES to expand the mission system and contribute to the civilizing mission as a whole.

Bible women were an essential part of the mission to civilize in missions abroad. In her discussion about the role Bible women played in North Indian British missions, Semple discusses how racial differences and professional identity were important distinctions in establishing mission

hierarchies.²⁷ These differences expressed themselves through an apparent difference in names between Bible women and missionary women. Similarly, to how single missionary women filled in the gap between domestic and "public" work, Bible women arose to bridge a gap between native peoples and missionaries operating in the colonies. It was these women that would contribute to the maintenance of the empire by eliminating the need for foreign missionaries and also have the advantage of commanding their native language and cultural connections to reach a broader pool of potential converts. However, despite their importance in the mission, Bible women still found themselves placed into the lower rung of racial, gendered, and economic hierarchies by white men and women missionaries.

Every volume of the FMI contains a plethora of statements, essays, reports, and poems written by Bible women. Semple explains, "women's work was well documented in literature aimed at women, but in official letters home and annual reports, their voices were consistently under-represented in what was considered 'official' business of the mission." Instead, the work of Bible women featured in the FMI took an increased role as missionary propaganda. A letter written by a Chinese Bible woman known as Fung-Hwa, to an unnamed female missionary noted as Miss N. is strikingly different in its over piousness compared to letters written by white British missionaries. Fung-Hwa, in this letter, uses language saturated with spiritual overtones, for example, she states:

Now, though I have not seen you, and you cannot see me, because we are so far apart, yet if we believe until death, in heaven I will certainly see you. We are all saved through one Lord and all His servants, and if we, while in the world, do those duties which He hath committed unto us, in a future day we shall receive a crown of life. You are our beloved sister. Now, I ask you to pray for me, so that I may have the strength to give glory to God and our Lord Jesus Christ.²⁹

Overtly religious testaments from Bible women fill pages throughout the publication period of the FMI. Despite the evident importance of Bible women in maintaining mission societies and schools, the readers of the FMI in London would have almost no knowledge of it. Instead, the intent was to use Biblewomen as testaments to the success of spreading Christianity in the east to acquire financial support and recruits.

Another example of the role Bible women played in exemplifying the type of western, as well as Christian influence, missionary societies sought to implement in their various stations across the world can be found in a letter written by FES missionary and administrator of the girls' school in Foochow, China, Miss Houston. The subject of this letter is a Bible woman known as Wee Inn, an ethnically Chinese woman raised and instructed in the Girls' school located in Singapore, and who was stationed with Miss Houston in Foochow. In this letter, Miss Houston describes how Wee Inn has proved to be a talented assistant, who exemplifies all the characteristics of an upright Christian woman. Miss Houston offers praise for the work her assistant has conducted, such as holding Bible

classes, recruiting other Chinese women to the mission, and instructing her own set of Chinese girls. Bible women like Wee Inn in their work represented much more than just able assistants but were testaments to the type of change missionaries could bring to the heathen lands. To the readers in London, Wee Inn represented the product of an ever-increasing British and western cultural influence.³⁰

The women in 19th-century missionary societies were intensely skilled in writing religious pamphlets and other materials that would be essential in the eventual emergence of female-led missionary publications such as the Female Missionary Intelligencer. As Judith Rowbotham explains, "it was women's initiatives in writing and producing material that was central to the expansion of available missionary literature from the 1870s, as well as the work itself."31 Although the FMI began its publication in 1854, it still contained that same impact. Many of the women who wrote for the FMI were trailblazers in the expansion of women in missionary societies. They had developed a reputation for excellent work and even better writing from their time working in London slums. One such woman, Mary Anne Aldersey, was famous in missionary circles for her commitment to conducting missionary work. Having been raised as a London based middle-class woman, Aldersey represented the archetypal female recruit for these societies. She was treated as an icon within the FES for not just being an example of what a female missionary should look like but for her already impressive set of accomplishments in the metropole and abroad. Aldersey famously studied under the tutelage of Scottish Presbyterian Robert Morrison, who taught her how to speak Chinese. Later, she would be elected as a member of the FES committee at its founding. However, according to the FES, Aldersey always considered herself and her work independent from any missionary society.³² Despite this, her work was still featured in the FMI up until she died in 1868. Miss Aldersey remains the trailblazer for single missionary women and the first single female missionary to operate in China and the architect of the first Chinese Girls' school in China located in Ningpo.

Women like Aldersey, when writing about their work, understood that they were writing for a general audience and therefore sought to construct narratives that would be compelling enough to attract funding and recruits.³³ Many of the letters found in the FMI illustrate stories in which the female missionary must go through a particular trial, or solve a particular problem that always leads to the same general conclusion: that the work they are doing benefits the women and girls living in those societies. A letter written by Aldersey in 1846 reflects this type of writing. In this letter, Aldersey tells the audience of a particular problem that had arisen in which a studious student of hers had stopped coming to join her at the mission. The student's widowed mother and grandmother, according to Aldersey, attempted to trick her by claiming that the girl due to her sickness was unable to attend and instead would be traveling to another village to be married off. Aldersey, hearing this, traveled to examine the girl and, upon finding no present sickness, attempted to take the girl despite protests from the girl's mother. She states:

I therefore mildly but firmly told the mother she must return with me. On this the mother made her way to her own bed, sat in the midst, and beat it most violently, tearing her hair, smiting her breast vehemently, declaring against my cruelty, and deploring her fate in the miserable tones which none can conceive but such as have heard the passionate lamentations of a Chinese woman.³⁴

In this passage, Aldersey paints native resistance in negative terms, that according to her, she was justified in taking the girl due to prior agreements made. The rejection of native agency for the work of a higher purpose is a common theme in the writing of missionary women.

In the same letter, Aldersey discusses the mother as an example of Chinese societies lack of family structure and the need to carry the gospel into these land as a means of preventing the outburst of a mother losing her child and how widowed women, in particular, are seen as even more depraved than women generally. She states:

You will judge from the above statement that they are not without energy, although unhappily ill-directed, and too often characterized by petulance and passion. Still, the young woman, when married, and perhaps with a little family growing up around her, is not as unhappy as before. The widow has no power over her own children—she is thus rendered desolate indeed. The spirit subdued...widows appear to me particularly prepared to receive the consolations of the Gospel.³⁵

In a particularly cruel fashion, Aldersey ignores the impact her action had taken to cause such distress in the widow and instead uses her pain to illustrate to the reader the necessity for marriage and Christianity to prevent these types of lamentations. Letters such as these carry the same themes as the speech made by Abeel. However, as Rowthbam states, "the rhetoric sought to indicate how readers should react to the stereotypes presented, that is with pity, but associated with this pity was an inexorable sense of superiority." Aldersey's letter emits both pity and superiority. Pity at the mother for having no control over the fate of her children due to her marital status and superiority that the only way to cure her of this ailment would be introducing her to the gospel.

In China, missionary women expanded their roles to not only the education of Chinese women but also their liberation from cultural practices they deemed contrary to the "way in which God intended to make us." In a letter written by W. J. Lambuth, a member of the FES located in Shanghai, argues that the present condition of women in China is not likely to change so long as men continue to revere the practice of foot binding. She argues that it is essential for every man and woman working in China to urge converted native men to abandon the practice. She states, "if every Christian man would refuse to marry a cramped-footed woman, I think, that as the leaven of godliness spreads over the land, the custom would be abandoned." This passage speaks to the role that missionary women thought they occupied as not only educators but also as liberators of not only the soul but also the culture they deemed barbaric. However, Davin notes, "Teachers at the first mission schools for girls accepted that their pupils would have bound feet. Missionaries, especially female missionaries,

were involved in the early anti-footbinding movement, but they tried hard not to offend Chinese opinion and they gave up the leadership of the movement to Chinese as soon as was practicable."³⁹ Instead, missionary women used the anti-foot-binding movement as a motivating factor in expanding their roles to include activism, and criticism of Chinese cultural practices, as a means of recruitment. However, the impact it had on Chinese women was non-existent.

Missionary discussions of the cultural practice of foot-binding had a more significant effect on the readers in the metropole than on ending the practice. Historian Alison Drucker notes, [m]issionaries and other Western women in China did not conceal the shock and disgust foot binding aroused in them. Their descriptions of the cruelty of foot binding electrified the female faithful back home, and their indignation spread to the general public."40 These descriptions of foot-binding stoked disgust amongst the audience of missionary publications, which in turn reinforced preconceived notions of Chinese people and culture as barbaric. Drucker continues, "they stressed that the crippling of women's feet interfered with the ability of housewives to maintain a clean and sanitary home and to take proper care of their children; also, by limiting women's potential for financial contribution, foot binding tended to promote female infanticide, the sale of young girls as prostitutes, and similar moral evils."41 The language of cultural criticism was once again tied intimately with the same language used to justify the beginnings of increased female involvement in the mission system—the language of saving women from infanticide, suicide, and potential marriage. Therefore, the practice of foot binding provided an excellent opportunity for missionaries to expand the mission to civilize. Soon, missionary societies such as the LMS and CMS would develop anti-foot binding societies within mission homes to stop the practice. Additionally, the practice provided ample opportunity for Western men and women to exemplify British cultural practices, such as western domesticity, in the eyes of the reader. The potential for readers to view Chinese cultural practices as horrid, while appreciating their station in western society was a sought-after effect in transmitting missionary work to audiences throughout the empire.

The Society for the Promotion of Female Education in the East labored throughout the 19th century to not only change hearts and minds but entire societies for the benefit of the soul. Out east, female missionaries brought "depraved" women and children into the fold of Christian and imperial life through girls' schools. In doing so, missionaries regulated marriages, reinforced gender, and racial stereotypes, edited out or rationalized native resistance, created hierarchical structures between themselves and native Bible women, and propagandized their work for an audience in the metropole. These efforts had a profound effect on the 19th-century imperial effort to establish justifications for their growing empire and the atrocities that occurred within it. They cemented missionary activities with the creation and maintenance of empire throughout the 19th century and beyond.

Notes

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- 12. Manktelow, "The Rise and Demise," 135-159.
- 13. Rowbotham, "Indian Sister's Plea," 256.
- 14. Rowbotham, "Indian Sister's Plea," 256.
- 15. Rowbotham, "Indian Sister's Plea," 146.
- 16. Midgley, "Envisioning Female Agency," 335–358.
- 17. Midgley, "Envisioning Female Agency," 335-358.
- 18. Delia Davin, "British Women Missionaries in Nineteenth-Century China," Women's History
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- 32. History of the FES, (1847).
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