Brief Discussion on Missionary and Transition
of Modern Chinese Customs

Haipeng Wang

School of History and Culture, Ludong University

Yantai 264025, Shandong, China

Tel: 86-535-668-5095   E-mail: wanghp0110@126.com

Abstract

Ever since the modern society, the large differences between Chinese and western customs have seriously obstructed dissemination of Christianity in China. Thus, missionaries who came to China paid great attention to observation and study on social customs in China. The serious condition in modern Chinese social customs has aroused deep concern of some missionaries who have profound understanding in Chinese culture who start from social customs, vigorously propagandize the concept that "only Christianity is able to save China" and meanwhile, hold a series of activities to modify undesirable customs in China, which has led to important effects upon transition of modern Chinese social customs.

Keywords: Missionary, Christianity, Customs, Social transition

1. Whether Christianity "corrupts the public morals" or "transforms social traditions": game between feudal scholars and missionaries

Since the middle and later period of Ming Dynasty until the earlier Republic of China, Christianity and the Chinese traditional culture centered with Confucianism had been "incompatible as fire and water". Introduction of Christianity in the middle and later period of Ming Dynasty was not shielded by outside force, but was basically normal communication between Chinese and western cultures. However, as a result of the great discrepancy between these two kinds of cultures, Christianity still aroused resistance and opposition of a large majority of Chinese people. All behaviors that didn't suit with Chinese traditional customs in Christianity and missionaries were frequently accused of the crime of "breach of morality". Especially after the "Rites Controversy" in earlier Qing Dynasty occurred, the concept of "breach of morality" of Christianity gradually settled out at the deep bottom of the heart of Chinese feudal scholars and became an important reason for them to oppose to Christianity and attack Christianity.

In the modern society in China, it was under shield of "solid ships and sharp cannons" that Christianity entered China, and dissemination of Christianity was protected by the unequal treaties. This improper means of entry and the extreme opposition between China and western countries determined that dissemination of Christianity was far away from being normal cultural communication, but was mixed together with the war, politics and unequal treaties. Although firm ships and sharp cannons as well as unequal treaties got rid of some obstructions for dissemination of Christianity and even enabled Christianity to rapidly develop within a certain period of time, they aroused more suspicion and revolt among Chinese people to a deeper extent.

Social custom is an important component of the culture, being at the surface of the culture and the external manifestation of social ideology. Thus, in the earlier modern society, discrepancy and conflict between Chinese and western customs became the focus of direct contact and opposition of Chinese and western cultures. In order to promote development of Christianity, missionaries in the recent years have strengthened their observation and study on Chinese social customs and selected undesirable customs in Chinese society as the breakthrough to disseminate the doctrines of Christianity. Some missionaries even looked upon Chinese social custom problems from the perspective of preach tactics. However, on the contrary, intellectuals in the modern Chinese society unconsciously inherited the means and theory to oppose to Christianity by feudal scholars and continued to take as an evidence of crime the fact that Christianity violated and did harm to Chinese social customs and called upon people by regarding this evidence as an important reason for opposing to Christianity. In such way, in the entire modern society, in face of the complicated and colorful Chinese social customs, Chinese feudal intellectuals started out from a cultural position different from missionaries and took diametric opinions as their

own tool of fighting: Chinese intellectuals attacked Christianity's "breach of morality", while missionaries propagandized that Christianity "make changes in customs and traditions".

In modern Chinese society, missionaries who came to China had held a series of activities in terms of modifying Chinese social customs, such as, opposition to foot-binding, opposition to smoking of opium, support to improve the life environment of women and enhance the social status of women, opposition to polygamy in the custom of marriage and early marriage, etc, and support equality of men and women and marriage freedom, etc. so long as these activities were concerned, most of the objects that missionaries "damaged" and "attacked" were undesirable customs that had been in existence commonly in Chinese society and were open for improvement. This "breach", ought to be termed as "destroy" in a strict sense, while it is this "destroy" that had progressive meaning to transition of Chinese social customs --- "eradicating the old" and "fostering the new" by foreign missionaries enabled Chinese social customs go towards the tendency of reform. Of course, foreign missionaries who came to China had the obvious inclination to completely negating Chinese traditional culture and customs. Their attack on the traditional ancestor worship and worship of Confucius in China and traditional belief customs caused sharp social opposition and differentiation and led to the severe turmoil of social order. This "destroy" had the obvious feature of cultural aggression. As a matter of fact, "making changing in customs and traditions" was not only to purely replace old customs with new customs, but also to reform traditional content and endow it with new content according to the development rule of social customs. If they adopted tough means in a wrong perspective to forcibly get ride old customs, even if they eradicated undesirable customs and indeed they made customs go towards the tendency of improvement, they would will lead to conflicts and contradictions and thus bring adverse effects to social stability.

2. Missionary: forerunner for social customs transition in modern China

It was true that there were many aspects in modern Chinese social customs that needed to be reformed and even to be thoroughly abolished. Thus, reform on Chinese social customs was urgent, necessary and progressive. Foreign missionaries exerted great influences upon Chinese social customs through some specific undertakings, which should be affirmed. However, to what extent was the effect of foreign missionaries? Generally speaking, evolvement of modern Chinese social customs was an outcome of multiple forces, and activities by foreign missionaries to modify Chinese social customs were just one of the factors. Their influence was also weak, but had great significance, because missionaries and their activities of reform on customs became the forerunner of reform on modern customs in many fields.

At the time when foreign missionaries brought Christianity into China, they also transferred certain moralization functions of Christianity into China. Hence, in its dissemination, Christianity would exert great influences upon customs in China. However, the process from the religion to moralization until custom was a quite slow one. Although foreign missionaries who came to China always intentionally simplified this process, closed the relationship and distance between Christianity and social customs transition and exaggerated the function of Christianity in modifying social customs, within the period less than one century and under the background that Christianity was encountered with the fierce resistance of Chinese people, it was difficult to give full play to the direct influence of Christianity on social customs. Thus, Christianity merely played a role of "ferment" in the social customs transition in modern China. However, compared with their directly attacking Chinese beliefs and customs, missionaries' dissemination of the Christian doctrines from the perspective of improving undesirable customs was a roundabout, bright and effective tactics if directly contrasted with the culture of Confucianism. Speeches of missionaries to admonish undesirable customs were not as disgusting as those articles that directly disseminated their doctrines. Even some Chinese people expressed their approval and recognition to this behavior of reforming undesirable customs. Furthermore, most influences of Christianity on Chinese social customs were not produced by the natural moralization function of Christianity, but were mainly produced by a series of activities conducted by missionaries for Chinese social customs, such as, opposition to foot-binding, opposition to smoking of opium, "enhancing the status of women" and marriage custom, etc, while advocating and holding of these activities was closely connected with the subjective initiative of missionaries, especially their enthusiasm in propagandizing Christianity and their dedication spirit. In addition, a series of activities conducted by missionaries to modify Chinese social customs were essentially aimed for promoting dissemination of Christianity. Thus, reform of social customs was actually the "byproduct" of their career to propagandize Christianity.

Chinese and western customs had great discrepancy. Although these two customs were difficult to reconcile and integrate, yet in terms of attitude towards Chinese social customs, Chinese people and foreign missionaries had more and more homoplasy and consistency. In activities to transform social customs, foreign missionaries and some Chinese people "treaded different paths that led to the same destination" in many aspects, such as,

opposition to the undesirable custom of foot-binding, custom about women and undesirable custom of smoking of opium, etc. Let's taking the Opium War as an example. After the Second Opium War, the trade of opium became "legalized", and for quite a long period of time, no one within the Qing Dynasty Government dared to discuss the issue of ban on opium smoking. It was exactly in such a difficult situation that foreign missionaries propagandized the public opinions of opposition to smoking of opium with persistence, did some feasible and effective work for Chinese people to ban on smoking of opium and attempted to strive for international aid in the moral principle, which finally aroused awakening of quite a lot of Chinese people and support from the international public opinions. Afterwards, quite a large number of Chinese people also took part in this group of criticizing these undesirable customs. At the end of the 19th Century, activities advocated by missionaries to ban on smoking of opium and opposition to foot-binding won positive support and approval from the Qing Government and the extensive far-sighted persons in China. In one word, owing to influence of the missionaries, some Chinese people were basically consistent with missionaries in terms of persuading to ban on foot-binding, ban on smoking of opium and improve the status of women, etc, and they were not totally opponent --- although most people intentionally evaded from the influences of Christianity and still rejected strongly Christianity itself.

Compared with activities of Chinese people to make changes in customs and traditions, missionaries had the relative advantages of stability and persistence in terms of modifying social customs. The activities of Chinese people to make changes in traditions and customs were usually affected by political movement in the fact that their activities were often started with emergence of political movement and came to a stop with sudden cease of the political movement. Thus, Chinese people often achieved limited achievements in terms of making changes in customs and traditions. By contrast, activities of missionaries were different. Although conflict between the civil people and Christianity had never stopped in the entire modern society and sometimes even caused great impact on Christianity, people seldom stroke such activities as ban on foot-binding and ban on smoking of opium. During the Hundred Days of Reform, public groups in all areas with the goal of reforming social customs emerged one by one. It was estimated to be approximately more than a dozen public groups. Their activity area was centered with cities and their content mainly included the two sorts of banning on foot-binding and banning on smoking of opium. It seemed that activities by the Reformers to reform social customs were ever on a grand and spectacular scale. However, they also had their disadvantages in that their sphere of activities were confined to the intellectual class in metropolitan cities, but the large number of rural people and the unwashed had no chance to participate. With continuous expansion and penetration of the power of Christianity, the social reform activities of missionaries had been extended to every corner in urban and rural areas and even to remote areas.

3. Foreign missionaries were unable to fundamentally resolve the issue of Chinese customs

At the time when western missionaries criticized how modern Chinese social customs were vulgar and superficial, they had kept their mouth shut as for unhealthy phenomena in western social customs. As a matter of fact, social customs in western countries were just the same as those in China in which the good and the b ad were intermingled, such as, intemperance, streetwalker, gambling and narcotics, etc, which were undesirable customs that existed commonly in their society. After they came to China, western missionaries had always been vigorously propagandizing that Christianity was able to "rescue correct customs", but it seemed that they had never come to realize the leak in the theory of their moralization: since Christianity was unable to resolve well the issue of customs in their own country, how come they declared that they were able to "correct" customs in China? Actually, any religion and its moralization is not omnipotent. Thus, pure dissemination of a religion and moralization of its doctrines have no means to thoroughly resolve the issue of customs in the entire society. The same is true with western missionaries and Christianity. Moreover, as a result of the features of relative stability and heritage of social customs, the difficulty in reform was supposed to be great.

Christian culture and the culture of Confucianism in China are two kinds of cultures with different heterogeneity, and the two cultures have great discrepancy and contradiction. As a heterogeneous and foreign religion that is strongly resisted by Chinese people, Christianity seems quite tiny in face of the traditional culture of Chinese nation. As disseminators for foreign religion, the small number of western missionaries also often felt "unable to do what they wished to" in face of the traditional culture and customs of China. Although western missionaries had played the role of forerunner and enlightenment in terms of modifying social customs of the modern Chinese society, it is still obvious to us that the various activities by foreign missionaries who came to China depended mainly on Chinese religions believers. Under the influence and enlightenment of western missionaries, Chinese Christian believers came to realize the differences between Chinese and western customs and disadvantage of Chinese customs and took a positive attitude in participating in the various activities of reform on customs advocated by western missionaries. A general survey of custom transition in the whole modern Chinese society, we come to the conclusion that it is Chinese people who play a role of subject.

"Any custom can not be abolished with a forcible means". Under the circumstance in the modern society when China and western countries are in extreme opposition, conflict of Christianity with Chinese culture and customs had the strong color of "cultural aggression." Western missionaries came to China with an identity of invaders in a way that Chinese people were reluctant to accept to "moralize" Chinese people and modify Chinese customs, which could not help but arouse strong resistance of Chinese people. Besides, at the time when western missionaries exerted certain influence upon Chinese social customs, Christianity also had the tendency to be compelled to change itself to adapt to the traditional customs of China. Ever since the second half of the 19th Century and after having undergone difficult and reverse evolvement, Christianity has, so far, been transformed from "a foreign religion" to the religion of Chinese people. It has been integrated into the traditional Chinese culture and has become a component of Chinese national culture.

In one word, since Christianity and missionaries were unable to completely resolve the issue of western customs, it was unlikely that they were able to totally resolve the issue of Chinese customs. However, from another sense of meaning, the issue of Chinese customs doesn't need Christianity and western missionaries to resolve, because Chinese people are the real dominator for their prospect and destiny. The historical practice of social custom transition in modern China proved that, only if we started out from the reality of China and came to seek for methods of resolution from an in-depth understanding in Chinese traditional culture, can we "suit the remedy to the case" and make reform of Chinese social customs go towards an orderly track.

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