Proceedings of ICIHCS 2026 Symposium: Art, Cultural Heritage and Conservation: Interdisciplinary Perspectives
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.MA39128

The Impact of the Spread of Christianity in Guangzhou During the Modern Period on Contemporary Youth Education in the Guangzhou Region

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Abstract. Against the backdrop of modern cultural exchange between China and the West, Christianity was introduced to Guangzhou, giving rise to a number of church-affiliated schools. While existing research has largely focused on the development history of these institutions, relatively little attention has been paid to their educational legacy. Based on three case studies—Guangzhou Union Middle School, True Light Middle School, and Guangzhou No. 7 Middle School—this paper employs a literature analysis approach, examining school archives, modern newspapers, and existing academic works to explore the impact of modern church-run education on local youth education. The study finds that church schools significantly advanced women's education in Guangzhou and introduced modern educational systems; however, their operations were driven by religious propagation goals and initially heavily reliant on overseas funding. Following the movement to reclaim educational sovereignty, these schools gradually underwent localization. This research offers insights for further discussions on the heritage of church education.

Keywords: Church School, Guangzhou, Youth Education, Educational Localization

1. Introduction

During the process of cultural exchanges between China and the West in modern times, Christianity was introduced to Guangzhou. As a coastal city that had earlier contact with foreign cultures, Guangzhou gave birth to many church schools founded by missionaries, becoming an important carrier for the establishment of religious culture in the local society.

Existing studies have conducted considerable discussions on the development of modern church schools in Guangzhou, but they have paid less attention to the potential impact of this historical origin on the retention of contemporary youth education. This article conducts a study on the influence of the dissemination of Christianity in modern times in Guangzhou on contemporary local teenagers. By reviewing school history archives, modern newspapers and periodicals, previous academic papers and monographs, and integrating the existing literature viewpoints for analysis. This research helps to understand how the introduction of Christianity shaped the modern education of teenagers in Guangzhou, and can also provide a reference for research on church education heritage.

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2. The spread of Christianity in Guangzhou and the overview of church education

2.1. The historical context of the introduction of Christianity to Guangzhou in modern times

Following the Opium War, unequal treaties repealed the prohibition on missionary activities. As a treaty port, Guangzhou became an important base for many Protestant missionary societies working across South China. Numerous church organizations were active in Guangzhou and the Guangdong-Guangxi border region during this period. The most influential among them were the American Presbyterian Mission, the Southern Baptist Convention,the United Brethren in Christ, and the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, alongside the French Catholic Church. These missions divided their fields of operation and mainly contacted local communities by establishing schools and providing medical services. Among them, the American Presbyterian Mission and the United Brethren in Christ were especially notable for their educational work in Guangzhou and wider South China.

Among these denominations, the American Presbyterian Mission became one of the strongest forces. In 1845,it formally founded its South China Mission and made Guangzhou its central base for expanding evangelical work into Guangdong, Guangxi, Hong Kong and Macao. Open-air street preaching attracted little support from most local residents. Because of this, missionaries treated school building as a main strategy. A series of mission schools was established in Guangzhou to recruit local youths. While spreading religious teachings ,these schools also introduced selected forms of modern Western knowledge. For many young residents of Guangzhou, mission schools became the main channel through which Christianity reached them [1].

In 1889, at the invitation of overseas Chinese communities, the United Brethren in Christ sent missionaries to South China. The society set up its mission station at Zhou Tou Zui in Henan (Guangzhou), which marked its formal entry into missionary work within the city. As an overseas mission connected to the Presbyterian tradition, it did more than preach alone; like other missionary societies then active in China, it treated education and hospital construction as key ways to approach local society.

At that time ordinary inhabitants in Henan district of Hai Zhu ,Guangzhou lived under poor conditions,and direct doctrinal preaching was not readily accepted .Missionaries therefore used schooling to teach local adolescents while introducing church ideas alongside new knowledge taught in class. The United Brethren in Christ later expanded its evangelical enterprise to Xiaolan of Xiangshan and nearby areas. As merely one among the many missionary societies that arrived in Guangzhou in late imperial and early republican China, its educational experiments constitute another microcosm of Christianity's influence on local youth in Guangzhou [2].

2.2. Representatives of major churches' secondary schools in Guangzhou and their development history

Today in Guangzhou, the well-known secondary schools whose predecessors were missionary schools include Guangzhou Xie He High School, Guangzhou True Light Middle School and Guangzhou No.7 High School. These three institutions serve as the case studies of this paper.

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2.2.1. The establishment and development of Guangzhou Xie He High School (Private Xie He Women's Normal School / Xie He Girls' School)

The origin of Guangzhou Xie He School can be traced back to Ai Zhi Kindergarten, founded in 1911 by Mrs. Bigelow, a missionary of the American Presbyterian Mission, North. After its foundation, the school relocated several times and added preschool normal courses. In later years, several Christian missionary societies jointly ran the school, including the American Presbyterian Mission, North, the American Missionary Association, and the New Zealand Presbyterian Mission. In 1916, Ai Zhi Kindergarten and Normal Department of True Light Seminary merged and was officially named Private Xie He Women's Normal School. From that point,the school adopted the ethos of "united efforts and harmonious cooperation". In 1922, the school moved to Mei Hua Gang in Xi Cun, the present campus site. It then continued to grow in size, recruited young female students, and provided both normal and primary school courses. As a missionary school run together by several denominations in modern Guangzhou, Xie He introduced modern Western knowledge while also spreading Christian cultural ideas. For this reason, it is a useful case for examining how Christian education affected local young people in Guangzhou [3].

2.2.2. The foundation and turbulent history of Guangzhou True Light Middle School (True Light Seminary)

True Light Seminary was a girls' missionary school founded by missionaries of the American Presbyterian Mission, North in modern Guangzhou. In the late Qing Dynasty, the traditional idea that "an uneducated woman is a virtuous woman" was still widely accepted. This limited women's access to formal schooling. Against this background, and as part of Christian missionary work, Harriet Newell Noyes of the American mission founded True Light Seminary in 1872 at Jin Li Bu of Guangzhou, with admission limited to local young girls. In its early phase, the school waived tuition fees and provided food, accommodation and clothing for students. Nevertheless, enrolment remained low at the beginning; only a small number of girls from Christian families attended. As the school developed, student numbers grew and classes were divided for teaching. Beyond disseminating Christian doctrines, the seminary delivered modern knowledge, breaking the barrier that prevented local women from accessing formal education. It cultivated a cohort of young women equipped with new learning and became a representative case of Christian education shaping youth in Guangzhou [4].

2.2.3. Historical overview of private Pei Dao girls' middle school of Guangzhou (today's Guangzhou No.7 High School)

The predecessor of Guangzhou No.7 High School, Pei Dao Girls' School, was a missionary school founded by the Southern Baptist Convention, a Christian missionary society, in modern China. In 1888, the missionary Emma Young was dispatched by the mission to Guangzhou and established Pei Dao School at Wu Xian Men. It initially offered women and children classes and recruited local young women. Opportunities for female education were extremely scarce in late Qing society, so only a handful of students enrolled in the early years. The school gradually expanded afterwards. In 1906, it relocated to Dong Shan, the current campus in Yuexiu District, and added secondary, normal and primary divisions. Apart from teaching traditional Chinese classics, the school introduced modern Western subjects alongside Christian teachings. As one of the early girls' missionary schools

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in South China, Pei Dao Girls' School recruited numerous young girls from Guangzhou and constitutes a typical instance of Christian education influencing local youth [5].

2.3. Sources of school funding and common characteristics of missionary schools in Guangzhou

According to the compiled materials, the modern predecessors of Guangzhou middle schools were missionary schools, whose founders were mostly Christian missionary groups from Western countries such as the United States. Groups including the American Presbyterian Mission, Southern Baptist Convention and others once ran schools in Guangzhou. In the early days after their foundation, the schools were guided by missionaries in terms of school-running direction, while local teachers were recruited to give lessons. Generally, elementary classes were launched first, followed by gradual expansion of school buildings, improvement of curricula, and eventual development into full-fledged middle schools. Xie He Middle School, True Light Academy and Guangzhou No.7 Middle School all developed in this way.

In the 1920s, influenced by the Movement to Reclaim Educational Rights, missionary schools began to adjust their management structures by adding Chinese school trustees, and the school-running sovereignty was gradually returned to Chinese people. In the early period, most of the schools' funds relied on donations from overseas churches. Although these schools were affiliated with different churches, they shared many similarities in their founding backgrounds, development processes and shifts in administrative authority.

3. An analysis of the educational practices of Christian missionaries in Guangzhou

3.1. Records of educational activities by mission societies and missionaries

After the opening of treaty ports in the late Qing period, overseas Christian mission societies including the American Presbyterian Mission, North, the American Missionary Association, and the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) successively entered Guangzhou. They regarded school founding as a vital means of cultural propagation. Many missionaries devoted themselves to local educational development, among whom Harriet Newell Noyes, Mrs. Bigelow and Emma Young were the most representative. Commissioned by the American Presbyterian Mission, North, Harriet Newell Noyes founded True Light Seminary in 1872, which exclusively admitted girls in Guangzhou. Mrs. Bigelow established Ai Zhi Kindergarten in 1911, which later evolved into Xie He School. Representing the Southern Baptist Convention, Emma Young set up Pei Dao Girls' School in 1888, the predecessor of today's Guangzhou No.7 High School. These missionaries mainly practiced their mission by establishing girls' schools. They offered normal, primary and secondary curricula and enrolled local young people, gradually embedding missionary education in Guangzhou and exerting certain influences on the development of local youth at that time [3-5].

3.2. Internal educational practices of missionary schools

3.2.1. Educational philosophies and school mottoes

At the time of their foundation, the three schools all carried an underlying Christian cultural orientation. After its merger and formal naming, Xie He School upheld the spirit of "united efforts and harmonious cooperation", encouraging mutual assistance and progress among students. True

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Light Seminary adopted "Ye are the light of the world" as its motto. Its educational goal was to break traditional norms, enabling women to acquire knowledge and serve society. Pei Dao Girls' School took "Love, Sincerity, Chastity and Fortitude" as its motto, expecting students to be benevolent and truthful, and uphold integrity and perseverance. Beyond delivering knowledge through modern curricula, the three schools used their mottos for moral education to shape the minds and personalities of young local women in Guangzhou [3-5].

3.2.2. School administration and the operation of school boards

In the early years of operation, the affairs of Xie He, True Light and Pei Dao were controlled by their respective overseas Christian mission societies. Foreign missionaries undertook major administrative work, while local Chinese teachers were recruited for daily teaching. Xie He established a board of directors at its founding, with multiple overseas mission societies jointly managing school affairs. After the rise of the Education Rights Recovery Movement in the 1920s, Xie He took the lead in reorganizing its school board. It incorporated distinguished Chinese community figures such as Luo Liuxinci into the board while retaining a small number of foreign members. True Light and Pei Dao followed suit and restructured their boards, gradually increasing Chinese representation and decision-making power. Later, Xie He appointed Liao Feng Ling as its first Chinese principal. The three schools gradually transferred school governance to Chinese personnel, transforming the previous administrative model dominated entirely by foreign mission societies [3-5].

3.2.3. Curriculum design: the combination of religious courses, modern Western subjects and local courses

The curricula of the three girls' schools, Xie He, True Light and Pei Dao, all showed clear features of missionary education. Each school offered Christian-related courses as a way to spread missionary cultural ideas. At the same time, they introduced modern Western subjects. Xie He offered preschool normal courses, while True Light and Pei Dao added modern subjects to teach contemporary knowledge. Traditional local content was not removed. Instead, it remained alongside foreign learning. The combination of these three kinds of courses met the missionary societies' aim of spreading their beliefs and gave young women in Guangzhou access to modern education, which helped break the long-standing barrier that had kept women from formal schooling [3-5].

3.3. Transformation of missionary schools from the 1920s to 1940s: the Education Rights Recovery Movement and the takeover by Chinese principals

The Education Rights Recovery Movement in the 1920s pushed Xie He away from direct foreign missionary control and toward Chinese administration. A clear change came in 1927, when the school reorganized its school board. Luo Liuxinci became chair of the board,and her daughter Luo Youjie also joined it. Although some foreign members still remained on the board, control over school operations gradually moved into Chinese hands.

This shift did not happen all at once. During this period of Chinese board governance, the post of Chinese principal stayed vacant for some time. It was only in 1932 that Liao Feng Ling, after returning from study in the United States, was appointed as Xie He's first Chinese principal. Under Liao Fengling's leadership, the school raised funds from several sources to expand its buildings. She also established the educational philosophy of "unity and harmony to nurture talented individuals".

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This marked an important step in making missionary education more locally grounded at Xie He [3-5]. The school's development then became closer to local educational needs rather than following earlier patterns set mainly by foreign missionaries.

4. An analysis of the impacts of modern Christian missionary schools on youth education in Guangzhou

Missionary schools in modern Guangzhou played a major part in expanding local women's education. Before the Republican period, girls had very little access to formal schooling. Schools such as Xie He and True Light enrolled female students on purpose, which gave women a chance to receive more systematic education. At the same time, missionaries introduced preschool normal education and teacher training to Guangzhou, which partly filled gaps in the local education system then. These schools offered newer subjects such as mathematics, physics and English, and they used more standardized forms of campus administration. This was a clear break from the teaching model of traditional private Si Shu academies. Many young people came into contact with new kinds of knowledge there and gradually developed more modern outlooks, which added new energy to Guangzhou society at that time.

Missionary schools also had clear limitations. One founding aim was the spread of Christian culture, so religious content appeared throughout daily teaching and school life. Their funding depended heavily on grants from overseas mission societies, which meant that their finances were not independent and could be affected by outside forces. There were practical problems too. During the Republican period, warfare and social unrest led to repeated relocations and temporary closures on many campuses. Under these conditions, missionary schools often could not provide stable long-term education. Their educational practice therefore kept a noticeable external orientation, and this remained one of their main weaknesses.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, former missionary schools in Guangzhou were gradually taken over and reorganized by the government rather than managed by overseas missionary organizations. Even so,some earlier resources remained instead of disappearing completely at once. Many original school buildings were kept and continued in use for later educational purposes. Some school ideas and campus traditions were also adjusted over time and passed down into later periods. The personnel legacy mattered as well. Alumni educated in these schools went on to work in different local industries and continued to have an influence there. Seen from this angle,missionary schooling did not end simply when its original administrative structure changed; parts of it survived through reuse, adaptation, and personnel movement into wider society.

5. Conclusion

This paper takes Xie He High School, True Light Middle School and Guangzhou No.7 High School as case studies. It mainly explores the developmental characteristics of modern Christian missionary schools in Guangzhou, the transformation of school governance, and the social impacts of such schools during the Republican period. It also analyses the progressive contributions and inherent limitations of missionary education within this unique historical context.

Overall, missionary schools effectively pioneered women's education in Guangzhou and introduced modern teacher training and preschool normal education systems. Nevertheless, the early phase of schooling was driven by religious proselytization. Educational resources were heavily dependent on overseas funding, and the schools could not escape disruptions caused by wars and social unrest. Following the Education Rights Recovery Movement, Chinese administrators

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gradually assumed school governance. The schools moved towards indigenization and became better aligned with the educational needs of local society.

This study has certain limitations. It does not deeply explore the personal perspectives of ordinary students of that era, and lacks questionnaire and oral historical materials to analyse young people's real learning experiences.

Future research may focus more on individual student experiences, or further investigate the long-term legacy that missionary school buildings and alumni networks exert on contemporary local education in Guangzhou.

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