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Christianity and Miao Education in Shimenkan, Guizhou

Abstract Shimenkan is a remote and mountainous village in Weining county, Guizhou province, an area traditionally populated by Miao ethnic minority. The arrival of Christian missionaries just over 100 years ago began Shimenkan's transformation from an illiterate school-less place, to a "revered site of Miao education." Today, Shimenkan has returned to being the worst performing part of Weining county in terms of educational attainment. By investigating and analyzing the impact of Christianity on Miao school education and community education, this paper will discuss how Miao students are coping with cultural aspects of education and community amidst social change, and the impact of the cultural context on their academic achievement. Where foreign culture meets local demands, little resistance to cultural education exists. In such circumstances, outside culture is likely to be accepted in the community, and may generate positive outcomes.

Keywords Christianity, Miao minority education, Shimenkan

Introduction

Even in the 1920s most Chinese and foreigners did not know that there even existed such a place as Guizhou province, or Weining county, never mind the small town of Shimenkan. However, its fame had grown to be such that letters from overseas merely needed to be addressed to "Shimenkan, China," and they would be delivered. In a few short years, this remote, impoverished Miao village had become famous in China and abroad. This is indistinguishable from the fact that British missionary Samuel Pollard had arrived in the remote mountainous area in 1905, where he was to carry out missionary and educational work for several decades. The barren, previously unknown town became the United Methodist Church's missionary, educational and cultural headquarters for the whole of southwestern China. Between 1905 and 1949, Shimenkan and its surrounding area witnessed 40,000 to 50,000 Miao conversions to Christianity,

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the establishment of 40 churches and 52 religious schools, the employment of 70 teachers, and the education of thousands of students, including two who went on to become medical doctors and 100 who graduated from university. During this time, a written script for the Miao language was invented, sometimes referred to as Pollard script (Editorial Board, 2006, p. 223). It transformed the Big Flowery Miao, as the group of Miao in Shimenkan are named, from illiterate community with no writing script of their own, no words for numbers over 20, and no formal education system, into the most educated ethnic group in the area.

Between June and August 2006, a field study was carried out in Shimenkan. Questionnaires were distributed to 50 local citizens, 152 students and 30 teachers. Interviews involved 20 local people, five teachers, 10 students and eight parents. Research methods included observation of the local spread of Christianity, and the conditions of Miao and community education. Through gaining familiarity with the spread of Christianity and the development of education in Shimenkan, this paper will illuminate the state of local education, and will delve into the nature and function of the relationship between Christianity and Miao educational development.

History of Christianity and Education in Shimenkan

Overview of Shimenkan

Shimenkan lies in the northwest of Weining county in Guizhou, on the border with Zhaotong city in Yiliang county, Yunnan province. The local government headquarters is 140 kilometers away from Shimenkan town. Weining county is one of the poorest counties in China, and one of the poorest and most remote parts of Guizhou.

The Shimenkan administration covers 143.54 square kilometers and six main ethnic groups inhabit the area: Miao, Yi, Han, Hui, Buyi, and Caijia. Before the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Miao minority made up 80% of the population, with very small Yi and Han populations. It is to be noted that before the founding of the People's Republic, Shimenkan and its surrounding area was under the control of one local township government, while after 1949, Shimenkan comprised of three authorities and 14 village committees. This paper refers to Shimenkan as the township, exclusive of the other areas. Nowadays, Han is the main ethnic group in Shimankan, while Miao, Yi and others minorities account for 26.7% of total population, and Miao alone accounts for 18.8% (Zhang, 2006, p. 194).

The Miao in Shimenkan are a subgroup of the Miao called the Big Flowery

Miao, due to the flowery design on their clothes.

The Spread of Christianity in Shimenkan

In 1905, a British Methodist missionary named Samuel Pollard established churches and schools in Shimenkan bringing missionary educational endeavour to the Miao region. Between 1905 and 1948, the Methodist mission established 18 churches in Weining county. After 1932, Shimenkan United Parish was the center of the Christian community. Under the jurisdiction of the Miao, the church expanded rapidly, having a big impact domestically and abroad. It was also known as the Shichuan parish. Foreign mails were able to directly reach Shimenkan from this point in time. Remote Shimenkan became a center of missionary work. The parish was in charge of Shimenkan, Changhaizi, and several Miao area churches such as Dapingzi, Mi'ergou, Niupokan and Wangwuzhai within Yunnan province.

The arrival of Christianity in Shimenkan made a significant change in the lifestyle of the local Miao people. Firstly, in every village, a church was built, and with it a school, where extensive teaching was carried out, popularizing education in the local community. Secondly, Christianity brought about reforms to the community, changing customs such as ghost worshipping, and early and unstable marriages. The mission also established hospitals, including a leprosy hospital, agricultural office, post office, and other public services, and focused on improving the people's ways of thinking and living (Editorial Board, 2006, p. 223).

After 1949, foreign missionary work was stopped due to the "Three-Self Patriotic Movement" with its principles of self-governance, self-support, and self-propagation. As a result, the mission was run with no foreign help at all. After 1980, the Weining mission was able to reopen its churches one by one, with Shimenkan church reopening in 1987. On November 12, 2005, a newly built church was opened in Shimenkan, with believers from the surrounding areas travelling long distances to take part in church services. According to the author and the local archives, 90% of believers are Miao, and 50% to 60% of Miao in and around Shimenkan believe in Christianity (initial interview with the former Director of Education Bureau of Weining county, Miao ethnicity, educated in Shimenkan in 1941–1946, July 5, 2007, at Shimenkan).

Shimenkan Christian Education

Before the arrival of Christianity to Shimenkan, Weining had had no school for the Miao minority, whether private schools, charity schools or academies (*sishu*). The Shimenkan Miao were a population with no formal education, no script for their language, no understanding of Chinese characters, and had no language expressing numbers above 20 (Pollard, Hudspeth, Parsons, Dymond, Kendall, &

Parsons, 1921/2002). A monument in Shimenkan from 1916 reads, “In the high forests live wild people. Neither the country nor the government rules over them.”

In March 1905, Samuel Pollard and five Han Chinese teachers arrived to Shimenkan to establish a church and a school. The school was the first in Weining district for Miao people, and the very first primary school in the whole county. In 1912, the mission built bigger classrooms thanks to a 2,000 pound sterling donation from a British Baptist philanthropist called Robert Arthington. It also built a senior primary school (Guanghua Primary School), and a junior middle school. After the establishment of the primary school, Miao education made great progress. Samuel Pollard promoted “education and other development via religion,” setting up churches and schools. As the mission expanded, by 1949, there were 24 Miao schools in the whole of Weining county, and Miao education spread and developed rapidly (Editorial Board, 2006, p. 101).

In 1913 the first cohort of Weining educated Miao entered Chengdu’s middle schools in Sichuan. In 1920 Wu Xingchun became the first Miao to enter medical school in Chengdu’s West China Union University. In 1929, another Miao became the first Guizhou Ph.D graduate. In 1935, Zhu Huanzhang, the first Miao pedagogy scholar, graduated from West China Union University. In 1943, Zhang Chaolun became the first Miao medical doctor to graduate. According to the records, in 1952, in the entire Weining county there were 10,600 students, of whom 1,432 were Miao students (13.5%). At the time, the Miao population in Weining was 6.6%. There were 58 Miao teachers, 23% of the total. Besides, out of a Miao population of 16,000, two thirds were literate, or at least able to read *Miao Night Class*, also called the *Miao One Thousand Words* or *Thousand Word Text for Civilians* written by Tao Xingzhi and translated into Pollard script (Old Miao script) by Zhu Huanzhang. The 1952 *Record of Weining County* noted, “In proportion to its population, Miao culture is the most widely spread” (Editorial Board, 2006, p. 223).

Investigation into Shimenkan Education

Guanghua School and Miao Education Today

Many years ago, Guanghua Primary School in Shimenkan was considered to be a “revered land of Miao education.” Where does Shimenkan Miao education stand now? In August 2008, a study was carried out at Guanghua Primary School, a nine-year school with a total of 455 students, of whom 96 were of Miao ethnicity (25%).

Following the Cultural Revolution, very few Miao went to college, and none attended university. Guanghua Primary School now has the lowest higher

education enrollment level in the whole county, and students' achievement rates are at the very bottom, a big contrast with the success of the 1940s.

Regarding Miao students and changes in educational quality, one of the school principal had the following to say:

The proportion of Miao students is not as it used to be. We have now around 25% Miao students, with the majority of students being Han and a few Yi students. When they start school, many Miao students cannot understand Mandarin Chinese, and they need several months to adapt. Even if the teacher is Miao, he or she cannot use the Miao language as the other, non-Miao students, would not understand. To launch Miao classes at school would be a good idea, but there is no way to carry this out. There are no teachers, no prospects and not enough interest from students. Shimenkan education in the past was very successful and this has determined the current situation. Funding, management, and teaching are good now, and the school atmosphere is good. However, it cannot be compared with the past, as the situation has changed. We are in a comparatively underdeveloped and isolated place. Even the teacher and student composition is different now. Lack of school achievements can be mainly attributed to the teachers. Most of them are just high school graduates with limited teacher training, and they do not have higher educational diplomas themselves. To teach junior high school, this level of education is inadequate. In cities, junior high school teachers are college graduates with bachelor degrees. Having poorly educated teachers is a big problem, as the school material is quite complex these days. If the teacher's level of education is not high, how can he or she teach well? Besides, there is an issue of professionalism. The older generation of teachers was more devoted to teaching, while teachers of today just drift along day by day without much professionalism. (Initial interview with the principal of Guanghua Primary School, July 2, 2006, at Guanghua Primary School, Shimenkan)

Today, the number of Miao students is quite low, with a high drop-out rate and poor academic results. During the research period, parents and students often said simply that "they couldn't learn." In the end, why is studying not effective? Below are a few explanations:

I studied until Grade 5. Then I stopped. One reason is that my home is quite far from the school, and 10 miles each way is a long distance to walk. It is exhausting. The second and main reason is that the teaching was not good. Even by Grade 5, I still had not learned much, and did not get much of what the teacher was telling us. Teachers and family members felt ashamed, so it was better just to give up studying. I really wanted to study. Farming is too hard a life, but I just couldn't learn. (Initial interview with the head¹ of Xinying village, August 10, 2006, at Xinying village)

¹ The head of Xinying village has quite a good level of education considering the village average. Only 56% of interviewed parents had education above Grade 2.

I am now in Grade 6. I do not know whether I will pass my exams to junior high school. I want to study well, but it is not easy. In the Grade 1, I did not understand the teacher teaching. In Grade 2, I understood just part of the class. Many students could not follow the teacher. Even in the higher grades I did not understand class, and I was too embarrassed to ask the teacher for more explanation. I had poor grades and the teachers did not care, so I lost interest in studying. The longer it went on, the less I learnt. (Initial interview with a Miao student, August 10, 2006, at Guanghua Primary School, Shimenkan)

We cannot blame our teachers for poor grades, we can only blame ourselves. If you do not put enough effort into studying, you cannot get good results, and studying gets boring. Very few Miao study well, even fewer pass exams. And we even do not have hope in ourselves. (Initial interview with a Miao student, August 10, 2006, at Guanghua Primary School, Shimenkan)

Another Type of School: Xinzhong Primary School

Seven kilometers away from Shimenkan there is a newly established school, called Xinzhong Primary School. It lies in-between two Miao villages Xinying and Zhongzhai, deriving its name from the first syllables of each of the two villages. The school was set up with funds invested by Wu Caijin from Shenzhen who oversees a number of private schools in China. This school solves the problem of school distance for local Miao villagers, and the children of Xinying and Zhongzhai have no problem to attend classes.

The school provides free tuition, books, notebooks, schoolbags, and other equipment. At the moment school has 137 students, seven grades, and eight classrooms.

School teachers are volunteers from outside Guizhou, who bring their families with them, and leave behind good jobs to engage in Miao education in the remote village. Their spirit is to be admired. These pioneers arrive in an unknown place, with different views and new ideas. The school principal from Liaoning province says:

Many people think we are here for the money. Believe it or not, my husband and I get paid less than half what we made in Liaoning. While in Liaoning our jobs were secure, here we work in the private sector. We come here following our beliefs and interest, to help others, and to do something meaningful. Miao kids are honest and well brought up, but their living conditions and learning environment is not that good. When they start school they have language problems as they do not understand Mandarin. Local people speak either the Miao language or some dialect of Mandarin, which are not that similar to Mandarin. We employ three Miao teachers, and they teach pre-school and Grade 1. They use the Miao language to teach classes so that the children can understand and

learn a bit faster. If we allow them all to teach in Miao that would be the best, and more convenient for children, but we do not have enough teachers who speak Miao. We have eight grades and only seven teachers. Basically teachers educate more than one grade each, which is quite a workload. We have 30 classes to teach a week each. (Initial interview with the principal of Xinzhong Primary School, August 3, 2006, at Xinzhong Primary School, Shimenkan)

Economics is often given as the main factor affecting education. Educational impoverished areas cannot pay teachers well, do not get enough funding, and are not seriously enough taken into consideration. Teachers' choices should not to be overly criticized, as they are just ordinary members of society, facing life and economic pressures, with rural teachers at the bottom of the social order and often with no choice but to become teachers. The economic factor is one of the most important when teachers choose the profession. However as the author investigated, economics is not the only driving force in the case of teachers at Xinzhong Primary School. Despite poor financial conditions compared with state schools, teachers' attitudes and professionalism were beyond comparison. When interviewing the school principal, one thing was particularly striking. At 4 p.m., when the classes were already over, two Henan teachers stayed behind with eight students to help them with *pinyin*, the Romanization system for Chinese characters. This is a rare phenomenon. After-class activities are usually done as part of teachers' job, but in rural schools with no financial motivation, teachers just want to help students to understand the textbooks. Teachers' attitude to teaching differs even in the same area. State school teachers usually give excuses about locality, compensation, and student quality, but private school teachers rarely complain about compensation or living difficulties. This is what the school principal talked about: the spirit, professionalism and devotion of his teachers.

Miao students in Xinzhong Primary School are also different than their peers in state schools. They value their time spent on studying. Below is a conversation with a 14-year old student in Grade 5.

Researcher: Can I ask you how come you are only in Grade 5?

Student: I started school quite late. My home is 8 kilometers away from Shimenkan school. It took me over one hour to walk each way. I was seven years old at the time, and after two months I just could not do it any longer, but I did not want to give up. Later, this school opened. As it is very close to my home, I study here.

Researcher: What do you think about this school?

Student: The school is very good, the teachers are good, the school is fun, I would rather not to go home for lunch but just stay at school and play.

Researcher: Do you have any problems with your studies?

Student: In the Grade 1, there was a Miao teacher using the Miao language to teach us. From Grade 2 onwards, teachers from outside the area teach us in Mandarin, and in general we are able to understand.² (Initial interview with a female Miao student, August 3, 2006, at Xinzhong Primary School, Shimenkan)

Is there a scientific reason to teach Miao students in their mother tongue and written language? Is there indeed any such need? Is it more or less fair for Miao students to have bilingual education? Such questions regarding the Miao and in fact all southern China's minority populations, are quite controversial. Cultural changes should not be given as a reason for limiting bilingual education (Teng, 2001). However, the author's investigations have found different answers to this question. Education department officials, teachers, and parents tend to think that there is no need for bilingual education, and that there is not much use of learning the minority language. Moreover, in consideration of equality and fairness in education, officials tend to be critical of Miao bilingual education. They think that equal and fair education means that all students should be treated in the same way, and that providing bilingual classes to Miao students is unfair on other minorities. In the research, only charitable community organizations, which contribute funds to local minority schools to help with bilingual education, had clearly positive opinions on bilingual education, and had considered the language barrier issue faced by the Miao students. In reality, employing Miao teachers to teach the lower grades has reduced the educational attainment gap between Miao and non-Miao students.

Shimenkan Social Education

Social Education before the Founding of the People's Republic of China

Shimenkan has had a long history as a Christian community. Starting in 1905 with the church's establishment, by the 1940s there was more than 20 churches in the area. Every church was also a school and a center of local culture. The historical records note that, "After Shimenkan school's establishment, people walked for two or three days to Shimenkan just to learn to read and write. Mostly this entailed adult education, with the purpose to learning how to read the bible" (Editorial Board, 2006, p. 56). In order to solve the language problem and to carry out missionary work, Pollard and other missionaries created a Miao script

² 92% of Miao students, 89% of parents, and 75% of teachers agreed in interview that at the initial stage of schooling, Miao students should be taught in their mother tongue. However only Xinzhong Primary School has classes in spoken Miao language, while other schools use Mandarin Chinese.

and spread it among Miao believers. The writing of the *Miao One Thousand Words* provided a text for educational purposes and eliminated illiteracy in most of the Miao community. "At the time, the Miao were not familiar with Mandarin, learning Mandarin was hard, so there was a demand for the new script. The script had been designed by Samuel Pollard and Stephen Lee. Zhong Huanran, James Yang, John Zhang, and Zhang Wu helped carry out bilingual education and achieved great success with two thirds of the 16,000 Miao people in Shimenkan becoming literate" (Yang, 2005). After the translation of the bible into Miao script in 1937 by Yang Rongxin, a Miao man from Shimenkan, education and religion grew closer still, with the Miao learning to read from the bible. Community education and Christianity became intertwined.

Christianity had an additional impact on Miao local education and people's lives. In 1907 in Shimankan Samuel Pollard held a meeting. With over 80 Miao representatives from different places attending, numerous reforms were decided regarding Miao religion, marriage customs, and lifestyle. The main reforms were: (1) Religious beliefs such as worshipping ancestors and worshipping nature (mountains, trees, door gods) were undermined in accordance with Christianity, and the missionaries banned all related worship. Only 20% to 30% of Miao continued to practice the old beliefs.³ (2) Marriage customs were changed. When Pollard arrived at any village, the first thing he did was to stop the practice of "free love," for example, closing down the *suzhaifang*, or houses where young people could meet freely with members of the opposite sex. Structured love relations and marriage were introduced to the Miao. (3) The traditional Huashan festival, including folk singing, archery, horse-riding, was enriched after 1910 with student acrobatic performance, mountain climbing, short and long distance running, basketball and other activities. The Huashan festival is like a modern and ancient Olympics wrapped up in one. (4) Miao lifestyle became more civilized. Miao habits included excessive drinking, and weddings, funerals and other group activities provided an opportunity to indulge. After the arrival of Christianity, drinking and smoking was prohibited. (5) Changes in literacy. Before the arrival of the missionaries, the Miao did not have the right conditions for learning, and were often looked down upon and discriminated against by landlords and other minorities, but after schools had opened, they became proud advocates of education (Editorial Board, 2006). These reforms still impact on Miao lives today. Miao have the highest level of Christianity compared to other minorities living in the area; and marriage customs and funeral rituals still follow the reforms of the early 20th century.

Through Christian education and reform, Miao from underdeveloped and

³ The tradition of Liuse and Liuba originated from ancient sacrifice activities. Liuse and Liuba were two people, the former responsible for sacrifice to the Zhaomise mountain god, and the latter assisting in the process.

ignorant society became more civilized. The social education environment and people's characters were improved. Up until the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Miao were one of the most culturally advanced minorities in the country.

Community Education Now

Shimenkan is an impoverished mountainous place, with Miao populations living up to 50 kilometers away from the Shimenkan center. As a result of such difficult topography, the level of education among the Miao is very low, and cultural and educational activities are scarce. The main cultural activity is the annual Huashan festival, but due to organizational reasons its scale is getting smaller, and is not as spectacular as before the founding of the People's Republic, and it no longer has the same educational and cultural function. The author found out that Christian activities are still the main form of community education. Below is part of a conversation with several Miao believers:

Researcher: For how long did you attend school?

Interviewee 1: I finished three grades.

Researcher: Do you still know Chinese characters?

Interviewee 1: I know a few, many I have forgotten.

Researcher: Do you know the Miao script?

Interviewee 1: I understand the Old Miao script.

Researcher: At school you were not taught Miao script. How did you learn it?

Interviewee 2: We all learn it by ourselves. We read the bible at church meetings.

Researcher: How do you study it?

Interviewee 1: After each service the teachers read to us, we learn to sing hymns and we memorize the words, if we do not know the symbol we ask friends or a teacher. It takes time, but we know most of it by now.

Interviewee 2: Look (pointing at few women). These women never went to school, but they can read some symbols, and they can read the bible. They learned in the church, they learned hymns. (Initial interview with two Miao believers, August 3, 2006, at Xinying village, Shimenkan)

The bible written in the Pollard Miao script was very significant. It was a basic reference book for Miao Christians, and the only Christian work in the Old Miao script, which is still used in Shimenkan today. During the research, Christians Miao, living in shabby earthen houses, showed the author their copies of the bible, the only book they own.

On Sundays, neatly dressed Miao believers from surrounding villages come to Shimenkan church. As on average they have to walk for two or three hours on

mountainous paths, the Sunday mass starts at noon. They all carry the bible in their old bags, and this is their main Miao language study material. 80% of these believers just passed Grade 3 of primary school, most only know a few Chinese characters, and some do not know a single one. However, peasant women who never went to school can read the Miao script, as they learned it from the bible. It might be thought that such knowledge is not very useful, is not broad enough, and does not carry real meaning. But in these remote poor living conditions, with no schooling, where life and culture blend together, an ability to read Miao indicates culture and belief. After the Miao script was created and propagated in the area, many books written in Miao script started to appear. But the one that has been passed on most, and is still in constant use, is the bible.

Discussion

The Rise and Fall of Christianity and Shimenkan Education

Traditionally, religion in minority groups was one of the main forms of education. It was always deeply rooted in the political, economic and cultural life of the place. Before liberation, as an outcome of history, minorities did not have formal schooling, and school education and religious activities were mixed together, with education heavily dependent on the religious system. Temples, churches, and later missionary schools, have all undertaken the role of spreading and universalizing education. Minority students have thereby naturally received religious influence (Wang, 2002). Therefore, student adaptation to religious teaching has become an important topic of research.

Shimenkan school has a specific historical background. Its situation is closely related to rise and fall of Christianity. Some people think that “when Christianity was on the rise, Miao education was on the rise; when Christianity was waning, Miao education was waning,” while others think there is no relation between the rise and fall of Miao education and that of Christianity, it is just a historical phenomenon (Shen, 2006). The author thinks that Christianity has played an important role in Shimenkan schooling. Religion and the influence of the social environment had a big impact on Miao students’ studies.

As Shimenkan Miao students say, religion is a big part of their educational lives. But at different points in time, religion has had differing impact on them, and students have in turn experienced different degrees of religious assimilation.

Christianity and Schooling before the Founding of the People’s Republic of China

Shimenkan school was originally opened and run by the church, and naturally

came under Christian cultural influence. Its prime purpose was to serve the church. "The first cohort of students was to become church members. Given the missionary association's need to establish more churches, graduates were sent to Yunnan's Huize, Xundian, Wuding, Zhenxiong, Weixin, Yongshan counties, and Xiaolian and Gongxian counties in the south of Sichuan, to act as preachers and primary school teachers. A bible class was set up, running twice a week, until in 1936 when it was completely abolished" (Wang & Yang, 1987, March, p. 56). Students' understanding and knowledge of Christianity came from both their home environment and school studies. With just two classes a week at the religious school, Christianity was popularized among the young. As a result of religious schooling and students' deep and broad understanding of Christianity, it played an important part in their lives. "Before 1925, children of believers registered their names to participate in Sunday prayers, but later, registration was no longer required" (Wang & Yang, 1987, March). "In the beginning, Shimenkan school activities were mixed in with religious propaganda. Every week there were two or three theology classes, mainly focused on the bible. Students in higher grades were required to recite one or two short paragraphs once a week. Those not able to recite passages would be criticized. Students lived on campus. Students in lower grades were not required to participate in Sunday mass. However students aged 16 and over were encouraged to participate in the late mass twice a week" (Tan, 1983, p. 33). As records show, the school directly provided religious education, making Christianity one of the main school activities.

Early school religious activities' main purpose was to cultivate Christianity in students, so they could help propagate the religion. Some school teachers were church members which meant that school teaching and missionary work was mixed. It is a fact that the purpose of the church was to gain new members via education. In general, the entire first and second cohorts of students turned out to become missionaries, and were sent out to do missionary work as well as to teach. As it can be seen, religion and education were at the time closely related. Without the missionaries there had been no education, and with the schools' existence, religion was spread. A student who had enrolled in the school in 1952, said the following about the relationship between religion and studying:

My father was educated at the Shimenkan church school. Later he went to schools in Zhaotong and Chengdu sponsored by the church. He ended up working for the church later on. At first he taught in Shanghai, and later he was a chief accountant for Shimenkan parish. If not for the church, my father would only have been a farmer. (Initial interview, July 28, 2006, at Shimenkan)

This shows that education at the time was built on the basis of religious services. Schooling helped to spread Christianity and Miao students studied its

teaching, and with the church's support and approval went out to carry on their studies or work, becoming a powerful force. Students had a positive attitude towards the strong religious approach at school. On the one hand, this was due to the students already being Christian because of their family upbringing, and that the school took preferential fees for the children of Christians, resulting in them being feeling grateful towards Christianity. On the other hand, the school curriculum was devised in such way as to broaden understanding of religion, especially the Christian doctrines of love, equality, sympathy for those in need. Such strict religious rules in China meant that the Miao lifestyle was on the periphery of Chinese society. Miao believers at even the lowest level of society felt respected and cared for. According to Diana Crane (1994/2006), culture is the best means to help people live. The Miao's experience in Shimenkan exemplifies the theory: Christianity helped the people with their existence, changing their social status via education and helped them give up on their original beliefs and adopt Christianity.

Christianity and the School Situation in the Early Years of the People's Republic of China

After 1949, Shimenkan church, along with other churches across the country, had its foreign missionaries expelled. Shimenkan school was taken over by the new government, and although Sunday church services were not particularly restricted, a large number of believers left Shimenkan to work elsewhere. Among their number were Zhu Huanzhang, principal of the junior middle school, and the chief church accountant Yang Rongxin. Han Chinese teachers were brought into the school from outside the area, and they tended not to be Christian. The religious atmosphere of pre-1949 was dampened, until restrictions came to a head in 1957. As an old alumnus recalled:

When I started at the school, there were no religious activities. Church was something I went to with my family. I tagged along when they went, and enjoyed it. The church put on activities, such as Christmas celebrations, and it was good fun. My school never said I couldn't go. But in 1956, the church activities stopped. Students stopped believing. (Initial interview, July 26, 2006, at Shimenkan)

His family is Christian, and his father served the church for a long time. He accepts Christianity as the family faith. In Shimenkan, there are many people such as himself. Due to family influence, they become interested in religion, but it is quite a superficial belief involving the attendance of some church activities. Compared with the previous generation, their understanding and belief are far shallower, because the religiosity of the school has nothing like that of

pre-liberation times where almost everyone was a believer.

Christianity and the School Situation in the Post-1980s

In the 1980s, Christianity saw something of a revival in Shimenkan, albeit rather gradual. The coming together of Shimenkan Christians only really took place following the rebuilding of the church, sponsored by a Christian believer in Macao. Prior to this, believers had started to gather for services in peoples' houses, and these meetings were organized on a village basis, as there was no one place and organization under which Shimenkan Christians could all meet together. After 2006, Miao believers from all the neighboring villages would congregate in the new church on Sundays. As many had to walk through the mountains for two, three hours to reach Shimenkan, the regular Sunday service would begin at noon.

Although there has been some recovery in number of church activities, the memory of the past remained strong, and there are comparatively fewer believers than before the anti-rightist campaign, and people are less open about their beliefs. With the government loosening social control and opening up to the outside world, the numbers of Miao believers has increases. According to the author, approximately 50% of Shimenkan Miao are currently believers. Miao families and children have various understandings and beliefs about Christianity.

I'm not a believer, but my wife is. She goes to church on Sundays to sing. I think there is no use in believing. If you get into trouble, you can't wait for God to sort things out. You can only rely on yourself, and find ways to earn money. (Initial interview with a 25-year-old man from a Christian family, July 18, 2007, at Shimenkan)

Although our school was founded from a church donation, we don't preach to the children. We teach the standard curriculum. Choice of religion is for the students to decide, and what's most important for them is to study. I am a Christian myself, but I rarely participate in church activities. I am too busy teaching, and with school things. Teaching is the most important thing. (Initial interview with the principal of Xinzhong Primary School Principal, August 5, 2006, at Xinzhong Primary School, Shimenkan)

My mother is a Christian, and I go to church with her on Sundays. She sings nice sounding hymns, and there are lots of people around. I know that the Lord is God, and that he is a good person. (Initial interview with a student, Grade 5, August 5, 2006, at Xinzhong Primary School, Shimenkan)

From the words of the students, they have a certain understanding of Christianity, and live in an environment that has Christianity as its backdrop. Family members all have a degree of connection to the religion. However,

compared with before, people have generally lost their belief, and generally students are not believers. They do not have a sense of Christian identity, and commonly do not believe in the existence of God, or that God is there to help them. They share the common young person's ideal of individual struggle. Students cannot easily identify with religion. However, nor do they particularly reject Christianity, and this has something to do with the fact that their parents believe. The author attended a service at Shimenkan church, and saw a number of neatly dressed Miao mothers carrying their sons and daughters to the service. From childhood, these children received this influence, and Christianity is bound to leave an impression in such a situation.

The Impact of Christianity on the Miao Concept of Community Education

During the course of the research, it was noticed that the Miao paid considerable attention to education and in particular women's education. The author rarely found illiteracy in their visits around Shimenkan. This is a very unusual situation for remote places peopled by minorities. Moreover, the concept of equality of education for men and women is well accepted, with many female Miao receiving education. According to the research data, 80% of women have been educated from Grade 1 to Grade 5 of primary school, although few have attended junior middle school. Comparing to statistics for other ethnic minorities, this is quite a rare phenomenon. In Weining, Guizhou, a very poor area, the proportion of female adults who received primary education is 45%. From the point of view of rural and women education, Miao parents are very supportive of their children's education. It might be result of their history, to attach value to the education and its achievements. In every Miao family going back two generations, there can be found literate educated people, a fact of which people are immensely proud, and an additional reason why such importance is attached to education.

Christian education has in recent history been the most important aspect of Miao society. Through Christian education, Miao believers have learnt of new ways of thinking and advanced ways of living, achieving a unity of purpose of religion and education. Even today, Christian education is important for the Shimenkan Christian community. Through their Christian beliefs, the Miao people gain an understanding of culture, Miao literature, and purification of the mind. They complete their self-education, an important part of adult continuing education. The twice weekly religious services act as the main place of learning for the Miao people. Most importantly, they learn to read the bible, and sing hymns, thus learning culture and language via religious attendance. They become a community with culture, and no longer illiterate. By this way, Christianity has become a part of the identity of the Miao people (Zhang, 2007, p. 1). From the discussions the author had with Miao believers, their knowledge of the bible

gives them a sense of loyalty and pride. From this level it may be argued that Christianity serves a far greater purpose than its religious function, and its educational function should be highlighted.

As for Shimenkan's educational transformation, there are those in the educational sector that say this has to be put down to history, and that in a historical period of special circumstances, Shimenkan education flourished as it did. Some even say that this was coincidental. But people forget that history is created by people, and that Shimenkan's history was created by Shimenkan people. If one considers those who created its history, it is hard to think of as a coincidence. Certainly, Shimenkan extraordinary educational development arose from a special period in time. It can be said that Shimenkan was the place with the first incidence of minority education, and one of the first incidences of western style education, at a time when such education was rare. It is incredible that this small mountainous area out of the way town becomes one of the first places to provide Western style education in the entire country. However, the historical factors that brought this to play are only one of the objective conditions for success. In minority areas around China, other churches also developed schools, but few achieved anything like the success of Shimenkan, showing that not all church schools can provide a good education.

Shimenkan's educational miracle has a lot to do with history, but even more to do with its people. In particular, those to consider are the founders of the school, and the local Miao people themselves. Their educational ideals and thoughts about setting up a school, and how these ideas were transmitted to and accepted by the local people, are key to the Shimenkan educational phenomenon. It is also important to consider the extent to which Miao students and local people were able to accept and adopt cultural knowledge from outside. In order to adapt to outside cultural knowledge, the Miao people had to continuously accommodate new understanding, make choices, and confront cultural conflict. During this process, the new culture and education underwent transformation and renewal to meet Miao needs, and enable local culture and education to retain its important role. In this way, Shimenkan's experience of one hundred years of educational transformation is a microcosm of cultural transformation. It is also a process of different cultures coming together with Miao culture in conflict, integration and adaptation. The more foreign culture has met local demands, the less the resistance to cultural education, and the more outside culture could be accepted and work well, to achieve good results, rather than vice versa.

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