

CULTURE AND RELIGION IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

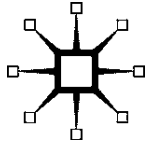


# Civilizing Missions

International Religious Agencies  
in China

*Miwa Hirono*





CIVILIZING MISSIONS  
Copyright © Miwa Hirono, 2008.

All rights reserved.

First published in 2008 by  
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN®  
in the United States—a division of St. Martin's Press LLC,  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Where this book is distributed in the UK, Europe and the rest of the world,  
this is by Palgrave Macmillan, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited,  
registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills,  
Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies  
and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

Palgrave® and Macmillan® are registered trademarks in the United States,  
the United Kingdom, Europe and other countries.

ISBN-13: 978-0-230-60897-9  
ISBN-10: 0-230-60897-3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hirono, Miwa.

Civilizing missions : international religious agencies in China /  
Miwa Hirono.

p. cm.—(Culture and religion in international relations)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-230-60897-3

1. Missions—China. 2. Missions—Theory I. Title.

BV3415.2.H57 2008  
266.00951—dc22

2008015900

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: December 2008

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America.

## Frames of Interaction

The three frames of interaction are conflict, adaptation, and the new consciousness. These frames are built around the responses of members of ethnic communities to the “civilizing mission.” The conflict frame refers to a situation in which members of an ethnic community consciously disagree with the ideology of a “civilizing mission,” or with the very existence of such a mission. The adaptation frame, on the other hand, refers to a situation in which the members of an ethnic community reach consensus over the ideology of a “civilizing mission” in the course of their interaction, leading to adaptation of that ideology by the members of the ethnic community. The new consciousness frame does *not* refer to something between the conflict and adaptation frames. It refers to a more mature and deeper relationship between the two parties, which eventually leads to unexpected consequences at the beginning of the interaction. This can, in turn, lead to a heightened level of self-realization of the members of the ethnic community.

For the conflict frame and adaptation frame, James Scott (1990) is an important reference in seeking to explain the conscious resistance of members of ethnic communities to domination.<sup>8</sup> Scott attempts to explore not only the “public transcript” of resistance to powerholders, which is “subordinate discourse in the presence of the dominant” (4), but also the “hidden transcript,” which is defined as a subordinate “discourse that takes place offstage, beyond direct observation by powerholders”; in other words, “something of the imaginative capacity of subordinate groups to reverse or negate dominant ideologies” (91). He continues:

It is plausible to consider [something of the imaginative capacity of subordinate groups] part and parcel of the religiopolitical equipment of historically disadvantaged groups. Other things equal, it is therefore more accurate to consider subordinate classes *less* constrained at the level of thought and ideology, since they can in secluded settings speak with comparative safety, and more constrained at the level of political action and struggle, where the daily exercise of power sharply limits the options available to them. To put it crudely, it would ordinarily be suicide for serfs to set about to murder their lords and abolish the seigneurial regime; it is, however, plausible for them to imagine and talk about such aspirations providing they are discreet about it. (ibid.)

The conflict frame and adaptation frame draw on the notion of resistance at the level of consciousness including both the “public

transcript” and the “hidden transcript” in its investigation of the response of members of ethnic communities to international agency.<sup>9</sup> What follows is an explanation of each of the three frames, and of the various expected responses of members of ethnic communities in relation to each frame.

### *The Conflict Frame*

In the conflict frame, members of an ethnic community consciously disagree with the civilizational ideology of an international agency, either publicly or discreetly (Scott 1990). This may occur for any variety of reasons. Community identity is not likely to change in this frame because the “civilizing mission” does not attain legitimacy in the eyes of the members of the ethnic community.<sup>10</sup>

“Resistance” is an important characteristic of expected ethnic community members’ responses within the conflict frame.<sup>11</sup> An important example of resistance is the Boxer Uprising of 1900, in which intensely anti-Western sentiments led to widespread attacks on foreign missionaries and their converts (Purcell 1963). In another example, the members of an ethnic community, confronted by Christian civilizing projects, declined to become Christians, and in some cases declined even to permit the missionaries to stay in their community. Some set fire to church buildings, and even killed some of the missionaries themselves.

Resistance includes not only violent resistance but also manipulation. Members of the ethnic community, for example, take advantage of the material benefits, while pretending to subscribe to the values that the international agency is attempting to spread. On occasion, ethnic community members have attended Christian churches, and even joined in some church activities, irrespective of whether they have been converted or not. This was done simply because joining in these activities led to such material benefits as access to education in Christian schools, and to health care in Christian hospitals. Ethnic community members can pretend to go along with an international agency while not actually agreeing with it (Thongyu 1986). After the international agency leaves the community, the community members can choose to embrace only the material advantages provided, and revert to their own identity (visible in the pre-existing social hierarchy and social practice). In many cases, it is difficult to ascertain whether conversions to Christianity are motivated purely by faith or material gain.

### *The Adaptation Frame*

In contrast, within the adaptation frame, members of an ethnic community reach a consensus over the ideology of the “civilizing mission,” which in turn leads to a degree of adaptation. For example, a participatory approach to decision making may be adapted to sit more easily with a pre-existing social hierarchy. One consequence of this adaptation could be a change in community identity, which is specifically the relationship between community elders and their followers, the men, women, and children.

The conflict and adaptation frames overlap. Even in circumstances whereby community members appear willing to accommodate the civilizing ideology and related activity, they may resist in the longer term. For example, in the case of community members consenting to the principle of gender equality, the breakdown of entrenched traditions will not occur overnight, and the actual relationship between men and women may not change for some time—and then perhaps only partially. In such cases, the interaction of an international agency and members of an ethnic community is understood as taking place within the zone of overlap between the conflict and adaptation frames. The third frame is the new consciousness frame, and it operates in a way different from the overlapping zone. It requires a much deeper relationship between both parties.

### *The New Consciousness Frame*

The central feature of the new consciousness frame is that as a result of interaction, relationships between both parties may lead to something completely new, that is, to unexpected circumstances. Members of an ethnic community acquire new consciousness of their identity and heighten their self-realization. It is not a simple “baptism” of an ethnic community in the ways of Christianity and Western civilizational ideology and their activity, nor is it a simple adherence to the status quo through a process of incremental adaptation. The level of the legitimation of an international agency that occurs on the basis of the new consciousness frame of interaction is likely to be very high because there is potential for interaction more as equals than as two parties in a dominant-subordinate power relationship such as exists in the two frames of interaction mentioned above. Interaction interpreted within this frame occurs only after the relationship develops and matures.

In his study of a variety of civilizing projects undertaken in China, Harrell (1995: 27) explains a situation that amounts to the new consciousness frame and discusses it as follows:

[Ethnic] consciousness may already exist, but it will be sharpened, focused, perhaps intensified by the interaction with the center. Or in some cases, a peripheral people that has no ethnic consciousness may develop one in response to the pressures of the civilizing project.

The new consciousness frame resonates in the work of Richard White (1991). In his analysis of the relationship between whites and “American Indians” in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, White proposed the notion of the middle ground as a way of moving beyond the simple dichotomy of “cultural persistence” versus “conquest and assimilation” (ix). A similar dichotomy exists in my analytical frame—that of conflict and adaptation. They are named differently from White’s because the focus of the framework is on the responses of the members of an ethnic community to external ideologies. Nevertheless, my study builds on White’s main argument that a dichotomous understanding of the relationship between two parties is not appropriate if one’s intention is to gain a better understanding of the depth of a relationship. As he aptly expresses it,

The history of Indian-white relations has not usually produced complex stories. Indians are the rock, European peoples are the sea, and history seems a constant storm. There have been but two outcomes: The sea wears down and dissolves the rock; or the sea erodes the rock but cannot finally absorb its battered remnant, which endures. The first outcome produces stories of conquest and assimilation; the second produces stories of cultural persistence. . . . But the tellers of such stories miss a larger process and a larger truth. The meeting of sea and continent, like the meeting of whites and Indians, creates as well as destroys. Contact was not a battle of primal forces in which only one could survive. Something new could appear. (ix)

A good example of the new consciousness of members of an ethnic community is offered by Nicholas Tapp (1989) in relation to the Hmong people living in Thailand. According to Tapp, Christianity offers its converts an alternative to “the possibilities

of the continuation of pantheistic Hmong shamanism or the adoption of the state religion of Thailand” (1989: 85). The alternative is the strengthening of the ethnic identity of the Hmong. This is the observable “new consciousness” created by the interaction between Christian missionaries and members of ethnic communities. In the new consciousness frame, community identity is likely to be changed or reinforced significantly as a result of self-realization.

## Conclusion

This chapter has provided a theoretical discussion of the concept of civilization and its meaning in the Chinese context. In so doing, it has revealed that the concept of civilization is by no means simply a product of the West. The Chinese had their own conception of civilization before the encounter with the West. However, as the encounter proceeded, the original concept of civilization *jiaohua* became *wenming*, which resonates more with the Western notion of civilization, understood as advanced technology.

It is important to reiterate that civilization should be understood as a self-proclaimed identity, which may change according to its context and circumstances, or as a result of interaction with others. This understanding of civilization provides a theoretical background against which to locate perceptions of international agencies in later chapters.

It is also important to take into account the fact that both the Chinese state and Western missionaries undertook their “civilizing missions” in relation to ethnic communities in China. The “civilizing mission” undertaken by the Chinese state predated that undertaken by missionaries. To improve our understanding of the nature of the “civilizing mission” over time, it is thus essential to move beyond the dichotomy of the West as the center of the “civilizing mission,” and China as a recipient of such a mission.

This chapter has also provided a theoretical discussion of ethnic community identity, identifying it as something created as a result of interaction with others. Consequently, the three frames of interaction are differentiated by the extent to which the interaction affects pre-existing notions of ethnic community identity.

The next chapter explores the “civilizing mission” undertaken by China’s state and provides the necessary historical and contextual