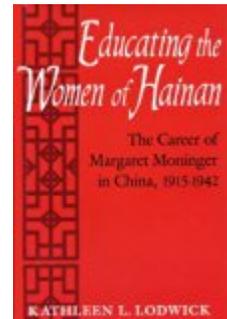


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kathleen L. Lodwick. *Educating the Women of Hainan: The Career of Margaret Moninger in China, 1915-1942*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1995. xv + 255 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-1882-6.

Reviewed by Shelton Woods (Boise State University)
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This is a remarkable biography of “Margaret” Moninger, a Presbyterian missionary who served on China’s southern island of Hainan between 1915-1942. This work is primarily based on Margaret’s Sunday letters to her family. Other sources Professor Lodwick consulted include oral histories with Margaret’s relatives and former Hainan colleagues as well as archival letters from Margaret’s contemporaries. What is obviously lacking, in terms of source material, is the voice of Hainan citizens. The book’s focus is not so much about educating the women of Hainan, as the title would lead one to believe, as it is about the life of Margaret Moninger between 1915-1942. The absence of the Hainan Chinese voice necessitates that the author’s focus is on the missionary rather than the “converts.” Yet, this study is significant because it explores Moninger’s motives, contradictions, spiritual journey, and her life’s ultimate pyrrhic victory. It is also valuable because it provides insight, through Moninger’s correspondence, to life on Hainan during the May Fourth Movement, the Warlord era, Chiang Kai-shek’s republic and during the Japanese occupation. To be sure, the years Moninger spent on Hainan were formative in China’s history, and Kathleen Lodwick examines these changes through the eyes of the Hainan missionaries.

The book’s first pages include an explanation of Moninger’s motives for missionary volunteer service. The author’s thesis is that Moninger, as a single woman and college graduate, never felt a divine call to serve in China. Indeed, by 1915, missionary service in Protestant mainline denominations was becoming much more of a profession than a calling. Many missionary boards of the day prized a medical degree above a divine calling. Thus, when Moninger applied to the mission board, she con-

fessed that she never had directly been responsible for another’s conversion and if China did not need her services she was willing to serve in another foreign land. The reason for her less-than-inspired surrender for the mission field was the future Moninger faced in her Iowa hometown. Her options were quite clear—she could teach elementary or secondary students in a small town in Iowa or hold a high profile position as a missionary. In China she acquired duties and responsibilities, including disbursement of enormous amounts of money, that would have been denied her had she stayed in Iowa. Lodwick writes: “Few women of her generation in America held positions of such responsibility” (p. 5). Marriage and a family—or any type of romance—were cynically dismissed by Moninger at an early age and there never appeared to be a serious thought about ever raising a family. Without this to consider, the opportunity to branch out into a world where women were not consigned to menial roles appealed to Moninger.

Lodwick places Moninger’s life in the context of similar literature, including William Hutchinson’s *Errand to the World*,^[1] Jane Hunter’s *The Gospel of Gentility: American Women Missionaries in Turn-of-the-Century China*,^[2] and Irwin Hyatt’s *Our Ordered Lives Confess*.^[3] But Moninger’s life does not neatly fit into any stereotype of early twentieth-century missionaries. There were various contradictions surrounding her life and work. To be sure, Moninger’s baggage to China included imperialistic attitudes: “From Margaret’s comment about the Chinese lacking a Western sense of fair play and sportsmanship and from the subjects taught in the mission schools, it is clear that the Hainan missionaries had no qualms about cultural imperialism. They were clearly teaching Western civilization to the Chinese in the mission

schools, and many of Margaret's letters from the 1921 school year demonstrate this" (p. 67). Professor Lodwick presents multiple examples of Moninger's cultural imperialism. Yet, there are instances of her sensitivity to Chinese cultural norms. Thus, during the 1920 Hainan New Year celebrations, although she wanted to visit outlying villages, Moninger stayed "at home" as she knew the Chinese families believed that a foreigner's presence during this season brought bad luck. On another occasion, a fellow Hainan missionary sought indemnity for the murder of her husband. This, of course, was the normal action following a foreigner's murder on Chinese soil. Moninger, however, wrote with some insight about how unfair these demands were and that these payments would make it "very hard for us to preach the Gospel when money payment has been demanded from people who did not ask us to come in the first place and from those who had nothing to do with the murder of Byers ... the enemies who did the deed aren't the one's who have to pay the money" (p. 110). Moreover, Professor Lodwick does a wonderful job presenting a multifaceted missionary who cannot be pegged a liberal, imperialist or racist.

Another fascinating aspect to this work is how we see Moninger's roots in Hainan grow deeper each year. Several of her letters from Hainan note that "these have been the happiest years of my life" (p. 92). Her roots grew so deep that when she was asked by her brother to return to Iowa to visit their dying father during March 1941, she chose to stay in China. She responded to her sibling's urgent request: "In some way I can't really think straight about the matter—and would always feel very, very badly if I did not get home in time to see him, and yet right now it does seem as if I were needed here...please let me know by air mail or wireless if anything more definitely serious or affecting the limit of time develops, because I care" (p. 196). Hainan was her life and took priority even over the impending death of her last living parent.

In this biography, Lodwick paints a portrait of Margaret Moninger—warts and all. That is, this book is honestly written and hero worship is not the goal. There were quirks in Moninger's personality and some disturbing habits including her obsession with the delivery and sending of mail. Most of the criticism comes from the letters of Esther Morse, an M.D. who joined the Hainan missionaries in 1930. Moninger and Dr. Morse shared the same house and, in her letters, the doctor often wrote derogatory comments about her house mate. The unflattering remark most often repeated involved Moninger's religious activities. According to Dr. Morse, her house

mate was a "holier than thou" member of the missionary community. Moninger reportedly spent hours preparing a sermon and usually put more time in a sermon than her male colleagues. Yet, there was a sense of dread, according to Dr. Morse, every time Margaret would preach: "Her expression when she's preaching irritates me, too, it's like the cat that's been in the cream and is congratulating itself that none shows on its whiskers" (p. 157). A schedule was made that limited the occasions Moninger would preach. Dr. Morse wrote that Margaret's turn "will come once every five months and I reckon we can all live through that. Aren't we awful to try and circumvent a fellow-missionary that way? She does pin-prick so" (p. 158). By sharing these letters, Lodwick produces a fuller picture of this missionary.

It is somewhat paradoxical that a woman whose career was in the "Lord's service" would have so little to say about religion or her personal beliefs. Yet, this is the case with Margaret Moninger. The author points this out in the opening pages and the missionary's silence on religious matters is broken just a few times in her letters. This lack of religious attention has two interesting aspects to it. First, it is probable that Moninger's silence on religious matters is rooted in her own conversion experience. Margaret grew up going to church and even attended Billy Sunday crusades where a definite invitation was given at the end of each service. Moreover, Margaret acknowledged the nebulous aspect of her conversion: "At the age of fourteen I was supposed to be converted in some revival meeting and joined the church. I said supposed to be advisedly as in looking over my past life I cannot say now that I really was consecrated for Christ at that time. Three years later in the fall of 1908 I joined the Christian Endeavor Society and I believe my Christian life really begins from the night I signed that Christian Endeavor pledge" (p. 18). She was not loyal to one denomination before joining the Presbyterian Mission and this too stems from her ecumenical feeling and what conservatives might call an indefinite conversion. But a second aspect to her religious convictions is that they became of greater importance as she grew older (p. 215). As noted above, by the 1930s she was preparing sermons that demonstrated her intimate knowledge of Biblical and theological writings.

Lodwick concludes this work by returning to her original thesis, i.e., Margaret Moninger's call to China was not premised on metaphysical beliefs but on a personal choice based on the limited options she faced in the United States. The book's final sentence captures Moninger's career in these words: "Her call had been

answered; her life had not been dull.” In this sense one might surmise that Moninger succeeded in fulfilling her call. But after reading this insightful biography one must conclude that Moninger’s victory was a hollow one. This personal conclusion is based on two issues. First, as the author described the final days and hours the Hainan missionaries had in China during 1942, there are descriptions of Chinese weeping over the loss of particular missionaries. Yet, there is no indication that even one Chinese shed a tear over Moninger’s departure. In fact, Margaret writes about some Chinese who were crying because certain missionaries of Hainan were leaving (she does not include herself as one for whom Chinese were crying). It is possible that after twenty-seven years in Hainan there were not a few Chinese (Christian or non-Christian) sorry to see Moninger leave? If there were, why are they not mentioned? Finally, we are told that Margaret Moninger spent her final years (she passed away in 1950) quite alone as there was “no one with whom to discuss the life she had lived” (p. 211). She spent the last years of her life enjoying a new hobby

“following baseball games on the radio” (p. 217). It is difficult to find a more anti-social if not lonely hobby than sitting alone day after day listening to baseball games. If her life’s call was to have an exciting existence, Hainan provided that for her—but at what cost?

Notes:

[1]. Hutchinson, William R. *Errand to the World: American Protestant Thought and Foreign Missions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

[2]. Hunter, Jane. *The Gospel of Gentility: American Women Missionaries in Turn-of-the-Century China*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984.

[3]. Hyatt, Irwin T. *Our Ordered Lives Confess*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976.

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