

Kelly H. Chong. *Deliverance and Submission: Evangelical Women and the Negotiation of Patriarchy in South Korea.* Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008. 272 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-03107-4.



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Published on H-Pentecostalism (September, 2009)

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In *Deliverance and Submission: Evangelical Women and the Negotiations of Patriarchy in South Korea*, Kelly H. Chong investigates the widespread involvement of middle-class women in South Korean evangelicalism, with an eye to exploring the paradoxes these women live out as they simultaneously experience both empowerment and subordination because of their cultural and religious experiences. There is something particular about the case of South Korean women, and yet some aspects of their experiences would be easily recognized by evangelical women in other cultures, and by middle-class women in other places and times. This is part of the appeal of this book. While it is an important addition to the literature about a specific part of the world where evangelicalism is expanding and flourishing at an astonishing rate, there are familiar echoes here that will resonate with readers whose basis for comparison is evangelical women's experiences in entirely different parts of the world, and even in entirely different times.

Chong, who describes herself as a person who "currently do[es] not consider myself to have a religious affiliation" (p. 40), seemed most surprised by the empowerment that these evangelical women reportedly experienced. Women testified that their religious involvements gave them increased self-confidence, individual self-fulfillment, and opportunities for learning and self-development. While feminist scholars such as Canadian historian Wendy Mitchinson have long asserted that the skills which women almost incidentally acquired through their involvement in religious organizations should not be overlooked (skills such as fundraising, parliamentary procedure, and organizational management),[1] scholars have been much slower to embrace religion as a suitable arena for feminist inquiry, probably because of their own aversion to organized religion and spirituality, as Ruth Compton Brouwer has noted.[2]

Chong is a sociologist and her study is an ethnographic one, which employs the methodology of a participant observer. Conducting her research over a period of sixteen months between

1996 and 1999, she explains that she tried “to spend as much of [her] waking time as possible attending church activities and interacting with women inside and outside of the church” (p. 37). That methodology definitely gave her this insider view she was hoping for, as she spent her time “talking to women, studying the Bible with them, singing with them, going out on evangelizing expeditions with them, visiting the sick and poor, and helping them with their church chores” (pp. 37-38). She divided her time between two different Protestant church congregations, one Methodist and the other Presbyterian, and she interviewed sixty women. While Chong acknowledges that Pentecostal/charismatic characteristics can be found throughout evangelical churches in South Korea, the book does not emphasize this characteristic because it is not central to her argument.

What seems familiar from studies of other cultures and time periods is the sense of limitation, subordination, and frustration that women reported because of the constraints placed upon them by their cultural and class realities, but also because of their newfound adherence to evangelical doctrines, particularly that of female submission. Chong devotes chapters 5 and 6 to examining “the complex meaning and dynamics of evangelical women’s engagement with the ideologies and practices of religious patriarchy as they play out on women’s religiosity and lives” (p. 134). Reading through Chong’s description of the women’s lives, one hears echoes of nascent feminist sentiments reminiscent of the 1950s feminist awakening that was stirring among suburban, middle-class, married women throughout North America in that postwar era. Perhaps it is the socially and culturally conservative lifestyles of South Korea’s contemporary middle-class women that seem so familiar, but certainly when Chong reports that some of the women, in their pre-conversion days, suffered from psychosomatic physical illnesses, “the so-called diseases with ‘no

name” (p. 90), the parallels with Betty Friedan’s postwar America are striking.

Yet Chong cautions readers against making assumptions about close parallels with the West, explaining that “in contrast to American liberal feminist assumptions, it is a mistake to presume in the Korean context that high levels of education and modernity have encouraged women to acquire conscious aspirations beyond familial roles, or that the major source of women’s frustrations lies in their restriction to the domestic sphere.” Instead Chong asserts that for South Korea “the forces of modernity have generated for women not so much an impulse toward emancipation from the family as a vision for a better domestic and marital life” (p. 75). Given the particular ideology and structure of Neo-Confucian patriarchy, with its strong emphasis on domesticity and enduring ties between mothers and sons, South Korean women face extremely complex domestic situations prone to conflict, not only with their husbands but even more frequently with their mothers-in-law. Evangelicalism has strong appeal for women facing these dilemmas because while it places high value on domesticity, at the same time it promises “a deep sense of personal achievement and a more empowered, reconstituted self-identity” (p. 129), outcomes that Chong calls “unexpectedly ‘liberating’” (p. 134).

Beyond the culturally specific realities of South Korean evangelical women’s experiences, as a historian of twentieth-century women in Canada, I read Chong’s account with a sense of familiarity. As a researcher of religious women, I sensed that this book was recording something quite familiar and pervasive, particularly when it revisited the seemingly timeless question of how an evangelical woman is to balance her newfound “personal freedom in Christ,” where there is “neither male nor female, neither slave nor free,” with the clearly gendered directives that wives must “submit to their husbands,” and in the most conservative evangelical circles, even “remain

silent in church.” The really useful thing about Chong’s work is that she does not settle for a simplistic answer to that question by coming down on one side or the other. Instead, she reports that the lives of the women she met testify that these two realities are held in tension with one another. The women in Chong’s account, like evangelical women in other times and places, are apparently leading lives which are simultaneously stories of deliverance and stories of submission, lives where they constantly negotiate with the constraints imposed upon them by patriarchy, whether it is cultural or religious in origin.

There are several reasons to commend this book. First of all, a study of women’s experiences in one of the hotbeds of contemporary evangelicalism, South Korea, where women account for 60 to 75 percent of the evangelical population, is most welcome. Second, Chong’s findings are very compelling because her account is a balanced presentation of the dichotomous and contradictory gender roles that middle-class women continuously negotiate with patriarchy in that evangelical subculture. Third, these well-documented case studies of individual women’s gendered faith dilemmas beg the question of how much of their experience is actually culturally specific to their own context, and how much of it is reflective of an evangelical culture that is much more widely experienced, across geography and time. The answer to this last question is one that we may never answer fully, but in attempting to address it, clearly there is a great deal of scope for scholarly work across the academic disciplines. As researchers continue along in their journey for answers to that enduring question, they will find that Kelly Chong has marked out a very useful path to follow, a path where the two tracks of deliverance and submission run along in parallel. It is the tension between the two that requires endless negotiations on the part of evangelical women in South Korea, and it is that negotiation that

provides scholars of gender and religion with a fascinating problem to consider.

Notes

[1]. Wendy Mitchinson, “Church Women and Church Missionary Societies in the Nineteenth Century: A Step Towards Independence,” *Atlantis* 2, no. 2 (1977): 57-75.

[2]. Ruth Compton Brouwer, “Transcending the Unacknowledged Quarantine: Putting Religion into English-Canadian Women’s History” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 27, no. 3 (1992): 47-61.

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Citation: Linda M. Ambrose. Review of Chong, Kelly H. *Deliverance and Submission: Evangelical Women and the Negotiation of Patriarchy in South Korea*. H-Pentecostalism, H-Net Reviews. September, 2009.

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