

## A Note on Sophia Martin Whittle's Trimetrical Classic to Instruct Girls\*

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The genesis of the printing and publishing industry of Singapore began in 1822, three years after the founding of the new settlement by Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles. Under the supervision of missionaries of the London Missionary Society and the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions during the first half of the 19th century, the mission presses published many religious books and tracts. Written not only in English, Jawi Malay but also in Chinese, Japanese and Thai, the missionaries hoped to convert their targeted audiences to Christianity.

In this short note, I introduce a Chinese publication entitled *Hsun-nü san-tzu ching*<sup>1</sup> (Trimetrical Classic to Instruct Girls) which so far is believed to be the earliest extant Chinese publication produced in Singapore.

In the centre of the title page, the title runs vertically. On its right is the author's name *Ma Tien Niang Niang* (i.e. Lady Martin). It is the Chinese name of Sophia Martin. On the top there are seven Chinese characters running from right to left horizontally which read "*Tao-kuang shih-er nien hsin — [chien]*" (First published in the 12th year of the reign of Tao-kuang, i.e. 1832). In the left bottom corner there is a seal bearing four characters *Wei Shan Tsui Lo*, meaning "charity is the happiest thing to do". Though there is no place of publication indicated in the title page and anywhere in the book itself, we know for sure, however, that it was published in Singapore. It is listed in Alexander Wylie's *Memorials of Protestant Missionaries to the Chinese* as a nine-leaves publication published in Singapore.<sup>2</sup>

The tract emphasises first the importance of education for girls. Education is an essential tool to help them in various aspects of life when they grow up. It is followed by the story of Adam and Eve who experienced original sin which taints all men. And men need to repent through Jesus Christ, the Son of God, in order to gain eternal life.

Little is known of the author. She was the sister-in-law of Rev. Walter Henry Medhurst (1796 — 1857), the printer-cum-evangelist of the London Missionary Society in Asia for a quarter of a century. Medhurst worked in Malacca and Penang from 1817 to 1821, and later moved to take over the Society's Java mission in Batavia. It was there that Sophia Martin lived with her sister Elizabeth

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Martin who met and married Medhurst in Madras in 1817.

Medhurst excelled in Chinese. He wrote more than 50 Chinese publications on secular learning and missionary works. Obviously, it was under the influence and guidance of Medhurst that Sophia Martin mastered the Chinese language while she stayed with the Medhursts in the 1820s.

After living with the Medhursts in Batavia for some years, for reasons of health, Sophia Martin sailed to Singapore in 1829. Three years later, on 23 December 1832, she was married to Thomas W. Whittle.<sup>3</sup> Her marriage, unfortunately was short-lived, lasting only two years. In 1834, Whittle passed away leaving behind his wife and a daughter Sarah Martin.<sup>4</sup>

As she had emphasised in her *Hsun-nü san-tzu ching* the importance of female education, the widowed Mrs Whittle established a Chinese girls' school in 1837 at Kampong Glam. The school held regular half-yearly sales of "useful and fancy articles" as fund-raising events. The school functioned for more than 20 years until the 1860s.<sup>5</sup>

On 14 March 1849, her only daughter Sarah Sophia, was married to Dr Robert Little<sup>6</sup> bearing him at least six children (four daughters and two sons).<sup>7</sup> Dr Robert Little was one of the celebrated community leaders in 19th century Singapore. He came to Singapore in 1840. Four years later, he helped to found the Singapore Library. He also took steps to form a Presbyterian congregation here. Little was very active in social work too. He was the honorary secretary and patron of Tan Tock Seng Hospital, chairman of the Singapore Young Men's Christian Association and trustee of the Raffles Institution. He owned a large estate at Siglap where he planted coconut trees, and founded the Singapore Coir Company. When the Colony was transferred from the East India Company to the Colonial office in 1867, he was one of the first unofficial members of the Council. His two younger brothers John and Matthew founded John Little & Company which still exists today.<sup>8</sup>

Nothing is known about Mrs Whittle after the 1860s. Presumably, the first author of Chinese books published in Singapore passed away some time in the 1860s.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Besides the Harvard-Yenching Library, the Department of Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books, British Library also has a copy of the *Hsun-nü san-tzu ching*.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Wylie, *Memorials of Protestant Missionaries to the Chinese*, p. 40, Shanghai: American Presbyterian Mission Press, 1867.

<sup>3</sup> See *Singapore Chronicle* 29 November 1832. In his *Memorials of Protestant Missionaries to the Chinese*, p. 40, Alexander Wylie (1815 – 1887) says Sophia Martin was married to Dr Little [i.e. Dr Robert Little] in Singapore. This note is followed by Professor Robert Kennaway Douglas in his *Catalogue of Chinese Printed Books, Manuscripts and Drawings in the Library of the British Museum*, p. 149, London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1877, and Dr Evelyn S. Rawski's "Elementary Education in the Mission Enterprise", in *Christianity in China: Early Protestant Missionary Writings*, edited by Suzanne Wilson Barnett and John King Fairbank pp. 146 & 216, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1985. As a matter of fact, Dr Robert Little was not her husband but the son-in-law of Sophia Martin. See also note 6.

<sup>4</sup> *Singapore Chronicle*, 11 December 1834.

<sup>5</sup> See for instance, *Singapore Free Press* 8 October 1852 and 7 May 1857.



- <sup>6</sup> *Straits Times* 21 March 1849; *Singapore Free Press* 7 April 1849.
- <sup>7</sup> See *Singapore Free Press* 3 March 1852, 31 March 1854, 22 May 1856, 27 May 1858, 18 October 1860, and 5 November 1863.
- <sup>8</sup> Charles B. Buckley, *An Anecdotal History of old Singapore from the Foundation of the Settlement under the Honourable the East India Company on February 6th 1819, to the Transfer to the Colonial Office as part of the Colonial Possession of the Crown on April 1st, 1867*, pp. 348 — 351, Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1965; also Walter Makepeace, Gilbert E. Brooke and R. St. J. Braddell (eds), *One Hundred Years of Singapore*, p. 501, London: J Murray 1921, Vol 2.
- <sup>9</sup> The name of Mrs Sophia Whittle appeared several times in various editions of the *Singapore Directory*. The last appearance is in "The principal inhabitants at Singapore" of *The Royal Almanack & Directory for the Year 1860*, p. 84, Singapore, 1860, saying she stayed in River Valley Road.