Preface and Acknowledgements

This project began with a casual conversation over coffee one afternoon. Both of us had done research on the encounters between Western missionaries and indigenous women (in Korea, in the case of Hyaeweol Choi, and in the Pacific, especially Vanuatu, in the case of Margaret Jolly). Our conversations pointed out a number of similarities and differences in the nature and impact of Christian missionary work on the formation of new domesticities and gendered modernities.¹ The differences in local histories and cultures proved to be crucial. Comparing notes was an illuminating experience, learning about different values and practices between Asia and the Pacific: very different architectural features, bodily practices, marital ideals, and positions of women within social hierarchies. Moreover, the differential salience of “written” and “oral” traditions in Asia and the Pacific offered an important methodological issue in how to analyse the dynamic interactions between indigenous people and Western missionaries. To our surprise, with only a few exceptions,² there was very little research that brought together the gendered dimensions of Christian missionary encounters in Asia and the Pacific from a comparative perspective. And so, from our casual conversation came the idea of convening a conference where scholars of Asia and the Pacific could meet to discuss the diversity and complexity of missionary encounters and further investigate the ways in which local people vernacularise and appropriate Christian messages.

In preparation for the conference we held informal seminars with interested faculty members and graduate students at The Australian National University, and we found one central recurring theme embedded in the dynamic, multi-directional interactions between Western missionaries and women in Asia and the Pacific. That recurrent pattern centred on the idea of domesticity and its paradoxical meanings and practices. In August 2012 we organised an international conference at The Australian National University called Paradoxes of Domesticity: Christian Missionaries and Women in Asia and the Pacific with the goal of addressing these questions. It attracted historians, anthropologists, literary scholars and ethnomusicologists as presenters and

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discussants. It brought together many senior scholars with several emerging researchers including postdoctoral fellows and graduate students. It offered an exceptionally fruitful and stimulating platform for a comparative study across the regions of Asia and the Pacific representing periods from the nineteenth century onwards. The results of our robust and vibrant debates are reflected in all the chapters in this volume.

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